THE Golden Valley

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FOR

RUTH

'The Traveller, that hath taken shelter under an Oak, eyes the Distant Country with Joy.'

1 APRIL 2ND, 1937: the first day of the Easter holidays. I had been travelling since half past eight in the morning, first up to Paddington from Gloucestershire, then across London and into the grime of Liverpool Street. Now, as I lounged back on the dusty plush of a third-class compartment and gazed fondly at the sepia landscape photographs that served for its decoration, I was aware of true bliss. I pulled down the arm-rest, blocked myself in closer to the smudgy window, and toyed with the idea of smoking a du Maurier mild. No, on second thoughts better to wait till the train started and see if anyone else got into the compartment. I stood up, let down the window with a crash and peered along the platform. The guard was chatting to the ticket collector. I saw him fish a large silver watch out of his waistcoat pocket, click open its cover, and then glance across at the station clock. Two minutes to go. From the direction of the bookstall two people came running—a schoolgirl and a young woman. The girl was wearing a dark blue gym tunic and clutching a soft felt hat to the back of her head. They reached the barrier and appeared to be asking what time the train left. I gazed at them curiously. The woman opened her handbag and produced two tickets. The collector examined these perfunctorily, clipped them and then pointed down the platform.

The girl was trotting down the train peering into the compartments. 'Hurry up!' she called. 'I'm sure there's one down here! Oh, come on, do!' She drew level with me

and then moved on, still adjuring her companion to hurry. The woman, following at her heels, glanced into my compartment and called: 'Here is one, Catherine! This will do.'

Reluctantly I stood back to let her get in, but it was not to be. I heard the girl calling: 'There's an empty one here! Come on!' and muttering something under her breath the woman moved off. I looked out once more, in time to see her climbing into a compartment farther up the train. The door slammed and a moment later the whistle blew. I felt in my pocket for my cigarettes and began to strip the cellophane wrapping from the packet.

2 FRISTON, Garston, Gribbenford—even now the names have the power to awaken my nostalgia. Today the impressions they evoke are generalized, but seventeen years ago I knew each stream, each bridge, each platelayers' hut and ticked them off as the train rattled past. But it was after the train had drawn out of Gribbenford that my excitement became really intense. Risking a cinder in my eye, I would lean far out of the carriage window, striving for the earliest possible glimpse of the bridge which heralded the approach of Fenley. As I leant out this time, I saw another head and a hand clamping a navy-blue felt hat firm against the wind. The brim vibrated fiercely in the gale, straw-blonde hair fluttered frenziedly, and then the head was withdrawn. A minute later the bridge was in sight, and the train

thundered through. When the smoke cleared I saw, far in the distance, the small huddle of warehouses and maltings and the yellow signal-box of Fenley, shrunk by distance to the dimension of toys. Drawing back my head, I began sucking furiously at half a dozen peppermints and collecting together my scattered belongings.

Angela and Sally were waiting to greet me. Angela was my stepmother and Sally her daughter, my half-sister. They were standing a little apart from the other people on the platform gazing along the train. I shouted and waved, and as they saw me and began moving towards me, I undid the door of the carriage and jumped down on to the platform.

Angela stretched out her arms to me and smiled, offering her cheek for me to kiss. She gave a little grimace. 'Good heavens, Tony, what *have* you been eating?'

'Peppermints,' I said shortly. 'Hello, Sal.' I bent and kissed her. She was eight and only came up to my shoulder.

'Pooh! You don't half pong!' was her comment. 'I bet you've been smoking.'

I scowled at her. 'Gosh it's good to be back! How's everyone?'

'They're fine,' said Angela. 'Alex has gone to Marchester but he'll be back this evening. Did you have a good journey?'

We began making our way along the platform. Ahead of us, in the centre of the small group waiting to leave the station, I caught sight of the girl and her companion. For some reason I had not expected to see them again; certainly I had not expected them to get off at Fenley. I

pointed them out to Sal. 'They came down in the train with me from Liverpool Street.'

'What about it?'

'Nothing. I haven't seen them before, that's all.'

She said, 'Spider's had another lot of kittens.' Clearly she wasn't interested.

I saw the two again as we left the platform. They were climbing into a large black coupé with a G.B. plate on its bumper. I asked Angela if she knew who they were. She glanced after the retreating car. 'That's Captain Marshall's car,' she said. 'You remember I told you they'd taken Cavingham Hall? The girl's probably his daughter.'

I recalled her having said something about it in a letter at the beginning of term. 'He was in the Navy, wasn't he?'

'That's right.'

'And the woman? Who's she?'

'I've no idea. Why are you so interested?'

I shrugged. 'No reason. I saw them on the train, that's all. I don't think she's English. She spoke with an accent, anyway.'

'The girl?'

'No, the woman. Perhaps she's her governess.'

'I daresay you're right.'

We reached the car and climbed in. Sal sat in the front beside Angela. As soon as the car started she turned round to face me, kneeling on the seat, and beckoned me close. I leant forward so that my ear was beside her lips. 'You *have* been smoking,' she whispered.

I frowned threateningly and motioned with my head towards Angela who was engrossed in the business of

reversing. Sal nodded and smiled. The bond of intimacy between us had been re-established; the holiday proper had begun.

3 AT HALF PAST EIGHT Angela drove me down to the station to meet my father off the Marchester train. A fine drizzle had begun to fall, and as the car turned out of the drive into the road, drops of moisture glinted like minute jewels in the beam of the headlights. I glanced at Angela out of the corner of my eye and was about to say something but changed my mind. She looked incredibly remote, almost as though she were separated from me by a sheet of glass. Her eyes were fixed on the road ahead, unwavering as a somnambulist's. I knew she was thinking of my father, probably imagining what she would do if the train had crashed. The predilection for imagining disasters was one of the few things Angela and I had in common. She indulged in it whenever Father was away. When he was at home he kept her feet on the earth.

We reached the turnpike on the main Marchester road and, having crossed over, began to descend the hill to the station. I said, 'Did you read about that accident near Ipswich?' I spoke casually but I saw her head jerk up and knew I had guessed right.

'No,' she said. 'When did it happen?'

'Oh, a few weeks ago. The Yarmouth train bashed into the end of a slow goods. The guard was killed.' I was making it all up as I went along, but I could see she was taking

it in. I piled on the detail sadistically. By the time we reached the station I almost believed it myself.

The level-crossing gates were closed and a couple of cars, their headlights dimmed and windscreen-wipers ticking, were waiting to cross. Angela parked the car and we climbed out, slamming the doors behind us, and made for the wicket gate. The mist-like rain wafted into our faces and beaded on our eyelashes. A signal bell struck as our shoes grated on the platform.

'There it is!' Angela could not keep the note of relief out of her voice as she pointed down the track to where a faint tuft of flame lit up the steam above the oncoming engine. I whistled nonchalantly and sauntered over to the one chocolate machine the station possessed. A scrawled note gummed on to the glass read 'Out of Order'. A roaring dragon, the engine hurtled past, battering us with sound; clanking and hissing. Angela started to run along the platform, her coat billowing behind her. 'Alex!' she called. 'Coo-ee, Alex!'

I followed at a more leisurely pace. I saw my father leaning out, unfastening the door of the carriage. As soon as his foot touched the platform Angela was in his arms. No soldier back from the front could have had a warmer welcome, but she was always like that with him.

I had previously decided that I would make no undignified display of emotion, but as he approached, smiling at me with the pale station lights glinting in the lenses of his spectacles, I forgot everything and flung myself at him, kissing him with a fierceness that surprised us both. It was symptomatic of my relationship with him; bursts of wild tenderness interspersed with long periods of inarticu-

late perplexity when neither seemed able to contact the other. Once I had gone for months, hardly speaking to him, avoiding his presence, until even he was aware that something was wrong. By then I had long since forgotten the trivial cause of it all, and the dismal agony dragged on to be ended finally by my catching a chill and going down with a temperature of 103. It took this to reconcile us. We were like two blind men stumbling against each other in the darkness and then losing each other again. Poor Angela did her best, but how could she understand, let alone cope with, a relationship which the protagonists hardly understood themselves? I glimpsed her now as she stood beside us, a faintly puzzled smile clouding her eyes. Perhaps she was thinking that by lunch-time tomorrow the chances were that we would hardly be on speaking terms with each other.

The train chuffed slowly away into the darkness. The signalman clattered down the wooden steps from his box, pushed open the gates and the waiting cars revved up their engines and jolted across the tracks. Arm in arm we walked back to the waiting car: Alexander Fenwick Crossfield, aged forty-six; author; critic; seer; a famous man: Angela Crossfield, his second wife, aged thirty-two; high priestess of the Crossfield fane: Anthony Crossfield, aged fifteen plus, son of the great man. No doubt people could have been found who would willingly have changed places with any one of us.

On the way home my father told Angela about the meeting he had been attending. His voice sounded tired and rather depressed. 'Talk,' he said, 'that's all they ever do. Sometimes I wonder if it's possible to be both a man

and a pacifist.' He sighed, and turning his head grinned at me. 'How's school been?'

I shrugged, feeling already the familiar twinges of guilt and resentment. 'All right.'

'And the Latin?'

My pleasure at meeting him again seemed suddenly to have evaporated. In a day or two my report would be arriving and the promises and betrayals would begin all over again. Meanwhile he was waiting for my assurance that I had worked hard and made real progress, neither of which I had done. 'Not too bad,' I said. 'Yammer said I was improving.' He'd find out soon enough what Yammer had actually said; until then my word was good enough. When the truth came out I could always plead that I'd misconstrued my teacher's ironies.

Father was reassured. 'Good for you, old boy.' He reached up and gripped my hand firmly. 'We'll have to get down to a few unseens later on.'

'Yes,' I agreed miserably, and let my hand lie passively under his.

Relief came from an unexpected quarter. Angela said: 'But you'll let him have a bit of time off, won't you, darling? I mean it *is* the holidays.'

'Of course, of course.' Father gave my hand a final pat and turned to face the windscreen. I sank back thankfully into the gloom.

4

AFTER supper I sat fiddling with the crumbs on my plate while Angela and Father went into the drawing-room. A short while later I heard her playing the piano. Edna came into the dining-room and began to clear the table. She clattered the knives and forks busily. 'What are you looking so down in the mouth about?' she demanded.

Edna had been with us for ten years—ever since we moved into the house in fact. She was four foot six high and as round and plump as a dumpling. Her devotion to the Crossfield family was a byword in the village. She coaxed and bullied us all, but if any outsider had the temerity to criticize one of us in her presence she flared up like a jumping cracker. She came from a family of fifteen, none of whom was taller than five foot, and although her home was less than a quarter of a mile from our house, she lived in and only went home on her half-days. Her conversation, which was non-stop, was full of proverbial wisdom and catch phrases. She also had a repertoire of narrative verse—most of it of a highly moral character—which she could spout for hours on end. Both Sal and I loved her and confided to her things we would never have told our parents or even each other. Nor was our confidence ever betrayed.

I flicked a crumb at her. 'How's Cyril?' I asked, ignoring her question. 'Has he popped the question yet?'

'Nosy aren't we? Come on, get your bum off that chair and give us a hand to wash up.'

I pushed back the chair and stood up. 'Well has he?'

Cyril was the local postman. He had been courting Edna for as long as I could remember. She usually referred to him as 'my steady', but she was very fond of him and although she was prepared to make jokes at his expense she didn't like it when others took similar liberties.

While we were washing up I told her about the term that had just ended and in exchange she told me all the village gossip, concluding with '—and Gladys's taken a job at Cavingham Hall.'

My interest quickened. 'What's it like?'

'Not bad, she says. They've got a cook so she's doing parlour work. They've got the place looking lovely.'

I told her about the girl I'd seen.

'That'll be Miss Catherine, and the other one'll be Miss Kep'ner.'

'A governess?'

'Something like that. Gladys didn't take to her much as far as I can make out. German she is. Mrs Marshall thinks a lot of her.'

'Are there just the four of them?'

Edna shook her head. 'There's Miss Manson—or Manderson—been staying with them. She's Mrs Marshall's sister—a nice kind lady, Gladys says, but she's gone now. And Mr Soutar.'

'Who's he? '

'Some kind of friend, I think. He's been over here once or twice to see your dad.'

I wondered why Angela hadn't mentioned it. 'Anyone else?'

'Not as I know of. Course they get visitors for the week-ends and what not. One of them was a 'sir'. He gave

Gladys ten bob when he left. A fool and his money I say,' but it was obvious Edna was impressed. It didn't take many ten bobs to make up her own wage packet.

The grandfather clock in the hall began to chime and she squeezed out the dishcloth and untied her apron. 'I'm taking the coffee in now. Do you want yours in the kitchen?'

I shook my head. 'First night back so I suppose I'd better go in. See you later.'

5 ANGELA was playing Chopin: I recognized the piece as I stood outside the drawing-room door, my fingers on the door-knob, about to enter. I waited till she reached the end of the phrase and then opened the door softly. She did not look up, even though the draught from the open window ruffled the curtains behind her.

Father was reading and as I glanced at him he took a pencil from his top pocket and made a note in the margin. His spectacles were thrust up on to his forehead and gave him a slightly rakish appearance. I heard the faint rattle of crockery from the distant kitchen and, as though she had timed it purposely, Angela concluded the piece she was playing and lowered the keyboard cover. Then she flexed her fingers and slipped on her wedding ring. I had watched her go through the same performance hundreds of times, but it never failed to fascinate me. Finally she reached up and switched off the standing lamp. 'Hello, Tony, I didn't hear you come in.'

I was certain she *had* heard me; it just happened to suit her mood to pretend otherwise. 'Shall I switch on the news?' I asked.

'Of course, dear, if you want to.'

While I was fiddling with the wireless Edna came in and put down the tray of coffee things. I found the correct wave-band and waited impatiently for the set to warm up. Angela walked across the room until she stood directly behind Father's chair, then, as Edna went out and closed the door behind her, she leant forward, sliding her hands down on to his shoulders and lowering her face until her chin rested on the top of his head. 'Is he ready for some coffee then?' she murmured. She spoke in what I called her 'teeny-weeny' voice and it always made me writhe with indignation. Father enjoyed it in a sort of shamefaced way.

'Um,' he murmured absently, and lifting his hand began to stroke hers.

I twisted the volume control violently and the announcer's voice roared out into the still room. They both looked up startled.

Angela gazed at me reproachfully, appeared undecided whether or not the spell was broken, then decided it was. Muttering an apology I adjusted the radio to the correct volume and walked over to them. Father reached out and selected a cigarette from the box beside him. I took a spill, thrust it into the flames and, when it caught, held it out to him. I watched until his cigarette was well alight and then blew out the spill. The way he smoked fascinated me in just the same way as Angela's routine with the piano fascinated me. He never varied it. First

there was the slow deliberate tapping on his thumbnail, then the moistening of his lips, followed by the slow sensuous rolling of the unlit cigarette from one side of his mouth to the other; finally the deep inhalation and the luxurious letting out of the first lungful of smoke, his lower lip thrust out so that the cloud rose up into the air above his head. All my early attempts to smoke were modelled on his action: I envied him the deep satisfaction he so obviously found.

When we were all equipped with our cups and saucers I asked who Mr Soutar was.

'He's one of Alex's fans,' said Angela. 'That's right, isn't it, darling?'

Father nodded. 'How did you hear about him?'

'Edna told me,' I said. 'He lives at Cavingham Hall, doesn't he?'

'Good Lord!' said Father, 'that reminds me. I've still got his manuscript in the study. I'll have to get Albert to take it back tomorrow. Wait—maybe you could run it over in the car, darling.'

Angela shook her head. 'Oh, Alex, I *can't*. I'm going to have my hair done tomorrow.'

'I'll take it,' I said.

'Will you, old boy? I'm awfully grateful. I'll write a note first thing in the morning. Dammit, I said I'd let him have it back weeks ago!'

'What is it?' I asked. 'A novel?'

'A play—in verse.'

'Any good?'

'No, not very.'

'Did he want you to get it published?'

'Of course, Tony.' It was Angela who spoke. 'What did you think he wanted?'

Her proprietorial attitude annoyed me. 'I only asked,' I said. 'There's no harm in that is there?'

I felt rather than saw Angela glance across at my father, but he chose to ignore it, and lifting his cup to his lips drained it noisily and passed it back to her.

'Would you like a game of chess?' I asked him. It was the nearest I could get to an apology.

'Isn't it a bit late, Tony?' put in Angela. 'Remember we go to bed at ten.'

To my delight Father chose to assert himself. 'Go ahead, old boy, I'd like a game. Set up the board.'

Repressing a smirk of triumph I walked across to the bureau and took out the chess set. Angela put on her spectacles and selected a novel from the shelf beside her. She smiled a tight-lipped little smile—very much on her dignity—slipped out her book-marker and began to read.

The game was a good one. At ten o'clock Angela closed her book, glanced ostentatiously at the clock and then gave a delicate yawn. Father was engrossed in his move and I affected not to notice. She took off her spectacles and tapped them against her teeth; then, having come to a decision, picked up the tray of coffee things and tiptoed out. Father glanced up from the board, caught my eye and winked. I smiled back but was too experienced a family diplomatist to say anything.

At ten past eleven I admitted defeat. Usually I was a bad loser but this time the game had been so close that I did not mind being beaten. In fact I almost enjoyed it. The fire had burnt down to its embers and the fender was

littered with Father's tobacco ash. I desperately wanted to say something that would show him I was aware of the bond of sympathy between us, but as usual I was tongue-tied. As we gathered up the pieces and began putting them back in their box, our hands touched, and, impulsively, I gripped his. He returned the grip silently. At that moment any words we could have spoken would have been superfluous.

6 I WAS awakened next morning by Sal leaping on to my bed. She was already dressed. I turned my back on her and tried to go back to sleep but she wouldn't let me; she said she'd had orders to get me up. 'Breakfast's in ten minutes and Daddy says you've got to be down before him.'

'Go and jump on yourself.'

'I'll tell him you're awake.'

'That's right,' I muttered bitterly. 'Telling tales on the first day of the holidays.'

She considered this for a moment, then tried another tack. 'The post's come.'

I sat up suddenly. 'O Lord! Is my report there?'

'Shall I go and see?'

'Good girl.'

'You must get up then.'

'All right.' I threw back the blankets and stretched. As soon as she had left the room I pulled them back again. In a second she was back squealing with triumph. 'I saw

you! I saw you!' She flung herself at me, struggling to expose me to the cold air, heaving at the blankets.

'Pax!' I cried. 'You win.' I climbed out of bed and reached for my shirt. She waited cannily until I had put it on and then scampered downstairs. I dressed hurriedly and was knotting my shoelaces when she returned.

'Well?' I asked.

'It's not there. I looked through the pile.'

I sighed with relief. The fact that the report hadn't come meant I was free till Monday—the whole week-end! I savoured the happy prospect, and remembered I'd promised to take Mr. Soutar's manuscript over to Cavingham. I told Sal and asked her if she'd come with me.

'When're you going?' She began to examine the books on the bedside table.

'After breakfast I suppose.' I picked up the hairbrush and scrubbed at my head. 'Father's going to write a note.'

'I can't.' She sounded sad. 'I'm going into Thaxworth with Mummy. Couldn't we go this afternoon?'

I shook my head. ' 'Fraid not. I'm going out shooting with Gordon this afternoon.'

'Couldn't you do that this morning?'

'Don't be daft. Still, maybe Angela'll let you come with us.'

'You know she won't. She's afraid you'll shoot me.'

I laid down the hairbrush and picked up my washing things. Sal was still fingering the backs of my books and I felt a bit sorry for her. 'Tell you what,' I said. 'We'll go nesting down on the fens tomorrow. What do you say?'

She brightened immediately. 'Honestly? You won't forget?'

'I won't forget,' I said, and walked out twirling my spongebag like a bolas.

7 SHORTLY after ten I set out for Cavingham Hall. The sun was well up, shining from a clear sky, and the birds sang lustily in the hedgerows. I took the path that ran over the fields and whistled as I walked. The long grass-stems, bowed under the weight of rain and dew drops, brushed against my knees and soon my trouser legs were wet through. I began to wish I had taken Edna's advice and worn gumboots; toyed with the idea of going back and getting out my bicycle; and decided it wasn't worth the effort.

I crossed a newly ploughed field and skirted round a plantation. Rabbits scattered in all directions and, as I shouted at them, a cloud of rooks swirled up above the trees, cawing their disapproval. I strode on purposefully, conscious of a feeling of delight, surrendering myself wholly to the magic of the day. I clambered over a stile, scrambled up the gentle slope on the other side and then paused, gazing out over the fens. They lay gleaming like quicksilver in the brilliant sunlight, dotted here and there with low reedy islands from which jutted occasional still-leafless trees. Moorhens and dabchicks bustled about in the shallows and, far off, I could just make out six snow-white specks which I guessed to be swans. Suddenly I wished Sal was with me and regretted that I hadn't persuaded her to come. I took out my packet of cigarettes and lit one, but after taking a few puffs I flung it away

impatiently, and, hitching my satchel higher on my shoulder, set off again.

The district around Fenley was the meeting point of three distinct types of countryside: the fens, the brecklands, and the rich, heavily wooded farmland. Cavingham Hall, though surrounded by its own woods, lay on the border between the brecklands and the fens in a shallow valley through which wound the river Gribben, one of the tributaries of the Ouse. I remember it essentially as a summer river, slow and reedy, with deep bends and holes in which the big fish lurked, and over which the willows cast dappled shadows throughout long hot August days. Now, as I picked my way between the clumps of bramble and gorse and reached the crest of the slope that hid Cavingham from me, I saw that the river had been swollen by the spring rains and had flooded out over wide tracts of the water-meadows on either side. Twenty yards of shallow water intervened between the end of the path and the wooden footbridge which spanned the stream, and tufts of spike grass and the pudding-shaped humps of overgrown molehills dotted the surface like a miniature archipelago. I picked my way down the slope, the soaked turf squelching unpleasantly under my feet, and began jumping from one tussock to another, balancing precariously with the knapsack thumping against my back and threatening to overbalance me at any moment.

By sheer luck I managed to reach the footbridge without mishap and crossed over, only to be faced with a similar problem on the other side. On the point of launching myself once more, I had a sudden vision of

arriving at Cavingham Hall soaked to the skin, with Mr Soutar's manuscript sodden and illegible. I sat down on the sun-warmed planks and took off my shoes and socks. With my trousers rolled above my knees and a sock-stuffed shoe under each arm, I stepped into the water. It was icy cold and the submerged grass squirmed unpleasantly between my toes. I forged forward recklessly, reached the path and felt in my pocket for a handkerchief to dry myself. To my disgust I discovered I had come out without one and was faced with the disagreeable prospect of putting on my thick woollen socks over my wet feet.

The sun was shining brightly and, after the numbing chill of the flood water, the grass felt almost warm underfoot. I decided to continue my journey barefoot if only until my legs were dry.

It was about half a mile from the footbridge to the Hall, and as I walked I could see, between the trees, the sun glinting intermittently from a skylight or window. It was a larger house than the one in which we lived, and stood in more spacious grounds. Parts of it were undoubtedly Tudor, but it had been remodelled in the prevailing styles of three or four reigns and had ended up predominantly Hanoverian. I had visited it once or twice when some friends of Father's had owned it, and several times while it had stood empty waiting for a buyer. I found myself wondering what changes Captain Marshall had made.

I noticed the first a few minutes later. The boathouse had been repaired. Some owner with a taste for landscape gardening had diverted the river into a small artificial lake and planted beech trees round it. Among the trees,

which hid it from the Hall, a boathouse had been built, but had long since been allowed to fall into decay. Reeds had grown up choking its entrance and birds had burrowed into the thatch. Even the weather-vane had succumbed, sagging over so that 'North' was high in the heavens and 'South' deep among the lilies of the lake. Now all that had been put right. The walls had been mended and re-tarred, the thatch renewed and the invading reeds cleared away. Even the racing fox on the weather-vane wavered in the breeze, his freshly gilded brush glinting in the sunlight.

I walked slowly on, uncertain whether I was pleased or disappointed by what I saw. I thought of the long summer afternoons I had spent fishing in the lake with only the drowsily humming insects and the moaning doves to share my solitude, and wondered whether I would ever fish there again.

I was still musing when, with a faint shock of surprise, I realized that the grass on which I was walking had been recently mown and that I was in fact already in the garden of the Hall. Furthermore I was still barefoot!

I glanced around, saw a clump of evergreens up the slope to my left and turned towards them. As soon as I was within their shelter I sat down and began to pull on my socks. However, in my anxiety to keep out of sight of the Hall I had forgotten about the drive and, although I was partly concealed from it by a high yew hedge, from certain points I was plainly visible. I was still struggling with my second sock when I heard voices approaching.

I turned my head and was just in time to see the girl whom I had noticed in the train. She was riding a bicycle towards the Hall and calling out to someone whom I

could not yet see. At that instant she caught sight of me, gave a little squeak of surprise and fell off. It all happened so suddenly that I was momentarily paralysed. One second she had been riding along, the next she was lying half on the gravel, half on the grass verge, her bicycle sprawled on top of her, one wheel still turning lazily in the air.

I scrambled to my feet and ran across to her. Her eyes were closed and faint specks of blood were beginning to ooze from a white graze on her forehead. Bending down, I thrust my hands under her arms and dragged her clear of the machine. I was dimly aware that someone was approaching, and for want of any better remedy I took her hands between mine and began to chafe them.

In everyone's past there are certain incidents which stand out clearer than all others, shining like diamonds against a background of dark velvet. My first meeting with Cathy is such a one. It is printed indelibly on my memory, and nothing that happened afterwards has ever been able to efface it or alter it in any way. She is lying on the grass with the sunlight falling across her face, isolating strands of her hair like golden cobweb. Her small, heart-shaped face is pale, and her closed eyelids are shadowed like most delicate porcelain. Her lips are parted—between them I can just see the glint of white teeth—and a drop of moisture has run from one corner of her mouth and trickled down her chin. She is wearing a primrose-yellow cardigan over a white silk blouse which is stretched tightly over the points of her breasts. As I stare down at her, her lips tremble, her breast heaves shudderingly and her eyelids flutter open. Her eyes, blue as periwinkles, gaze up

directly into mine and her forehead crinkles into a puzzled frown. Then the vision fades, a shadow falls across her face. The shadow is cast by Miss Keppner.

8 WHOLLY concentrated on my efforts to revive the girl, I was not immediately aware of the arrival of her companion. Suddenly I was thrust roughly to one side and the woman I had last seen on Fenley station flung herself on her knees beside us. Clasping the girl by the shoulders she half lifted her, pressing her against her bosom and murmuring words which I could not make out but assumed to be German.

I crouched beside them, making sympathetic noises and feeling extraordinarily helpless. I noticed a further graze on one of the girl's knees, and with my outstretched hand began gently to brush away the grains of gravel which were sticking to the cut. The woman's back was towards me but she must have sensed what I was about. 'Leave her,' she said. 'You have done enough damage already. Leave her alone.'

I began to protest my innocence, but she only repeated: 'Leave her alone. Leave her.'

I climbed slowly to my feet and realized that I was still without my shoes. 'I think she'll be all right,' I said. 'She banged her head on the gravel.'

The woman said nothing and I walked quickly across the grass to where I had left my shoes. While I was putting them on I kept glancing back and saw the girl

thrust the woman from her and sit up, propping herself on her hands and shaking her head. I knotted my laces, picked up the knapsack and hurried back.

They both turned towards me. The colour had come back to the girl's cheeks and she smiled at me ruefully. The woman had produced a handkerchief and was dabbing at the blood on the girl's forehead. I noticed a red stain on the woman's blouse where she had pressed it against the graze and began to say something. The girl cut me short. 'It wasn't your fault. I wasn't looking where I was going.'

I glanced at the woman, expecting her to make some comment, but she said nothing. The girl gestured towards her bicycle. 'Is it all right?'

I hurried to the machine and picked it up. The handlebars were badly twisted but nothing worse. Straddling the front wheel and twisting hard I soon had them straight again. 'There,' I said, 'it's quite all right now. The mudguard's a bit scratched though.'

The girl laughed. 'I did that when I came off last time.' She placed a hand on the woman's shoulder and stood up. 'I'll ride it back to the house.'

'No!' The woman's voice was firm. 'That is ridiculous. We will walk. He can wheel the bicycle.'

'Don't be silly, Ilse. Of course I can ride. *You* think so, don't you?' The last question was addressed to me.

'Well——' I began, but she interrupted.

'It's all right, Ilse dear, I was only joking. Of course I'll walk if you say so. Anyway my head aches.'

She raised her hands to her temples and then crooked her fingers and combed her hair back behind her ears.

The woman bent down and began dabbing at the grazed knee. The girl glanced down at her and then turned to me. 'What were you doing over there?'

I told her and explained the reason for my visit.

'Are you Mr Crossfield's son?' she asked.

'Yes. I'm Tony.'

She wrinkled up her eyebrows and the bruise on her grazed forehead whitened under the taut skin. 'Didn't I see you on the train yesterday?'

'I saw you, too', I told her. 'You nearly got into my carriage at Liverpool Street.'

She considered this for a moment, then asked, 'Are you still at school?'

I was about to reply when the woman said: 'Come, Catherine, we must put iodine on these cuts. You can talk to Mr Crossfield some other time,' and taking the girl by the arm, led her up the drive towards the house. I followed behind wheeling the bicycle.

When they reached the front door the woman turned her head. 'Would you please take the bicycle round to the back? You may leave Mr Soutar's manuscript with the servant.' Her words were civil enough but the tone of her voice was unmistakable. What she was actually saying was: 'Clear off! We don't want you round here.'

As I turned away I saw the girl glance back at me over her shoulder and I felt my cheeks and ears burning.

9 I PROPPED the bike against the wall of one of the outbuildings and walked up the yard to the back door. It was opened by Gladys, Edna's sister. 'Well,' she exclaimed, 'if it isn't Master Tony! What brings you here?'

I told my story once more and handed over the parcel and the accompanying note. She promised to see that Mr Soutar got them safely, and told me to remind Edna that they were going to the pictures next Saturday. I said I would.

I walked back by the road. It was a longer journey by some two miles but this suited me. I wanted time to think.

First there was the girl. I judged her to be about my own age—perhaps a little older. I knew that she was still at school because I had seen her in a school uniform. But these were prosaic facts and had little in common with the mysterious excitement she had awakened in me. I felt as though I had drunk a quart of fizzy lemonade which was tingling and prickling inside me; yet at the same time there was a sense of apprehension, of sickness almost, that previously I had associated with unexpected summonses to appear before my headmaster. I wanted to sing and shout and I wanted to cry. I wanted to talk to other people and at the same time to be far away, alone with my excitement. I wanted both to share it and to hug it to myself. I fingered my own forehead and thought about the bruise on hers, and then I remembered that she had not cried. For some reason this struck me as quite wonderful. With

a smack like that, I told myself, anyone could have been excused if they'd howled the place down, but she hadn't made a murmur. I sought in my memory for something to express what I felt, and found it, oddly enough, in one of the passages I had been made to learn for School Certificate.

> Oh thou art fairer than the evening air
> Clad in the beauty of a thousand stars;
> Brighter art thou than flaming Jupiter
> When he appeared to hapless Semele;
> More lovely than the monarch of the skies
> In wanton Arethusa's azured arms;
> And none but thou shalt be my paramour!

The words rolled out across the sunlit meadows and the grazing cows lifted their heads and gazed at me with mild-eyed curiosity. I recited the passage from beginning to end three times and each time it seemed more marvellous, more appropriate. I would no doubt have recited it yet again, had not the sun at that moment disappeared behind a cloud. In the sudden gloom my thoughts turned involuntarily to Miss Keppner.

I found myself recalling the moment in the previous afternoon when she had peered in through the window of my railway carriage and had turned away muttering as the girl called her. What was their relationship? I wondered. Edna had said she thought she was a governess, but if the girl was still at school why did she need a governess? And then, as clearly as if the words had been spoken in my ear, I seemed to hear her saying: 'Leave her. Leave her alone,' and a shiver ran up my spine. Edna would have said some-

one had walked over my grave. I laughed to reassure myself, but it wasn't altogether successful. I tried telling myself that she had been angry because she was frightened—perhaps afraid that Captain Marshall would tick her off for not taking better care of his daughter; but I was not convinced.

Next moment the sun reappeared and at once my spirits revived. Of one thing I was certain: Miss Keppner or no Miss Keppner I would make it my business to see Catherine Marshall again.

10

ON MONDAY morning my school report arrived. I had pushed it into the bottom of Father's pile of letters and now had to suffer the agony of watching him work his way slowly down to it. The toast and marmalade went bitter in my mouth. Sal guessed what was the matter immediately, but knew me better than to say anything. Angela was reading a letter from her brother who was in South America. Every now and then she looked up and said, '*Do* listen to this, darling,' and read out a long passage, while Father politely lowered the letter he was studying and listened, smiling dutifully. How I wished I had put the thing on the top instead of the bottom!

He did reach it eventually, of course. By that time I was in such a state of nervous exhaustion that even Angela noticed it and asked me if I was feeling all right. Sal silently mouthed 'Report' at her and she gave me a sympathetic smile. I couldn't really appreciate it; in fact,

as Sal said later, my answering smile nearly turned the milk sour. Out of the corner of my eye I watched Father pick up the envelope and examine it. Then he raised his eyebrows a fraction and glanced across at me. I looked down modestly at my plate and waited for the axe to fall.

Usually he slit his envelopes open with his finger but this time in honour of the occasion he used a knife—no doubt to avoid tearing off an 'Excellent', I told myself with bitter irony. I heard the blade rasping through the tough paper, then the smooth whisper as the report was drawn out and finally the crackle as it was unfolded. For a second or two there was complete silence in the room, then Angela—being kind again—started a hollow sort of conversation with Sal on whether she'd christened Spider's new kittens. I risked a quick glance at Father and my heart sank. Any hope I might have had drained swiftly away. His eyes were working methodically down the sheet and the lower he got the glummer he looked. Finally, unable to bear it any longer, I said in a voice I hardly recognized as my own, 'Is it as bad as that?'

'Um,' he said and again, 'Um.'

'Not even the English?'

This time he didn't even say 'Um' and in spite of all my efforts to stop them I felt tears begin to scald behind my eyes. Angela and Sal got up and went out. Still Father said nothing. I kept my eyes glued to my plate and tried to pretend I was eating. I heard him gather up his letters and drain his coffee cup. Then he pushed back his chair and stood up. 'We'll have a talk about it later, old boy. Come along about eleven.'

I nodded miserably, still staring down, biting my lips

to keep back the tears. His hand alighted on my shoulder, gripped it and then relaxed. I hunched defensively and heard the door close behind him. 'Bugger!' I said savagely. 'Bugger! bugger! *bugger!*' and looked up. The report was lying where he had left it beside his plate. I stared at it, hating it, yet gnawed by a horrible curiosity. Could it really have been as bad as that? Surely *someone* thought I had 'shown signs of progress' or 'improved'. No one did. It was the worst report I had ever seen and I had seen some fair stinkers in my time. Even the games master accused me of 'lacking team spirit' and Old Benjie the art master, whom I had always regarded as my friend, had swopped sides to be in at the death. In his opinion I was 'not exerting myself to the full'. I thrust the report back into the envelope and walked out to find Edna. She, at least, would see it from my point of view.

The interview at eleven o'clock was a dismal affair. Even after six years my father still contrived to be hurt and disappointed by my attitude to school. He pointed out that I was sitting for my School Certificate in July, and that unless I really 'put my back into it' and 'got down to some serious work in the holidays', my chances of passing were, to say the least, slight. Morosely I agreed, though privately I thought 'slight' was an unduly optimistic estimate. At the age of fifteen I was firmly convinced that the gods had not blessed me intellectually, and that it was unfair to treat me as if they had. My father, perversely I thought, was of a different opinion; in fact his constant theme was that I had it in me to do really well. So convinced was he that he was right, that he now proposed a fixed timetable of extra study during the next three and a

half weeks. He had even gone so far as to draw up a neat little chart with the exact amount of time to be allotted to each subject. I stared at it in dismay. To spend a holiday swotting up Maths, History and English, not to mention French and Latin! Borstal could have been no worse. And some people have the effrontery to suggest that one's school days are the happiest of one's life! I made a silent vow that if ever I found myself saying such a thing I would consider my life wasted.

The new routine was to come into force on the following day at 9.30 a.m. My father grinned balefully as he added, 'Until then, old boy, your time's your own.'

I didn't even bother to try and grin back. I picked up the postcard on which he'd thoughtfully copied out a duplicate timetable, and walked out. My time was my own, was it? Well damn and blast him for his generosity! There and then I decided to pay another visit to Cavingham Hall.

Put like that it no doubt sounds as if the notion was spontaneous, but in fact it had been in and out of my mind ever since Saturday, and the only reason I had refrained from going was that I could not think of a suitable excuse. As I looked distastefully at the card in my hand I realized it had to be now or never. I hurried through into the scullery and dragged on my gumboots.

I had hoped to get away without being seen, but my luck was out. Sal appeared, curious to know what Father had said to me, and asked me where I was going.

'Down to the fens,' I told her shortly.

'Can I come?'

'No, it's too deep where I'm going.'

This started one of those interminable 'It is', 'It isn't' arguments which were such a feature of our relation. It was ended by my promising to take her as soon as I'd seen if it was safe. 'Tell Edna not to lay dinner for me,' I said. 'I'll have something when I get back.'

Sal tried a Delilah. 'It's steak-and-kidney pud—your favourite.'

I was not to be tempted. 'See you later,' I said, and added bitterly, 'Not to mention every day for the next three and a half weeks.'

As I strode off down the yard I saw her with her nose pressed to a white blob against the scullery window watching me out of sight.

II

IT DID not occur to me until I was in sight of the Hall that perhaps Catherine was not at home, but once the possibility had entered my mind it grew rapidly and in no time at all had become a conviction. To dispel my fears I set myself the task of holding my breath until I had touched the boathouse. If I succeeded it meant that Catherine was at home and that I would meet her.

I took a few practice gulps, tried to judge when I was within a likely distance and set off. I soon realized I'd made a bad miscalculation and in an effort to pull it off I began to run. My gumboot tops bit into my shins and my lungs worked like blocked bellows. Fifty yards to go; thirty; could I do it? I was suffering agony and staggering like a drunkard and still I wouldn't give in. The black wall of the boathouse seemed to advance and recede, its out-

lines growing blurred and wavy. I clapped one hand over my mouth and with the other gripped my nose fiercely. I was almost there. Two more steps. One. Crash! I tripped over my own feet and collapsed like a punctured balloon, my outflung hand inches short of the target. As though from an immense distance I heard someone laughing.

I sat up slowly, shaking my head, and trying to re-orientate my scattered senses. The first thing I did was to touch the boathouse—I suppose in an attempt to fool the gods who had watched me performing my self-appointed task—and then I climbed unsteadily to my feet.

'What on earth are you doing?'

I spun round and there was Catherine. Had I not been so deeply engrossed in my test I would surely have seen her. She was sitting in a little green and white rowing-boat and leaning forward over the oars. I simply gaped at her, too dazed and too surprised to answer her question.

'You look as though you've seen a ghost.'

This time I found my tongue. 'Hello,' I said. 'I didn't see you there.'

She gripped the oars and paddled herself a little nearer to me. 'Now,' she said, 'tell me what you were doing.'

'I was trying to touch the boathouse,' I said, and it sounded damned silly even to me.

Again she prodded with her oars, edging the boat a fraction nearer to me. 'Why?'

'It was a sort of test,' I explained. 'A bit like touching wood. If I touched the boathouse without losing my breath—well, something I wanted to happen would happen.'

'Oh.' She looked at me steadily for a moment. 'What was it?'

'I'm not allowed to tell anyone. That's part of it.'

'Do you often do things like that?'

I nodded, embarrassed. 'Quite often. It's really a sort of habit of mine.'

She chuckled. 'You've no idea how funny you looked running along and holding your nose at the same time. Would you like to come for a row?'

As she was speaking she backed the stern of the boat up against the bank and drew up her knees to make room for me. In so doing she exposed a book which was lying open on the boards at the bottom. I recognized it at once; it was the same geometry text-book that we used at school.

I clambered aboard and sat down in the stern. The oars dipped, were snared by the lilies, and broke loose. The boat moved out on to the lake. I sat with my hands folded in my lap and looked at Catherine. She rowed well and was obviously taking pains over it, feathering her oars delicately and letting the blades bite to an equal depth. Every so often she would glance over her shoulder to make sure she was steering a straight course. I saw the bruise above her left eyebrow like a dark thumbprint on her fair skin and asked her if it still hurt. She laughed. 'It's a bit tender if I touch it, but it doesn't really hurt. I was afraid I was going to have a black eye and that would have been *too* awful.'

'Does your governess still think I did it?'

'Ilse? She's always like that. Uncle Thomas says it's because she's an emotional Nordic type—you know, German. But she's not really my governess.'

'What is she then?'

'Well, in a sort of way she is—during the holidays anyway—but really she's Daddy's secretary. When I was little she was my nurse.'

I gestured with my hand towards the boathouse and the Hall which was just coming into view. 'Is she here now?'

'She's gone up to London to see her brother. She often does. Why?'

'Nothing. I just wondered.' I indicated the open book between her feet. 'Does she teach you geometry?'

'No, that's Daddy.' She screwed up her nose in a comical expression of distaste. 'Ugh! How I hate it!'

'Geometry?'

'And algebra and arithmetic. Are you good at maths?'

'Terrible. I got three per cent in my last algebra exam.'

She laughed. 'I got fifteen but I cheated. I hate to think what I'll get in School Cert.'

'Me too. My report came this morning and Father's making me do extra lessons all through the holidays.'

'How awful. I'm supposed to work in the mornings, but when Ilse's away I usually manage to sneak off. That's why I'm out here now.'

She shipped her oars and let the boat glide on under the overhanging branches of the beech trees on which the young leaves were beginning to show a delicate grey-green. The noise of water spilling over the sluice at the far end of the lake swelled to a throaty murmur as we approached. There was no breeze at all and the tiny

ripples from the boat's prow died away almost as soon as they were created.

'I often used to come here fishing,' I said, 'in the summer. I caught a terrific perch just over there by the sluice.'

'Did you?' She was not very interested. 'Don't you get bored fishing? I mean just sitting for hours and hours and nothing happening?'

I smiled and shook my head. Fishing was one of those things you either loved or couldn't understand. It was no use trying to explain. My experiences with Father and Angela had taught me that.

The boat nuzzled softly in among the rushes and came to rest. Catherine bent her arms and raised them so that her hands were behind her head. Then she lifted her hair and let it fall back silkily, a lovely sensuous movement that I later came to associate with her. She smiled at me. 'Would you like to row?'

'All right.' I stood up carefully, caught hold of a branch above my head and moved down the boat toward her. 'Now you.'

I took one of her hands in mine and steadied her while she stood up. For a moment we were face to face. Her eyes glanced into mine, paused fractionally and then looked away. The boat lurched and she clutched me. 'Golly!' she exclaimed. 'That was close.'

She edged her way past and sank down thankfully on to the seat I had vacated. I waited until she was settled and then took my place at the oars. 'Where shall we go?' I asked.

'Oh, up there.' She waved a hand vaguely towards the

far end of the lake and settled herself comfortably, her head thrown back so that her falling hair almost brushed the surface of the water. I paddled the boat clear of the reeds and began to row.

12

THE idea came to me quite suddenly. It was a fusion of what I had previously wanted with what I now knew, and it must have been quietly forming itself in my subconscious mind while I pulled the boat steadily up the lake. When it did come it was complete in all its detail—Minerva, fully armed, and I the all-powerful Jove.

'Catherine!'

She sat up suddenly. 'What is it?'

'I've just had a terrific idea.'

She rubbed the back of her hand across her nose and grinned. 'The way you spoke I thought the house was on fire or something. Well, go on, what is it?'

'You do Latin, don't you?'

'Worse luck.'

'Well, look. My father teaches me Latin for School Cert. He's jolly good at it and—well, what I thought was maybe we could do it together. I mean him teach us both. You could come over to our place—I've got a sort of workroom in the attic, a jolly good place, and we could work there together. It would be heaps better than us both grinding away in solitary confinement.' I paused as I spotted a possible flaw. 'Miss Keppner doesn't teach you Latin, does she?'

The enthusiasm with which I had outlined my plan must have touched off something in her. She stared at me with a fixed expression in her eyes, her chin cupped in her hands, and shook her head slowly. 'No, she doesn't.'

'Well then?'

Suddenly she reached forward and gripped the oars, her eyes dancing with excitement. 'Yes, why not? And, Tony, why don't *you* come over here for French? Ilse can teach us both. I could go to you twice a week and——'

'*I* could come to you twice!' I cried, taking the words from her mouth. 'Do you think they'll agree?'

'Why shouldn't they? It's a wonderful idea. But we'll have to get Uncle Thomas on our side before we tell them. You're sure your father will do it?'

'Absolutely.'

'Well, what are we waiting for? Let's go and find Uncle Thomas. Come on, move over and I'll help you row.'

With much laughter and splashing we began pulling back towards the boathouse.

13

WE REACHED the front door of the Hall breathless, having raced across the lawn. Catherine burst open the door and ran in calling, 'Come on, slowcoach!'

I looked down at my gumboots, still muddy from my cross-country trek, and paused. 'My boots,' I said. 'I can't go in like this.'

She clicked her tongue impatiently. 'Take them off then.'

Obediently I sat down on the doorstep and dragged them off. It crossed my mind that in both my encounters so far with Catherine's family I had been in my socks, and I pointed this out to her.

'Rig of the day, Number Ones,' she said mysteriously. 'Don't worry, no one'll mind.'

I pushed my fingers through my hair and followed her.

We ran Uncle Thomas to earth in the conservatory. He was reclining in a wicker-work chaise-longue doing *The Times* crossword. I had an impression of a great bolster-shaped body which seemed to sag and crumple in the oddest places, and a red, fleshy face. He had red wet lips, a red nose and red cheeks, while from the corners of each eye a scarlet network of veins spread out to encroach on the grey, slightly jelloid irises. His hair was dark grey and flopped over the collar of his dark blue, velvet smoking-jacket, though I later discovered I had overestimated its length because of his hunched posture. Around him like an invisible aura hung a faint but distinctive scent; a mixture of bay rum and parma violets.

He looked up as we entered and tapped a silver pencil against his uneven yellow teeth. 'Jellied serpent of old Nile,' he said, 'question mark, five letters.'

'Aspic!' I said with a sudden flash of inspiration. 'Cleopatra, you know.'

'Bravo! Aspic, of course.' He pencilled it in deliberately, murmuring as he did so: ' "The stroke of death is as a lover's pinch, which hurts and is desired". Sir,' he concluded, 'I am everlastingly in your debt.'

'This is Tony, Uncle. Tony Crossfield,' said Catherine.

At the mention of my name a change came over him. His eyes, which had focussed themselves dreamily on some far corner of the conservatory, suddenly swung round. 'So!' he said, and his little black pupils were alert and interested. 'The son of the great Alexander Fenwick? I am honoured indeed.' He dropped the newspaper he was holding and heaved himself up in the chair, puffing out his lips and cheeks as he did so.

I held out my hand. 'How do you do, sir?'

He chuckled. 'Good. Good. I like your manners.' His hand enveloped mine and pumped it up and down, while his gaze swam back and forth between us and settled finally on Catherine. He released my hand and sank back. 'I presume you want some service performed, my dear? Well, you have but to name it. Unless, of course, it's the marriage service.'

Catherine swiftly outlined our plan. He listened closely, plucking at his lower lip. When she had finished he was silent for a moment and I had the impression that he was considering aspects of the situation unrealized by us. His fingers relinquished his lip and moved to the lobe of his ear. 'Brünhilde's our problem,' he said.

I looked quickly at Catherine, wondering whom he meant, but relieved to hear him speak of '*our*' problem. Was 'Brünhilde' Mrs Marshall?

I was enlightened as soon as Catherine spoke. 'Oh, I'll manage Ilse, Uncle. It's Daddy who's going to be awkward. Can you persuade him?'

'Yes, I think so. But I'm not sure that I share your confidence regarding our Nordic friend. She is'—he turned to me again—'ah, how shall I put it?—a lady of

very decided character. Could I — dare I — call her formidable?'

Again I found myself remembering the last words I had heard Miss Keppner utter and I nodded my head slowly.

Catherine seemed to think he was seeing problems where none existed. 'I'm positive she'll agree,' she asserted. 'Quite *absolutely* positive. And Mummy will too, so there's only Daddy left.' She bit her knuckles, thinking hard. 'I've got it. I'll ask him at lunch. You'll have to pretend you're hearing it for the first time and say what a good idea you think it is, then we'll present a united front.'

Uncle Thomas smiled and there was something quite enchanting about him when he smiled. It was as though a bright light had been switched on inside his head and was shining out through a dozen chinks. 'There speaks the great-grand-daughter of the man who won the Battle of— ah, Akapan,' he said to me. 'Faultless strategy; courage; cunning. With such a commander how can our enterprise possibly fail?'

'Well, that's settled then,' she said. 'Don't forget—a united front.'

'Aye-aye, Cap'n. United front!' said Uncle Thomas, and raised his hand in a salute. We left him to his crossword.

Not until some time later when I had left the Hall and was on my way home did it suddenly occur to me with a shock of surprise that 'Uncle Thomas' and 'Mr Soutar' were, almost certainly, the same person.

14

I WAS sitting in the kitchen finishing my lunch when the telephone rang. I heard Angela's voice saying:

'Who? Oh yes. Will you hold on a moment and I'll call him. Tony! Tony! 'Phone, dear!'

'Coming!' I dropped my knife and fork and charged into the hall. Sal appeared at the drawing-room door with a book in her hand and stood waiting to hear what I said. I waved her back and picked up the receiver. 'Hello. Tony here.'

'We did it! Daddy's agreed!' Catherine's voice sounded so clear she might have been speaking from the dining-room. 'Have you fixed it your end?'

'Not yet. I was waiting to hear from you. I'll do it straight away, and then ring you back.'

'Good. I thought Mondays and Wednesdays here, Tuesdays and Thursdays with you. Do you think that'll be all right?'

'Fine,' I said. 'Keep your fingers crossed.' I was about to ring off when I thought of something. 'I say, you don't think Ilse will try and wreck it, do you? I mean, we haven't told her yet and Uncle Thomas——'

'Of *course* not, silly. Honestly, Tony, I *know* she won't.'

'Well I'll go ahead then. Bye-bye.'

As I replaced the receiver Sal said, 'What are you going to do?'

'M.Y.O.B.' I retorted. 'You'll find out.'

'I know who you were talking to.'

'That's funny, so do I.' I wanted to get rid of her while

I thought out the best way to approach Father. It had just occurred to me that I was not as absolutely certain of his co-operation as I'd made out. Keeping at a safe distance Sal followed me into the kitchen and renewed the attack.

'You said you were going to take me down to the fens.'

'Well, so I am.' I waved my hand towards the window-panes which were flecked with raindrops. 'It's no use if it's raining.'

'It wasn't raining at dinner-time. Why were you so late? I don't believe you went to the fens at all.'

'That's just where you're wrong,' I said. 'Now why don't you run along and talk to Angela?'

She looked at me reproachfully and the corners of her lips twitched downwards pathetically. 'You're always sending me away. I think you're beastly—just beastly.'

'Oh look, Sal, be reasonable. Father's given me enough work to last me into the middle of next year. I've got to have *some* time to myself. What do you do when I'm at school?'

'Well,' she pouted, 'you might at least tell me who you were 'phoning up just now.'

I looked hard at her, debated with myself whether to tell her, and decided to risk it. I took the precaution of making her swear on her most solemn oath not to breathe a word until I gave my permission. As I had expected, she agreed at once.

While I was recounting what had happened I could see her wondering where she fitted into the picture but when I'd finished her only comment was to ask what I thought of Mr Soutar.

'I liked him,' I said.

'I didn't,' said Sal.

I pondered this for a moment. Sal had an uncanny flair for first impressions and was rarely mistaken. Nevertheless I felt certain this was one of the occasions when she'd misfired. I shrugged, dismissing the subject. 'D'you think I should go and see Father now or wait till after tea?'

'He's down by the bees with Albert,' said Sal, 'but I expect he'll come in if it keeps on raining. You can see him then.' She was staring out of the window as she spoke and her back was towards me. As I watched she rucked up her frock and began abstractedly to scratch the seat of her knickers. 'Isn't it funny, Tony,' she said, though she seemed to be talking more to herself than to me, 'isn't it funny? All of a sudden you seem much older—much, much older.'

15 As so often happened, my first instinctive conviction that Father would approve of the scheme was correct. I telephoned Catherine straight away and arranged that she should come over at eleven the next morning. 'And you've been invited to lunch,' I added, 'so there's no need to rush back.' She recited the names of some text-books and asked me whether I thought they would do. 'Fine,' I said. 'See you tomorrow, then.'

After she had rung off I stood for a moment with my hand still on the 'phone, picturing her in my imagination, then I went upstairs to get the attic ready to receive her.

Next morning I was up betimes. I nipped into the

bathroom, borrowed Father's razor and shaved my upper lip. Then I routed in the airing cupboard and found my favourite shirt (dark blue, almost black), and selected a suitable tie. I spent a long time in front of my mirror, but even so I was the first member of the family downstairs. I walked through into the kitchen to test Edna's reactions. She was pleasantly impressed.

'Do you think she'll like it then?' I asked.

'Well, *I* do,' she affirmed staunchly. 'You look real posh to me.'

'And the tie goes all right?'

'Makes you look proper grown up!'

'Grown up'! That was what I wanted to hear. First Sal, now Edna. My childhood was tumbling round me like a house of cards.

At ten o'clock I went up to my attic and tried to make some notes on Elizabeth Tudor's foreign policy, but my mind wasn't on it. My thoughts kept wandering off and homing on Catherine. After half an hour I laid down my pen and went to see if she was in sight. I stared out of the nursery window—the only one which commanded a full view of the drive—until I heard Angela coming upstairs, and was forced to retreat. Back in the attic I picked up my book again and vowed I wouldn't take another look until I'd made notes on the next three pages.

I was half-way down the second page when there was a tap at the door and Sal's head appeared. 'She's here,' she whispered. 'Downstairs, talking to Daddy.'

'Is she?' I strove valiantly to keep the excitement out of my voice. 'I'll be down in a minute.'

Sal withdrew her head. I waited until I heard her go

downstairs then gave a brisk once-over to the room, straightening a cushion here and a book there. When it was arranged to my satisfaction I combed my hair and went out. I heard Catherine's voice before I saw her and was struck for the first time by its quality. It was soft and murmurous like water running swiftly in cool places. Where other girls' voices grated harshly or piped in squeaks, hers seemed to float and hover, dipping and soaring, effortless as a gull riding on the back of the wind. I listened enchanted, wondering why I had not noticed it before, until I was roused by hearing Father laugh. I ran across the hall and flung open the drawing-room door.

Catherine turned to me and smiled. 'Hello, Tony. I was just telling Mr Crossfield how you came to my assistance in your socks.'

Angela said: 'I've poured your coffee out, Tony. It's there on the tray.'

While I was stirring my coffee I looked at Catherine. She was wearing a royal-blue, roll-neck pullover and a grey skirt and her hair was caught back with a black ribbon. She was beautiful and I wondered if she knew it. Certainly Father did, and I suddenly realized how charming he could be when he chose. Witty himself, he made Catherine seem witty too. Her most ordinary remarks suddenly took on a new significance as he repeated them, embellishing them with his own.

In the act of reaching out for a biscuit I happened to catch sight of Angela. She was smiling at them but the smile concerned her lips alone. It came as no surprise to me when a few minutes later she set down her cup, glanced at the clock, and said, 'Isn't it time for lessons to begin?'

I took my cue. 'Come on, Catherine, I'll show you the Chamber of Horrors. Are you ready, Father?'

He nodded. 'I'll be up in a minute. You can make a start by revising a few subjunctives.'

I picked up Catherine's books and led the way upstairs. After I had shown her the attic, I asked whether it was all fixed for me to visit the Hall next day. She nodded.

'Ilse was all right, then?'

Again she nodded.

'But not enthusiastic, is that it?'

She lowered her eyes and then raised them to mine. I could see she was on the point of saying something but not certain how to begin. 'Well . . .?' I prompted.

'Uncle Thomas was right,' she said. 'I had an awful job with her. At first she wouldn't even hear of it, and said I had no right to go and make arrangements behind her back, and that I was cruel and—oh well, you can guess the rest.'

'Still she must have agreed in the end.'

'In the end she did.' Catherine paused. Her eyes caught mine and glanced away. 'She was awfully strange, Tony.'

I suddenly thought I saw what she was trying to say. 'About me?'

'Yes, sort of.' Once it was out she seemed relieved.

'What did she say? Go on, you can tell me.'

Suddenly, surprisingly, she giggled. 'She wanted me to promise her something.'

'What was it?'

'You won't laugh?'

I assured her I wouldn't.

'You won't tell anyone?'

'Of course not.'

She half turned from me, looking towards the window, and I suddenly noticed she was blushing. Even the tips of her ears had turned pink. 'She wanted me to promise to tell her if—if you touched me.' The last words came out in a rush.

For a long moment I said nothing, then I asked her if she had made the promise. Slowly at first so that the movement was almost imperceptible, but growing rapidly into an exaggerated parody of negation, she shook her head. As I watched her I felt my heart begin to pound. Its hammering seemed to fill my chest, expanding till my whole body shook with it. I saw the loose ends of her hair swinging like golden tassels. I opened my lips to say something but no words came, and, as though in a dream, I stretched out my hand, touched her on the shoulder and turned her towards me. Her eyes were very bright, her cheeks flaming, her lips parted. Under my fingers I could feel her trembling violently. For perhaps five seconds we stood there, our eyes fixed on each other, neither daring to make the first move, and then, a long way off, I heard a door slam. As though a spring had been released we both moved together, our lips met, touched for an instant and then we had jerked apart. 'Quick!' she said, 'he's coming! Sit down!' And hardly knowing what I was doing I obeyed.

My memories of the next hour are somewhat hazy, but the sense of vivid excitement, almost as though I had been charged with electricity, remains clear to this day. One

aspect alone stands out in detail, perhaps because it was unique in my experience, perhaps because my father remembers it too and still refers to it. For one whole hour I was good at Latin. How it happened I do not pretend to know, but happen it did. From somewhere—out of thin air it seemed to me—came knowledge. Words, phrases, declensions, constructions that hitherto had been dark mysteries to me suddenly became crystal clear. My mind leapt ahead, dealing with difficulties before we reached them, answering Father's questions almost before he'd asked them. It was as though for one brief glorious hour the spirit of omniscience had descended like the holy dove upon me. I was inspired.

After lunch I obtained Father's permission to take time off and accompany Catherine for part of her ride home. I pumped up my cycle, gave it a cursory dusting and met her in the drive. 'How did you like the lesson?' I asked.

'I thought you said you were no good at Latin.'

'I'm not—honestly. I don't know what came over me. I just seemed to know it. Well, you saw how surprised Father was.'

She considered this for a moment and then grinned. 'He'd have been even more surprised if he'd come in a minute earlier.'

Before I could retort she'd jumped on her bike and set off at full speed down the drive. I caught her up when she stopped to unfasten the gate. 'What's all the hurry?' I panted.

She turned and faced me. 'Tony, don't come with me. Please don't.'

'But why?' I said in astonishment. 'Why not? What have I done?'

'Nothing.' She put out her hand and rested it on my arm. 'I just don't want you to, that's all.'

'Is it—is it because of what happened?'

She shook her head. 'Silly,' she said. 'Of course not.' She glanced round quickly then pulled me towards her and kissed me lightly on the cheek. 'There!'

My bewilderment must have shown plainly on my face, for she laughed. 'Don't look so upset. I'll explain tomorrow.'

She leant forward over her handlebars, about to move off. Suddenly the possible reason for her strangeness occurred to me. 'Catherine!' I called. 'Is it Ilse?'

'Tomorrow. I'll tell you tomorrow.' And she was away. I watched her until she was out of sight, hoping against hope that she would turn and wave, but not once did she look round. Slowly, pushing my bike as I went, I began walking back up the tree-lined drive to the house.

16

ALL the rest of that day, and most of the night too, my mind was full of Catherine. I lay awake, thinking of her, while outside the wind rushed wildly through the trees. The house was full of strange creakings and whisperings. Somewhere a loose window banged, on and on, maddeningly. At last I could bear it no longer and got out of bed. It was my attic window which I had forgotten to close. After I had fastened it I

stood in the dark room thinking, 'It was here that we kissed, here on this spot where I am standing now.' I stretched out my arm as I had done when I had laid it on her shoulder and turned her towards me, but now, although it could feel my own heart beating, there was no answering tremor beneath my fingers. I heard the hall clock chime and shivered, suddenly aware that I was wearing only my pyjamas and that my feet were bare. Clutching my jacket tightly about me I turned and hurried back to my bed.

By morning the gale had blown itself out, but evidence of the rough night was everywhere about me as I set out for Cavingham. The drive was littered with twigs, many of them green with their first leaves, and wisps of straw hung from the telephone wires in a ragged fringe. I cycled slowly, anxious not to arrive early. Only the thought of meeting Miss Keppner caused me any anxiety, and that dwindled into insignificance beside the prospect of seeing Catherine again. Even the reasons for her strange behaviour the day before seemed somehow less important than they had. '*Je t'aime*,' I sang. '*Je t'adore*. Catherine, Catherine, *moi je t'adore*.'

At five minutes to eleven I turned in past the lodge and cycled up the gravelled drive. Someone was shaking a mat out of an upper window of the Hall. I wondered if it was Gladys, thought of waving, and then decided not to risk it. I left my bike propped against the garage wall, removed my trouser clips and walked up to the front door with my books under my arm. As my fingers touched the wrought-iron bell-pull I was suddenly overcome with panic; my stomach seemed to have turned to water and I

felt my knees quivering inside my trouser-legs. The windows seemed full of hostile eyes. Then the door opened and there was Gladys. 'Will you come in, please?' she said and held the door open demurely.

'Hello, Glad——' I began and then caught sight of someone standing back in the hall and my greeting died on my lips.

Gladys closed the door, walked past me and said, 'Mr Crossfield, ma'm.' Then she bobbed and disappeared.

A woman moved towards me holding out her hand. 'Good morning, Tony,' she said. 'I'm Mrs Marshall, Catherine's mother. She's told me a lot about you.' She was tall and rather thin and wore a light grey dress that seemed to take away what little colour she had. Only in her hair which was pale gold could I see any resemblance to Catherine. Her lips had formed themselves into a smile as though she were on the point of saying, 'How *very* interesting,' and yet thinking of something quite different the whole time.

I took the hand she held out and shook it. 'Good morning,' I said, 'I hope I'm not too early.' As I spoke I felt a cold rivulet of sweat trickle down from my armpit.

She assured me I wasn't. 'Catherine will be down in a minute. Would you like to leave your books over there and come into the drawing-room for some coffee?' She pointed to a dark wooden chest, then moved silently across the carpeted floor to where a velvet bell-rope dangled, and tugged it. I set down my books and followed her into the drawing-room.

There was a fire burning in the grate and around the walls were pictures of sailing ships. Only one, a print of

Van Gogh's 'Sunflowers', struck a discordant note. Mrs Marshall noted my glance and smiled: 'Catherine gave it to me last Christmas and insisted I hang it in here. Do you like it?'

We chatted about paintings for a few minutes and then the door opened and Catherine came in, followed by Miss Keppner. I stood up, uncertain whether I should shake hands. I need not have worried. Miss Keppner walked across to me, smiled and held out her hand. '*Bonjour, m'sieur.* I did not think that we should meet again so soon.' And to my delighted astonishment I saw an unmistakable twinkle in her eye.

'*Bonjour, mam'selle,*' I replied, and as I answered her smile with my own I felt as though a great weight which had been pressing down on my heart had suddenly been spirited away.

17

SOME time later, while Catherine was struggling with a piece of oral translation, I found myself wondering how I could possibly have seen a bogey in Miss Keppner. The wish, I decided, had been father to the thought. It had suited my romantic idea to have the maiden guarded by a dragon, and what better dragon than a German governess? But as I looked at her now, sitting with her back to the sunlit window so that her short dark hair seemed haloed with gold, I realized that my dragon had never existed outside my imagination. The words and scenes on which I had based my creation shrank to their true proportions. All that remained was a young woman

with brown eyes, and brows that just met above the bridge of her short straight nose. I gazed at her dreamily, my eyes wandering from point to point like questing bees, until they finally alighted on the silver brooch that held together the lapels of her white blouse. There they rested until she raised her head and said, 'Perhaps you could help us, Mr Crossfield?'

I blushed and dropped my eyes to my book. 'I'm afraid I've lost the place,' I muttered lamely.

Catherine leant across and laid her finger on the page. If we had been alone I would have lifted her hand and kissed it, but Miss Keppner was looking at me, waiting for me to go on. 'Er, the flowers,' I translated, 'the perfumed flowers—no, *scented* flowers. The scented flowers were filling the garden with their heavy perfume and—er, thousands of bees darted in the——'

'Thousands, Mr Crossfield?'

'*Mielleux*,' I said. 'Isn't that thousands?'

'*Mille* is thousand.'

I glanced at Catherine but she looked blank. 'I give up,' I said.

'Is that what they teach you at school, Mr Crossfield? To give up? Really, you surprise me.' Her tone was light and bantering, but I had the feeling that I was somehow missing part of the joke. 'You should try and guess it,' she continued. 'Even if you are not sure, it is surely better to try than to (she hesitated momentarily) "give up".'

'I did guess,' I said. 'I guessed thousands.'

'It's "honeyed",' said Catherine, who had been consulting the vocabulary at the back of her book. '*Mielleux*, adjective, honeyed. Shall we write it down?'

Miss Keppner smiled. 'I think Mr Crossfield will remember it. I feel sure he has an excellent memory. Now shall we continue?'

I picked up the thread of my translation and the lesson proceeded.

18

MRS MARSHALL had invited me to stay to lunch, and when the lesson finished Catherine took me along to the bathroom to wash my hands. 'That's Ilse's bedroom,' she said as we passed a door, 'and that one's mine. Would you like to see it?'

'Very much.'

She walked ahead of me and opened the door. 'It's not very tidy I'm afraid.'

I went in after her and looked around. I was enchanted, not so much by the room as by the traces of its owner. A dropsical rag doll propped in the window niche; the heel of a red slipper peeping out from beneath the bed; a framed photo of a man in uniform.

'Is that your father?'

She picked it up. 'Yes. It's not awfully good but I like it. It was taken in Gib. See, that's part of the Rock in that corner.'

'Were you in Gibraltar, then?'

'No, worse luck. I lived with Aunt Trottie in Winchester. When Daddy came home we moved to Pompey.'

'Pompeii?' I had visions of erupting volcanoes.

'Pompey's Navy for Portsmouth, silly.' Turning her

back to me she put down the photograph and picked up a hairbrush. Then she began stroking her hair, her head tilted sideways so that her hair fell in a golden screen to her shoulder. I took a pace backwards and closed the door.

'Catherine.'

'Um.'

'Why didn't you let me come with you yesterday?'

For a second the brush paused and then resumed its downward course. 'Do you really want to know?'

'You said you'd tell me.'

'Well,' she laughed, 'if you *must* know it was because I wanted to go somewhere.'

'Where?'

'No, silly, *somewhere*. You know.'

I shook my head. 'How could I know?'

'Oh, *you*!' She put down the brush, gathered up her hair in her two hands and swung round. 'In plain English I wanted to go to the lavatory. Now are you satisfied?'

'Oh,' I said, and rarely can that word have held such a wealth of mortification.

'And now you can fix my ribbon for me.'

19

JUST before lunch the whole family congregated in the drawing-room to drink sherry. At first I had an uneasy suspicion that this must be in my honour, but Catherine assured me they did it every day. I was introduced to Captain Marshall. From the photograph Catherine had shown me I had assumed him to be

quite tall—certainly as tall as his wife—but this was not so. He had iron-grey hair cut very short so that it stood up like a brush all over his head and his eyes were the same vivid blue as his daughter's. He gripped my hand and looked at me so hard that I began to wonder if my neck was dirty. Releasing me at last he picked up a glass from the tray beside him, tilted his head and emptied it off in one go. Then he dabbed at his lips with a white handkerchief and said: 'Well, young man, what are you going to do? Write?'

'I haven't really made up my mind, sir.'

He picked up another full glass but this time he only sipped it. I took a sip at my own and smiled at him. Suddenly he called across the room: 'Trix! What was the name of that writer fellow Jack brought along? You know, friend of Mavis's.'

Mrs Marshall, for it was her he was addressing, mentioned a name. He repeated it for my benefit. 'D'you know him?'

'No, sir. I don't think so. Perhaps my father does.'

'Yes, I daresay. Birds of a feather, eh? So you haven't made up your mind what you want to be. Thought of the Navy?'

'Oh, Daddy, you *promised*!' Catherine had moved across to us and now stood beside me. 'No recruiting. Remember?'

The Captain wasn't in the least put out. 'Who's recruiting? I just asked him if he'd thought of the Navy. Well, have you?'

I risked a lie. 'As a matter of fact, sir, I have.'

'Glad to hear it. D'you smoke?'

'Well . . .'

'No one'll split on you.' He flicked open a gold cigarette case and held it out to me. I took one and waited while Catherine struck a match. As I was getting my cigarette alight Mr Soutar came into the room and moved towards us. 'D'you think there'll be a war?' asked Captain Marshall.

I thought he was addressing Mr Soutar and waited for him to reply.

'Well, *do* you?'

'Oh,' I said. 'Father thinks so.'

'He's a conchie, isn't he?'

'A pacifist.'

'Still, he's right. Forty-one'll see us in the soup again. Let's see, how old are you?'

'Nearly sixteen.'

'Same age as Cathy.'

'The best age, Cornelius,' said Mr Soutar, drifting into the conversation. 'At sixteen the world is your oyster: at fifty you know that it—ah, contains nothing but cultured pearls. The tragedy of life in a nutshell—or should it be in an oyster shell?'

Captain Marshall snorted. 'The tragedy of your life, old boy, is the thousand a year your mother left you.'

'True, true,' nodded Mr Soutar. 'And yet, you know, I sometimes wonder if I would have been any happier without it. The—ah, amateur has so many advantages over the professional. Just consider——'

'Some other time, Thomas,' said Captain Marshall, cutting him short. 'Lunch'll be getting cold.' He set down

his empty glass and stubbed out his cigarette. 'Fire away, Trix.'

And led by Mrs Marshall we filed through into the dining-room.

20

'I THINK Daddy's taken a fancy to you,' said Catherine. After lunch she had cycled with me as far as the road bridge over the Gribben, the border between the parishes of Cavingham and Fenley, and now we were leaning against the parapet and gazing down on the dark, swirling water.

'Probably he thinks of me as a possible recruit.' I affected to be offhand; nevertheless I was pleased by what she said.

'Maybe.'

I half hoped she would prolong the topic but her mind had already moved to other things. She picked up a pebble and flicked it out into the river. 'Do you think there'll be a war?' she said.

'Goodness knows. I suppose so.'

Another pebble followed the first. 'I'd rather like there to be one. I'd be a nurse like Mummy was. That was how she met Daddy.'

'You'd be gassed before you ever got into a hospital. They'd get the hopsitals first so that the doctors couldn't look after the wounded. In the next war we'll all be in the front line.' I was repeating things I'd heard my father's friends saying. The scenes I described had no reality for

me; in fact, for myself, I rather fancied the idea of being in uniform.

'Daddy'll be made a Commodore and we'll have heaps of money. Maybe you'll be on his staff. Would you like that?'

'Not me. I'll go into the Air Force.'

'Would your father let you?'

'He couldn't stop me. Besides I don't think he'd mind awfully.'

'But he's a con——'

'Yes, I know, but he's an intellectual one. I mean he *thinks* fighting's no good but he doesn't really *feel* it.'

'Did he say so?'

'Well, no, but it's true just the same.'

Catherine was silent for a time, then she said, 'I like your father, Tony.'

'He's all right,' I said, and added, 'I like yours too.'

She pushed herself back from the parapet and took hold of her bicycle. 'I'll see you tomorrow then, at eleven.'

As she began to manœuvre the cycle round I caught her by the arm. She paused at once, almost as though she had been expecting something like this.

'Must you go already?' It was not what I had wanted to say.

She nodded. 'Ilse's expecting me.'

I slowly released my grip and my hand slid down her arm until it rested on hers. 'Tomorrow, then.'

'Tomorrow.' She smiled and thrust herself away from the bridge. Her cycle gathered speed down the slope. I felt as though something was being pulled out of me.

'Catherine!' I called. 'Catherine—I love you.' But my voice betrayed me, for the last three words came out scarcely louder than a whisper, and though Catherine glanced back and waved I knew she had not heard my confession.

21

'TOMORROW.' How the word echoes in my mind as I recall those weeks in April; always 'Tomorrow'. I could not seem to realize that 'today' is for ever yesterday's 'tomorrow', and the weeks slid by without my telling Catherine of my love. I kept it like a treat always in store and lived on what I gleaned from day to day. It was enough for my purposes, for despite my disillusion over Miss Keppner part of me still regarded Catherine as the heroine of romance and myself as the knight errant. A phrase—a word even—would keep me occupied during the hours when she was not with me, and when she was I asked no more than her presence. My love for her was nourished by the air she breathed, by the tilt of her head and by the way she smiled.

It was Edna who brought me down to earth just in time. We were sitting in the kitchen one evening after supper. I was trying to write a poem to Catherine but it wasn't going very well, and she was reading her weekly magazine. She came to the end of her instalment and put the paper down. 'Well,' she said, 'only three more days left.'

I scribbled out the lines I had written and started

again. I had written only two words when the full import of what she had said struck me. I dropped my pencil and stared at her aghast. 'No,' I said, 'it can't be!'

'I'm right, Tony. See for yourself.' She pointed to the wall where a calendar was hanging. I ran across and stared at it. She was right of course. Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. Already as I stared at them they seemed to be slipping away, merging into the unthinkable horror of the summer term. 'God,' I muttered. 'Oh God. What can I do?'

Edna gripped her nose between her thumb and forefinger, an infallible sign that she was concentrating hard. For myself I could think only of trying to sprain my ankle or break my leg, and even those desperate plans were dashed a moment later when Edna said, 'Miss Catherine'll be going back too, won't she?'

I nodded. Catherine had spoken of it only last week. How was it possible I had not realized then? Three days! Seventy-two hours! I gave myself up to despair.

Suddenly Edna said: 'I've got it! Why don't you take her to Marchester to the pictures? Just the two of you. If you catch the half-past two train you'll be there just after three. You can have tea at Lyons—they do lovely teas—and then go to the pictures. Here, give us that paper: let's see what's on.'

I handed her the local newspaper. 'They'll never let us,' I said.

'Faint heart never won fair lady,' said Edna, licking her thumb and riffling over the sheets. ''Course they'll let you. Let's see now. Ah, what about this? Leslie Howard in *Pigm'lion*. He's ever so nice. Or how about Will Hay,

he's a proper scream. Glad laughed herself sick last time we saw him.'

'I haven't got any money,' I said.

'Ask your dad for some.'

'I couldn't possibly. What would I tell him?'

'Tell him the truth. Tell him you've worked like a nigger and you deserve a holiday.'

'There's still her people. I'm sure they'd never let us go. Especially Miss Keppner.'

'What's the good of jumping fences before you get to them? Ask your dad first, then when he's agreed you can tell her. Anyone'd think you didn't want to go.'

I sat down opposite her at the table, and picking up my pencil began doodling designs on the paper. Edna stared at me with scornful disapproval. 'Well,' she said finally, 'you're a one, and no mistake. Are you going to ask him or aren't you?'

'I don't know, Edna. It's a wonderful idea, but——'

'But!' she pounced on the word. 'If ifs n' ans were pots and pans we'd never need a tinker. There's you been talking about nothing else but her for three weeks and now it comes to it it's all ifs and buts. If I was her I know what I'd do all right.'

'What would you do?'

'I'd say if you don't care enough about me to take me out to the pictures you can go an' jump in a muck-heap and good riddance to bad rubbish.'

'But you don't understand——'

'Oh, don't I, Mister Romeo? I understand quite enough, thank you very much, and a good deal more than you might think.' She pushed back her chair and stood up.

'Writing poems,' she said, and the scorn in her voice was terrible. 'Do you think you'd be here now if your dad had spent his time writing poems to your mum? Sometimes you make me wonder what the world's coming to.' And with this final thrust she stumped out of the room.

I was still thinking about what she had said when she returned a few minutes later. She marched up to where I was sitting and planked her hand down flat on the table in front of me. When she lifted it I saw a folded one-pound note. 'There,' she said. 'Now there's nothing stopping you.'

Her gesture produced on me the effect her words had failed to do. I caught up her red, work-scarred hand and kissed it fiercely. Then I jumped up from the table and ran out of the kitchen along the passage and into the hall. Without pausing to consider what I was going to say I knocked on the door of my father's study, waited for the familiar, patient 'Come in', and turned the handle.

'I want to take Catherine to Marchester on Wednesday and I haven't got any money,' I said. 'Can you give me some, please?'

Father stubbed out his cigarette and swung round to face me. For one ghastly moment I thought he was going to refuse, then I saw his hand begin to move towards his breast pocket. 'How much do you want, old boy? Will two pounds do you?'

Two pounds! I'd never in my life had so much money at one time. I nodded, watching fascinated as he took out his wallet and extracted the notes. He handed them to me with a smile. 'Have a good time.'

That was all, no questions, nothing. Just the two pieces

of green paper which crackled as I held them. I looked from them to him. 'I'll bring back what I don't spend,' I said. 'It was just——'

But already he was turning away, reaching for his pen. 'That's all right,' he said. 'Go ahead and spend it.'

Clutching the money as though I was afraid he might snatch it from me, I ran back to the kitchen.

As soon as Catherine arrived next morning I told her of my plan. She listened carefully, nodding her head. 'I'd love to, Tony,' she said when I'd finished. 'I think it's a wonderful idea.'

'Your father'll let you?'

'I'm sure he will.'

'And Ilse?'

'Ilse!'

I was reassured. 'I'll bike back to Cavingham with you,' I said. 'It's not much fun riding in the dark by yourself.'

'That's all right, I'll ask Mummy to meet me in the car. She'll want to anyway.'

My face fell. This was to be our own affair and already others were sneaking in. 'Must she?' I asked.

Catherine looked at me in surprise. 'I thought you said biking in the dark wasn't much fun.'

'By yourself I mean. It's fine when there are two of you. Honestly, Cathy, I'd much rather she didn't meet you.'

'Well, all right, I'll ask her. I haven't got any lights for my bike though.'

Gladys has. She'll lend hers to you if you tell her what it's for.'

'You *have* thought of everything, haven't you?'

'Everything,' I echoed confidently. 'Everything.'

22

SINCE Tuesday was the last day of our lessons I had arranged to meet Catherine on Wednesday at Fenley station in time to catch the two-thirty train. I arrived with plenty of time to spare, put my bike in the cloakroom and bought the tickets. The minutes ticked past. I walked out on to the road and looked up the hill. Still no sign of her. The signal bell began to clack. I watched some men unloading coal from a truck and then went and had another look at the clock in the booking office. Twenty-five past—no, twenty-six; the minute hand had jumped on even as I watched it. Surely she was in sight by now. I recrossed the line and again peered up the hill. Someone was riding down towards the station, but even from that distance I knew it wasn't her. A host of ugly nightmares crowded into my mind. She must come, I told myself, she must, she must. Along the line a signal arm thumped into place. The door of the signal box opened and the signalman clattered down and began to close the gates. I ran back on to the platform and gazed up the line. Charlie, the clerk from the booking office, sauntered across ready to collect the tickets. He grinned at me. 'Wotcher, Tony.'

'Wotcher,' I muttered.

'What's eatin' you, boy?'

Just as I began to tell him I caught sight of the tell-tale squirt of smoke against the distant bridge. 'Christ!' I said bitterly, 'this would happen.'

'Here's someone a-comin',' said Charlie. 'Flamin' girt hurry too by the looks on't.'

It was Catherine all right. She was bent low over the handlebars and her legs were spinning so fast that they were almost a blur. As I ran down to meet her the train pulled in. I grabbed the bike from her, pushed her on to the platform and then dragged the bike behind me through the wicket gate. 'Climb in!' I called to her. 'Anywhere, it doesn't matter! I've got the tickets.' Then I dashed up to Charlie. 'Look after it for us, Charlie,' I said and thrust the bike at him.

'Right y'are, Tony. Hop in right smart.'

I found Catherine again and clambered aboard just as the train began to move. 'Lord!' I gasped, collapsing on to the seat beside her. 'What happened to you?'

She was still breathless from her ride and didn't answer at once, but rested her head back on the cushions and gazed up at the roof. A tiny muscle twitched in her jaw and I could see a pulse fluttering under the skin of her throat. The only other passenger, who had looked at us curiously when I got into the compartment, returned his attention to a detective novel.

Catherine lowered her head, gazed at him for a moment and then turned to me. 'I never thought I'd make it,' she said.

'Nor did I. What happened?'

She pushed her hair back from her collar and shook her head. 'The oddest thing, Tony. We lost the bike lamps.'

'What do you mean? How?'

'Perhaps I'd better begin at the beginning. Well, after I rang you yesterday tea-time to say it was all fixed and everything, I got hold of Jimmy and told him to see

my bike was all right—you know, pumped up and everything. Just before he went home he told Gladys to tell me he'd done it and everything was all right. I'd asked Gladys if I could borrow her lights and she'd agreed. She gave them to me and I left them on the kitchen dresser. I didn't think any more about it till after lunch today, when I went out to get my bike and bring it round to the front; and what do you think? One of the tyres of my bike was as flat as a pancake!'

'Good lord!' I said. 'What did you do?'

'I was in an awful stew. It was about a quarter to two then, and Mummy and Ilse had gone off in the car so I *had* to bike. I ran round looking for Jimmy, but of course it was his day off. So I asked Gladys if I could borrow her bike. She said I could and I was just about to get on it when I remembered the lights. I ran back into the kitchen to get them and—well, they'd gone. I *knew* I'd put them on the dresser and Gladys and Mrs Garfield had both seen them there and they swore they hadn't moved them.

'I ran everywhere looking for them but they'd vanished completely. I thought of ringing you up, until I remembered you'd have left by then. I asked everyone if they'd seen them and of course no one had. The last person I asked was Uncle Thomas. By then I was desperate. He hadn't seen them either but of course he solved the problem.'

'What did he do?'

'He gave me ten shillings and told me to buy some in Marchester. If I'd had any sense I'd have thought of it myself, but by then I was so hot and bothered I didn't know if I was coming or going. Anyway I made it, though

I've never biked so fast in my life. When I saw the gates shut and heard the train I thought I'd burst.' She drew in a great breath and let it out slowly. 'There, now you know everything.'

I was not so sure. The bike being punctured *and* the lamps missing, smacked of more than coincidence, and I told her so. She laughed. 'That's what Uncle Thomas said, but who'd have done it? Jimmy?'

'I don't know. Still, it seems strange to me.' I caught sight of the other passenger smirking at us over the top of his novel and changed the conversation.

23

AS SOON as we stepped off the train I knew instinctively that this day was going to prove momentous. It was as though the journey had drawn out finer and finer the invisible cords joining us to Cavingham and Fenley, until, at the instant we alighted on Marchester platform, they snapped, leaving us free.

Catherine sensed it as acutely as I did. I could tell from the way she looked about her as though everything she saw had been mysteriously transmuted into something rare and strange, and from the way she smiled when I left her for a moment and went to buy some cigarettes.

While I was waiting to be served at the kiosk I watched her standing where I had left her under the clock, gazing about her, still with that rapt expression and a half smile on her lips. And I saw, too, how men would glance at her and walk on and then turn their heads for another glance,

while she remained all the time serenely oblivious of their attention.

I bought my cigarettes and rejoined her. 'Where shall we go first?' I asked.

'I don't mind. Anywhere.'

'We'd better see about those lights then. Come on.' I took her by the hand and led her out of the station and up the hill towards the centre of the city.

We bought the lamps at the first shop we saw. Usually I accepted anything a salesman offered me even if it wasn't exactly what I wanted, but this time, for Catherine's benefit, I made a great point of seeing that they worked properly before we paid for them. I insisted on taking them to pieces and then reassembling them until the shop assistant was driven to weary sarcasm.

When we regained the street, the lamps safely stowed in my pockets, we both burst out laughing. 'You're sure the boolbs are all right, sir?' I stuttered, imitating the assistant's accent. 'Not too *bright* for you?'

'You were *awful*,' she said. 'Just *awful*.'

'Shall I go back and say we don't want them after all?'

'You wouldn't dare.'

'Oh, wouldn't I?' I made as if to turn back but she clutched my arm. 'If you did,' she said. 'If you did . . .'

'What if I did?'

'I—I wouldn't speak to you ever again.'

'You would. You know you would.'

'Just you try it and see.'

'All right.'

'No! No! Oh, Tony, *don't*. You'll give me a stitch.'

'Boolbs?' I said facetiously. 'Loovly bright boolbs? Daffodil boolbs?'

'His *face*, Tony! His *face*!' She propped herself against me and laughed till the tears ran down her cheeks.

'Eh, lass,' I said. 'Wot I always ses is I likes a coostermer what knows 'is own mahnd.'

'Oh, no,' she protested weakly. 'Stop it, please!'

But I couldn't stop. Wilder and yet more wild grew my fancies until poor Catherine had to lean herself against a nearby wall doubled up with hysterical laughter, and jam her fingers into her ears. Passers-by stared at us curiously and that only made us worse.

Eventually we managed to sober up a bit, but we were still simmering with it, and one only had to catch the other's eye to start us both off again. We tottered along the street, gasping and groaning, until we reached the foot of the castle mound. There we plumped down on a bench and waited while the effects slowly wore off.

At last, after I had smoked a cigarette and Catherine had combed her hair, we felt ready to continue. The question was where? Catherine slipped her comb back into her pocket, and looked up at the castle. 'Let's go up,' she suggested. 'I've always wanted to see it.'

Hand in hand we plodded up the steps.

We spent the next half an hour wandering round the museum, our footsteps echoing hollow in the dim corridors. We ended up in a long gallery of glass showcases filled with relics of Ancient Britain. The last case in the row was only half arranged; a few nondescript bronze articles and a small heap of printed cards. I pulled the lid of the case experimentally and found it was not locked.

Glancing round I caught Catherine's eye. 'Go on,' she said. 'I dare you.'

It was as though an arm had reached out from inside the case and grabbed me. Without a second's hesitation I lifted the lid, thrust in my hand and seized the first thing I saw. 'Quick!' I said. 'That way!'

We hurried through a doorway at the end of the room. As we turned the corner someone called after us. I heard feet padding through the room we had just left and my heart froze. 'Through here,' said Catherine, pulling me by the arm.

We found ourselves in a small, empty room with no door other than the one by which we had entered. 'We're stuck,' I said. 'Back, Cathy!'

But it was already too late. As we turned we saw our pursuer in the passage behind us. 'Oi!' he called. 'Can't you two read? No exit through 'ere.'

He blinked at us through steel-rimmed spectacles while we gaped back at him open-mouthed. 'We didn't see,' I stammered. 'I'm terribly sorry.'

To my surprise he smiled paternally. 'Ah's not your fault, 'eaps do it. I've been on at 'em for months t'keep the door locked or get a screen up or something. But will they? Not on your life. Keeps us exercised they think, runnin' up an' down. What a perishin' job!'

He was staring at Catherine as he spoke as though begging her sympathy. She smiled at him. 'It must be awfully dull for you.'

'Dull! I'll say it's dull, miss. Miles of perishin' fossils. Not that it's not interestin' in its way, mind you, but—well I ask you—*stones*! 'alf an acre of stones. Still we mustn't

complain. I might 'a' been breakin' the ruddy things on Dartmoor.'

I caught Catherine's eye and signalled for her to leave. She turned to him. 'Can you show us the quickest way out, please?'

He pointed down the room. 'Straight through there, miss, and the first on your left.' We thanked him and walked off, conscious of his eyes upon us until we finally turned the corner.

When we got outside into the open air I felt so weak at the knees I had to sit down. Catherine flopped on to the bench beside me. 'Phew!' she said, 'that *was* close. Why on earth did you do it?'

'You dared me,' I said. 'Here.' I held out the object I had stolen and had been clutching so tightly that it had left its imprint on my palm. It was a small ring, green with age and decorated with a curious design that seemed to be composed of four serpents linked in the form of a fylfot. 'Take it,' I said. 'A present. Something to remember me by.'

She took it from me and slipped it on to her finger. It fitted perfectly. 'It's lovely,' she said. 'I wonder how old it is?'

I lifted her hand in mine as though to examine the ring again, but instead kissed it. She let her hand rest against my mouth for a moment and then drew it slowly away. And all at once I felt the same sense of overwhelming compulsion that I had felt before when she had said: 'Go on. I dare you.' I caught her by the arm and turned her face towards me. 'I love you, Cathy,' I said. And this time my voice did not fail me.

I don't know what I'd expected her reaction to be. I hadn't even thought about it. I saw a tiny frown settling across her eyes and her lips beginning to tremble and suddenly I realized that she was going to cry. As I saw the tears begin to gather along her lower lids I pulled her gently towards me. 'Don't', I murmured. 'Don't cry. Please, Cathy.' I slipped one arm round her and with the other began stroking the hair back from her neck and ear.

After a time she lifted her head but kept her face turned from mine as though ashamed of her tears. I fumbled in my pocket for a handkerchief and passed it to her. 'Have a blow on this,' I said.

She took it from me and trumpeted loudly into it. Then she dabbed at her eyes. 'All right now?' I asked.

She nodded and turned to face me again. Her nose was a bit red and her eyes too, but to me she'd never looked more beautiful. I kissed her again, this time on the lips. As she drew away she leant towards my ear and whispered so softly I barely heard, 'I love you, too.'

24

THE rest of our expedition was uneventful. We had tea in the cafeteria of one of the big stores, and then, by common consent, went to see the Will Hay film. It seemed to both of us that *Pygmalion* smacked of 'Eng.Lit.', and 'Eng.Lit.' was school, purgatory, separation. At the mere thought of it a vague gloom descended upon us.

We reached the station a few minutes after ten, having

walked from the cinema. Catherine said she felt hungry so we went into the railway buffet and had coffee and sandwiches. While we ate we talked of the weeks ahead, exchanged our school addresses, and promised to write to each other. But our conversation was sporadic, and there were long periods of silence during which we contemplated the dismal prospect of being parted for thirteen weeks. There was the slight possibility that we would be able to arrange a meeting in London, but neither of us felt it was at all likely. Far better to be prepared for the worst and avoid disappointment.

The train was almost empty and we found a compartment to ourselves without any difficulty. We sat with our arms round each other's waist and Catherine rested her head against my shoulder. During one long interval of silence I thought she had fallen asleep but suddenly she said, 'Tony, do men ever fall in love with each other?'

I told her they did.

'Then women do too, I suppose?'

'Yes, I suppose so.'

'But you've never heard of two doing it?'

'I think I have. Why?'

'Oh, nothing.'

There was another pause. Then, 'Tony?'

'Yes.'

'What do men *do*?'

'Well, kiss I suppose.'

'Don't you know?'

'They do. They kiss and—well, they go to bed with each other.'

'Oh, *that*. Women do *that*.'

'How do you know?'

'I just do. Ilse——'

The door of the compartment was thrust open and the ticket collector came in. Catherine sat up and I hunted out the tickets. When he had gone I asked her what she had been going to say about Ilse, but she pretended she couldn't understand what I was talking about and nothing I could say would make her tell me.

25

WE WERE the only passengers to alight at Fenley. Charlie had long since gone off duty but we tracked down our bicycles and I fitted the lamps we had bought on to Catherine's machine.

We had the road to ourselves. The night was breathlessly calm and a half moon ghosted across dark canyons of space to slide behind translucent tatters of high cloud. The only sound came from the faint squeak of our cycles, the crunch of our tyres veering into the dusty margin at the road's edge, and from a fox barking in the pale fields beyond the hedge to our right.

We crossed the main road and coasted down the long incline to the bridge. In the distance the lights of the Hall seemed to wink at us. We reached the slope of the bridge and slowed almost to a stop. 'Let's get off,' I said. 'There's heaps of time.'

We propped up our bikes and leant over the parapet. The moon's reflection stretched out on the water like a strip of silver indiarubber, broke into fragments and reassembled itself. The river lapped and gurgled under the

arch. I put my arm about Cathy's waist and felt the slow beating of her heart, and all at once I was filled with a harsh, savage despair that all this was coming to an end. I began to curse bitterly, whispering the ugly passionate words out over the dark water, while tears smarted in my eyes, blurring the reflections. At last all that was left was one question. 'Why?' I said. 'Why?'

She did not know the answer; neither of us knew it. If there was one at all it lay far beyond the realms of our comprehension in the world where thirteen weeks was something less than a lifetime. She lifted her hand and with her fingers stroked the tears from my cheeks. Then she pressed her cheek against mine. I began to say something but she shushed me and we stood in silence, gazing out across the moonlit woods and fields, conscious only of an unfathomable sadness and of the warmth of each other.

How long we stood like that I do not know but I felt Cathy sigh and knew that we must go. We retrieved our bikes and set off slowly on the last stage of our journey. Five minutes later we turned in past the dark lodge of the Hall, our lights flickering over the white bars of the gate and splashing on the ochre gravel of the drive. The house loomed up before us, massive as a prison, with lights glowing behind its curtained windows.

We cycled round to the back, bumping over the uneven flagstones, and dismounted. Cathy heaved open the garage door and switched on the light. I turned off the lamps on her bike and wheeled it inside. As we were closing the door I heard the sound of approaching footsteps. We both turned and saw a shadowy figure emerge from the darkness of the yard. Even before Cathy called

out I knew it was Miss Keppner, and that she had been waiting for us. I turned my back and fumbled with the latch on the garage door, while Cathy left my side and walked towards her. When I turned round again I saw that Miss Keppner had taken Cathy in her arms and was kissing her. I picked up my bike and climbed on to it. 'Good-bye,' I called.

Cathy broke loose and ran across to me. 'Aren't you coming in? Just for a minute? Do, Tony.'

I shook my head, not trusting myself to speak, conscious of Miss Keppner watching us. Cathy put out her hand and touched me on the arm. I could see her eyes in the moonlight, dark and perplexed. 'Good-bye then,' she whispered.

I stabbed down hard on the pedals and left her standing there.

26

THAT summer term I remember only as a sort of grey interlude measured out by the arrival of Cathy's letters. It was as though I were only half aware of what was going on about me and went blindly through the motions of day-to-day existence, guided by habit. Even the prospect of the examination seemed unreal, though I worked harder than I had ever done, using study as a drug to tide me through the lengthening days. And I wrote to Cathy incessantly. I wrote in the evenings, long diary letters carried over from one day to the next. I would creep out of the dormitory on the pretext of going to the lavatory and sit wrapped in my

dressing-gown on the bathroom windowsill, writing until my eyes ached and the paper became a blur. Then I would hold it up and catch the last glow of the fading twilight to read what I had written; stumbling finally back to bed to fall into a sleep that was more like a coma of exhaustion than anything else.

Cathy's letters were shorter than mine and more matter-of-fact. I read each one through so many times that I soon had whole pages off by heart and when no one was around I would recite them to myself like poems, trying to give each word and phrase the inflexion and cadence I imagined she would have used had she been saying it. We always ended our letters with the words 'Only 60 more days', 'Only 58 more days', ticking them off as prisoners scratch out the days of their sentence on the cell walls. Thus did May slip into June and June into July.

With July came the examination, and even of that I have only a generalized recollection; the sun blazing in through the netted windows of the gymnasium and the dust motes dancing in the slanting beams; the back of the boy ahead of me bent over his desk; and from all sides the sound of frantic scratching as the pen-nibs scrabbled like cockroaches across the papers.

I remember a letter I got from Cathy soon after the examination had begun in which she asked me what questions I'd answered in the first paper. It struck me as odd that, though separated by so many miles, we were both doing the same thing at the same time; and often in the papers that followed I would stop writing to wonder if perhaps she was answering the identical question.

When the examination ended all purpose went out of the term. I cut the few lessons which were organized for us and spent the days wandering in the park, sometimes with friends but mostly on my own. Whole afternoons I passed lying on my back, half dozing, or staring up at the clouds sailing serenely across the azure sky. I dreamt of Cathy without end, planning out in infinite detail the days that lay ahead, until my longing for her became like a physical pain which I could relieve only by bouts of furious activity. Time and again I risked my neck climbing the highest trees in the park and once slaved for three days with pick and shovel helping to excavate a new long-jump pit. Anything to pass the days more quickly. Luckily for me the School Certificate class was always regarded as privileged once the examination was over and my anti-social inclinations passed without attracting undue attention. At last a letter arrived from Cathy which ended with the words 'Only 2 more days'. I received it on the last day of the term.

27

CATHY had arranged to stay with a school friend in Battersea for two days before travelling down to Cavingham, and I persuaded a companion to perform a similar service for me. I travelled up to Paddington with the school party. When we arrived I apologized to my friend for not accompanying him to his home, presented him with my attaché case and hurried to the nearest telephone booth.

No sooner had I closed the door behind me than I felt the familiar tenseness in the pit of my stomach. I picked up the directory, hunted through it and found the number I wanted. I pushed down the two pennies, dialled, and waited. In the booth next to mine a woman was talking. Our eyes met through the glass and we stared blankly at each other. All the time her lips were quacking away soundlessly.

'Hello!'

In my nervousness I nearly pressed the wrong button. 'Hello,' I said. 'Can I speak to Miss Catherine Marshall, please?'

'Who is that speaking?'

'Tony Crossfield.'

'Oh, Mr Crossfield, this *is* a surprise!'

'*Miss Keppner!*'

I was momentarily stunned. I don't think my shock would have been any greater if my father had suddenly spoken on the other end of the line. During the past thirteen weeks I had hardly given Ilse a thought. Cathy and no one else had been my whole concern, not Cathy-plus-Ilse. Nor had Cathy ever mentioned the possibility that Ilse might be with her. Yet how could it have happened without her knowing about it?

'Hello. Are you still there?'

I collected my thoughts. 'Sorry, Miss Keppner. Yes, we broke up today and since I'm staying in London for a few days——'

'You thought you would like to see Catherine. But of course.'

'Is she there?'

'I'm afraid she's not. Would you like me to give her a message?'

'When will she be back?'

'At about tea-time.'

'Oh well, it doesn't matter, I'll ring again later. Good-bye.'

'Good-bye, Mr. Crossfield.'

As I replaced the receiver it crossed my mind to wonder why she never called me Tony.

28

WHAT really upset me was that Cathy had not told me about Ilse. It was my pride which was smarting. During the period of our separation I had grown to assume that there were no secrets between us. I had come to look on Cathy as my own possession. Thus I was ready to see this incident as little less than a betrayal.

There were still two hours to go before I could reasonably ring again. I debated whether to go to my friend's home in Hampstead. Finally I decided to catch a bus to Battersea.

I sat in the front seat on the top deck and stared down at the traffic. I had no plan and was guided solely by my impulse to see Cathy as soon as possible. I reasoned that since Ilse knew that I was in London and that I intended to see Cathy, it couldn't make much difference whether I telephoned first or appeared in person. Besides, there was just a chance I might see her before Ilse had an opportunity to talk to her.

The bus reached Chelsea Embankment and turned on to Battersea Bridge. A high haze dulled the sun and gave the river a sluggish, leaden appearance. It was nearly low tide and a few gulls were squabbling and circling over the mud-banks. Along the Embankment the trees looked almost mauve. I got off on the southern bank, asked a passer-by for directions, and began to walk towards the park.

I saw Cathy long before she saw me. She was walking along the path towards me and gazing across at a tug towing a string of lighters upstream. She was wearing her school uniform. Over one arm she carried a blazer and from her other hand dangled a panama hat. There was no one with her.

The instant I saw her I forgot all about Ilse and my injured vanity. 'Cathy!' I called. 'Cathy!' and began running towards her. I saw her start as she heard her name and then she turned. For an instant she stood rooted in surprise. Then the blazer fell to the ground, the hat likewise. 'Tony!' she cried. 'Oh, Tony!' and she was in my arms.

We kissed as though we were both consumed with an unquenchable thirst, clasping each other so tight that it hurt. Had any stranger been at hand he would certainly have thought us mad or at least delirious. We spoke nonsense, breaking in mid-sentence to laugh, neither listening to the other. During our separation our love had grown into a passion. We had become peerless in each other's eyes. Yet I realize now that had it not been for those long weeks apart, doubt and mistrust springing up like weeds would probably have choked our love to death inside a

month. As it happened we had each been forced to love an image of the other, and now we could see the reality only through the web of the dream.

It was some time before I remembered Miss Keppner, and by then my earlier anxiety seemed ridiculous. I told Cathy of the 'phone call and how surprised I had been, but I told it as a joke against myself. The explanation was so absurdly simple that, when I heard it, I could not understand why it had not occurred to me before. For the past three years it had been Miss Keppner's duty to take Cathy to and from her school and through this she had got to know a number of Cathy's school friends and their parents. The parents of Jenny, the girl Cathy was now staying with, had become very friendly with her and she often came to see them on her visits to London. She was, as Cathy put it, regarded almost as 'one of the family'. Thus was the mystery explained.

We walked back slowly through the park and talked of the two months ahead of us. Cathy's birthday fell on August 20th, three weeks before mine, and she told me of the party she was planning. She had already invited a number of her school friends down to stay and there would be dancing and games until midnight.

'I can't dance,' I told her.

'I'll teach you.' She dismissed my objection perfunctorily and swept on. 'I'm going to hang Chinese lanterns all over the garden and in the trees by the lake. I can just see it, can't you?'

'It sounds wonderful.'

'It *is* wonderful. But that's not all. For midnight I've got the best idea of all.'

'Go on.'

'Hans is going to bring his guitar and I'll row him out on the lake and he'll sing to us!'

'Ilse's brother?'

'Yes. I haven't asked him yet, but I'm sure he will.'

'What if it rains?'

'Oh *you*!' She shook my arm impatiently. 'Anyone would think you didn't like the idea. Of course it won't rain. Not on my birthday.'

So confident was she that I was won over. The pictures she drew appealed to my romantic imagination, and soon I was outdoing her in ideas. 'Why not a masked ball,' I suggested, 'and fancy dress?'

'Oh, Tony, what a *wonderful* idea!' She clapped her hands in delight. 'A masked ball! Why didn't I think of that? We must tell Jenny and Ilse. Come on!' She caught me by the hand and began running along the path towards the park gates.

29

WE WERE both out of breath by the time we reached the house. Cathy leant against the porch puffing and blowing while I rang the bell. We heard footsteps descending the stairs, then the door opened and there was Ilse. Her eyebrows lifted a fraction as she saw me. 'You are an early bird, Mr Crossfield.'

'I met her in the park,' I explained.

Cathy nodded, still out of breath.

'You are too soon for tea.' Ilse stood back to let us in. 'But you look as though you both need a wash. What have you been doing?'

'Tony had a marvellous idea for the party,' said Cathy. 'Go on, Tony, tell her.'

I outlined my suggestion while we walked upstairs. Hardly had I finished before Cathy broke in. 'Isn't it wonderful, Ilse?'

For some obscure reason I had expected Ilse to object, but to my surprise she was almost as enthusiastic as Cathy herself. We went into the bathroom and while I was washing my hands Cathy stood in front of the long wall mirror and Ilse sketched in with deft movements of her hands the dress she planned Cathy should wear. She gathered up Cathy's hair, bunched it forward over the top of her head and then fixed it in place with some slides from her own head. When it was done Cathy turned to me. 'Do you like it?'

I nodded, awestruck by the transformation. She looked surpassingly lovely. Ilse smiled at me. 'There, Mr Crossfield!'

'What about the dress?' I asked.

'It will be of dark blue velvet with a wide skirt. I shall make it myself so that it fits her like a glove.' She ran her hand caressingly down over Cathy's breast and against her waist. 'Then here it will flare out, so. The collar and the hem will be of silver lamé but so discreet. Ah, she will be the belle of the ball! Everybody will fall in love with my little mouse.'

I caught Cathy's eye and smiled.

'What will you wear, Tony?'

I shrugged. 'I'll think of something. Perhaps Miss Keppner will help me.'

'Yes, do, Ilse.' Cathy began unfastening the slides and handing them back to Miss Keppner. 'Think of a costume for Tony.'

'Why not a court jester? Would you like that, Mr Crossfield?'

'Do stop calling him "Mr Crossfield",' said Cathy. 'It makes him sound about fifty. And, Tony, you must call her Ilse. Now move over and let me wash.'

'I think I'd like to go as a matador,' I said.

Ilse finished arranging her hair and sat down on the edge of the bath. 'Yes,' she said thoughtfully, 'that would suit you. You would have to wear your hair in a pig-tail.'

'Not me. I'll be a pig-tailless matador with a cape lined with scarlet silk.' I caught hold of a bath towel and swirled it around me. 'Toro!' I cried.

Cathy laughed. 'Uncle Thomas can be a bull, and we'll arrange a bull-fight. Oh, Ilse, it's going to be the most wonderful party ever. Hurry up, August the twentieth!' Seizing the towel from me she waved it in the air and then flung her arms round my neck and kissed me.

Without saying a word Ilse got up and walked out of the room.

'Oh Lord!' I said. 'Now you've done it.' But I wasn't really perturbed. I was too sure of myself and of Cathy for that.

Cathy looked puzzled. 'Do you think she minded?'

'What do you think?'

'Oh dear.' She clicked her tongue in annoyance. 'Why didn't I have more sense?'

I kissed her again. 'What does it matter? She'd have found out sooner or later anyway. As a matter of fact I thought she'd have guessed long ago.'

But Cathy wasn't really listening to what I said. She handed me the towel. 'I'd better go and see her,' she said. 'You wait here.'

'But what if someone comes in?' I protested. 'I haven't been introduced yet. What shall I say?'

'They're all out. Anyway, I'll only be a moment.' And with that she was gone.

I hung the towel over the rail and began to comb my hair. Within a minute Cathy was back. 'Well?' I asked.

'She's locked her door, Tony. She won't answer.'

'That settles it then. Probably she's getting changed.'

'Don't be silly.'

'What's silly about that?'

Cathy looked at me quickly, as though she were about to explain, and then seemed to think better of it. 'I'll take you down to the drawing-room and then I'll try again.'

I allowed myself to be led downstairs. It seemed to me that Cathy was making an awful fuss about nothing and I said as much. She shook her head. 'You don't know Ilse like I do.'

'What is there to know?'

'I can't explain now. There isn't time.'

We reached the drawing-room and she opened the door and pushed me inside. 'How long are you going to be?' I asked.

'Not long.'

The door closed and I heard her feet on the stairs. Then there was a prolonged pause. I opened the door and

listened. Silence. I tiptoed to the foot of the stairs and strained my ears. I fancied I could hear voices, but it was impossible for me to make out what was being said and in the end I went back to the drawing-room.

It seemed a long time before I heard Cathy returning. I got up from the chair in which I was sitting, walked across to the window and stared out.

'Tony.'

I turned towards her. 'All right now?'

She closed the door carefully behind her and then stood with her back to it facing me. I stared at her. The room seemed suddenly to have become very cold. 'You've been crying!' I exclaimed. 'Cathy, what's happened?'

I ran to her and caught her by the shoulders. 'Cathy, darling. What's the matter?'

Her face seemed unnaturally pale, and the shadows under her eyes to have deepened almost to bruises. She took a deep breath, looked at me and then away. 'I told her,' she said.

'Told her? About us?'

She nodded.

'What did she say?'

'It—I—oh, Tony!' The misery she had been suppressing rose and engulfed her. She clung to me and sobbed as if her heart were broken. Bewildered and amazed, I did my best to comfort her, but part of my mind was distracted by the thought that at any moment the others might return and find us there.

Gradually, as her grief subsided, I was torn between curiosity to know what had caused it and fear lest my questions should bring it back again. I took out my hand-

kerchief and dabbed at her cheeks. 'There,' I said. 'It's all over now.'

A vast sigh shuddered through her. 'I'm sorry,' she said at last. 'I didn't mean to. I just couldn't help it.'

I smiled encouragingly. 'Feeling better?'

She nodded and blew her nose. I said nothing, waiting for her to begin. I watched her screw up the handkerchief into a small, damp ball and transfer it from one hand to the other.

'I hate her for making you cry,' I said at last.

To my surprise Cathy shook her head. 'You mustn't hate her,' she said. 'You see . . .' She looked into my eyes and smiled tearfully. 'No, you don't see, do you?'

'No, I don't.'

She gazed at me hard for a moment, while yet another sigh rose and ebbed within her. Outside in the street a taxi hooted cheerfully. She glanced at the window and then having come to some sort of decision she said flatly, 'You see, Tony, Ilse loves me too.'

I looked at her blankly and my incomprehension must have shown plainly on my face, for she smiled again and laid her hand against my cheek. 'I don't know what you mean,' I said at last. 'What's that got to do with it?'

And suddenly I remembered the conversation we had had in the train coming back from Marchester. 'You mean like men?' I said. 'When you said that about men "falling in love"? You mean she loves you like that?'

I did not express myself clearly but she knew what I meant.

'But that's not real love,' I said. 'Not like us.'

'That's what I told Ilse.'

I shook my head. The whole world seemed suddenly to have gone topsy-turvy. I clutched at the nearest straw. 'But you don't love her like that, do you?'

She was silent.

'Cathy!' It was a cry of despair. 'Cathy, you *can't*!'

Her eyes were dark, anguished and confused. 'I don't know,' she said slowly. 'Tony, I just don't know.'

30 IT WAS, I suppose, at that moment that my love for Cathy shifted on to another plane. Hitherto, although I had been aware of the external world, it had, in a sense, been kept at bay. True it had enforced our separation, but this I recognized as one of the clauses of a tacit agreement which we had to abide by if our love was to be tolerated. Our private world lay within the confines of the external one and our rent, the price of happiness, was our participation in everyday existence. I did not wish it otherwise. Even in my letters to Cathy I had never put forward any pointlessly romantic suggestions for, say, stowing away aboard a liner bound for the South Seas, because such plans would inevitably have brought us into conflict, and ignominious defeat at 'Their' hands. Our only hope, and I had realized it almost at the moment I first met Cathy, was to play the game according to 'Their' rules. It was a game in which our opponents held all the aces but one, and that one was our love. Now I was no longer sure that the final ace was mine.

I do not wish to give the impression that at the time I

saw everything as clearly as I have stated it here; it is too neat, too clear-cut by far, to give a true impression of the position as I was then aware of it. But in its essentials it is correct. What I did realize was that somehow, unbeknown to me, 'They' had succeeded in breaking into our world and were even now undermining its foundations. Cathy was no longer my exclusive property—had perhaps never been—and I must fight for her with every weapon I could command.

Now, as we stood facing each other, I was aware of this change only dimly. I saw that, overwrought as Cathy was, nothing was to be gained by questioning her further at the moment. Instead I forced myself to smile. 'Terry will be wondering where I've got to,' I said. 'I suppose I ought to be getting back.'

She sighed again, this time with relief, and I knew I'd said the right thing.

She walked with me to the front door. On the top step I paused and turned. 'I'll see you again, won't I?' I said. 'Before we leave London, I mean?'

She nodded, smiled tremulously, and then the door had closed, shutting her off from me. As the catch clicked I began to reproach myself for having surrendered her so easily. I gained the street and glanced up at the windows on the first floor, but if I had hoped to catch Ilse peeping down at me I was disappointed; the panes were blank; not even a curtain moved. I turned my steps once more in the direction of the park while the events of the afternoon and the words Cathy had spoken churned over and over endlessly in my mind.

It had been my intention to wait for her to make the

next move but by half past nine that evening my resolution had grown weaker than a cobweb, and a few minutes before ten I made some excuse to my friends and went out to telephone from the privacy of a call-box. I dialled the number and waited. Finally a man's voice answered. I asked to speak to Cathy. I heard him put down the receiver and the sound of his footsteps walking away. A door banged and then Cathy was on the line.

'Yes?' she said. 'Yes? Oh, *Tony*!' and the way she said it told me all and more than I wanted to know.

I told her I wanted to arrange a meeting for the next day, but the simple truth was that I wanted to hear the sound of her voice, so when we had fixed a meeting place I started her off on the subject of the party and she chattered away happily for five minutes while I kept her going with monosyllabic promptings. At length, when that topic was exhausted, I began telling her how much I loved her. 'Oh don't, Tony, don't,' she kept laughing in protest, but I wouldn't stop even when she threatened to ring off. Then someone must have called to her, for I heard her say, 'Just a minute,' then to me, 'I've got to go now, Tony,' and finally, whispering over the line came the words, 'Good night—my darling.' There was a click and the line went dead.

I stood there for a moment gazing stupidly at the receiver in my hand and then replaced it. How strange the words had sounded, not like Cathy at all. Yet assuredly she had said them. I repeated them to myself and, as I did so, I was filled with a mysterious exaltation. To me at that heady moment, no obstacle seemed insurmountable. The world was my oyster, Cathy its pearl, and my love for her

expanded outwards like the warmth of the sun, until it embraced the whole of humanity, the very universe itself.

31

I HAD hoped that I would be able to travel down to Fenley with Cathy, but when we met she told me that her father and mother had come up to London by car and that she and Ilse would be going back with them. She said she thought there might be room for me as well and asked me if I'd like to go with them. Some obscure reason prompted me to refuse, and though a moment later I regretted my decision I could not humble myself sufficiently to change my mind. I even went so far as to say that long car journeys always made me feel sick. Cathy accepted it philosophically and I was left with the rather hollow satisfaction of hearing her say she would much rather have gone with me. We walked slowly down to Trafalgar Square and sat on a bench beside the fountains. I knew we were thinking of the same thing, but both of us lacked the courage to come out with it. Cathy made a desultory attempt to reopen the subject of her projected party, but it needs two to make a conversation of that type, and she soon lapsed into silence.

Luckily she had more sense than I had. Suddenly she laughed. 'Aren't we silly,' she said, 'just sitting here like two stuffed dummies. After all, it isn't as if we see each other every day. Go on, tell me what you did after you left yesterday.'

Relieved, I recounted what had befallen me since I left her. 'Now it's your turn.'

I noticed she was wearing the ring I had given her and was turning it round and round on her finger. 'You mean about Ilse, don't you?' she said.

As she said it I was assailed by a curious feeling of distaste. Did I, after all, want to hear about Ilse? Some instinct, no doubt engendered in the days when Cathy had been my heroine of romance, intervened to protect the fading ideal, and it was on the tip of my tongue to prevent her telling me. But though I did not act on my impulse, my motive for not doing so was far from being plain curiosity, rather was it the first stirring of my realization that if I wanted Cathy I would have to have her as she was and not as I had dreamed her to be.

'Tell me about her,' I said.

'What do you want to know?'

'Well . . .' I paused. 'Tell me what happened yesterday.'

Round and round went the ring, its crest vanishing and reappearing from behind her fingers. 'She was crying,' she said. 'I heard her crying the first time when the door was locked.'

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'I don't know,' she said, and I knew she spoke the truth.

'Go on.'

'I left you down in the drawing-room and went back and she let me in and—oh, Tony, *must* I?'

She sounded so distressed I half relented, yet the moment when I could have let her off had passed, and now there was no turning back. 'Yes,' I said brutally, 'you must.'

She sighed, and when she spoke again her words were without emphasis, like a recitation learned by heart and imperfectly understood. 'She called me names, horrible names, and you too. She was crying all the time. Then she started kissing me; but not like we kiss.' There was a long pause. 'She'd never kissed me like that before. And then I told her about us and how we loved each other and she began to cry more than ever.' She paused, her hands folded in her lap, and stared out across the square at the plumes of the fountains.

'Was that all?' I asked.

She shook her head.

'Well?'

She turned to face me and I was shocked to see how pale she had gone. Her eyes seemed to look right through mine. 'It doesn't matter,' I said. 'I don't really want to know.'

But she went on as though she had not heard me. 'She told me that when she was my age in Germany, some policemen came to the house. They took her sister and started hitting her and calling her a dirty Jew and then four of them held her arms and legs and they threw her on to a table——'

'Don't,' I said. 'Don't, Cathy.'

'She said that if ever anyone did things like that to me she would kill them.'

She frowned as though she were trying to bring my face into focus. The tenseness went from her cheeks and lips. 'There wasn't much else,' she said simply.

There was still one question I had to ask. 'But now she knows about us, what will she do?'

'It's all right. Last night, after you'd 'phoned, she came and saw me in bed. She said she'd been upset and was terribly sorry for what she'd said and that she'd love me just the same. So there's nothing to worry about now, is there?'

'No,' I said, taking her hands in mine. 'There's nothing to worry about now.'

And getting up from our bench we walked across the square to where a man was selling popcorn. We began to feed the pigeons.

32

THAT meeting was our last in London. The following day I travelled down to Fenley and was met as usual by Angela and Sal. Our family reunion was a strangely subdued affair for more than half my mind was on Cathy. I took the first opportunity to telephone to the Hall and find out if she had arrived, only to be told that their plans had been altered at the last moment and they were staying on in London for another two days. There was nothing I could do about it except curse myself for having turned down the offer of the car ride. I thought I detected the machinations of Ilse in the delay and was filled with foreboding, for despite Cathy's assurance I could not wholly convince myself that, as far as Miss Keppner was concerned, there was nothing to worry about.

However, my gloom was dispelled when, that same evening, Cathy rang me from London to explain that quite unexpectedly her father had had to report to the

Admiralty. She told me also that her parents had agreed unconditionally to the party, and had asked her to extend her invitations to include Angela and my father as well. Furthermore Hans had agreed to come on condition that he could bring a friend of his who played the accordion. 'So you see,' she ended, 'everything's working out beautifully.'

'Yes,' I agreed, and could not resist adding, 'just so long as it doesn't rain.'

I heard her laughing. 'If you say that once more I shan't invite you.'

I promised I wouldn't and, after exchanging love, we rang off.

Although my mind was set at rest it was no real compensation for the fact that Cathy was a hundred miles away, and I spent the next two days mooning about the house, unable to concentrate on anything for more than a few minutes at a time. I succeeded in exasperating everybody by turns, and they were almost as relieved as I was when finally Cathy 'phoned to say they had arrived at the Hall. Pausing only to tell Edna not to lay supper for me, I got out my bicycle and headed for Cavingham.

33

I HAVE been told—in fact I have said so myself more than once—that at the moments when we are happiest we are unaware of being happy. Only on looking back can we say with truth, and often with surprise, that at any precise instant in the past we

were indisputably happy. Yet, if this is indeed so, I am at a loss to explain the state of mind I enjoyed during the three and a half weeks immediately prior to Cathy's party. For there is in my mind no doubt at all that during that time I was aware of true bliss. Not realizing that happiness is essentially finite I assumed that it would last for ever, or to be more exact, I just didn't think about it at all. I lived in a kind of golden dream; a fool's paradise, perhaps, but what would I not give now to be once more that fool and able to re-enter it!

The days pass in review before me, bright as flames. Long summer days which, in retrospect, always seem to begin in the same way, with the mist gathered in milky folds across the fens, curling in wisps and coifs over the water-meadows, and clinging caressingly to the trailing willow fronds along the river bends. As the sun rises higher, strident as a trumpet in the cloudless sky, the mist gradually disperses. The silence gives place by infinitesimal degrees to a subdued murmur of insects; the click and whirr of grasshoppers; the sonorous booming of bumble bees; until, when the crystal clearness has dimmed to a faint blue haze, the love-sick wood-pigeons begin to burr throatily from among the high beeches. And through all this, accepting it as a matter of course, as much a part of it as the scene itself, pass Cathy and myself.

If there were days when we were not in each other's company I have forgotten them. I became almost a stranger in my own home and a permanent guest in hers, though the majority of the time we spent out of doors. Our friendship (only we ourselves, and perhaps Ilse, looked on it as anything else) seemed to amuse our families, and we

were too absorbed in each other to spoil their fun. Captain Marshall referred to us jocularly as 'the love birds' and seemed mildly surprised when our laughter was the loudest of all. But the most unexpected reaction came from Ilse. Where I had been prepared for fierce opposition I found only sweetness and understanding. She went out of her way to be pleasant to me and, after my initial surprise, I went more than half-way to meet her. I told myself that I had misjudged her, and, paradoxically, found her love for Cathy more of a bond of sympathy than a cause for jealousy. Cathy herself was delighted at the way things had worked out, and never wearied of telling me how she had known all along that it would happen. If I did have any doubts of Ilse, and truly I think I had none, I kept them hidden even from myself.

The days slid by imperceptibly as the river and each one brought new delights which I now remember only as a series of shimmering visions of Cathy. One is of her sitting on the landing-stage near the boathouse and, though we bathed in the lake many times, for some reason this particular picture stands out achingly vivid in my mind's eye. I am still in the water, looking up at her from below. She has just climbed out and is sitting with her feet dangling, her hands clasping the boards at either side of her. She is leaning forward towards me and laughing as she splashes water at me with her feet. Her sunbright hair, dark at the ends where it has been immersed, clings to her shoulders and a trickle of water has run diagonally down along her neck into the softly shadowed cleft above her breasts, to be lost behind the blue screen of her costume. That is all. Just Cathy, and the sunlight, and

the water drops glittering like diamonds. Just that. One moment among many such which has somehow contrived to remain separate, until within its slight compass it has contained them all and can make my heart ache even as I recall it.

And there are others, many of them, each in their own way as powerful to hurt or to delight. There is the time when, having dragged the little green and white boat over into the river, we rowed for miles upstream into the vast wilderness of the fens, then poled ourselves through the curtain of reeds to discover a new mere, unknown, we told ourselves, to any but the wild water birds. We may well have been right at that, for the fens change their shape during the floods, and reeds grow fast, but right or not it was our discovery, a part of the external world that had somehow been overlooked and could therefore be claimed legitimately for our own. We moored to the only clump of reeds that stood plumb in its centre, ate our lunch, and then lay back side by side and gazed up at the sky. By and by Cathy fell asleep. I could hear her breath, soft and regular, and stretching out my hand I laid it on her breast. So gently did I move that she did not wake, or perhaps she only pretended to sleep; whichever it was I let my hand remain there holding her breast more lightly, more tenderly than if it had been a fledgeling which I had found by the wayside and now held wonderingly cupped in my palm. And that moment, too, has remained for me as something infinitely precious, infinitely pure; when I lay drowsed by the hot sun, listening to the invisible moorhens cluck and splash beyond the boat's side, and felt beneath my fingers Cathy's heart, seeming to take its

slow rhythm from the heavy slumbrous heat of that far-off August afternoon.

I could go on indefinitely, for one picture recalls another and that one yet more, until it seems to me that my whole life would not be time enough to do justice to those few brief weeks. For something always calls me back. Perhaps it is the ghost of Cathy herself, for she, too, wherever she may be, must surely remember. Or is it, after all, only a trick, a sort of mirage beckoning me back instead of forward, until like a child, but without a child's excuse of knowing no better, I cry for the moon? I do not know. Nor do I want to know.

34

MEANWHILE the preparations for the party went ahead smoothly. Mrs Marshall suggested that a Bridge room should be set aside for those who did not want to dance and insisted that fancy dress be made optional for guests over the age of twenty-one. After some hesitation Cathy agreed. Captain Marshall was put in charge of the bar, and Mr Soutar undertook to supervise the décor both in the house and the garden. Invitations were sent out and lists drawn up of guests who would be staying at the Hall over the week-end.

As the day approached excitement spread like an infection through the household. It manifested itself in different ways with different people. Captain Marshall became ostentatiously the *grand seigneur* who had seen so many parties that he could afford to remain amused and

aloof. Mrs Marshall developed a permanently worried expression and more than ever seemed to be living in two worlds at once. She would appear to be listening politely to what one said and then would make a remark about 'airing bedding' or 'ordering another ham from Bullman's', which showed only too plainly where her thoughts really lay. Mr Soutar, on the other hand, was unashamedly enthusiastic. Parties, he explained at some length, were the very essence of civilized life. His favourite word at this time was 'glamour', which he pronounced to rhyme with the French *amour*. In the interest of glamour he made repeated excursions to Marchester, and once even to London, returning with car-loads of streamers, crêpe paper, glittering trinkets and, of course, Chinese paper lanterns. He commandeered Jimmy and Mr Baines, the local handyman, and set about transforming the estate into an oriental Garden of Delights. Under their combined onslaught the boathouse began to sprout architectural affinities with the Brighton Pavilion. One of my most cherished memories is of Mr Soutar in his shirt sleeves, perched precariously on a ladder, hammering away at a canvas dome and chanting, *con brio*:

'In Xanadu did Kubla Kahn
A stately pleasure dome decree!'

Ilse alone seemed unaffected by it all. She went about her work coolly and efficiently, always ready with sensible advice when it was required. It often was, for Mr Soutar's projects had a way of getting out of hand. She worked tirelessly on Cathy's dress and was charming to me, going

out of her way to offer suggestions on the costume which Angela and Edna were making for me, and even at one point offering to make my cape herself. An offer I regretfully declined because of my probably quite unfounded fear of offending Angela.

One evening, a week or so before the party, I walked round to the garage with Cathy preparatory to collecting my bike and setting off home. Suddenly it occurred to me to ask her if she had ever solved the mystery of the missing cycle lamps.

'Why, yes,' she said. 'Didn't I tell you? Ilse found them.'

'Where?'

'You'll never guess. In my bedroom.'

'I thought you'd looked there?'

'I did. But you know how it is when you're flustered. You think you do things properly but you never do.'

'It still seems funny to me. Besides, you were so sure you'd left them in the kitchen. I remember you saying so in the train.'

She laughed, dismissing it. 'I did, didn't I? The mystery of the missing lamps. Chapter one: Who done it? Chapter two: I done it myself! End of the mystery.'

'It still doesn't explain your bike being punctured all of a sudden.'

'You're impossible,' she laughed, and as she said it I was forced to agree, rather ruefully, that perhaps I was. Anyway, as she herself put it, it was the end of the mystery.

35 THE weather and its vagaries became a topic of increasing importance as the twentieth drew ever closer. The examining of Captain Marshall's barometer became for Cathy and myself first a daily, then almost an hourly ritual. But despite our constant tapping on the glass the needle stuck heroically at 'Fair' and even advanced a fraction towards 'Very Fair'. Nothing, it seemed, could prevent the 20th of August doing all and more than we expected of it, and when I eventually retired to bed on the evening of the 19th with my costume complete in every detail lying neatly folded on the dressing-table, I looked out of my window at a sky which seemed to tremble under its weight of stars and my heart was charged almost to the point of tears with anticipation of the happiness to come.

My sleep was heavy, dreamless and long. I awoke slowly and it was as though I were climbing laboriously up a long ladder towards the circle of light at the mouth of a deep well. I stared up at the electric bulb above my head and watched the flies jerking round it in their endless flight. The sun was streaming in through the window, and quite suddenly I remembered. I threw back the clothes and scrambled out of bed.

The others were already at breakfast when I arrived downstairs. I greeted everyone effusively, anxious to share my happiness. Angela looked up and smiled. I seized the packet of cornflakes and began showering them into my bowl. Then I noticed the postcard lying on my plate. I remember I lifted it casually and turned it over,

wondering vaguely as I did so who could be writing to me.

It was the result of my examination. I had failed.

Even now, so many years later, the sheer paralysing horror of that instant remains alive for me and *will* remain until I die. Nothing, not even such academic success as I later achieved, has been able to alter one jot of its nightmare frightfulness. I sat as though I had been turned to stone. My eyes moved mechanically down the list of subjects and the result scrawled against each one. 'English—Pass: Eng.Lit.—Credit: Maths—Fail: Latin—Fail: History—Pass', and so on down to: 'Result—Fail'. Underneath the Headmaster had appended a note: '*Bad luck! Better than we'd all expected. He'll clear the hurdle easily at Xmas!*' To me, at that moment, it was as meaningless as the hieroglyphs on the Rosetta Stone. Father, Angela, Sal; all were watching me, saying nothing, waiting no doubt to see how I would take it, for they must already have read the result for themselves. Were they relieved or disappointed when I carefully put the card back on my plate, helped myself to sugar and milk and began eating my cereals? I cannot even begin to imagine; I doubt whether I was even aware of them as individuals; my perception was too numbed. It was as though I had suddenly withdrawn like a snail into my shell and left my body to peform automatically the functions necessary to my existence. Within myself I could do no more than recognize the fact of failure. For one instant I had had a vision of what it would mean and then my imagination had rejected it, shut it out like a blind pulled down against the too bright sun. One thing alone stood out clear among the wreckage—to see Cathy. She became the still centre

in my chaos, around which, later, by slow degrees, I could begin to group the shattered fragments that remained. But, first, to see her.

I walked to Cavingham, following in half-conscious ritual the exact path I had taken on the occasion when I had met her first. Within me, locked tight, like some outrageous monster preserved for centuries fast in glacial ice, I carried my despair. Only Cathy, I realized, had the power to tame it, to prevent it consuming me utterly. It never occurred to me—perhaps not unnaturally—that I was bringing a somewhat bizarre gift to commemorate the advent of her seventeenth year!

Mr Soutar was the first person I saw. He was standing on an up-ended tea-chest tying lanterns on to the lower branches of one of the beech trees. Watching him were two girls and a boy of about my own age. I tried to slip past unnoticed but he saw me and called me over.

I walked slowly towards them, doing my best to prepare part of my mind to react in the way I assumed was expected of me. From his perch Mr Soutar called out introductions cheerily and I shook the hands that were offered. 'Have you seen Cathy?' I asked.

'She was with Miss Keppner when I saw her last,' said one of the girls who had been introduced to me as Beryl. 'She was trying on her dress.'

I thanked her and turned away, only to be called back by Mr Soutar. 'Tony, you can climb, can't you? Be a hero and fix a few of these higher up.'

There was nothing for it but to comply, in fact some part of me almost welcomed the opportunity to perform a task at which I was skilled. I darted at the tree and in a

moment was above Mr Soutar, reaching down towards his outstretched hand. He climbed down from his box, puffing exaggeratedly for the benefit of his enthralled audience, and began calling out directions to me. 'A bit higher. No, no, that won't do. Wait, I'll go back a bit. We must get perspective or our effect will be spoilt. To the left a fraction. Further still. Ah, that's it! Can you fix it there?'

While I was tying the lantern in place I saw Cathy come out of the house. Arm in arm with her were two more boys, and a girl I recognized as Jenny. I scrambled down, only to be confronted by Mr Soutar holding another lantern. 'This one over there I think, Tony, and a little higher.'

'Coo-ee!' called Cathy, disengaging one of her arms and waving. I pretended not to have seen her, took the lantern and ascended among the branches once more. Cathy and her companions joined the group around Mr Soutar. She shielded her eyes against the bright sunlight and peered up. 'Hello, Tony!'

'Hello,' I called. 'Is this about right?'

'More to the left,' said Mr Soutar, 'and higher a little.'

'Here?'

'Farther over.'

'Who's for a swim?' called Cathy suddenly.

'Marvellous idea! Cheers, Cathy! Lovely—lovely!' The chorus of shrill voices leapt like puppies round her.

'Race you in!' called someone and set off at full pelt up the slope to the house with the rest, Cathy among them, shouting and laughing hard on his heels. I was left staring after them, forgotten by all but Mr Soutar, whose patient

instructions, rising like bubbles from the umbrageous depths, burst unheeded round my ears.

Soon, clad in their costumes, the others reappeared and raced barefooted to the landing-stage. I waited for the first splash but none came. Then Cathy emerged from the house, walking as sedately as a queen to her wedding. The cries broke out afresh. 'Come on, Cathy! We're waiting!' But she did not hurry her pace and I watched like one enchanted as she passed down the slope beneath me and out of my line of vision. Not by so much as a glance did she acknowledge my existence.

Finally Mr Soutar decided that his work was done and I was permitted to descend. By this time the others were visible only as heads on the surface of the lake. Among them Cathy's gleamed bright as a buttercup.

I walked to the water's edge and stood watching them, feeling both envious and aloof, yet, in a curious way, momentarily able to participate in their happiness. Only for a moment. Like a dark fog my misery rolled back, extinguishing the brief light beneath a blanket of gloom that seemed a thousand times heavier than before. Just when it seemed to me that Cathy was avoiding me on purpose she turned and began swimming towards me. Her arms flickered pale gold under the water, drawing her nearer with calm unhurried strokes. I moved to the very edge of the landing-stage and knelt down on the sun-warmed boards. She gave a final thrust with her legs and glided in, her outstretched hands reaching for mine. I caught them and drew her towards me. The shadow of my head and shoulders fell across hers. She looked up into my eyes. 'Cathy,' I said, 'I've failed.'

I cannot think what reaction I expected her to make. It was as though I were staggering under the weight of an intolerable load. My single thought was to rid myself of it and she was the only one who could relieve me. Yet, even as I said it, I saw myself for one instant as she must have seen me, not in any metaphorical sense but just plainly, physically. Perhaps it was the sight of my reflection in her eyes. I do not know, but such was the fact, I saw myself silhouetted dark against the silver-blue brightness of the sky, bending towards her, and then the moment passed. She released one hand from mine and pushed back a lock of hair that had fallen across her forehead. 'You pig,' she said. 'Why didn't you wish me many happy returns?'

My shock could have been no greater if she had suddenly grown horns and a mermaid's tail. I felt as a ghost must feel who suddenly awakens to the fact that he is real only to himself. I stared and stared, my lips moving soundlessly.

'Well?' she said. 'I *do* think you're mean.'

Could it be that she hadn't heard? Again I said it. 'Cathy, I've failed.'

'You've said that once.'

'But——'

Suddenly she burst out laughing. 'Oh, Tony, if only you knew how funny you look! Here, pull me up.'

As though in a trance I obeyed. She flopped down on the landing-stage at my side. 'Don't go too near the sluice, Geoff!' she called. 'It's weedy!'

'Cathy,' I muttered, but something arose within me to prevent me reopening the subject. 'Many happy returns,' I murmured.

She turned to me, her eyes dancing. 'Isn't it a wonderful day? Just what I always said it would be. And my dress. Tony, it's terrific! I'll show you as soon as we go in.'

She must have seen the helpless bewilderment in my eyes, for a shadow like a swiftly flitting cloud passed across her face. She put out her hand and laid it on mine. 'Don't worry about the stupid old exam,' she said, and wrinkled up her nose at me.

I shook my head and somehow managed to grin back at her. But the shock I had received was almost greater than the original news of my failure. As once before, when she had told me of her relation to Ilse, Cathy had failed to come up to my expectations; though what those expectations were I hardly knew myself.

36

IN SPITE of repeated invitations I did not stay to lunch at the Hall, but made some excuse about having to try on my costume, and walked back the way I had come. In place of the awful pregnancy of disaster which I had borne on my way there I now felt only a strange unreal lightness as though any wayward breeze could have lifted me like a puff of thistledown and blown me, unresisting, where it willed, and I began to wonder whether perhaps it was not all a dream from which I would eventually wake to find Sal grinning down at me.

This curious state of mind persisted throughout the afternoon and was still present when, after tea, I walked upstairs to my bedroom and began to array myself in my

matador's costume. No one had referred to the examination, nor had there been any hint, however oblique, that this day was in some way different from all others. My father seemed as detached as he always was; Angela was as tentatively friendly; Sal and Edna were—well, were Sal and Edna.

I finished dressing and walked into Angela's bedroom to survey the effect in the long mirror. I stood and gazed at my reflection, moving first one arm then the other, opening and closing my mouth, nodding my head. Faithfully my image responded. I heard Angela returning from the bathroom, heard her call down over the banisters: 'Alex! Time you were getting ready, darling,' and, from below, Father's answering halloo. I glanced once more at my reflection and then walked out.

At six-thirty we said good-bye to Sal, consoling her once again with the promise that to make up for her disappointment she would be taken to Marchester for an outing of her very own; then we climbed into the car. Angela drove. She wore a fur cape over her evening dress, and Father sat beside her looking very distinguished in his stiff shirt and black bow tie. As we swung out of the drive he turned his head and smiled at me. 'Remember, old boy, we're counting on you for the introductions.' I nodded and wrapped my cloak tighter about me. Hardly another word was spoken until we reached the Hall.

There were already several cars in the drive, for at the last moment Captain Marshall had seen the party as an opportunity for getting to know some of the local gentry and had extended invitations with a liberal hand. Cathy, somewhat to my surprise, had been quite agreeable,

though she firmly insisted that the fancy dress rule be enforced for those under twenty-one. Angela parked the car and we climbed out. From inside the house I could hear the sound of music, and I saw people moving back and forth behind the brightly illumined windows. Father lit a cigarette but at a word from Angela, dropped it on the gravel and scuffed it out. I slipped on my mask and led them forward to the front door.

We were met by Mrs Marshall. I hardly recognized in her the pale harassed woman whom I had so lately heard fretting about the number of *vols-au-vent* required to feed so many guests. She looked twenty years younger as she held out her hand to Angela and smiled at Father and me. 'At least I have met *you* before,' she said to me gaily and somehow the way she said it seemed to extend the familiarity to include my parents as well. She beckoned across to a knot of people who were gathered, laughing and chatting, in the doorway of the drawing-room, and I was momentarily taken aback when a Chinese mandarin, complete with foot-length moustaches and curved fingernails, detached himself from the group and glided to join us.

'Your most humble and hon'lable servant,' he lisped, in a high sing-song tone, and made a low bow over his clasped arms.

'Mr Soutar!' I exclaimed.

He smiled, and suddenly becoming himself, shook Father and Angela by the hand and led them off to get drinks.

I found myself alone. One or two people glanced at me curiously and then moved on smiling. Behind my mask

I cherished, ostrich-like, an illusion of inviolable security. Retreating farther into the shadows I folded my arms beneath my cloak and twisted my lips into what I imagined to be a cynical and disillusioned sneer. Either because my acting was so consummate in its artistry that people were frightened off, or because I had withdrawn too deeply into the shadows, the fact is nobody noticed me. Finally I abandoned my pose and went in search of Cathy.

I could not find her in any of the rooms on the ground floor and extended my search to the bedrooms. Her own room was empty, so was the schoolroom, and I was about to give up when I heard voices from behind the door I knew to be Ilse's. Without thinking I tapped briefly, turned the handle and thrust my head into the room.

They were both there. Cathy was sitting before the dressing-table mirror and Ilse was bending over her doing something to her hair. But the thing which made my heart leap to my mouth was the fact that Cathy was naked from the waist up. I was vouchsafed such a vision as the poets dream of; for in the brief instant before I clapped the door to with a half-choked apology, I had seen not one view of Cathy but four. Her back which was towards me; her front reflected in the centre mirror; and two three-quarter views in the side ones. As I stood, trembling like a leaf with my hand still clutching the door-knob, there came from inside the room a startled squeak which broke away into sudden, bell-like laughter. I heard someone—it must have been Ilse—hurry over to the closed door and click the key in the lock. Then I heard no more, for I fled swiftly along the passage to the bathroom and bolted myself in.

If anything had been needed to dissolve completely the few weak links binding me to the world of reality, that electrifying vision supplied it. I leant my back against the door and closed my eyes, only to find that the darkness which descended on me was rent by an endless series of rocketing lights, each one of which was a miniature Cathy. And when I opened them again there, confronting me in the mirror above the wash-basin, was no longer my own face but the wax-like visage of some macabre Belmonte, masked and caped for God alone knew what incredible fiesta.

I was brought partly back to my senses by feeling somebody rattle at the door. 'One minute,' I called, and seizing a brush that lay handy began to smooth my hair.

I slid back the bolt to find Jenny standing outside. 'Tony!' she exclaimed in surprise. 'What are you doing in there?'

I looked round and saw for the first time a card bearing the printed message, 'LADIES' CLOAKROOM'. Before I could explain she had scuttled past me and locked the door behind her. I made my way along the passage to the landing. Ilse's door was still closed but I could see no line of light beneath it. I leant over the banisters and looked down.

Below me Gladys was standing with a tray of drinks. I called her name experimentally. She glanced up and smiled. Shrugging off the twinge of disappointment I felt at having my disguise penetrated twice within a minute, I ran along the landing and down the stairs to the hall.

'Good evening, Master Tony,' she said. 'Do you want a drink?'

'All right,' I said, taking one. 'What is it?'

'Sherry.'

With sudden bravado I gulped a glass down and helped myself to a second, laughing at her protestations that I'd be 'flat on my back in a jiffy'.

The liquor tingled pleasantly in my throat and stomach. 'Has Cathy come down yet?' I asked.

She grinned at me knowingly. 'You're waiting to dance with her, aren't you?'

Belmonte the Second treated her to a clandestine smirk and tilted his glass.

Gladys laughed, delighted. 'Oh, Master Tony, you *are* a one.'

'Am I?' I tossed back a wing of my cape so that its scarlet lining flamed over my shoulder and with an enchanted smile Gladys moved away towards the drawing-room.

'So our matador has already begun his conquests.'

I jerked round to find Ilse smiling down at me from the curve of the stairs. She descended slowly towards me. I had been surprised at the change in Mrs Marshall, but that was nothing to the shock I now experienced as I looked at Ilse. She was dressed in the costume of a Bavarian peasant girl; the black velvet bodice laced up under her breasts so that it seemed to proffer them like two ripe plums on an ebony platter. Her dark eyes, subtly enhanced by mascara, smiled at me amused and knowing.

I ran my tongue around my dry lips and dragged my eyes away from that enchanting bosom. 'Hello,' I said. 'I didn't know you were going to wear fancy dress.'

'Do you like it?'

'Very much,' I affirmed and felt myself blush behind my mask.

She glanced down at the glass I was holding. 'Would the matador consider it beneath his dignity to fetch a drink for a peasant maiden?'

'Of course,' I said hastily and darted away in search of Gladys.

She was still standing there when I returned. I handed her the glass and she thanked me with polite gravity, her eyes still holding their secretive twinkle as though she found something about me exquisitely amusing. I had seized the opportunity to take another glass for myself and now I clinked it against hers. 'Cheers,' I said.

'Cheers,' she murmured.

Her voice seemed to flow over me like warm honey. Frantically I searched for something to say. In my haste I stumbled on the thing which was uppermost in my mind. 'I'm awfully sorry I butted in on you like that. You see, I was looking for Cathy and——'

'Oh, it was you, was it? I might have guessed.'

'I thought you knew,' I said abashed.

'You didn't stay to be identified,' she chuckled, taking another sip at her glass. 'Were you shocked?'

'Oh no,' I began, then caught her eye and grinned. 'Well, I suppose I was a bit. I didn't expect——'

'No, of course not. How could you? We tore her dress when she was trying it on for the last time and I had to mend it. But, after all, it wasn't such an unpleasant shock, was it?'

I shook my head, grateful that she should be so understanding.

'On the contrary if anything?'

I nodded, repeating her phrase, letting my mind luxuriate on my vision. 'Has she come down yet?' I asked at length.

'Yes, some time ago. She's probably dancing. Shall we go and see?'

'All right.' I took another swig at my drink. Although I did not realize it I was already some way towards being drunk. 'I can't dance,' I told her. 'Cathy was going to teach me but she never did.'

'I'll teach you.'

'Will you really?'

'Really. I'll ask Hans to play a polka. Anyone can dance a polka. Shall we finish our drinks first?'

I downed mine at a gulp and replaced my glass carefully on the chest where I'd once placed my text-books. Ilse set hers down beside it. 'Come along,' she said, and taking me by the hand she led me through the drawing-room and out into the conservatory.

37

IT WAS as though we'd moved out of a quiet backwater into a raging mill-stream. The conservatory was a glittering kaleidoscope of coloured lights, waving streamers, and swirling, laughing dancers. Perched on a decorated rostrum at the far end were Hans Keppner and two other men, all dressed in Tyrolean costume and all playing away as though their lives depended on their never stopping. Among the

dancers my eyes sought for Cathy. I saw her almost at once—how could I not?—for among the rest she shone like the moon among a host of stars. At that moment I would, I think, have been content simply to stand back silent among the other onlookers and admire her from a distance, for there was something almost a little frightening about her radiance. Even I, who had seen her in a score of different moods, had never seen her like this.

Ilse left my side and threaded her way to the rostrum. I saw Hans lean down towards her, still playing as he listened to what she said. Then he nodded and sat back. Ilse returned and held out both her hands to me. 'Just follow me,' she said. 'It's easy.'

I nodded and at that moment the music stopped. It started again almost immediately, a fast, lively tune that seemed to set my feet jogging of their own accord. Ilse waited a moment till some other dancers had taken the floor, then with a sudden bob towards me, seized me and set off. 'Let your feet take you!' she called, laughing into my face. 'Relax!'

And then, for the first time in my life, I was dancing.

Ilse smiled her encouragement and applause. 'Fine! Fine! *One*-two-three and *hop*-two-three and *one*-two-three and *hop*!' Round and round we swung, our shoes clicking on the marble floor, my cape swirling, her skirt fluttering. Up to the rostrum and back again, twirling like dervishes. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Cathy whisk past on the arm of my father. Ilse smiled and nodded, her brown eyes almost black, and lambent with amusement. I whirled her round so that I could get another glimpse of Cathy, but she was gone.

'There,' said Ilse when at last the dance ended. 'Didn't I say I would teach you?'

I nodded my gratitude, too out of breath to thank her properly. What was all this mystery about dancing? It was too easy. I looked round for Cathy but she was far away, momentarily out of reach. I turned back to Ilse. 'Shall we have another?'

'Another drink?'

'No, another dance.'

'All right.' She waited, her head held slightly on one side, till the music began again. 'Now you *must* follow me. Put your arm round me, a little higher. That's right, and your other here. Perfect. Now listen to the music.' She hummed the burden of the tune. 'It's a waltz,' she said. '*One*-two-three; *one*-two-three. Ready? *Now!*'

I soon got the hang of it. 'Why,' I said, pulling her a little closer to me, 'I thought dancing was difficult.'

She smiled at me out of the corners of her eyes and relaxed in my arm till it seemed to me that we were not two people but one. I felt her breasts and her belly pressing against me and desire woke within me, stretching itself drowsily like a waking cat. The pink tip of her tongue peeped from between her lips and then ducked out of sight, only to reappear mischievously a second later on the other side of her mouth. I took a deep breath and swallowed. The perspiration broke out on my forehead and under my arms. '*One*-two-three,' she murmured, '*one*-two-three.' And suddenly there was Cathy smiling at me over the shoulder of her partner. 'I thought you couldn't dance?' she called.

I shook my head, fearful of losing the beat of the music.

Ilse glanced up at me and then lowered her eyelids. We danced on without interruption until the music came to an end.

I led her over to a row of chairs and waited for her to sit down. She excused herself. 'Why not have a dance with Catherine?' she said. 'There she is, over there.' Then she walked across the room and out through the door.

Cathy was standing by the rostrum talking to Hans. I made my way towards her. She was not wearing her mask, and looked round and smiled as I approached. 'Why didn't you tell me you could dance?'

I shrugged. 'I didn't think you were interested.'

Someone came forward with a tray containing three glasses of beer for the orchestra. 'Ilse dances well, heh?' said Hans, grinning at me and passing a glass to each of the others.

'So does your father, Tony,' put in Cathy.

I raised my eyes to hers. Never, I thought, had she looked so lovely. Reaching out my hand I took her lightly by the wrist. 'Will you dance with me?'

She screwed up her eyes and put her finger to her lips as though she were thinking hard. 'Um—yes,' she said and laughed.

'What shall it be?' called Hans, who had been listening in.

'A polka,' I said quickly.

'Oh no,' Cathy protested. 'I'm much too hot. A waltz, Hans. Another waltz.'

'All right,' I agreed, relieved that she hadn't asked for something that I'd never heard of. 'A waltz then.'

Hans set down his glass on the rostrum and turned to the others. Just as the music started I knelt down, ostensibly to fix the buckle on one of my shoes, though really to gain a little time for other dancers to move on to the floor. I did not yet feel confident enough to risk leading off. When I straightened up the dance was well under way. I took a step towards Cathy and held her as Ilse had shown me. Hans grinned and winked. 'Right?' I asked.

Cathy seemed a little surprised at my question but she nodded and I struck out, mentally counting '*one*-two-three, *one*-two-three,' in time to the music.

For a little while all went well, then, with gradually mounting anxiety, I saw we were heading straight for a pillar. It suddenly occured to me that I didn't know how to turn a corner. Somehow, when I had danced with Ilse, there hadn't seemed to be any corners, just one-two-three, one-two-three. The idea that she might have taken it upon herself to lead never struck me.

Cathy was murmuring something into my ear but I was too worried to listen. I watched another couple swing into the corner, pause, and reverse gracefully away. Offering up a silent prayer I took a deep breath and tried to do the same. I came down with all my weight on Cathy's toe. She drew in her breath sharply and went rigid in my arms. 'Sorry,' I muttered.

She looked doubtfully at me and bit her lip.

Relax, I told myself, relax. But it was no good, I couldn't relax. I began to lose the beat, stumbling and butting against Cathy's feet until in the end she broke loose. 'What *are* you doing?' she demanded hotly.

I shrugged my shoulders unhappily and just at that moment Geoff and Beryl floated by. 'What's up?' they called.

Cathy looked at me and blushed scarlet. 'Come on,' she said, grabbing me. 'Now dance properly.'

I had been nervous before; now after her injunction I began to give a passable imitation of an epileptic. She bore it nobly for a minute or so and then struck. 'You're making me look ridiculous,' she whispered, and her eyes seemed to crackle like splinters of blue ice.

'It's your fault,' I protested angrily. 'I danced all right with Ilse.'

'*My* fault!' Her lips thinned into a tight, pale line. She gave me one last searing glance and stalked away, her back stiff as a ram-rod, her head held high.

I gazed after her, my anger fading like breath from a window-pane. I could not understand what had happened. 'Cathy,' I muttered. 'Cathy, come back.'

'*There* you are,' came Ilse's voice from behind me. 'Do you want to dance?'

I shook my head. I was a failure. First the exam; now Cathy. Was there no end to humiliation?

Ilse caught me by the arm and drew me gently back. 'Shall we go and have a drink?' she suggested.

Drunk or sober, what did it matter now? I had made Cathy look ridiculous. My life was over. I turned towards Ilse.

She led me into the drawing-room. 'Have you had anything to eat?' she asked.

'I don't think so.'

She shook her head and left me, to return a moment

later with a plate of sandwiches. I took one, not wishing to hurt her feelings, and bit into it moodily.

'How did the waltz go?' she asked.

Probably she's making fun of me, I thought. Well let her. The more the merrier. 'Didn't you see?'

She nodded and helped herself to another sandwich. 'Still, you shouldn't let it upset you. We all get tangled up at some time. Remember *mielleux*?'

She was being kind, of course, but it wasn't sympathy I wanted. A fine martyr Sebastian would have made if the Roman soldiers had fired rubber arrows! 'It's not that,' I said.

'Well, what is it?'

'Didn't Cathy tell you? No, of course she wouldn't have.'

This time she really did look mystified.

'About my exam.'

'No. She said nothing.'

'I failed.'

'Poor Tony. When did you hear?'

'This morning.'

She laid her hand on my arm and let it rest there. 'No wonder you're not enjoying the party.'

'Oh, but I am,' I asserted, screwing the knife deeper into the wound. 'Really I am.'

She smiled, but said nothing.

I looked across the room to the bar. 'I thought we were going to have a drink?'

'What would you like?'

'I don't mind. Something strong.'

'Gin?'

'All right. Shall I get it?'

'No, you wait here and have another sandwich.'

I watched her walk to the bar and begin filling two glasses. The sound of a gay tune came drifting in from the conservatory. I wondered if Cathy was dancing and, if so, with whom. Ilse recorked a bottle and picked up the glasses. As she turned towards me she motioned with her head to another corner of the room. 'Let us sit down over there,' she called. 'Bring the sandwiches with you.'

When we reached the sofa I put down the plate and stretched out my hand for the glass. 'Why,' I protested, 'this is orangeade!'

'Taste it.'

I lifted the tumbler to my lips and drank. The spirit clutched at my throat and made my eyes water.

'You said you wanted something strong,' she said, sitting down and patting the cushion beside her. 'I can put some more orange in it if you like.'

'No,' I said, 'it's all right. It's fine.'

She glanced at me darkly and once again I saw the tip of her tongue run like a tiny animal along her lower lip. 'What did you fail in?' she asked. 'Or don't you know yet?'

I sank down beside her. 'Maths, Latin, physics, chemistry. I passed in French.'

'I thought you would.'

'Did you?'

'Of course. One day you'll be very good at French.'

The idea that I'd ever be good at anything struck me as almost ludicrous and I said so.

She shook her head. 'You just think that now. Wait till you're at the university.'

'The university! Me!'

'Certainly.'

I laughed. 'And Cathy too, I suppose?'

'No, she'll never go. Besides she doesn't want to.'

'What will she do?'

'Catherine? Marry and have lots of children.'

'Perhaps she'll marry me,' I said, and took a deep drink from my glass.

Ilse only smiled.

'Well, why not?' I asked belligerently. 'She loves me.'

'You love her,' Ilse corrected gently.

'She loves me too. She's said so.'

Again Ilse only smiled. I looked down into my glass. 'She has,' I muttered. 'She has.'

Ilse stretched herself back on the sofa and blinked up at the ceiling. 'Love,' she murmured, so softly I hardly heard her, 'when you speak of love it sounds so simple, like A.B.C.' She leant forward again so that her face was suddenly close to mine. 'I don't believe you know what love is,' she said.

I lowered my eyes before hers; saw her lips moist and slightly parted and, lower still, the creamy curve of her breasts so lightly curbed behind the frilly lace of her blouse. I had a sudden desire to plunge my head down and sink my teeth into that peach-smooth flesh.

'Well,' she whispered almost in my ear. 'Do you?'

Did I? Was love after all nothing but this terrible melting ache in the pit of my stomach? this fearful hammering in my chest? this insufferable longing to annihilate myself and all my anguish in her? Not knowing, how could I reply except by silence?

She waited only a moment and then sank back into the cushions. 'Would you like to fetch me another drink?' she asked.

Afraid to look her in the eyes I put out my hand to take her glass, but she caught me by the wrist and turned me towards her. 'Shall I teach you?' she murmured. 'I am a good teacher.'

'Your drink,' I muttered hoarsely.

'Yes, of course.' She tilted her glass and drained it off. 'Not too much orange, mind.'

I moved slowly across to the bar, conscious of a dull ache in my groin. One or two people were standing about talking and smoking but I did not recognize any of them. I set down the empty glasses on the wine-stained cloth and sorted out the two bottles. For the first time I was aware that I was far from being sober and to counteract it I became exaggeratedly careful, measuring out the spirit as though a drop too much or too little would make all the difference. While I was doing this Captain Marshall appeared. 'Hello, Tony,' he said. 'Your sweetheart's looking for you.'

'Cathy?' I asked slowly.

'How many have you got?'

I smiled and replaced the cork in the bottle of orange squash. He caught sight of the two generous glasses. 'I say, old man, that's not lemonade you know. Who's it for?'

I gestured across the room to where Ilse was just visible in the depths of the sofa. He raised his eyebrows and then winked. 'Chin-chin!'

'Chin-chin,' I echoed, and steered slowly away down

the channels between the arm-chairs. Strangely enough my only reaction to his news was anxiety lest Cathy might find me!

'What did he say?' asked Ilse when I reached her.

'The Captain? He asked if I was having a good time.'

'Was that all?'

'Yes,' I said. 'What did you think he said?'

Ilse stretched out her hand and I offered her a glass. She waved it away. 'Pull me up.'

I set down the glasses on an adjacent table and did as as she asked. 'Let's go and dance,' she said.

'What about these?'

She grinned. 'All right, I'll race you. First to finish wins.'

She picked up the drinks and handed one to me. 'Now!'

I held my breath and gulped mine down. By the time I set my empty glass down on the arm of the sofa I was drunk.

38 DRUNKENNESS makes some people quarrelsome, others miserable, a few, the lucky ones, happy. To me it did none of these things or, perhaps, a little of them all. My main sensation was of being almost disembodied, of standing outside myself and watching my body perform; applauding its skill with the same tolerant interest one might reserve for, say, a first-class juggler on the stage. I was enraptured by the insouciant skill with which it contrived to weave so gracefully

across that crowded ballroom floor; enchanted by its poise and the unerring precision of its movements. How casually, how superbly it sauntered forward and swung Ilse into its arms to glide into the intricacies of the waltz. I followed so closely that the three of us might have been dancing together. I was fascinated and perhaps a little regretful that it should be my body and not me that was having all the fun, but the artist in me took charge and reconciled me to my rôle by allowing me to participate vicariously in my body's achievements. Nor would I allow it to dance with anyone else. For when, as occasionally happened, a stranger came up to Ilse and requested the pleasure I made my body slip silently away to the margin of the hall and wait until she was once more free. I was dedicated to her and she, it seemed, to me, for whenever a dance was over she would make her way to where I was waiting, and lift her chin slightly as if to say 'Are we ready?' and off we would go again.

Cathy I was aware of only vaguely. From what her father had said, and from the slightly sad smiles she gave me whenever we passed, I gathered that she had forgiven me, but this knowledge which might earlier have given me so much happiness, now served only to accentuate my sense of detachment. She seemed to belong to another world, which, like Parthenophil, was lost to me and had become as something I remembered a great while since, a long, long time ago.

As the evening progressed more and more people moved into the conservatory. I noticed Gladys and Jimmy, both dressed in their best clothes, standing at the back near the entrance and gazing wonderingly at the colourful

spectacle, and now and again Father and Angela would pass us smiling in the throng. But though I smiled back I did not speak to them, for that might have broken the spell.

Then, at the end of one dance, I saw Captain Marshall making his way down the floor to the rostrum. As I turned to watch, Ilse took me by the hand and steered me towards the door leading into the garden. 'Let's get some fresh air,' she said.

I followed obediently, but just as we reached the door Captain Marshall scrambled up on to the platform and held his hands aloft for silence. 'Wait,' I said.

'We'll come back later,' she whispered. 'It's nothing important.'

But I was curious to know what he would say and hung back in the doorway. The light cascaded out on to Ilse's upturned face as she urged me to come away. Obstinately I remained, listening.

He was thanking everyone on Cathy's behalf for helping to make it such an enjoyable evening. Realizing that Ilse had been right after all, I turned away. I did, however, catch his concluding words: 'And now,' he said, 'I feel certain you will all want to join with me as I give Catherine what I am sure she will agree is her best birthday present. Today I was informed of the result of her examination. Cathy, you've matriculated!'

I walked slowly down the steps towards Ilse and, as the applause rushed out into the warm night air, I glanced back. My eyes happened to light on my father. He was standing with his head bowed, staring down at the floor.

Ilse put out her hand to guide me down the last few steps. 'You knew, didn't you?' I said.

'Knew what?'

'That she'd passed School Cert.'

'No,' she said. 'Has she?'

I was certain she was lying, but I felt too distant to argue with her. Besides, the fresh air was affecting me and I had to concentrate hard to keep my balance. Ilse reached up and pulled off my mask, then taking my arm she put it round her waist, and we walked away from the conservatory along the path that led round the house to the front lawn.

Someone had lit Mr Soutar's lanterns and they now hung glowing like weird, luminous fruits, among the dark branches of the beech trees. Above them sailed the moon, brilliant and full, its globed reflection rocking gently between the lily pads on the still, dark lake. I let Ilse lead me where she wished. She was humming a tune softly to herself, her head resting against my shoulder and, as we crossed the silvered lawn, she lifted my hand from her waist, moving it up under her armpit so that it clasped her breast. Every so often she would pause and glance up at me as if to satisfy herself that I was still there.

Our feet whispered through the dewy grass as we neared the lake's edge and moved towards the boathouse, now more than ever fairylike with the moonlight glittering from its silver domes and cardboard minarets. As we came up to it Ilse gently released herself and moved forward alone. I followed close at her heels and in a moment we were inside. Her white blouse glimmered in the shadows as she took my hand and drew me down beside her on to a heap of cushions. Then her arms were about my neck, her mouth searching for mine. I heard her

breathing hard and fast and there was a kind of fierce desperation about her movements as, with one hand, she struggled with the lacing of her bodice. Then, wondrously soft, her breast was bare beneath my hand. I closed my eyes and it was as though I were falling headlong into a bottomless chasm. From far away I seemed to hear her whispering some sort of instruction and in her voice, too, I recognized that same hint of desperation, of barely suppressed hysteria. Her hands began to press and fumble at my body, tugging at the silk scarf twined about my waist. 'Help me,' she whispered, and then the scarf had come loose and she was sliding her hand down, down, and turning her mouth once more to my mouth. Her lips writhed, opened, and her tongue leapt like a flame towards mine. At the instant they touched, I seemed to hear Cathy's voice, faint and plaintive as a bird's crying across the fens, saying: 'Tony, she'd never kissed me that way before. Tony. Tony.'

It was as though a spring, wound beyond its point of endurance, had suddenly leapt loose inside me. Clawing myself away from her I staggered up, jarring my shoulder agonizingly against a wooden bracket, and turning, stumbled to the door. I heard her sharp cry of distress; her voice calling: 'Come back, Tony. Tony, *please*.' And deep in my own nightmare I was yet able to recognize in her fading words the echo of a loneliness more profound, more frightening even than my own.

I reeled up the slope towards the drive, gained the shelter of some bushes and flung myself down upon the dew-drenched turf. The ground seemed to sway beneath me and suddenly the spirits I had drunk rose in my

throat and poured from my mouth. I lay inert, like one drowned, while spasms of vomiting racked me. Yet even the stink of bile seemed to bring a kind of relief.

Then, from far away, I heard faint shouts of laughter. They grew swiftly louder, more distinct, and among them I picked out odd, disjointed snatches of music; the squawk of an accordion; the lugubrious trilling of a clarinet. I wriggled deeper into the shadows, fearful of being discovered, but they were passing on the other side of the bushes and suddenly, ringing clear on the still air, came Cathy's voice: 'No, I'm going to get the boat out and bring it round. You're to wait on the landing-stage.'

It was some seconds before I realized the full import of what I heard and then, strangely, my immediate reaction was anxiety lest Ilse should now be lying where I had left her, for some part of me still vibrated in sympathy with that anguished appeal. Not till much later did it occur to me that she might conceivably have known of Cathy's arrangement, have even intended her to discover us, and even then I could not wholly believe it, for why would she have wished to be found with me? Yet out of the confusion of my thoughts one fact emerged clear. The danger was past. My love for Cathy had been tried almost to breaking point but had survived. I was alive and she should still be mine!

Scrambling to my feet I snatched up my bedraggled scarf and began hastily to wipe my lips and cheeks. Behind me, laughing and chattering, the guests poured from the house and streamed down across the lawn to the lakeside. As I hurriedly straightened my costume and emerged once more into the moonlight I saw a white boat

glide out from the shore. The music struck up, and, suddenly, timed to absolute perfection, a rocket soared high into the air above the trees, dipped in a splendid arc, and burst superbly into a gorgeous shower of glittering drops.

39

I DID not see Cathy again that evening, for she was in the boat with the musicians, but I managed to get a message to her by Jenny that I would come over to the Hall the next day.

Although so many of my problems seemed to have resolved themselves I was still faced with the inevitable paternal interview on the subject of my failure. This took place after breakfast on the day following the party. To my surprise he was not in the least censorious. I gathered that he had never expected me to pass at the first attempt, and that the headmaster's note had come as something of a pleasant surprise to him. Nevertheless, since I would be sitting the examination again at Christmas he felt it would be as well if I kept my hand in with a little holiday work—not, of course, a full programme like the Easter one, but, say, a couple of hours every day immediately after breakfast.

The very thought of beginning the dismal grind once more was an anathema to me, especially since, this time, there would be no Cathy to share it with, and if Father had had the temerity to suggest it twenty-four hours earlier I would no doubt have risen in open revolt. As it was I accepted his proposal resignedly, and we fixed the following day for the recommencement of my labours.

It was eleven o'clock when I arrived at the Hall. Cathy had only just finished her breakfast and was sitting before a card table which had been set out on the gravel in front of the house writing thank-you letters. She looked up smiling as I approached. 'There you are!' she said. 'I got your message.'

I took her outstretched hand in mine but did not kiss her for fear of curious eyes within the house. 'I meant to congratulate you last night,' I said, taking a seat facing her across the table, 'but somehow I just didn't get a chance.'

'I know,' she nodded, 'all those people. But wasn't it a surprise? Honestly, when Daddy came out with it like that I thought I'd faint. "Catherine, you've matriculated!" ' She imitated her father's voice as she said it and then broke into a giggle. 'Still,' she said, suddenly serious, 'it's over now, thank goodness. No more Latin, no more French, NO . . . MORE . . . MATHS!'

'It's not over for me,' I reminded her.

'Yes, I know. Poor Tony. Was I beastly to you yesterday? Somehow, what with the party and everything—Still, you know what I mean, don't you?'

'Yes,' I said, 'I know.'

We were silent for a moment, then she said, 'What'll you do now?'

I told her about my interview that morning. She shook her head sympathetically. 'It could be worse I suppose.'

'I suppose it could. What'll *you* do?'

A faraway look came into her eyes and she smiled as though at the contemplation of some secret happiness.

'You're going back, aren't you?' I asked, unable to keep a trace of alarm out of my voice. 'To school, I mean.'

'Good heavens, no! Whatever gave you that idea? Me take Higher? Heaven help us!'

'But I thought——'

'Oh, Tony, don't be so silly. You know I'm not the brainy type.'

'You're brainier than I am. You passed.'

'That was just a fluke. Anyone can pass School Cert.'

'It's easy for you to talk.'

'You'll pass at Christmas, I know you will, and then you'll get Higher and go to Oxford and——'

'Have you been talking to Ilse?'

'No. Why?'

'I just wondered. Where is she by the way?'

'She's gone up to London with Hans and Michael. They caught the seven o'clock train.'

'Did you see her before she went?'

'Not this morning, I was asleep. I did last night.'

I looked at her closely but her expression was tranquil and friendly. 'When's she coming back?'

'Tuesday or Wednesday. She wasn't sure.'

'Did she . . .?' I began, and paused, trying to frame the question in such a way as not to arouse any suspicion. 'Did she say anything about me?'

She opened her eyes a little wider and then shook her head. 'About *you*? No, I don't think so. I can't *remember* anything, anyway, but that's not so surprising. I was absolutely whacked last night. Mummy and Ilse just about had to undress me and put me to bed. Why? Did you expect her to say something?'

'Oh no,' I said hastily. 'I just wondered, that's all. I mean, after our row and all that . . .'

She laughed. 'Yes. What on earth happened to you? I saw you dancing with Ilse afterwards and you were doing beautifully.' She swung round in her chair and pulled off one of her sandals. 'Look, that's what you did! That bruise there. Can you blame me losing my temper?'

I shook my head. 'Still,' I said, 'it *was* only my third dance.'

She peered fondly at her wounded toe. 'What do you mean?' she asked.

'Just what I say. It was my third dance. I'd only danced twice before in my life. With Ilse.'

Disbelief showed in her every feature. 'You fibber! Why, you told me——'

'No I didn't,' I cut in. 'You said, "Why didn't you tell me you could dance?" and I said, "I didn't think you were interested." That's all I said.'

'Yes,' she said slowly, remembering, 'that's right. Then why on earth didn't you tell me instead of doing your best to trample me to death?'

I shrugged. My motives, which no doubt had appeared sound enough at the time, now seemed to elude me. 'I suppose I thought you'd laugh at me,' I said.

She shook her head pityingly, and at that moment Jenny appeared, closely followed by Geoff and Beryl, and the conversation drifted off on to topics of general interest.

I stayed on to lunch at the Hall, but I did not get more than an odd moment alone with Cathy. We spent the time playing games with her friends and just before tea I took my leave.

Cathy came down to the yard to see me off. 'Well,' she said, 'they're going back tomorrow and then we'll be by ourselves.'

I nodded. 'That's what I want. More than anything. I say, shall we go up the river again?'

'Yes, let's. Tomorrow?'

'Tomorrow. I'll get away as soon as my lesson's over. You get some sandwiches and—— No, blast it, I can't! Oh damn and blast and bloody hell!'

'Why? What's happened?'

'I forgot. Tomorrow afternoon we're all going to Marchester. It's a treat for Sal because she missed your party.'

'Can't you get out of it?'

'Not a hope, worse luck. She made me promise.'

'It looks as if it'll have to be Tuesday then.'

'Oh, Cathy, I *am* sorry.'

'It's not *that* serious, silly. Tuesday'll be just as good. Let's hope it's a nice day.'

'It will be,' I affirmed. 'It *must* be.'

She lifted her hands and crossed her fingers solemnly. Then she ducked forward and kissed me. 'Good-bye,' she said softly, 'and work hard.'

She followed me into the drive as I cycled slowly away, and waved until I was out of sight.

40 I REMEMBERED Cathy's parting injunction when, on Tuesday morning, I sat in my attic before an open copy of *Caesar's Gallic Wars*. I was in my shirt sleeves and, although the window

was open to its fullest extent, no current of air stirred in the lace curtains. I heard Albert scooping up coke in the yard below. A bluebottle rocketed frenziedly round the room, ricochetting from wall and ceiling to crash finally in a miniature explosion against the window pane. I flapped at it half-heartedly, and with a final hysterical whine it zoomed out into the sunlight. In a moment, like quicksand, the silence had swallowed up the sound. I took a deep breath and tried to concentrate on the text before me, but the words seemed to dance on the printed page, adopting queer, fanciful shapes and meanings, until, at the end of half an hour, all I had produced was three lines of illegible nonsense and a page of doodled patterns. I threw down my pencil and, cupping my chin in my hands, stared out of the window. I saw the wild bees which had their nest in a blocked drain high on the side of the house, skimming like golden motes over the roofs of the outhouses. In the paddock beyond, the elms were lumps of green and purple shadow, wobbling jellies in the dancing air. The sky glittered like polished steel.

I stuck it till a quarter to eleven and then went downstairs. Edna was in the kitchen rolling pastry. Her face shone bright red from her exertions. 'Well,' I said, 'I'm off.'

She straightened up and rubbed her nose with the back of her hand, leaving a streak of flour across her cheek. 'You'll need a mac,' she said.

'A mac!' I was incredulous. 'On a day like this? Don't be daft.'

'You'll be the one who's daft, if you don't.' She plunged her hand into the bin and sprinkled more flour on the pastry-board. 'Where're you going, anyway?'

'The fens.'

She grunted. 'Got any dinner?'

'Cathy's getting it.'

'There's a turnover for you if you want it. Take one for her too.'

'Thanks awfully, Ed.'

I found a piece of greaseproof paper in a drawer and wrapped the pastries in it. They were still warm. "Bye, then,' I said. 'See you this evening.'

'Don't forget your mac,' she called. I laughed and walked down the cool, shadowy passage to the back door. The yard was like an oven.

On the point of wheeling my cycle out of the garage I decided it was too hot to ride and took instead the familiar path across the fields. I carried my jacket slung across my shoulder, and with every step I felt the dull, satisfying bump as Edna's turnovers, stowed in one of its pockets, swung against my back. Binders were already at work in some of the fields, and I made a mental note to take Cathy rabbiting as soon as an opportunity arose. Meanwhile, as I listened to the distant jingle of harness, the soft *clack-clack* of revolving sails, and the faint shouts of the harvesters, they seemed to merge and form the background of a soft, sensuous dream of happiness: a dream which had Cathy for its centre and all the delights of summer for its shimmering periphery.

As I topped the rise that brought me in sight of the river I saw Cathy standing leaning over the railings of the footbridge. I broke into a trot, calling to her as I ran. She turned and waved. 'I knew you'd come this way,' she said as I came up to her.

'Did you? I was going to go by bike but I changed my mind. Gosh, isn't it hot?'

'Umm. Lovely.' She gazed drowsily across to where some cows stood knee deep in the muddy shallows, eyeing us incuriously and swishing their tails at the flies which hovered in pestering clouds about their flanks. 'Did you have a nice time yesterday?' she asked.

'It was all right.'

'Did you go to the pictures?'

'Come on,' I said. 'I'll tell you about it on the way,' and taking her by the arm I guided her across the bridge and into Cavingham.

She had already placed our lunch in the boat and we climbed aboard and rowed across the lake to the point where it was easiest to make the crossing to the river. As we landed and dragged the dinghy ashore I motioned towards a brightly striped canvas tent that stood under the nearby trees at the lake's edge. 'When's Mr Soutar going to take down the decorations?' I asked.

Cathy straightened up. 'Oh, that. He's leaving that one for the time being. He sits in it and writes.'

'Is he there now?'

She shook her head. 'He's gone to Gribbenford with Mummy. Come on, you aren't pulling.'

I bent to the task and in a few minutes the boat was sliding down to the river amid the pungent odour of crushed wild peppermint.

We tossed up to see who should row first. I lost. Cathy made herself comfortable in the stern. 'Ready?' I asked.

'Ready.' She gave a great sigh of contentment and

laid back her head. I dipped the blades of my oars and pulled out into the middle of the stream. A dragonfly rushed by with rattling wings, paused for an instant above Cathy's head and then darted on its way. 'Well,' I said, 'this is better than the Gallic wars.'

Cathy made no comment. The sun glittered in the threads of her hair and turned her eyelashes into arcs of golden mist. 'A penny for them,' I said.

She gave a lazy, interrogative grunt.

'Your thoughts. A penny for them,' I repeated.

'I was thinking . . .' she said slowly, and then stopped.

'Well, what about?'

'Oh, just thinking.'

I glanced over my shoulder to see where I was going, and then returned to her.

'I'm glad they've gone,' I said. 'Beryl and Jenny and the rest. They didn't really belong here. Not in the way we belong I mean; though, of course, it was nice for a change. Are you glad they've gone, Cathy?'

'I am if you are,' she murmured drowsily.

'You aren't really listening,' I accused her. 'Would you rather I didn't talk?'

'I *was* listening,' she affirmed, 'and I meant what I said.'

'Well, then, tell me what you were thinking about before.'

'I thought you'd forgotten that.'

'Was it about me?'

'Maybe.'

'Well, about us then.'

'Us.' She repeated the word curiously as though it

had suddenly taken on a new and mysterious significance. 'Yes, I suppose it was.' Suddenly she pulled herself upright and gazed into my eyes. Then, seemingly reassured by what she had seen, she sank back.

'Well,' I said, after her silence had lasted for some time, 'you still haven't told me.'

When she spoke next it was not in answer to my question, in fact she seemed to be talking to herself as much as to me, and there were long pauses as though she were debating carefully on the form her words took. 'Supposing there was something you wanted to do ever so much,' she said, 'and you had the chance to do it—just supposing, mind—but *if* you did it there's a chance that you'd hurt someone you liked ever so much. Would you do it?'

I repeated the gist of what she'd said and considered it carefully. 'I don't know,' I said at last. 'I suppose it'd depend on what the thing was.'

'Something really terrifically wonderful.'

'What sort of thing?'

'Well, like having a thousand pounds to spend on anything you liked. Something like that.'

'And you couldn't share it with the person you liked?'

'No.'

'No one's given *you* a thousand pounds, have they?'

'That's just an example.'

'You said there was only a chance you might hurt the other person. Is it a big chance?'

'I'm not sure. Fairly big.'

I shrugged. 'People always get over things. Besides, it *is* only a chance, so—well, I think *I'd* do it.'

'Would you really? Even—well, say it was me you'd hurt?'

'That's different. Anyway I can't see anyone offering *me* a thousand pounds.'

'But it's *not* a thousand pounds!'

'Well, nor anything like it. Or you either for that matter.'

She sighed again. 'You're not much help really, you know.'

'I thought I was being extremely helpful. I said do it. What did you want me to say? Don't do it?'

'Maybe. I don't know.'

'Well, why don't you tell me what it is, then? Or have you just made it all up?'

For a moment she was silent, then she said, 'How did you guess?'

I laughed. 'I don't know. Maybe because it seemed such a stupid sort of problem; rather like those impossible maths questions—you know the sort of thing. "If A ploughs ten acres in ten hours and B ploughs six acres in eight hours how long will it take them to plough B's sister's allotment." Which reminds me, T has been rowing for X hours.'

'All right, I'll take over now.'

She sat up and we changed places. The grass banks had given way gradually to ragged tufts of reeds and the trees round the Hall, dropping slowly astern, had lost their distinct outlines and assumed the shapelessness of a line of low dark clouds. I lay back luxuriously, grinned up at the sky and listened to Cathy humming to herself as she rowed.

Some time later she rested on her oars and looked round her. 'Thank goodness!' she exclaimed. 'We're nearly there.'

I shook my head. 'It's a good way yet.'

'No it's not. Look, there's that tree where we saw the heron. It's just opposite there.'

I sat up and looked where she pointed. 'That's not the tree. Ours had a branch broken off it low down.'

'I'm sure that's the one. I remember those reeds.'

'All reeds look alike. It's like saying you remember a cloud. Really we've got a long way to go yet. Would you like me to row for a bit?'

'Tony, I'm *positive* that's the one.'

I shaded my eyes and looked hard at the grey skeleton of the tree. Sure enough there *was* a broken branch, though smaller and higher up. 'I don't know,' I said, 'it does look a bit like it. All the same I'm certain it's not the one.'

'You're just saying that because you don't like being wrong.'

'Honestly I'm not. Still, if you're so sure . . .'

'I am. *Quite* sure.'

'All right then. You'd better row till we're opposite it, then we'll try and push through.'

The nearer we approached, the more certain Cathy became that this was the right spot, and the more convinced I became that it was not. The only way to settle it was by trial. Accordingly, when we reached a suitable place, we changed position. She knelt in the bows ready to thrust apart the reeds with her arms and I stood up in the stern and used one of the oars as a pole.

It was hard going. The level of the water had dropped considerably in the last week or two and often the keel of the dinghy was ploughing through mud. After ten minutes we were both perspiring freely. The reeds hissed against the boat's sides and then sprung back in a tall curtain astern. I paused to regain my breath. 'We should be getting near now,' I said. 'It only took about three minutes last time, and even if we are going slower, we're not *that* much slower.'

Cathy only grunted but I knew what she was thinking. 'Right,' I said cheerfully, 'push on!' I made the blade of the oar firm against the base of the reeds and gave a shove. The boat moved a few grudging feet and stuck fast. 'Well,' I said, 'that settles it. You *must* be wrong.'

'There's no need to be smug about it,' she retorted. 'It's just that the water's much lower now.'

It was on the tip of my tongue to answer back, but even I realized that an argument would have been pointless. Instead, using the oar to balance myself, I climbed on to the thwart, and tried to see over the tops of the reeds.

'Well?' she asked.

I shook my head. 'I'm a couple of feet too low. Maybe you could climb on my shoulders.'

'And fall into the mud? No, thank you.'

I sat down in the stern and grinned at her. 'What do you suggest?'

'Go back, of course.'

I looked at the reeds behind us and then I looked at Cathy. 'We'll have to turn her somehow. The question is, how? We can't push her out backwards.'

She began to laugh, shaking her head from side to

side, and slapping her knees with the palms of her hands. 'We're marooned,' she spluttered. 'Help! Help! Save me! Save me!'

'How about you saving *me*?' I said. 'After all, you got us here.'

She nodded. 'I know. Wasn't it awful of me? Do you think we'll stay here till we die? Just think, in a hundred years' time an ancient reed-cutter may discover two skeletons, picked white by the vultures, lying locked in each other's arms.'

'You've forgotten the floods,' I said. 'We'll be washed down the river like the Lady of Shalott. You remember:

> 'Who is this? and what is here?
> And in the lighted palace near
> Died the sound of royal cheer;
> And they cross'd themselves for fear
> All the knights at Camelot.'

'It's a lovely idea, anyway,' said Cathy. 'I wonder if it's ever happened? People getting lost in the fens, I mean.'

'I expect so. After all, they've been here for hundreds of years. Father says there's a ruined monastery somewhere in the middle.'

'Really? Why didn't you say so before? We could have gone and found it.'

'We still can.'

She frowned suddenly as though I had reminded her of something unpleasant and rather sad. Then she shook herself and smiled. 'Shall we have something to eat now, or wait till we get out?'

'Better have it now,' I said. 'We may never get out.'

So we had our lunch where we were, with only the reeds and a few inquisitive buntings for company. And after lunch I lay down with my head in Cathy's lap while she stroked my hair and sang to me. As I recall it now it seems to me that there was something pensive and melancholy about her singing. It was a song without words, a patchwork thing composed of snatches from the end of one ditty, the beginning of another, the middle of a third; a strange little threnody that seemed to rise hesitantly from her lips, hovering tentatively in the still air until, like a wisp of wood smoke, it drifted off and was lost somewhere far away over that desolate expanse of reeds.

And, listening to her, I, too, became affected with her mood, with that strange bitter-sweet dejection that is surely as old as mankind itself; a vague, uneasy yearning for some mysterious never-never land which lies, half dream, half memory, always just out of reach round the corner, or in the next room, or in that valley on the other side of the hill.

At last she broke off her song and leant forward over me, gazing down into my eyes. Her hair swung forward, hung down, and touched my cheeks. I smiled up at her but could detect no answering smile, only a look of wistful tenderness as though her eyes were trying to tell me what her lips would not. And as I stared up at her I heard, far away, a sound like the dull booming of a gun. She must have heard it too for she lifted her head at once and looked about her, even though there was nothing to see but the reeds.

'I wonder what it was?' I said.

She shivered, and at that moment a puff of wind

skittered over the tops of the reeds to expire with a faint hiss in the invisible wastes beyond.

I scrambled up, balancing myself by a hand laid on her shoulder, and tried once again to peer out of our compound. It was then that I noticed the heat and brightness had drained from the sun. It seemed to hang like a pallid disc in the sky. 'I think we'd better get a move on,' I said. 'This isn't a good spot to be caught in if a storm comes on.'

Cathy's eyes went wide. She clutched the lapels of her blouse and drew them up close under her chin. 'There won't be a storm, will there?' she asked. 'I hate storms.'

I took another glance at the sky and shrugged my shoulders. 'I don't know,' I said, trying to make my voice sound reassuring, 'but it's best to be on the safe side. Pass me that oar and I'll try to push us back a bit. You try and keep the stern clear.'

She obeyed my instructions but, as I half expected, the result was negligible. The boat was designed for going forwards in water, not backwards in mud, and the more I pushed the deeper the stern embedded itself. The ridge of mud climbed higher astern until at last it reared itself above its thin coating of brackish water. 'It's no good,' I said at last. 'I'll have to get out and drag her round. Make sure that painter's fast.' Then I pulled off my socks and sandals, rolled my trousers up above my knees and stepped over the side.

There is something indescribably horrible about stepping into deep mud; perhaps it is its incalculableness, the feeling that you are sinking down, down, and that there is nothing firm left anywhere in the world. I clutched in

sudden panic at the nearest clump of reeds and dragged myself up, and where each of my feet had been a large, oily bubble rose and pouted, for all the world like a pair of black fleshy lips.

'Are you all right?' asked Cathy.

I nodded and stretched out my hand for the rope. 'You'd better sit right back in the stern,' I told her, 'then she'll come round more easily.'

While she was moving back I made my footholds secure on the roots of the reeds. Then, taking a good grip on the rope, I lay back and pulled.

For what seemed an unconscionable time nothing happened, but at last, after some desperate straining, there came a sigh, the mud released its hold and the bow tilted and swung slowly towards me. I heard the water gurgling back into the cavity the keel had left and, letting out more rope, I moved cautiously round to a new position. This time she came more easily. Stumbling backwards, the rope looped round my waist, I was able to keep her on the move. With Cathy calling encouragement to me, I splashed and slithered through the reeds until I reached a point where I judged it would be possible to use the pole once more. Throwing the painter aboard I scrambled back, my feet and shins unrecognizable under their coating of black slime, and took up my position in the stern. As I bent to retrieve the oar I heard in the distance, ominous but unmistakable, the first dull rumbles of the gathering storm.

We did not speak much as we forged back towards the river. Occasionally I glanced up at the sky overhead and what I saw there made me redouble my efforts. Only

gradually did it dawn on me that we must have missed our way. I was afraid to tell Cathy lest she should abandon hope altogether, and without her in front to part the reeds all my efforts would be useless. Nevertheless it was heartbreaking to go on and on poling into that anonymous curtain with the growing certainty that each yard we advanced only took us deeper into the wilderness.

At last Cathy looked round and I read the unspoken question in her glance. 'We *must* reach it soon,' I said, and at that moment the sun vanished completely, leaving us in a world of jaundiced twilight.

As it happened we reached the river a minute or two later. No sooner had we emerged than I realized what had happened, for I now saw that the tree which we had used as a landmark was some way over to our right. In turning round and steering blind we had veered a few points off our course. This had been just enough to make us miss the bend in the river from which we had originally set out, and continue into the elbow of the next. For the last fifty yards of our journey we had probably never been more than a dozen feet from the river the whole time. However, we were in no mood to waste time discussing our error. Even with the current in our favour I estimated it would take us the best part of an hour to reach the Hall and I expected the storm to break at any moment. Telling Cathy to begin rowing for all she was worth I knelt in the stern and began kicking my legs clean in the water.

While I was doing my best to dry myself I looked up at the sky. The sight filled me with awe. Never, before or since, have I seen anything quite like it. It was the colour

of a ripe damson and utterly flat. Apart from a faint golden fringe to the west it stretched unbroken from one side of the fens to the other. There was no trace of separate clouds, no hint of unevenness in its texture, just that one colossal pall hanging motionless above our heads. And, as I gazed up into it, I became terribly afraid. My teeth began to chatter and my heart seemed to contract as though it were in the grip of paralysis.

Yet worse even than the sky was the stillness. Previously there had always been *some* noise filling in the background even though it was only the chirp of the reed-buntings; now there was nothing but the splash of Cathy's oars and the pathetic squeak of the rowlocks. Even the rumble of thunder had stopped. It was as if the whole world held its breath.

'Say something,' panted Cathy suddenly. 'For goodness' sake *say* something!'

With an immense effort I succeeded in dragging my eyes away from their hypnotic contemplation of the sky. 'Say what?' I asked, stupidly.

'Well, sing, then,' she commanded. 'Go on, sing!'

So I began to sing 'It was on the isle of Capri that I found her', and even its inappropriateness was better than that awful silence. When I'd finished that one I sang 'The daring young man on the flying trapeze', and after that 'Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer do'. I stopped only when I saw that Cathy could row no more. We scrambled into each other's place, nearly upsetting the boat in the process, and she began to sing in my stead. And still the storm did not break.

A few minutes later I glanced over my shoulder and

found to my intense relief that the trees round the Hall were already clearly visible, dark comforting humps of shelter. I turned and grinned at Cathy. 'We'll make it yet,' I said.

I saw her lift her hand and pat the side of the boat. Her lips began to form the words 'touch wood' and at that instant my eyeballs were seared by a brilliant streak of light and the sky fell on us.

Instinctively we both flung ourselves forward into the bottom of the boat and lay there shuddering. The torrent smashed down upon our unprotected bodies and the river roared as though the rain were molten metal. When I had regained my senses sufficiently to raise my head I saw a fantastic sight. All around the lofty reeds were smashed as flat as though a steam roller had passed by, while over them hovered a mist born of the spray from a milliard shattered raindrops.

All at once I was no longer afraid. In the midst of that cataclysm I became aware of my own insignificance; I reached the point where there was simply no sense in being terrified. I felt the lash of rain on my back and shoulders as no more than a pleasant drumming, and the continual roar of the thunder reached my ears as a subdued mutter. I heaved myself back on to my seat and bent once more to the oars. A little while later Cathy too raised her head. I splashed the ankle-deep water at her with my foot and bawled, 'Bale!' I do not think she heard me, but slowly, as though each movement she made were in itself a separate birth, infinitely laboured, she cupped her hands and began scooping the water over the side.

The rain was still falling in torrents when eventually

we reached the trees, but the initial fury had spent itself. Somehow we managed to drag the boat up the bank and I remember how the bakelite picnic cup went cascading out over the stern with the rain water and floated off down the river. Then I caught her by the hand and dragged her after me towards the shelter of Mr Soutar's tent.

By that time our ears had grown more accustomed to the incessant din, but every now and again a particularly vivid flash would make us wince as though a whiplash had flicked across our shoulders. We reached the tent and cowered inside, clutching each other convulsively while the rain drummed down through the branches on to the roof and atomized into a fine mist about our heads.

I could feel Cathy trembling in my arms, a tiny, restricted movement as though she were a wire which had been strung tight and set vibrating. I looked down at her back and noticed how the rain had made her blouse transparent so that the white band of her brassière stood out clearly against the skin of her shoulder-blades. And, as I stared at it, I too began to tremble. My pulse began to race with an insufferable longing. I took the fabric of her blouse between my fingers and began to pull it gently upwards. As it slipped smoothly away from the waistband of her skirt I slid my hand in against her back. At once she stirred restlessly, like an uneasy sleeper. I began to murmur her name, entreating her, over and over again: 'Cathy. Cathy. Cathy,' while outside the thunder echoes rolled like rocks and the lightning flickered ceaselessly across the zebra walls of the tent.

Gradually I felt her breath quicken. Her lips parted and began to nuzzle in against my neck and shoulder.

The rhythm of her trembling slowed, became deeper, heavier. She began to twist her body against mine like a cat rubbing itself against its master's legs, while her arms tensed themselves against my back, straining me closer towards her. My fingers found the clip they had been seeking, fumbled it undone, and the next moment, like a morsel of quicksilver, her breast was alive in my hand. She gave a little moan, shuddered violently, and then went limp. I raised my head, glanced round for somewhere to lay her down, and, at that instant, there came a flash which made all the previous ones seem insignificant. For a fraction of a second the whole tent was illuminated as though a battery of searchlights had been turned upon it. In that moment, splashed inky black against the wall before me, I saw the shadow of a gigantic bat.

I flinched and started back. Cathy's head jerked up. Her eyes snapped open and remained, wide fixed, staring at some point beyond my back. I swung round.

'Ilse!'

Hers was the shadow I had seen. She was standing at the opening of the tent, bareheaded, with a mackintosh thrown across her shoulders. Behind her spread the lake, spiked with a million drops. Around her head the lightning seemed to flicker in a fantastic halo. She did not so much as glance at me. I followed the line of her gaze and saw Cathy, her eyes still fixed on Ilse, plucking nervously at a shoulder strap which had slipped down her arm and now hung in a white loop below the sleeve of her blouse. As I stared at her, her face crumpled and tears began to stream down her damp cheeks.

The sight of them galvanized me into action. I

reached out and caught her by the arm. 'Stay here, Cathy!' I said. 'Cathy, you must!'

She did not seem to hear me. Her face was turned beseechingly towards Ilse. Like a sleepwalker she pushed my hand away and began moving towards the opening in the tent.

'Cathy!' I shouted suddenly. 'Cathy, don't go!'

I might as well have shouted at a corpse. It was as though for her I had suddenly ceased to exist. Neither of them spoke, but Ilse slowly raised one arm and folded the mackintosh like a cradling wing round Cathy's quivering shoulders.

As they turned away something seemed to snap in me. I rushed out into the rain crying to Cathy to come back. I could not touch her. Before such a refusal to admit even the possibility of my existence I was as impotent as a ghost. My arms fell back to my sides. I stood and watched them move off under the dripping trees. They looked like some curiously humped monster. And so, gradually, they drew farther away from me, walking slowly, but with an absolute fixity of purpose, until at last they were lost to my sight on the rain-screened slopes of the lawn.

41

IT WAS late when I reached home. Like Lear I had wandered out across the heath and let the storm do what it would with me. It was only my legs, carrying me along habitual paths, which brought me eventually to one of the entrances to our grounds. When

I reached the house I walked upstairs, undressed and got into bed, leaving my clothes in a damp heap on the bedroom floor.

All night long I was plagued by dreadful dreams, and when I awoke next morning my whole body seemed to be on fire. I somehow managed to get dressed and stagger downstairs for breakfast, but Angela took one look at me and sent me straight back.

I was ill for three days. By the morning of the fourth the worst was over though I felt weaker than a new-born puppy. I lay back on my pillows, too spent even to look at the newspaper, and tried not to think of anything at all. In the afternoon Sal came in to see me. She hovered in the doorway as though she were shy, and kept glancing over her shoulder to see if anyone was coming. I smiled at her. 'Well, what have you been doing with yourself?' I asked.

She shrugged, not looking at me, seemingly preoccupied in clicking the door-knob backwards and forwards. Finally she raised her head a fraction and glanced at me from under her lowered lashes. 'You didn't take your mac, did you?' she said.

I recognized it as her special brand of rhetorical question and didn't attempt to reply.

She gave a few more experimental twists to the knob. 'Edna told you to take it.'

Still I said nothing—there was nothing I could say. She relinquished her door-knob and wandered over to the window. When she spoke next her back was towards me. 'Did *she* get wet too?' she asked.

'We both did.'

She seemed to ponder on this for a long time. Finally she said, 'She's gone away, you know.'

She had been tracing out the pattern on the lace curtain with her finger but as soon as she'd spoken she stopped, still with her back to me, standing perfectly silent like a person who has dropped a pebble down a deep well and waits with bated breath for the sound of the splash.

'Who told you?' I asked.

Something, maybe it was the queer choked sound of my voice, made her swing round. Her eyes were bright with an unholy excitement. 'Edna told me. She heard from Gladys. She went two days ago with that German woman. Didn't she tell you? Didn't she say she was going?' The little tumbling sentences seemed to hiss at me like a nest of tiny, poisonous snakes.

'Where's she gone?' I heaved myself towards her and snatched for her arm. 'Where's she gone? Tell me.'

She winced with pain. 'Let me go! You're hurting! Let me go!'

But I only repeated my question, digging my fingers deeper into the flesh of her arm.

And suddenly she did not struggle any more. She gazed straight into my eyes and a queer triumphant little smile played round her lips. 'Abroad,' she said. 'Hundreds of miles away. She'll *never* come back.'

I let go of her arm and sank back on to the pillows. She stood, slowly caressing her bruised arm, and stared at me. 'I'm glad she's gone,' she said. 'Glad, glad, *glad*!'

At that moment Edna came in. She took one look at me and then turned on Sal. 'You've told him!'

Sal lifted her head and gave Edna back look for look. 'What if I have?'

It was the only time I'd ever seen Edna really angry. She took one step towards Sal, lifted her hand and brought it down with a stinging smack across her cheek. 'Now go and tell your mum that!' she said.

Sal backed slowly away, her lip quivering, her eyes bright with unshed tears. As she reached the door she paused and looked back. The pattern of Edna's palm stood out clear on her white cheek. 'I *am* glad!' she repeated. 'I *am*!' and then her voice broke and she stumbled away, sobbing, along the landing.

I looked at Edna. 'It's true then?'

She nodded, her face a study in vicarious misery. I turned my back to the window and buried my face in the pillow.

That night I awoke with Cathy's voice ringing in my ears. I threw back the bedclothes and stumbed towards the door. 'Tony!' she was calling. 'Tony!' It seemed to be coming from the landing. I staggered out clutching the wall for support. 'Where are you?' I whispered. Now it was from downstairs. 'Tony! Tony!' The shadows seemed to swing up and down. I reached the head of the stairs and started down. 'I'm coming,' I said. 'It's all right, Cathy, I'm coming.' The banisters bent and swayed under my hands. There was a strip of light under the drawing-room door. 'Cathy! Cathy! Where are you?' Now her voice was coming from the front door. She was out there on the lawn, standing there waiting for me! I stumbled on the stairs and thrust out my hand blindly into the shadows. 'Cathy!' I cried. 'Wait!' And then the floor was tossed up

in a mighty whirlwind and I was falling . . . falling . . . falling . . .

I came to lying on my bed. Father was bending over me. I closed my eyes again. When I next awoke daylight was filtering into the room. He was still there sitting beside my bed. After that I remember nothing at all.

I have since been told that I was very ill indeed and that at one point there seemed some doubt as to whether I'd pull through. For much of the time I was raving and I must have talked about Cathy, though what I said they have never told me. Perhaps if they ever read this they will, for I would dearly like to know.

Recovery was a slow process. One day I would feel quite well again and then next I would be sweating with fever. Nevertheless I did eventually begin to mend, and exactly one week after my sixteenth birthday the doctor decided that I could be carried down into the garden and allowed to sit in an arm-chair.

It was one of those September days that seem somehow to have got left over from July. The sky was deep blue, brushed with a faint cobweb of high cloud; the bees murmured; the birds sang. I lay back and dozed. The sunlight beat on the rug across my knees and turned the customary darkness behind my eyelids into a warm, red mist. From the other side of the lawn came the click of croquet balls as Sal practised vigorously in preparation for the great handicap match we were to play when I was better. Every other minute she would call out: 'Did you see that, Tony? I went through from right over there and croqueted at the same time.' To which I would murmur

the polite disbelief that was all she required of me. We had long since made up our quarrel and never referred to it.

But Cathy I could neither forgive nor forget. Who was it said, 'When we love we often doubt what we believe most'? He might have been speaking about me. Every day I went through fresh agonies of hope and despair as the post came and brought no word from her. I wrote scores of letters and tore them up before they were half finished. What had once been so easy, to tell her of my love, now seemed impossible. The words would not come, or, if they did, they were the wrong ones. There was so much I could not understand; so much I could not even bear to contemplate.

I was lying there, half asleep, when I heard Angela saying, 'I've brought a visitor to see you, Tony.'

The wild hope that was always lurking ready, sprang into my heart. I sat up and looked round. 'Oh,' I said. 'Hello, Mr Soutar.'

The disappointment in my tone must have been obvious to him but he made no sign that he had noticed it. He advanced smiling towards me with one hand stretched out and the other swinging a straw boater. 'And how is the invalid?'

I shook the hand he offered me and forced myself to smile. 'Much better, thank you.'

'Good. Good.' He drew up a deck-chair and eased himself down into it still beaming genially. 'Such weather,' he breathed, 'in September. Why, it's almost indecent. It puts me in mind of Tennyson. Does anyone read him now, I wonder?

Unwatched the garden bough shall sway,
The tender blossom flutter down,
Unloved that beech will gather brown,
This maple burn itself away.'

As he recited the last line his face assumed an expression of wonderful surprise. 'Fancy me remembering that,' he said. 'Let me see, how does it continue?

Unloved, the sunflower, shining fair,
Ray round with flames her disc of seed.'

He went on to recite the whole poem, with an unselfconscious delight in his own performance and the poem's beauty. And as he slipped from verse to verse so did my sense of faint embarrassment fade. I leant my head back and closed my eyes, surrendering myself wholly to the seduction of his voice.

'As year by year the labourer tills
His wonted glebe or lops the glades;
And year by year our memory fades
From all the circle of the hills.'

He came to the end and I opened my eyes slowly and blinked up at the unfathomable sky. 'That was lovely,' I said.

'It is, isn't it?' he agreed. 'I suppose one would say it expressed—ah—consolation. Sadness and consolation. Man fades; the world remains.' He gave me a quick, flickering glance out of the corner of his eye. 'So much of beauty is transient, is it not? It fleeteth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay. "Beauty is but a flower which wrinkles will devour". There it is again, you see.

We cannot escape it.' So he rambled on, talking half to me, half to himself, and, gradually, it dawned on me that he was trying to tell me something, that behind this iridescent screen of words there was a particular message to which he could refer only by allusion. He was like a fly buzzing round and round a morsel of jam, alighting for a second and then zooming away to the far side of the room, only to return again a moment later. And, quite suddenly, I realized that he must know about Cathy and me; not in the way that, say, Captain Marshall knew, but the truth—knew that we had loved each other and that the cause of my illness lay perhaps deeper than even my parents supposed.

I sat up suddenly and turned to him. 'She told you something,' I said. 'She gave you a message for me. What was it? Please, Mr Soutar, tell me.'

For a moment he seemed at a loss for words. His fingers ceased their restless prowling round the brim of his hat and began plucking at his lower lip. His eyes met mine for a second and then looked away.

'She did,' I insisted. 'I know she did. Please tell me. Please.'

To me his hesitancy was inexplicable. Those little nervous pluckings and glancings were quite incomprehensible. Not until many years later did I realize that in them I was seeing the outward manifestations of a profound inner struggle. At that moment Mr Soutar was like the spectator on the touchline who, having shouted critical advice for the greater part of the game, suddenly finds himself called on to participate. Yet I am sure that some part of him welcomed my bald appeal for help. Perhaps

it came just in time to make him realize that he was still of some account in that stormy world through which he had hitherto glided so gracefully and to so little purpose.

His hand dropped from his lip and slipped inside his jacket to emerge, a second later, holding a black leather wallet. This he allowed to fall open in his palm and from it he lifted a blue envelope. He held it before him and, for the first time, looked me straight in the eyes. 'I have no idea what is in this, Tony. Catherine handed it to me on the morning she left and told me to give it to you when I saw you. I think she assumed you would shortly be coming to the Hall. Perhaps I should have brought it sooner; if so I must ask you to forgive me. I wish—I wish most dearly that things had not turned out as they have. Alone, among my peers, I do *not* think it has all been for the best.' He handed the letter to me, replaced his wallet, and heaved himself up out of the deck-chair. 'And now,' he said, 'if you will excuse me, I think I shall stroll over there and—ah, luxuriate in your mother's dahlias.'

He moved away and with shaking hands I ripped open the tab of the envelope. This is what I read:

My dearest Tony,

I've tried and tried to write this letter and now I cant put it off any longer because were leaving for Italy tomorrow. I was going to phone you but then I thought that someone might hear what I said and I just couldnt bear *that, so I'm writing to you instead. Oh dear, I still dont seem able to say it, do I? You see Tony I did* try *and tell you in the boat but you wouldn't understand—you remember—when I asked you what youd do if someone told you to choose between hurting someone or doing something*

wonderful and you said 'Hurt someone because theyll get over it'. Only when I said 'Me' you said 'That's different'. So you weren't really much help were you? You see, Tony, it was you *I meant not* me. *But now I see it's me too.*

I wanted to tell you when you came to see me after the party but I'd promised Ilse I wouldnt. It was her birthday present for me and she'd saved it up to tell me after the party was over. She'd talked about it before but not for ages and then—after the party and everything—it seemed so wonderful and I was so happy. But I'd promised you see and I couldnt break my promise could I? Besides she said if I told anyone, even you, we wouldn't be able to go.

When Ilse was telling me about it that night I kept thinking 'If only Tony could come too'. I said so to her and she agreed it would be lovely but she said what with you having to work for that beastly exam and one thing and another it just seemed impossible. Then she said how we'd see each other—you and me I mean—when I got back and I could tell you all about it and it didn't seem so bad then.

And I will, Tony, I will.

Now shes just come in to tell me I've got to go to bed because were leaving very early in the morning. Anyway I'd just about got to the end hadnt I?

So now I'll say good-bye Tony. I'll write to you when we get there and tell you about it. Now I really must stop.

All my love,

Cathy.

PS. I cant give you any address because Ilse isnt quite sure of it.
PPS. Excuse the writing but my pens got a wonky nib.

I read it through twice and each time I stopped at the sentence: 'But now I see it's me too'. It seemed to me that

in those words something had broken through. They were like a tiny fissure through which Cathy's love had managed to leak out, artless and unpremeditated. They were my only hope.

I turned and called to Mr Soutar. He ambled slowly towards me, fanning himself with his hat. 'When's she coming back?' I asked.

He shook his head. 'Originally they planned to stay for a month, but I have an idea that was modified later.'

'But surely Mrs Marshall knows?'

'The arrangement was a somewhat fluid one.'

'At least you know her address,' I said. 'You must know that.'

'Doesn't she give it?'

'She said she didn't know it.'

Mr Soutar pursed up his lips and tilted his head slightly to one side. 'Curious,' he murmured. 'Curious.'

'What's curious?'

He flicked his hat. 'Thoughts. Idle thoughts.'

'But the address?' I persisted.

'Ah yes, the address to be sure. Now let me see.' He frowned, thinking hard, and then shook his head. 'I'm sorry but I seem to have forgotten it. However, if you write to her care of the Hall, it will certainly be forwarded.'

'Thanks,' I said. 'I will.'

Shortly after this, despite my protests, I was returned to my bed.

During the next ten days I wrote and sent to Cathy two letters, addressing them as Mr Soutar had suggested. They were very carefully composed and for each one I

produced at least half a dozen rough drafts. I have forgotten their exact wording but the aim in each case was the same—to exploit as best I could all that I felt to be enshrined in the words: 'But now I see it's me too'. It was the one foothold left to me; the only line of her letter that acknowledged the fact of her love.

Two days after sending the second letter I received a postcard from her. It was a view of the Doges' Palace. The address was 'Venice'. On the back she had written: '*Having a wonderful time. Wish you were here. Yesterday I went in a gondola, they only have one oar which the gondolier pushes from side to side. Are you still working hard? Love Cathy.*' It might have been written to an aunt.

By this time I was up and about once more, though still under orders to take things easily. There had as yet been no mention of my return to school, though term had already begun. I passed the days by reading novels—and, for form's sake, an occasional school book—and by playing interminable games of cards with Sal and Edna.

Then, a few days before the end of the month, Mr Soutar reappeared. He brought the news I had been waiting for. Cathy was returning the next day. He seemed surprised that she had not written to tell me herself, but I pointed out that she probably thought I was already back at school.

He nodded. 'There is perhaps one other thing I should tell you,' he said, '—forewarned is forearmed as they say, and . . .' He fluttered his hands and smiled at me.

'Well?' I asked.

'I have been informed that she is—ah, proposing to return almost immediately.'

'To Italy!'

'So I believe.'

'With Miss Keppner?'

'Brünhilde will, I presume, accompany her on the journey, but Catherine will be staying on by herself, or rather with friends of—ah, Miss Keppner.'

'Are you sure?'

He spread his hands wide and shrugged. 'What *is* sure in this world of ours, Antonio?'

'And she's arriving tomorrow?'

'By the three o'clock train.'

I bit my lip, envisaging Angela's protests. 'I'll come,' I said. 'At about five. Will you tell her, please?'

'Yes,' he said. 'I'll tell her.'

I knew Angela would never consent to my cycling to Cavingham and, after a lot of hard thinking, I presented myself with two alternatives: either I could risk her—and Father's—wrath by sneaking off immediately after tea, or I could ask Father to take me there in the car. The possible third alternative—to ask Angela instead of Father—I dismissed almost at once. I could not endure the thought of that little, understanding smile I knew she would give when I broached the subject to her, the smile which was for me the incontrovertible proof that she was for ever incapable of understanding. I decided to ask Father.

That evening, after supper, I knocked on the door of his study. He swung round in his chair to face me, the desk light carving out pits of shadow on his cheeks and round his eyes. 'Hello, old boy,' he said. 'What can I do for you?'

'Cathy's coming back tomorrow. Mr Soutar told me. I want to go over and see her.'

He placed his finger-tips together and steepled them against his lips. 'Has anyone said you can't?'

'No,' I said, 'it's not that.' And I went on to explain the problem.

He nodded his head slowly, no doubt thinking that if he didn't fall in with my proposal I would go anyway. Finally he smiled. 'All right, old boy, I'll take you. Now hadn't you better get to bed—convalescence and all that?'

'Thank you, Father,' I said fervently. 'Good night.'

'Good night, old boy. And don't worry.'

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AT A quarter to five next evening Father and I walked down the yard to the garage. A wind was beginning to get up. The trees shifted and strained uneasily against each other, giving out little moans and squeaks of protest. Over the flat fields towards the fens a few rooks circled raggedly, dark dots against the low, scurrying clouds. While I fastened back the garage doors Father revved up the engine and backed the car out.

As we turned out of the drive a handful of raindrops flicked like needles across the windscreen. Father peered up the road. 'It looks like being a dirty night,' he said.

I nodded, lost in a reverie of Cathy. Suddenly a thought struck me. I turned to him. 'Would you drop me

at the Hall lodge?' I said. 'I'd rather walk up to the house.'

'All right,' he agreed. 'How long will you be?'

'I'm not sure.'

'Will an hour do you?'

I had expected less. 'Yes,' I said. 'Will you go home?'

'I'll wait.'

'You don't mind not coming in?'

'Not a bit.'

'I won't stay long,' I said. 'I just want to see her, that's all.'

'Your chauffeur will be waiting, sir,' he said, and smiled at me.

The car clock read one minute to five when we drove up to the Hall gates. I unfastened the door and got out. 'You can turn up there,' I said, pointing along the road. He gave a salute and let in the clutch. 'Good luck!' he called.

I walked up the drive towards the Hall. The rain was beginning to fall faster now, drifting against my face like wreaths of cobweb, and by the time I reached the front door I could feel the droplets which had gathered on my cheeks mingling and trickling down my chin. I brushed them away on the sleeve of my mackintosh and put out my hand for the bell. Before I could touch it the door opened and there stood Mr Soutar.

'Come in,' he said, and pulled me forward by the arm. 'I observed your approach.'

'Did you?' I began stripping off my coat. 'You told Cathy?'

He said: 'I should go straight up if I were you. She's in her room.'

'Hadn't I better say how-d'you-do to Mrs Marshall first?'

He took my coat from me and shook his head. 'I think it best not to disturb her. She—ah, has a headache.'

'I'm sorry. Still, maybe you could say it for me?'

He seemed strangely ill at ease. 'Yes, yes. Of course,' he said, ushering me into the hall. 'I'll leave your coat here on the chest.'

I assumed he was whispering because of Mrs Marshall's indisposition, and I too lowered my voice. 'Perhaps I'll see you later?' I said.

He nodded and smiled. 'Up you go.'

I glanced down at him over the banisters. He had wrapped my scarf up in my coat and was arranging it on the chest. Against the dark wood it was almost invisible.

Outside Cathy's door I paused fractionally. My stomach seemed to turn over. I took a deep breath and knocked.

'Come in.'

I turned the handle.

She was sitting on the bed with her legs drawn up under her. In her hand there was a string of beads and there were some loose ones lying in a box beside her. She had been threading them on to the string. The end of the thread was against her lips.

'Tony!'

Her unfeigned astonishment took me aback. 'Didn't you expect me?'

She shook her head slowly, gazing at me, her lips slightly parted.

'Didn't Mr Soutar tell you?'

Again she shook her head. 'Do they know?' she said.

'Know what?'

'That you're here.'

'I don't understand,' I said, and took a pace towards her, my hands held out. 'What's it matter anyway?'

She drew back slightly and the necklace slipped from between her fingers. A few beads rolled on to the floor.

'Cathy, what's the matter?'

As though with an immense effort she dragged her eyes away from mine and began feeling around on the bed for the dropped beads. 'You shouldn't have come,' she said. 'You shouldn't.'

I caught her by the shoulders and turned her face to mine. 'Tell me,' I began, and then, with her lips so close to mine, I could restrain myself no longer.

She squirmed away from my kiss and gave a queer little exclamation, a mixture of a sob and a giggle. 'Don't,' she said, 'oh, don't. It's so silly.'

'What's silly?'

This time there was no mistaking her giggle.

'We are,' she said.

I stared at her. She seemed to quail under my gaze. 'Well,' she muttered, 'so we are. We're so *young*.'

I felt like a man who has returned home to find that strangers have moved in during his absence. The house is the same but everything inside it is unrecognizable. I put out my hand as if to touch her face and then slowly

withdrew it. 'But your letter,' I said wonderingly. 'What about your letter?'

'Oh, that,' she said. 'Was it awfully stupid?'

'Stupid?'

'I wrote it in such a hurry.'

I still couldn't believe it. This was Cathy, my Cathy, the girl who had sung to me, who had cried for me.

'But *my* letters,' I said. 'You got *my* letters.'

'What letters?'

'The ones I wrote to you. The ones they forwarded.'

'I didn't get any letters.'

I knew then that I was beaten, that I'd been beaten right from the start. '*She's* done this,' I said. 'Ilse's done it!'

'Oh, Tony, don't be so silly.'

'The bitch,' I said dully. 'The rotten, lousy bitch!'

'Stop it!' she cried. 'Stop it!'

And at that moment, in a flash, all my love for Cathy was there before my eyes. Then it dissolved away and I saw her face trembling through the tears I was powerless to stop. All I could do was murmur her name brokenly.

'Tony.' Her arms went out to me. 'Oh, Tony, don't cry. Please don't cry.'

Her hand brushed against my sleeve, caught me, and began pulling me towards her. The door swung open.

'So! You have come back, Mr Crossfield!'

There was no mistaking that voice. I pushed Cathy's hand away and turned to face her. 'You!' I choked. '*You!*'

She stood there with the light blazing on to her face

and her eyes moved slowly from me to Cathy. 'Don't you think you'd better go now, Mr Crossfield?'

I took a step towards her and drew back my arm.

'No!'

Cathy sprang from her place on the bed and flung herself upon Ilse. I lowered my arm. Ilse stood there rubbing her cheek slowly backwards and forwards against Cathy's hair. 'Really I think it would be best if you went,' she said. 'For your own good. This is no place for you now.' Her voice was quite empty of expression. No hint of hate, or pity, or triumph, tinged the flat statements.

I looked from one to the other, and suddenly I knew that she had spoken the truth. There was nothing here for me at all; perhaps there never had been anything. Heroes; heroines; dragons—the dream was dead at last.

I thrust my way past them on to the landing and ran down the stairs. To get away, to escape, that was all that mattered now. As I fumbled for my coat in the semi-darkness I heard from the drawing-room Captain Marshall's voice raised in a shout. 'You let him in!' he was saying. 'What d'you mean you "let him in"? You're nothing but a bloody pimp, Thomas! D'you expect me to stand here and let that pup sniff round my daughter after what Ilse told me?'

The car was waiting with its parking lights switched on. Inside I could see the glow of Father's cigarette. I snatched the door open and clambered in. 'Hello,' he said. 'You weren't long. Did you see her all right?'

I did not trust myself to speak.

He flicked on the roof light, took one look at me, and flicked it off. Then he started the engine, drove on for

half a mile, and stopped. He took out a fresh cigarette, tapped it deliberately against the steering-wheel and lit it. At last he said, 'Can't you tell me, Tony?'

I did my best, though it is beyond my power to say what he made of the disconnected fragments I gave him.

We sat there for a long time. The last shreds of twilight faded and only the wind and the rain were left. Then my father began to speak. He spoke not about me but about himself—himself and my mother who had died when I was born. But somehow I realized that it was about me too. Of what he said then little remains in my memory, but one phrase stuck fast. I remember how it seemed to fit itself in with the soft whirr and click of the windscreen wiper so that it repeated itself over and over again in my head: 'Drive your cart . . . and your plough . . . over the bones . . . of the dead.' Years after I discovered it was a quotation, and I can still recall the surprise I experienced at that discovery. I was so sure Father had said it for me alone.

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I HEARD via Mr Soutar and Angela that Cathy went back to Italy. She stayed there, I believe, until the Munich crisis of 1938. Then I lost track of her for some time because the Marshalls left Cavingham and moved to somewhere near London. During this time I returned to school and succeeded in passing my examinations. I suppose that as far as school was concerned I was what the educationalists call 'a late

starter', for I don't recall finding my studies particularly difficult. As Ilse had foretold, I went to Oxford, though only for a special 'short course' before joining up. Ilse herself was pushed into an internment camp for a time at the outbreak of war. However, within a matter of weeks Captain Marshall had managed to pull enough strings to get her out and she was soon back in her old post. Cathy joined the W.R.N.S.

With that most of my knowledge of them ends because in 1941 poor Mr Soutar was killed in an air-raid. They didn't even find enough of him to bury.

That fact I gleaned from a chance meeting with, of all people, Hans Keppner. He had joined the Pioneer Corps and was a sergeant when I bumped into him in Folkestone in 1943. We had a drink together and cursed the war and then he told me about Mr Soutar's death. I asked him if he knew anything about Cathy, but it was some time since he'd heard from Ilse and, apart from the fact that Cathy was now an officer, he couldn't tell me much. But in the course of our conversation he said something which seemed to pluck at my memory, though, at the time, I couldn't be sure why. This was that he and his two sisters had left Germany when they were very small children and had passed their childhood in Zürich, where Anna had died of T.B. at the age of fifteen. Not until I was lying in bed that night and going over it all in my mind did I recall the conversation which Cathy and I had had one hot summer morning beside the fountains in Trafalgar Square.

Only one thing remains. About a year ago when I was visiting my dentist I chanced to pick up one of those

society magazines that seem to abound in medical waiting rooms. It was printed on heavy, glossy paper and illustrated with drawings and photographs in sombre sepia. Dogs, horses, and houses predominated, with a liberal salting of sports cars and yachts. Grouped around these were the human beings. I turned the pages listlessly, my eye wandering from group to group, when suddenly my attention was caught by a name in one of the captions: 'Rear Admiral Cornelius Marshall, R.N. (Retd.)'

It was Captain Marshall right enough. However, it was not the Captain I stared at but the woman who stood next to him. According to the legend she was the Hon. Mrs R—— P——, but I knew Cathy when I saw her. She'd put on weight and her hair was cropped short, but she was still lovely. I only wish I'd changed as little in the sixteen years since I'd seen her last. I tore out the picture surreptitiously, and it is lying here on the desk before me as I write this. It is the only picture of Cathy I possess. Perhaps one day I shall meet her again.

Colin Murry

Colin Murry was born in Abbotsbury, Dorset, and educated at Brasenose College, Oxford (where he took a B.A. English Literature degree), and at University College, Leicester. He is a schoolmaster by profession and started writing in 1945. He has written short stories, poetry, children's stories, novels and plays. He was married in 1950 and in 1951 moved to Brighton and took a teaching post at Whittingehame College. He now has two daughters. His special interests include sailing, fishing, painting and amateur film-making.