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CURIOUS RELATIONS

CURIOUS RELATIONS

by

WILLIAM D'ARFEY

Edited by

WILLIAM PLOMER

> We are still far from the time when people will understand the curious relations which exist between one fragment of nature and another, which all the same explain each other and set each other off.
>
> VINCENT VAN GOGH: *Letters*

JONATHAN CAPE
THIRTY BEDFORD SQUARE
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INTRODUCTION

William d'Arfey is the pseudonym of a man no longer living. He was a wonderful raconteur and had in particular many stories and anecdotes about his kinsfolk in late Victorian and Edwardian times. A Zola might have marshalled them into a novel, but d'Arfey was not a writer, and he knew enough of the difficulties of practising any art to know that none can be undertaken lightly. I thought his stories were worth recording, both for their own sakes and for the qualities he brought to the telling of them. I thought they could be composed, first, as a picture of a rich, unlevelled and now vanished society, a picture on which he could employ his descriptive, inventive and satirical energies; and secondly, as an expression of his consciousness of its having come to one of its ends in his own person. I accordingly urged him to attempt a book, and offered the title and epigraph as a focus.

In the course of writing his book, d'Arfey was the victim of a long and exhausting illness, and before the work was finished or he was better he gave what was left of his strength to his country; but the effort was too much for him and he died before the second Great War was very far advanced. The MS. that he left was only a first draft — rough, fragmentary and episodic — which needed, at the very least, much cutting and polishing. That task he left to me, if I was willing and thought fit to undertake it. I have now done it, not merely as a duty to my dead friend, but in the hope that the stories will be as entertaining in print as they were when spoken.

The book must be taken for what it is, since it cannot be what it might have been. I will not enlarge here upon its merits and faults, because they seem to me patent. Though

solidly founded in fact, it takes in the main the forms of a grotesque fiction, so it need not be judged as a serious essay in social history; but its prevailing theme — that a society economically secure but lacking in adaptability may become corrupt, fantastic and moribund — is serious enough. It only remains to say that none of the characters in the book refers to any living person.

W. P.

NOTE

THE D'ARFEYS

Cornelius d'Arfey married Amelia Beddoes. They had three children:

1. Augustus, who died unmarried;

2. George, of Marsh Hall, who married, first, Violet Cavanagh, and secondly, Susannah Underhay, by whom he had a son, William, the author of this book; and

3. Elisa, who married Captain Featherstonehaugh-Brickley.

THE MOUNTFAUCONS

Augustus Mountfaucon married Constantia Casterby. They had nine sons, of whom the fourth, Morven, married Susannah, the widow of George d'Arfey; and nine daughters, all but one of whom died unmarried. The exception was Emmeline, who married the Rev. Septimus Hotblack.

I

GEORGE D'ARFEY

When my grandfather, Cornelius d'Arfey, married Amelia Beddoes, his father said, 'Corny's a fool, he has married a fool, and I suppose he'll beget fools'. The supposition did not prove true: whatever my father was, he wasn't a fool.

Amelia's father had a good deal of money, and the things an expensive education could in those days do for a girl it had done for her. She was a tiny blonde beauty. Unfortunately her hair turned grey when she was still quite young, and rather than injure its texture by dyeing it, she habitually wore a wig, as did Cornelius, who was bald. Both were musical and both had been well trained: Amelia used to claim that she had once been invited at a party to sing a duet with no less a person than the celebrated and lovely Malibran, and that afterwards the great soprano had commended her.

She was a vain, gay, feather-brained creature with a passion for dress and jewellery and an insatiable appetite for flattery, of which her colourless husband was sparing. Such colour as his character possessed was lent by his irascibility — a quality his wife shared. Indeed, they were both excitable, and their entertaining was a source of constant anxiety both to their guests and their servants, for, when provoked, they would snatch off their wigs and fling them at one another. One of those fantastic coiffures of the eighteen-thirties, which simulated bunches of grapes, clusters of roses, open fans, cockle-shells, or heavy braids and loopings like a spaniel's ears, and of which the elaboration must have reduced interest in the face beneath, would suddenly hurtle through the air, only to descend on to the roast turkey; or a Byronic black postiche would extinguish

the ice-pudding; either might land in the soup, the gravy or the fire, or get caught on the epergne or the gasolier. If Amelia sang a shade off pitch or my grandfather fumbled over a Beethoven sonata, tempers and toupees flew high.

My grandmother was proud of her slender figure and did everything in her power to prevent it from being spoiled by childbirth. She flatly refused to have more than three children – a forerunner in this of the modern woman – and their births were well spaced out. In those days there were no reliable methods of contraception, and so, when her pregnancy had reached a suitable stage, she would summon the entire staff, butler, footman, housemaids, cook and buttons, and these, armed with cushions and soft eider-downs, would be stationed at strategic points at the foot of the staircase. She would then fling herself, like Sappho from her Leucadian crag, from the top of the long first flight into a general mêlée of willing arms at the bottom. She never broke a limb or contracted peritonitis, and she never failed to bring about a miscarriage. Many years later she admitted to her daughter Elisa that she felt considerable relief when this drastic preventative became no longer necessary.

Apart from his peppery temper and musical gifts, my grandfather seems to have been an uninteresting sort of man, somewhat dominated by his sprightlier wife. They were certainly not a united couple, and indeed the d'Arfeys seldom displayed any talent for unity and had little of what is called 'family feeling', save in so far as their interests were concerned.

As the children grew up they tended more and more to be at loggerheads with their parents. Elisa, Cornelius's only daughter (who was very much younger than her brother George, my father) did, it is true, have her father well under her thumb, but disliked her mother, perhaps because she showed no signs that she was going to be as pretty or to

have as fine a voice, and both these facts caused her to be very jealous of her parent. Obstinacy stamped her character, as it did that of my father, and it went with a great deal of egotism and a general disregard for the wishes of other people; their tempers, too, were bad and their nerves quite uncontrolled. My uncle Augustus was the easiest of the three children, but he had none of Father's talents; much more tractable, he joined the Indian Army at the age of eighteen on my grandfather's suggestion, and there died of sunstroke and a surfeit of beer on his twenty-first birthday.

Father and Aunt Elisa detested one another all their lives and maintained a kind of guerrilla warfare for nearly seventy years. Granny was serenely indifferent to her children until she grew into an old woman, and Aunt Elisa got on with her father only, who was as wax in her hands. My grandfather admired his surviving son's brains, but no real love was lost between them.

At Oxford Father broke loose from the cramping influence of his home and launched out as a tremendous blood; he was an excellent athlete and could run like the wind, a fact which he kept carefully to himself until in his first term he astonished the entire town by breaking all previous records held for the mile. He was too indolent to do much work, but he had an innate capacity for passing examinations with the minimum amount of preparation. His forte was mathematics, at which he was brilliant, but most of his time was devoted to an unsuccessful attempt to master the flute, an instrument which, like all others, persistently eluded his control.

Before very long he had tired of Oxford, and rejecting his father's entreaties to him either to enter the Civil Service or to make mathematics his life's work, he insisted on going into the Army. During his short spell at Oxford he had contracted a sensational total of debts, and his father's heart not unnaturally sank at the prospect of those he would

probably incur when in the service. The situation was hotly canvassed from every angle, but in the end Father, as usual, had his own way. He bought a commission in the X-shires, and as Ensign d'Arfey joined his regiment at Glasgow.

His time at Glasgow was on the whole uneventful, but colour and incident were provided by the then enormous incidence of drunkenness in that city. The officers' principal diversion was to jump over the bodies of drunks lying in the streets as they returned to barracks from their evening outings.

Father was one of the only twenty officers to go right through the disastrous Crimean campaign from the first to the last shot. At nineteen he was gazetted a captain, so great had been his regiment's losses of officers and men. He made an excellent soldier; the hardships of this ill-conducted war brought out of his moody nature unsuspected qualities of toughness and patience. Possessing, when he cared to avail himself of it, considerable charm, he was always more agreeable to men and women who were of an inferior economic status than he was to those of his own world, for whom he reserved as a rule the rough side of his tongue; in consequence, the men under him showed him loyalty and devotion.

He conducted the X-shires' regimental band, the only one of its kind in the campaign, putting his unfortunate bandsmen through their paces properly, and compelling them to perform such then revolutionary works as the overture to 'The Flying Dutchman', 'The Pilgrims' March' and the overture to 'Rienzi'. Sometimes on Sundays, out of compliment to the Russians, who would come out to listen on one bank of the Alma while he conducted on the other, he would lead his men through a fantasia of his own arrangement based on arias from Glinka's 'A Life for the Czar' or his 'Russlan and Ludmilla', or through the overture to 'Prince Khmolsky'. At other times the Russians would reciprocate with a well-

meant pot-pourri from 'The Bohemian Girl', which drove Father, as a passionate Wagnerite, almost frantic. Each side would invariably conclude its programme with the national anthem of the enemy.

On one occasion he and some brother-officers were given three days' leave, which they elected to spend among the orange-groves and olive-woods of Batchi-Serai. Having consumed in the joyous company of some of the officers of the celebrated Preobrajhensky regiment prodigious quantities of sweet pink Crimean champagne and bucketsful of vodka, by their second night they had all completely passed out. On the following morning, when they were due back in camp, they awoke to discover that all their money had been stolen. The colonel commanding the Preobrajhensky regiment was scarcely in better form, for he added to the gaiety of nations that day by taking a full-dress parade wearing Father's forage-cap.

On finding out their loss they drew lots to see who should be left behind as a hostage while the money owing to the indignant innkeeper was collected and sent to him, and the lot fell on Father. With a towel packed with ice twisted round his throbbing temples he decided to while away the time by calling on the local mayor and obtaining from him a paper stating exactly what had happened; the mayor obliged with a most imposing document engrossed on vellum and hung with big dangling seals, not one word of which could Father read. His brother-officers returned to the British lines in perfect order, and in due course he received the money. Hastening back to camp, he was immediately arrested, deprived of his sword and courtmartialled. After explaining what had happened, he was promptly acquitted amid loud laughter and was handed back his sword, but when he asked for his document back his commanding officer grinned, saying:

'Not on your life, d'Arfey, me boy! In the first place,

there's hardly a man in the British Army can read a word of their damned lingo, and we've only your word for it as to what it says; and in the second place, if I gave it back to you you'd use it to get sozzled all over again.'

While he was on active service Father wasn't too particular how he came by a work of art; he succeeded in looting from a church a magnificent seventeenth-century bell, as well as some superb eleventh-century ikons. Unluckily, it was an army regulation that all metal found automatically became the property of the Engineers, so, bearing this fact in mind, as soon as he had got safely back to camp he and his batman set to work to bury the loot under his tent. He had just managed to dispose of the ikons safely and was starting to conceal the bell, when an officer of Engineers arrived most inappropriately and claimed it. Father was successful in bringing back the ikons to England, and many years later lent most of them to his friend Dante Gabriel Rossetti; but Rossetti died while Father was on a cruise in the Levant, and by the time he returned home he discovered that William Michael Rossetti had sold them with the rest of his brother's effects. Father's loot included the minute pink-and-blue kid-topped boots of the Russian Commander-in-Chief, Prince Mentchikov, which he had left in his post-chaise after the battle of the Alma; Cinderella could just have squeezed them on.

Father carried the colours of the X-shires at the Battle of the Alma and also led an attack on the Redan. He was severely wounded at Inkerman, but regrettably by an English naval bullet.

One day after the fall of Sevastopol he was seated in the trenches dressed, because of the terrific heat, in a suit of pea-green silk, when an important-looking officer whom he did not know came up to him and said: 'And who the devil may *you* be, sir?'

Father turned a wintry blue eye on him and replied:

'Captain d'Arfey of the X-shires! And who the devil are *you*, sir?'

Despite the fact that this big shot was none other than Lord Rokeby himself, the acting Commander-in-Chief of the British Army, Father got away with it, helped perhaps by his quelling eye and insolence of manner.

By the end of the campaign he had been mentioned six times in dispatches and had been strongly recommended for the V.C. He was one of the first British officers to be so honoured, but he refused point-blank to accept it. I suppose that his motive for not doing so was some queer fusion of modesty and pride. He would submit to limelight raining down on him (though apparently without pleasure) but would not raise a finger to attract it. I believe his real reason for rejecting this decoration was an inner conviction that some of his brother officers — or more probably still, some of the men under him — deserved it more than he, but to have admitted to this would have seemed to him sentimental. A curious trait in a man of his imaginative capacity was his resentment and anger at the achievements of that extraordinary woman of genius, Florence Nightingale, who, apart from Todleben, was the only great figure in the whole wretched affair.

Father wasn't popular with his brother-officers, because when they bored him, as they frequently did, he wouldn't speak to them, and the fact that he had more money than most of them only aroused their jealousy. He was nervous and irritable like his father, and the hardships of war and the sufferings of his men had only increased these characteristics; he never forgot the general absence of decently warm clothes, the army boots soled with brown paper, the brandy that froze solid in the tents, the match that was only struck to light a cigar when not fewer than twelve men were present.

When the war was over the resilience that he had shown

in its earlier stages was exhausted. But he returned home in high fettle, and later was awarded a number of medals, including the order of the Mejidieh from the Sultan and a handsome testimonial to his valour in a silver-printed white-satin envelope, as well as pieces of the regimental colours that he had carried at the Alma. He was something of a hero and the family were suitably impressed. Even his sister Elisa was awed and curbed her disposition to gibe, and Cornelius showered money for a time on his son.

Soon afterwards Father went with the X-shires out to India to help establish calm after the Mutiny, but to that country, to the English there and to the Indians he took an instantaneous dislike: he openly expressed the wish that everyone concerned would cut each other's throats as quickly as possible, brown and white alike. Most of all did he dislike the British mem-sahib, about whom he could find nothing bad enough to say. 'No wonder the Indians mutinied,' he would observe gloomily. In consequence he was feared, he was disliked, he was sometimes admired, but he was never loved. In order to get away from the country — which had, so he said, a curse on it — he resigned from his beloved regiment, sold his commission (he was one of the last British officers to do so) and obtained a fresh one in the Army Service Corps.

After a short while in Australia he was stationed with his regiment at Chatham. There he again became unpopular, owing to his blunt refusal to call on any of his brother-officers' wives, giving as his reason the fact that in his opinion no gentlewoman would consent to live in barracks, and that in any case — and he was doubtless quite right — none of them had any conversation that could be endured. Nothing less than a first-rate wisecrack could prise open his shell, but wit was rare in the Chatham society of 1860.

It was about then that he saw for the first time Violet Cavanagh, or to be more exact, that he saw her legs, a

spectacle which reacted on his Victorian nerve-centres like hashish or champagne. The remainder of the lady was lost to sight, for she was struggling along the Brighton front in a hurricane and her copious crinoline had blown inside out over her head. Without waiting to be asked – which would have been impossible in the circumstances – and seeing that she was about to walk blindly over on to the shingle, Father seized the billowing folds that covered her face and the springy cage of whalebone, and somehow managed to right them. Miss Cavanagh thanked him with a good deal of maidenly reserve, for she had reached the age when that quality was as essential as it was becoming; she was on the brink of the mid-Victorian woman's nightmare, the age of thirty.

She was a small, exquisitely pretty woman, rather Spanish in type, and the model she aimed at copying was the Empress Eugénie. A little shaken, she permitted Father to give her his arm and to escort her back to the handsome Regency villa at the back of the town where she lived with her family. Mr. Cavanagh was a rich man, but the family were inclined to look down upon Violet, since she was the child of his second marriage, her mother having been governess to his first wife's children.

Father thought that he had fallen violently in love with her. Some few years her junior, he proposed almost immediately, only to be flatly rejected. The fury of Amelia and Cornelius gave way to relief, for they had set their hearts on Father's making an impressive match. The lovely Violet had a similar objective in mind, as had *her* parents, and so a general deadlock was reached. Father wooed her ardently, but all to no purpose. She wasn't the least bit in love with him . . . and yet . . . and yet . . . she was getting nearer to the hopeless age every day, and she wavered a little. For months Father worried her as a dog worries a bone, in the face of fierce opposition from his parents, and in the end she

gave way, but it was perhaps more a gesture of despair and defeat than anything else. And Father, that immeasurably obstinate man, would doubtless soon have tired of her repeated refusals, had it not been for the hostile attitude of Amelia and Cornelius.

The gaiety of the wedding was somewhat marred by the fact that the various sets of in-laws were barely on bowing terms. The d'Arfeys were furious at their son's pig-headedness, and the Cavanaghs were sullen because they thought, and quite rightly, that Father and his relations gave themselves airs. The honeymoon, a revelation of mutual unsuitability, was spent in Paris and in Italy; Father wished to look at pictures and Violet at fashion-plates; he at Duccio, she at Dubufe. The d'Arfeys always prided themselves on the way they spoke French, and each thought that he was the only member of the family with a fluent command of idiom and an undistinguishable accent; but it was unluckily indisputable that Violet was a first-rate linguist, and she accordingly deprived her husband of an admirable opportunity for display. His taste in music was cultivated, hers was popular; she had ears only for Offenbach, and was always humming airs from 'Robinson Crusoe', from 'La Créole' or 'La Grande Duchesse de Gérolstein'. She proved to be a vain, extravagant, good-humoured, good-natured, selfish and amusing woman, while he was a witty, kind, courageous, cultivated, rather cruel, generous and lonely egoist.

He had left the Army mainly because its conversation bored him. Deprived of a profession which he secretly loved and in which he had succeeded, he retained only its idiom, since most of his friends were still in it. He became an indolent, bored dilettante, perhaps too oppressed by emotional emptiness to give himself up to any other occupation; he had endless talents, but none was ever developed.

It was now that Cornelius d'Arfey's health began to show signs of giving way. That furious brunette, his daughter

Elisa, was turned seventeen and her eyes were fixed on marriage. Hard, handsome and elegant, she wanted to get away from home and had succeeded in attracting the eye of Captain William Featherstonehaugh-Brickley, of the Scots Greys, who had indeed proposed to her. Her parents strenuously objected to such a marriage on the grounds that William's mistresses were legion, a state of things which marriage to my aunt Elisa seemed unlikely to remedy.

It was in the middle of a singularly acrimonious argument between my aunt and my grandparents that Cornelius leaned quietly back in his chair and died without a sound. Amelia and Elisa wrangled on furiously for a long time with all the inexhaustible vitality of our family, without coming to any conclusion save a mutually unfavourable one about each other. It was a bleak autumn night and that the fire had long since gone out was unnoticed by either of the ladies, both of whose tempers were now at boiling-point. It was long after twelve when Amelia discovered that it was time to take my grandfather up to bed, and when she at last rose to do so she discovered that he must be put to bed for ever.

Father took charge of the situation as the heir to Cornelius's estate, but wisely washed his hands of his young sister's matrimonial projects. Two weeks later she eloped from Chester Terrace with her William, having spent the interim in passing, with the connivance of the kitchen-maid, the entire contents of her elaborate wardrobe piece by piece through the scullery window. The widowed Amelia now sentimentalized over her absent daughter, and probably sincerely; yet she couldn't help feeling a certain relief that this stormy petrel had fled the nest.

Two years after their marriage, a long lapse for so observant a girl, aunt Elisa discovered what her entire circle had been bursting to tell her — that uncle William was unfaithful to her; and on learning this she tried, with a singular lack

of success or originality, to devote the remainder of their married life together to making him regret it. Like all similar efforts it was doomed to failure from the start.

Father was now a rich young man of twenty-nine, and having left the Army he proceeded to turn his attention to finding a small country estate where he could settle down with his wife. His character was complex and difficult, and the carapace of arrogance which he had developed and which so often put people's backs up was far more self-protective than they had the wit to see; underneath it lay shyness, the desire to conceal a sense of waste, of opportunities frittered away, of gifts and powers unused.

His first obstinate impulse was to say no to everything, out of sheer cussedness; a habit of mind with which Violet soon learned how to deal by proposing to do the exact opposite of everything that she wished to. There was an engagingly ingenuous streak in him, for after a quarter of a century's marriage he had never found out this simple trick.

It was in the year 1861, when driving through a lonely and little-known part of Somerset, that he came upon Marsh Hall, the property that he was to buy and where he was to live for the rest of his life. Marsh had consisted in the seventeenth century of a two-roomed cottage, the remote hide-out of a gang of smugglers, and round these thickly-walled rooms a house had gradually sprung into being in the succeeding couple of centuries. The mud walls, cool in summer and deliciously warm in winter, now enclosed Father's study and Violet's morning-room, and round them a country house, vaguely Regency in character, had formed a courtyard, the north side being the servants' wing, its back abutting directly on to the steep, lofty, pine-clad hill known as Byron's Wood. Pines and great beeches shrouded the whole house in a whispering green shade; in front of it a wide lawn sloped down till it merged imperceptibly into fields traversed three-quarters of a mile away

by the little-frequented road that led to Bessbridge. Beyond this lay a wide brackish marsh that mirrored each changing mood of the sky and was held in a greenish-brown frame of rank grass and sedge which never changed its look either in summer or winter. And beyond a narrow bank of mud and shingle the waters of an estuary lapped gently, soft-tongued, yet capable in a harsh winter of hurling themselves at the old jetty where clay from the pits of Dolbreck had been landed earlier in the century, but which now was used only by Father as the quickest means of boarding his yacht. On a wild December day spray would beat up as far as the windows of Marsh, nearly a mile and a half away.

Across the water lay the long low purple ribbon of Torney Island, blotting out the smaller islands that lay clustered behind it, and beyond it the crests of the violet Dolbreck hills raised themselves in a sweeping undulation against the skyline. In winter the winds raged round Marsh, and though in a high gale the house would seem to pitch and toss, yet the great buttress of Byron's Wood against which it lay broke the force of the storm; groaning and crashing, its violence would ebb away among the branches of the lofty pines. On the wildest night one lay at peace, quite secure in the great protective embrace of the hill.

The house was low, long and white, and the big windows had large slatted green shutters that it took all one's force as a child to budge. It was approached by a vaulted avenue of rhododendrons forty feet high, which in June gleamed with pure white flowers like a tunnel hewn out of ice, the dull gold of the gravel drive being dappled as though with snow. Heath-land surrounded the house, with knee-deep drifts of long pale silky grass, interspersed by glowing barriers of gorse. Above Byron's Wood (it had no connection with the poet, but was merely named after a long-dead landowner) there ran a field carpeted in summer with soft-leaved, crimson-petalled clover over which hung incessantly

like a light veil the humming of bees. Below this, in a grove of scarlet rhododendrons, at the extremity of a spur of the wood, there was an ancient summer-house that dated from the close of the previous century; built by a retired naval captain who had enlarged the house, it was octagonal in shape and its white and dove-grey walls, elaborately moulded, were decorated in a very twentieth-century manner with swags and festoons and loops of painted rope that were coiled like watch-springs, like snakes, in light, graceful patterns linked together by springing hempen arabesques of white and mottled lilac, the whole a charming, faded fantasy.

When Father bought the property it had long been deserted and was fast going to rack and ruin. For a time he laboured over it spasmodically, darkening the not over-light house with a half-planned pinetum, which providentially refused to grow within the shade of the noble, ancient beeches; only a solitary macrocarpa survived, attaining the monstrous maturity of a gigantic Christmas-tree. The vine-houses had fallen into ruin, and the elaborate parterres which he planned were never completed and were soon invaded by briars and weeds; it was like the garden of the Sleeping Beauty. The deep green *tonnelle* which ran up the length of the kitchen-garden at the foot of Byron's Wood grew rank and dim, the nut trees where the nightingales sang were choked by the evergreens, and the lavender bushes exhaled no more than the ghost of fragrance. Roses grew in wild untended profusion — tea-roses, moss-roses, saffron Maréchal Niels, and a frosted waterfall of Seven Sisters that flung its still cascade from the thirty-foot height of verdure that vaulted over the green *tonnelle*. Clematis, brick-red passion-flowers and honeysuckle broke down the roofs of the greenhouses, and bindweed scattered its white trumpets over the swelling, untrimmed box-hedges, while scarlet and white rhododendrons and shell-coloured *azalea mollis* triumphed over the general neglect.

They had not long been settled in when Violet found that she was going to have a child; it proved to be a very little one and came into the world still-born. Her recovery took some little while and it became obvious that she was putting on weight rapidly. By the time she was up and about again the unfortunate young woman had become ludicrously fat. She naturally assumed that this disfigurement would soon pass, but as the months went by her girth only increased. Twenty-five years were at once added to her age. Her fatness was both comical and tragic, since she was too short for the highest of heels to help her. Her dignity, the swimming movements of her vast crinolines, the carriage of her swan-like neck and her slim — if invisible — legs had vanished almost over-night; in a month an *élégante* by Constantin Guys had become a savage caricature of a bourgeoise by Daumier: she would ruefully make fun of her own bulk in order to deprive others of the pleasure of doing so. In a few months she was pregnant again. Her second child was also born dead, and childless she remained.

Father had by this time outgrown his early extravagance, and he now steered a somewhat erratic course between extreme parsimony and wild expenditure. He would give elaborate dinner-parties with the sole idea that *he* should be entertained; if amused, he was an admirable host, but when bored he did not attempt to conceal the fact: in this condition he could be appallingly inhibiting. Should the conversation fall below the high standards he expected — and in the country it almost invariably, inevitably did — he would take out his large gold watch and lay it on the dinner-table, staring fixedly at it in a hostile, resentful silence which only helped to make the guests, rather than the party, go.

He was a very generous man, and no one who ever came to him for help was turned away empty-handed. 'Money solves most people's problems for them,' he would say, and would give it to them, even, generally, if they were known

to be habitual wastrels. 'Oh, well...' he would say with a shrug if remonstrated with. Like his parents and his sister Elisa he had an admirable ear for music, but was one of the very worst executants that ever lived, a fact that he was aware of and which rankled with him. Even my mother many years later (for at this date she was not yet born), when playing her few, painful and utterly laborious morceaux on the harp, including a composition entitled 'In a Cottage near a Wood lived a Maiden Fair and Good', was as much a virtuoso as he; but she, entirely unmusical, confessed to only having attempted to learn this instrument with a view to displaying her beautiful arms.

But Father was much more fanciful; in the music-room there were beautifully-bound volumes of his arrangements for two concertinas, or for concertina and accordion, of the 'Siegfried Idyll', of the Fire-Music, of the Graal-Music, of a fantasia of his own based on the arias of Cherubini's exquisite and forgotten opera, 'Der Wasser-Träger'. Could oddity go further? It is a complete mystery with whom Father could ever have contemplated playing these arrangements; as great a mystery as what 'The Dance of the Blessed Souls' — another arrangement — could have sounded like on the concertina. He couldn't even attempt to play the accordion; and there was apparently no one but his intelligent Negro coachman who could tackle its intricacies.

Bayreuth was a great bone of contention between Father and Violet, the latter disliking Germany and the Germans and their cooking, and even more the, to her, quite incomprehensible music of Wagner. She flatly refused to speak or to understand a single word of the language (which in actual fact she spoke fluently), probably because she bitterly resented being invariably taken for a German woman in view of her bulk; and this was understandable in a woman who had only a few years earlier always been taken for a chic Frenchwoman or a Spaniard. But she never forgave

the Germans and went into deep mourning for six months after the Franco-Prussian war. She never forgave Wagner either, and for the few years that she survived him she always celebrated February 13th, the anniversary of his death, with a combined oyster-party and whist-drive, an entertainment which for the three or four years that it was held was always preceded by a terrific scene with Father. He, in an attempt to pacify the manes of the dead master, would on this day decorate the white marble bust of him which stood on the top of the library bookcase with a freshly-made laurel-wreath, much to his wife's disgust.

And thus my Father and his first wife lived in luxury and thrift, in idleness or in frantic and unfruitful activity: but the axe would not be heard thudding in the cherry-orchard for some time yet.

II

THE CADI AND THE LADY

When Father and Violet were in their fifties, they decided to go on a long, leisurely cruise round the Mediterranean and the Levant, but after it, for reasons which will appear, Father really ceased to care for the exotic.

For years Violet had been pitied for her appearance, but Fate was now to produce a startling vindication of her personal charms. In the towns of the North African littoral they created a furore. Descending the gangway to set foot on the soil of Tangier, bejewelled and smartly dressed by Worth, she might well have used the very words that the young Cécile Sorel was to exclaim fifty years later at her revue début, as she paraded down a flight of stairs on to the stage of the Casino de Paris: '*L'ai-je bien descendu?*'

Not a single Moor present on the landing-stage had an

eye for anyone else: Violet had caused a sensation quite comparable to that when Lily Langtry drove round the Park for the first time; probably not since Lady Hester Stanhope, nearly eighty years before, had Africa been so staggered by a white woman. Touts stopped touting and tarts tarting; pimps pimped in vain; and there was a buzz of deep warm voices, as every Moor within hailing distance jostled his neighbour in order to get a better view. Each man was murmuring to the next one something to this effect:

'*Hadi el mra mezyana bezzaf, el hamdu Llah!*' ('In the name of Allah, what a splendid woman!')

Splendid teeth were glistening in the evening sun like mother-o'-pearl counters and soft eyes lit up as she passed, poised majestically on her high heels. At first she thought they were all laughing at her, but no woman can long remain blind to all the most obvious signs of sincere admiration, more especially when some of those rendered left but little to the imagination. It was a triumph, albeit a slightly *risqué* one; but Violet, though respectable, was no prude.

Richly-dressed Moors struggled for the honour of carrying her parasol, her field-glasses, her handbag, and she found her plump arms laden with bouquets of jasmine and violets; she let fall her lace handkerchief, and before it could be retrieved for her it had been torn to pieces by admiring souvenir-hunters. At last Father got her into a carriage, panting, perspiring, but happy. He was in a good mood and was amused to notice in his wife's manner towards him a new faint note of patronage.

They dressed for dinner, Violet in abundant white satin, and Father, who, despite his bald head and greying beard, was accustomed to being taken for very much his wife's junior, for once forgot his habitual slovenliness, busied himself with sponging the soup-stains off his tail-coat, tucked a gardenia in his button-hole and put on all his rings. They

went downstairs for a drink on the terrace overlooking the street and there they found some of her more persistent fans awaiting her. These were not of the Moorish plutocracy and could only admire such a vision of Moorish delight from a decent distance.

She settled down to enjoy her drink with a perfectly assumed air of unconsciousness, while in a well-bred silence below her admirers watched her every gesture. After a while Father began to feel a little self-conscious with so many eyes fixed glitteringly on his wife; bending over her he asked if she would not care to go in and dine; but quite unused to open admiration from any quarter she was naturally a little reluctant to be deprived of this unfamiliar stimulant. However, a flash of cold blue hunger from her husband's eye soon persuaded her.

Their flower-decked table was in the centre of the room; at a table exactly opposite theirs sat a Moorish gentleman, half Moor, half Negro, resplendently dressed, his handsome face wearing an expression of hauteur and his bearing indicative of a calm, authoritative self-possession. When they were half-way through the fish the maître-d'hôtel came over and presented Violet with a bunch of camellias; he asked them how long they proposed staying in Tangier, and after a little general conversation discreetly indicated the Moorish gentleman, explaining that he was the chief Cadi or Magistrate, a man of great wealth and of very noble family, who was also an ardent xenophile, with a special regard for the English. He implied that the Cadi would be very willing to act as their cicerone during their visit.

Like most European women Violet was very curious to see the inside of a harem, and before Father had time to get a word in she had thanked the maître-d'hôtel and had asked him to present the Cadi to her; this was probably a gross inversion of Moroccan etiquette, but it passed. They had soon finished eating, and the Cadi rose majestically and

came over to their table, greeting them in fluent French with the greatest distinction of manner. He began to shower compliments on the English in general and on Violet in particular; and the fact that he persisted in addressing her as 'Mademoiselle' Father put down to Moorish flattery or to a misconception of linguistic niceties. The conversation grew animated and she became visibly younger under the Cadi's brilliant, appreciative gaze.

She was a sensible woman and she felt younger, rejuvenated. A woman more given to self-deception and more tied to British convention, or one whose vanity had not suffered a severe set-back, might have affected to despise admiration from such a quarter; but Violet within her limits was a realist. She kept her weather-eye open for the ridiculous, but the Cadi's perfect manners provided no excuse for laughter. They got on together admirably, and an invitation to visit his palace the following morning had been accepted, when he announced his intention of sending a carriage to the hotel '*pour amener monsieur le capitaine et sa fille*'.

There was a moment's absolute silence as the full purport of these words sank in on his audience. It was broken by Father, who gave a sort of strangulated gasp; Violet was more self-possessed, but her face, too, was a study in conflicting emotions. She felt a wild longing to laugh and only good manners restrained her; an overwhelming feeling of triumph at this physical vindication of herself, as well as a queer sense of pity for her husband whom she knew to be profoundly mortified, and who was furious with himself, and consequently with her, for the very fact that he was. Only a very faint smile hovered for a moment on her lips as she glanced at her dumbfounded husband.

Father couldn't believe his ears; he looked helplessly round the room for support, for some refutation of the innocent libel, and didn't find it. He felt that everything was damnably unfair, that he had been taken advantage of,

and his wife's pale smile and the Moor's searching gaze made him angrier still. After all, if he was old, well, she was older; they both ought to be sitting by an English fire-side and not gallivanting in North Africa. And was, by any chance, that damned Cadi trying to take a rise out of him? But no; it was quite obvious that he wasn't, that he had spoken in all sincerity, and this didn't make things any better. A fat old woman, that was what Violet was. And then what nearly always happened with Father happened; he began to laugh to himself, with a choking, bubbling mirth that nothing could stop.

The Cadi looked at him in astonishment.

'*Pourvu que mademoiselle le veut toujours*,' he added, rather uncertainly.

'But *madame's* my *wife*, Cadi, not my *daughter*!'

The Cadi's face fell a little and then resumed its former look of bewilderment. What on earth was the old Roumi laughing at? Didn't that fine, magnificent woman look young enough to be his daughter? All the Rouama were rich, and why shouldn't a rich old Roumi be able to afford to buy a beautiful fat wife, a wife fatter than any woman in Meknès, that city of pearls, where all the women are the size of houses? He couldn't for the life of him think what the old Roumi was laughing at.

Father's laughter and the conversation languished; more compliments were exchanged and the visit was fixed; the Cadi took his leave and they retired to bed.

In the morning, awaking refreshed, Father's mood had changed to one of resignation not unmixed with bitterness, but tempered by his sense of the ridiculous. He thought he would go out and buy his wife some flowers; returning with a huge bunch of violets he was astonished when his wife burst into tears on receiving them. He looked at her blankly for she didn't cry easily.

'What in heaven's name's the matter?'

She dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief, knowing only too well what a fat, elderly woman looks like when she weeps.

'I'm a fool!' she said bitterly; 'why should I mind your going and getting me flowers because some Moor finds me a little less repulsive than I am? But why should *you* bring me flowers because of it? It only makes me feel more of an idiot than ever.'

He didn't see what she was driving at, but he pacified her; and in due course the Cadi arrived to take them over to his palace. Sitting in the inner court sipping sherbet their spirits revived; after a while the Cadi suggested that Violet, whom he still referred to as 'Mademoiselle', might be interested in meeting his wives.

These ladies were speechless with amazement when they saw her, were vastly intrigued by her hat, her dress, her jewellery; but more still by her girth. One of them, a cynical-eyed Negress, obviously didn't believe in her for a moment; creeping up unobserved behind Violet, she gave her posterior a sharp pinch, to which there was naturally no response, since all that she had gripped was a bustle with its stiffening of whalebone and buckram. She turned to her fellow-wives with an air of triumph which clearly said: 'Phoney! I told you so!' But Violet had caught her at it in a mirror, out of the corner of her eye, and thought to herself: 'Ignorant, impertinent savage!' And before she had time to move away a slim brown hand had again pinched her lightly, this time on the lower part of her thigh. Violet swept round on her indignantly, only to notice on her face a fleeting look of satisfaction. 'This,' said the Negress's face, as her fingers sank into the generous flesh, 'is the real thing, and *no* mistake.'

There was genuine awe in the sly glance that she gave the white woman; and at that moment, as Violet turned in vexation to her host, she intercepted an almost imperceptible

glance exchanged between the Cadi and his wife. She pondered its significance for a moment and then forgot it. The Cadi excused himself and went off to rejoin Father, and the ladies, as playful and as curious as kittens, ran their henna-tipped fingers over the heavy silk of her dress, and chattered like birds; their manner since the pinch was extremely deferential, as they plied her with sherbet and sticky Moroccan sweetmeats.

The Cadi rejoined Father and they seated themselves under a shady tree. A long, rambling conversation was started by the Moorish gentleman, which consisted principally in what one might call elaborate figure-skating around and up and down the person of Violet; oriental compliments ricocheted off one protuberance on to another, somewhat to Father's embarrassment. However, after a while their conversation began to take on a more general character, turning to divorce, to English and Moorish civil law, and to the relative expediency and dispatch of the two systems. Father wondered a little at the nature of his host's queries, and, rather bored, answered them to the best of his ability. And then suddenly the Cadi rose and faced his guest, saying:

'*Monsieur le capitaine*, I am a very rich man.'

Father raised his eyebrows.

'And could we not therefore,' continued the Cadi, 'come to some arrangement?'

'Look here,' said Father, 'I haven't the faintest idea what you're getting at, Cadi.'

It was the latter's turn to look bewildered.

'*Mais voyons, monsieur le capitaine*, it is the question of madame.'

'*Madame?* But what on earth's *she* got to do with this?'

'I confess I first took her for your *daughter*, monsieur; but nevertheless I am desperately anxious to marry her and am willing to pay any price for her — in reason, that is, *bien*

entendu. I should of course make her my head-wife. *Cela va sans dire.*'

Father couldn't take it in all at once; swallowing very hard several times, he goggled at the Cadi, whose face had now assumed an extremely serious expression. And then, completely forgetful of good manners, he burst into a shout of laughter. The Cadi, enveloped in a mantle of dignity, looked for a moment horror-stricken at his guest's bad manners and then resumed his argument.

'*Monsieur le capitaine* is amused, but I repeat that I am a very wealthy man, and that I should pay a very handsome price for Mademoiselle – I mean Madame' – he corrected himself.

Father tried to control his mirth and said gravely:

'But in England we don't sell our wives, Cadi.'

The Cadi eyed him in well-bred incredulity; this was clearly the flimsiest excuse for refusing a friendly request.

'Then divorce her, monsieur; I will buy her afterwards.'

'But I've never sold a wife before. I shouldn't know what to ask for her.'

'*Je l'ai déjà dit; je payerai un prix spécial.*'

'But don't you think she ought to be consulted first of all, Cadi?' said Father, his eyes alight with laughter.

'Men can settle such matters without the aid of women, monsieur, surely?'

'But surely she ought to have *some* say in the matter?'

'How much did you pay for her new?' He broke off. 'Oh, I recollect now. European women pay their husbands handsomely in order to make them buy them. *Quel drôle de pays!*'

Father smiled at this, being rather taken with this simplified view of what was clearly intended for the French *mariage-de-convenance.*

'But we Moors,' continued the Cadi, 'are less avaricious, for we buy them outright, without unnecessary prelimin-

aries.' He shrugged. 'Still, if you *wish* to consult her . . .'

Father was twinkling with amusement.

'I think, you know, Cadi, that we had better consult her.'

'Consult whom about what?' said the voice of Violet. They looked round and there she was; bored with the prattle of the ladies of the harem, she had come out to rejoin them. Father looked a little self-conscious, but the Moor glowed at sight of her.

'You were talking about me, weren't you?'

Father felt that the situation was getting ever so slightly out of hand, but the Cadi seized the opportunity for more gallantry.

'*Bien sûr, madame; naturellement.* Of whom else should we speak?'

Violet smiled at him. 'And what were you saying?'

'Look here, Violet — ' said her husband roughly.

'Yes, George?'

'What I mean to say is — ' He was getting a trifle flustered now.

'Yes, George?'

'A joke's a joke — *but* — '

'A *joke?*' interjected the Cadi indignantly.

'What joke?' asked Violet.

'It's not worth going into,' said Father.

'*Mais voyons, monsieur!*' cried the Moor.

'What *is* all this ridiculous mystery?' asked Violet. 'George! You're behaving like a schoolboy. What is it all about? I insist on being told. Why, good heavens, you're *blushing!*'

Father directed, without effect, a furious blue ray on her, jerking out furiously:

'How *dare* you? I'm not!'

'Permit *me* to explain, madame,' said the Cadi.

'I wish you would, monsieur.'

'Look here, Violet!' cried Father in a voice of extraordinary savagery: 'don't be a fool!'

His wife looked at him with serene indifference, but with something else as well behind her plump imperturbability.

'Thank you, George; I'm not in the habit of being one.'

Father glared at her, not venturing to speak for fear of being forced into an explanation, which was precisely what his wife intended to force him into making. She smiled brilliantly at the ravished Moor.

'*You*, Cadi, you know how curious women are.' She laughed. 'You'll explain the mystery to me, won't you?'

The Cadi gazed back at her, completely infatuated.

'*Mais bien sûr, madame;* it was like this —'

Father had turned the colour of a turkey-cock, an absolutely abnormal condition for him who was so habitually self-possessed.

'God damn it all!' he shouted: 'if anyone's got to explain this damfoolishness, *I* will!'

He fortunately spoke in English, although the Cadi must have guessed from his tone and his expression the nature of his feelings. In any case the Cadi had long since come to the conclusion, it may be assumed, that all the Rouama were mad and that their manners left something to be desired; but his own perfect dignity remained unimpaired.

'I am waiting for you to explain it, George.'

Father's manner changed; he was obviously putting a break on himself; but his irony, to which spleen usually lent wings, was now heavy-footed.

'Rather a delicate thing for a feller to explain to his wife, Violet; hardly know how to put it, really . . . but the fact is . . . the Cadi here says he wants to . . . er . . . marry you.'

His manner was now genuinely embarrassed; now that the cat was out of the bag his customary courtesy had come back to him and with it the natural responses of a Victorian husband to an unusual and irregular situation.

'Really, I'm sorry, Violet... I beg your pardon... but it isn't a situation that one quite knows how to explain to a lady.'

Behind his wife's cool manner there was a visible trace of amusement.

'The Cadi wishes to *marry* me?... But surely he *knows*?...' She thought for a moment. 'But how stupid of me! Of course their marriage customs aren't *ours*. I see...'

'You see, Violet, I didn't want to embarrass you.' But his wife's attention was elsewhere. A quarter of a century of snubs, of unrestrained irritability had left their mark on her; not a stupid woman, she was aware that her tough, thin-skinned husband was not insensitive to ridicule; in her blood was the heritage of thousands of years of womanly servitude; and suddenly the discipline to which this nineteenth-century wife had been bred gave way. In her next question there could have been heard the first crackings of the foundations of a still seemingly-solid edifice which were at that very moment being busily undermined in the frozen north by a bearded Scandinavian dramatist. She turned to the Moorish gentleman with a charming, interrogative smile, behind which there burned the desire for revenge on a thousand wrongs.

'*Vraiment, monsieur le Cadi, vous voulez m'épouser, pârait il?*'

The brown face beamed at her in ecstasy.

'*Ah madame! Vous me rendez fou, vous le savez bien!*'

Father's face was a study; sheer unbelief, amazement, horror and a sense of outrage chased one another in procession over it; and before he had time to find words the Cadi went on.

'*Mais qu'est-ce-que vous pensez, madame? Est-ce-que j'ai le bonheur infini de vous plaire?*'

She was still smiling at him. '*En effet, monsieur, je trouve que votre idée est bonne... qu'elle est flatteuse, mais* — In fact,' said she, flashing a plump finger in the direction of my outraged

Father, 'so far as I can see, Cadi, there is only one difficulty – my husband.'

A look of veiled relief appeared in her husband's eye; her behaviour was of course quite outrageous, but she had *some* sense of decency left. But who the devil would have thought that that damned *nigger* could have had so much impertinence?

'But,' his wife continued brightly, 'I dare say we could get round that, Cadi. Of course, my position would have to be made perfectly plain to me; I mean religiously, in law, as regards my position in . . . er . . .' She blushed a little. 'In your . . . er . . . home . . . er . . . harem.' Confusion mantled her full cheeks still more, as she gave Father a *look*. But he had stood as much as he was able; he jumped to his feet, still inarticulate with anger, and strode over to his wife. It seemed for a moment as though he might hit her, though she didn't flinch or take her dark mocking gaze off him; and then all his training reasserted itself and he stood still, scowling at her like ten thousand fiends.

'Violet!' he shouted, having lost all his self-control: 'You're nothing but a blasted *fool*!'

She gave him a blistering look; but then the Cadi, who could only follow the English conversation very imperfectly, stepped gallantly into the breach.

'Yess! Yess!' he exclaimed with beaming pleasure in his own ability to save a situation by an irrelevant compliment. 'Yess, *vraiment!* Madame is indeed the fattest of all the fat women I have ever seen anywhere!'

Poor Violet took this back-hander with some astonishment, for, to tell the truth, it hadn't occurred to her that the measure of her startling success with the indigenous population was her sheer bulk. What now seemed to her to be this volte-face on the part of her dusky admirer caused her to look a little put out. The Cadi saw that he had somehow said the wrong thing. He hastened to put matters right.

'Allah! Mais dire que madame est belle! Jamais je n'ai vu une dame si belle! Jamais de ma vie!'

But his handsome *amende* was a little lost in the ungallant and unkind guffaw with which Father greeted his previous reference to his wife's embonpoint; and this, for Violet, was the last straw. She'd had enough of Father's rudeness and turned to the Moor.

'Well, *monsieur le Cadi*, and what are we doing to do?'

'Mais c'est facile; divorçons, madame!'

Violet gazed malevolently at Father, who looked as though he would at any moment blow up. She smiled at the Cadi.

'Eh bien, monsieur, je suis prête.' She gave another hostile look at her husband. *'Bien prête, je peux vous assurer! Divorçons, Cadi, et tout-de-go!'*

With these words the pent-up storm broke loose.

'Violet! ! !' roared her husband: 'have you gone completely out of your mind? Out of whatever mind you ever had? Stop making such a damned fool of yourself this instant, and stop trying to make a fool out of me! I've never heard anything so disgraceful in all my life! You're nothing but an old fool! Get your things; we're leaving here at once, this instant!'

Perhaps he hadn't meant to be cruel; as with most men, his sense of humour underwent a marked modification when someone else's sense of fun was directed against him; but Violet began to cry. The poor Cadi was completely mystified, while Father was more embarrassed and angry than ever, feeling dimly that he had overstepped the limit.

Somehow he got her away. Their boat was sailing in a few days, but Violet kept to her room, where she kept getting superb bouquets from her Moorish suitor. These she acknowledged with polite, vague, little notes, but she never saw him again, and no explanation of what must have seemed to him strange conduct was ever vouchsafed to him.

The evening before their boat was due to sail for Tripoli, Violet got up to take some things from the hotel down to her cabin. It was a stormy, sultry evening, and after she had deposited them and had crossed the gangway back on to land again it suddenly started to rain in torrents. She was wearing a new dress which she didn't want to spoil and there was a good stretch of open space to be covered before she could reach shelter. She ran for it. Once there, she collapsed; her bulk, her heavy dress, her heels skidding on the slippery cobbles had been too much for her weak heart. She died almost immediately.

She was buried in the European cemetery. The heart-broken Cadi came to her funeral, and as the almost square coffin was lowered into the grave, was heard to murmur to himself in a pitiful voice:

'She was the *fattest* woman I ever saw. Beautiful! Beautiful!'

Their friends on board observed that Father did not seem to be unduly cut up at her death, but her revenge had hastened home ahead of him. Guessing that he would suppress this story in its entirety and that he would forbid her to mention it, she had told it graphically in a letter to her sister.

III

SUSANNAH

ABOUT eighteen months after Violet's death Father married for the second time. His bride was my mother, Susannah Underhay.

Mother's family came from the north of England. Her mother, Alice Rendal, was the daughter of a naval engineer, one Eustace Rendal, himself the son of a yeoman-farmer

whose family had been settled in Northumberland for five or six centuries. Eustace was brilliant at his job and, although far too trusting, was an excellent business-man. By the age of forty-two he had made a fortune, but by the time he was fifty-five his partner, the first Lord X, had swindled him out of most of it, leaving him with the very comfortable pittance of about three thousand a year.

Mother's father was the Reverend Anthony Underhay, the only son of Simon Underhay, who was a rich jute-manufacturer, deriving the bulk of his fortune from Government contracts for the making of tents and ropes and so forth.

The fortunes of Eustace Rendal first began to decline at the beginning of the 'fifties, when my grandmother Alice was about seventeen. Up to that moment her father had lived in great style, having as his especial hobby the growing of orchids, which were the grand passion of his life; it was said that his orchid-houses were inferior in the whole country only to those of Paxton. When the first financial blow fell it was obvious that immediate and drastic economies had to be effected; the orchids were disposed of, the hot-houses closed, and most of the gardeners had to be dismissed; nearly all the horses were sold too, and the grooms given a month's wages.

Her mother being dead, Alice had charge of the household and upon her devolved the duties of engaging and dismissing the staff. One of the last gardeners to be engaged by her was a man named Walmersley, a bent little fellow with a wall eye whom nobody liked very much, on account of his surly manner, but who was good enough at his job. Her father, seeing how drastically he was forced to cut down his expenditure, had told his daughter to dismiss Walmersley and to give him a month's wages in lieu of notice, and this she duly did, explaining to the gardener the absolute necessity for her doing so. He took his dismissal in bad part,

but this, in view of his habitual surliness, hardly surprised her.

For her sixteenth birthday Alice had been given by her father a superb white Arab mare named Suleima, on which she doted: indeed, Suleima, though full of mettle, was charmingly docile and affectionate. It was Alice's custom to go up to the stable before dinner and give her pet an apple or some lumps of sugar, and as a rule she went alone.

The night that she dismissed Walmersley, she went up to the stable a little while before dinner with a basket of apples in one hand and an old lantern in the other. It was her custom to call out Suleima's name as she got to the door of the stable and the mare in reply would kick her hoof against the loose-box door. Alice cried out gaily to her, but to her bewilderment there was no answering sound. She hurried into the stable with her dim light and called again. Nothing stirred. She ran along the now empty line of loose-boxes until she came to Suleima's at the end. When she flung the door open, a dreadful sight confronted her. The lovely white mare, her lustrous eyes just glazing, was lying on the ground in a dark pool, and as the horrified girl bent over her she saw in the lantern's pale glimmer dark, moist patches of something still faintly steaming on her flanks; she became aware that the air was full of a rank, sharp smell. She dropped on to her knees by the horse and nearly fainted, for the stains were of blood and the delicate white coat was horribly lacerated, and strangely so, by numberless groups of two jagged wounds regularly spaced together. She forgot her physical horror of blood at the sight of her beloved pet's martyrdom and began caressing the mare's blood-stained nose, whispering endearments to the dying animal. A sudden convulsive tremor shook the mare; her bloodshot eyes dilated and a gush of crimson sprung from her nostrils; she was dead.

Alice knelt there motionless, for how long she did not

know; she neither cried nor spoke, but felt only the warmth slowly ebbing from Suleima's body, the sour, heavy smell of blood thinning out on the frosty night-air that came in through the open door, enveloping the living and the dead. After what seemed an age she got up dully, only to stumble over something; she picked herself up and her lantern shone upon a long-handled, two-pronged fork; it was the weapon with which Walmersley had stabbed Suleima to death in revenge for his dismissal. Still unable to utter a sound, to speak, to cry, she fled back to the house, conscious only that she must escape from this horror; she ran into the empty drawing-room, and as she stared incomprehendingly at her reflection in a tall mirror with the white radiance of the colza-lamps concentrated upon it, her voice, unsought, came back to her. She started to scream, and her cries brought her father and some of the few remaining servants to her help, but she couldn't speak; she could only gaze speechlessly, bound in her nightmare, at the girl in the glass, her light dress covered with great splotches of blood, her hands crimson and her face unrecognizable. She waved them away from her in terror; and it was only after several minutes that she was able to gasp out:

'Suleima! . . . Suleima!'

No trace of Walmersley was ever discovered. . . .

When she was about twenty-three Alice became engaged to Anthony Underhay, whose family lived not far from the Rendals. Some while before, Anthony had taken his degree at Heidelberg and had since taken Holy Orders; he was a handsome young man and a passionately devout one. Although in receipt of the comfortable allowance of a thousand a year from his father he managed to live, before his marriage, on a fraction of this sum. The only personal luxury which he permitted himself was his clothes, which, though not numerous, were of the finest cut and quality;

the balance of his allowance was practically all distributed in charity, leaving him only a narrow margin on which to subsist. Anthony's first living, a small one, was that of Lam in Shropshire; he married Alice Rendal in Northumberland and they moved into the rectory at Lam. For the first few years of their married life they were very comfortably off and without financial worries of any sort, and in due course five daughters were born to them, of whom my mother, Susannah, was the third. Anthony took little care of his health, and during a very hard winter towards the end of the 'seventies he worked night and day among his poorer parishioners, bringing them food and firing, reading to them and helping to nurse the sick. Returning home late one night, soaked through and half-frozen, he contracted a severe inflammation of the lungs, from which he never recovered.

His widow was left with five daughters to bring up and nothing to do it on but her late husband's very shrunken private income. In her earlier life she had been used to living in large houses, which symbolized for her a kind of gentility; she now refused to contemplate living in a small one, and took one in Somerset very much beyond her slender means. It was therefore impossible to send her daughters to school, and such teaching as they received they either got from their mother, herself ill-educated, or from illiterate jobbing governesses engaged by the hour. About the running of a house, the management of money, or 'the facts of life', they were permitted to learn nothing whatever; and all their clothes were made for them by their nurse. Fortunately for them, their early life had been fairly spartan: when Mother used to go and spend Christmas as a very small girl with her Grandfather in Northumberland there was placed every night on her *table de nuit* a hammer, with which to break the ice which had formed by morning in the hip-bath that had been filled overnight.

SUSANNAH

Susannah was a plain child, placid and good-tempered, and always kept firmly in her place by her eldest sister, Zillah; but in adolescence she suddenly bloomed, and it was commonly said that she closely resembled Lily Langtry in appearance, having the same kind of hair, complexion and figure. This comparison, whenever it was made — and apparently it frequently was — never failed to throw my normally tranquil Grandmother into a fury: of its justice I am unable to speak.

In some ways Susannah was a very innocent girl, raw and ingenuous to a degree and astonishingly ignorant of life; her controlled temper was, she said, more due to discipline than habit. She early realized that someone, in a family of five temperamental little girls, had to be placid, if life was to be endurable. In certain ways she was by disposition tough, and this quality tempered her malleable, soft and what she called 'biddable' character, and common sense lent balance to her very romantic nature.

My Grandmother sternly refused all offers made by various rich women to bring her daughter Susannah 'out' in London, to 'launch' her. It would not, said Mrs. Underhay, be fair by the others; it must be all or none; and none it was. Locally the nadir of entertainment seems to me to have been touched one day in the 'eighties when my Grandmother received an invitation from a Scotch peeress who lived in the neighbourhood and which read as follows:

'The Countess Glenmyle requests the pleasure
of the company of
Mrs. Underhay and the Misses Underhay.
October 16th, 1885 Tea and Prayers'

Susannah was profoundly by nature a hero-worshipper, although her north-country common sense was strong enough to make her assure herself that her heroes in some way merited her devotion. Because of her secluded life, she

tended to choose her heroes from literature. Don Juan, Henry the Fifth, Henry of Navarre, Manfred, and Marmion were her prime favourites; men of action had the first place always, and Werther she found a pain in the neck. She had a strong predisposition to day-dreaming, but fearing that this, indulged in, would weaken her grasp of realities, checked its growth in herself relentlessly. She liked a man of character, and character was what she found lacking in her first young beaux; the moment that she found she was able to do as she liked with them she lost interest in them.

Her most persistent admirer was young Eric du Cane; handsome and well off, he was the heir to a baronetcy and an excellent match for a penniless girl; but the moment that he revealed himself as her adoring serf his number, so far as she was concerned, was up. A holy terror to his mother and sisters, he was wax in her hands. Whenever he wouldn't do what Mrs. du Cane wanted him to she sent an S O S to Susannah Underhay, urging her to tell him to obey, and he would instantly comply. On one occasion the thought of being parted from Susannah was too much for him and he flatly refused to go back to Oxford, and it was only her order that he was to do so immediately which prevailed on him; but this very compliance was fatal to his chances. Susannah wanted resistance, a display of will more forceful than hers, a difficult conquest — and as sometimes happens with the things that one desires most persistently and perhaps most unconsciously, she got it in the end.

It was about five months after Violet d'Arfey's death in Tangier that the Underhay girls prevailed on their mother to give a large garden-party to which almost everybody they knew was to be invited. The entertainment was to take the form of tableaux-vivants, with Susannah cast for the roles of the Sleeping Beauty and of Rapunzel. Greatly to their surprise Father turned up, for it was known that garden parties weren't at all his cup of tea.

They had in fact had a bad association for him ever since a day in the 'eighties when he had gone to one at Lord Doncaster's, suitably dressed, gardenia in buttonhole — but wearing on his feet an incredibly old pair of heelless carpet slippers. He suffered acutely from corns, but these slippers were so deliciously roomy that he was scarcely able to keep them on at all. He was deep in a high-class conversation with Mary Doncaster as to whether or no the second theme in A flat of the Parsifal prelude did or did not belong to the Catholic liturgy known as the 'Dresden Amen', when a voice behind her called her suddenly and urgently away. Trains that season were inordinately long, and as she swept quickly round Father moved too. Neither of them observed that he had stepped forward on to the edge of her train, or that he was vaguely waggling a throbbing toe in the air — for he was inclined, too, to gout — with his slipper balanced on its tip as his hostess moved imperiously off. A powerfully-built woman with a powerfully-built dress, she jerked her skirt free of the other slippered foot that was anchoring it to the ground, snatching up in the mesh of her laces and frillings the slipper that was poised in air, flinging it into the middle of the pursuing flood of satin, where it bobbed up and down like a gaudy little dinghy caught up in the creamy churning wake of a big liner. Father, poised on one foot, was too busy keeping his balance as the dress swept away from under him to notice for a moment what had happened; and when he did so he found that he was left standing there with one foot in a carpet slipper and the other in a crimson silk sock. Just as he had taken in his position some heavy drops of rain began to fall and there was a general stampede for shelter. Hopping along in the tide of scurrying guests he saw in the distance a small dog make a dive at Lady Doncaster's train and pounce on the carpet slipper as it bobbed along on it, only to disappear for ever with it into some bushes. No, he had never cared for garden parties, and

after that one he cared for them less than ever. His appearance at the Underhays' was therefore surprising.

Susannah hadn't seen him since his wife's death, but in the last years of Violet's life she had been a fairly frequent visitor to Marsh where she played tennis – very badly – or bézique; but at no time had Father paid her any special attention. He was an intensely reserved man, with an imperturbably aloof dignity and a manner so detached as to suggest a coldness which he by no means always felt. Mother was rather awed by him, and all her tremendous feeling for the chevaleresque was stirred by his military record; and especially by the fact, revealed to her by Violet, since *he* would rather have died than mention it, that he could have received the Victoria Cross for the asking. All this, as well as his obvious intractability and his sense of distance, appealed to her romantically; and her feeling for the past and the romanticized aspects and characters of history also came into play. The d'Arfey past stirred her, and certain relics of the great dead which Father possessed – a jewelled watch of Catherine the Great's; a fan, with opal-studded sticks, painted by Boucher; a turnip-watch that had belonged to Doctor Johnson; and so forth. She was excited, too, by the fact that the d'Arfeys had been given the right to add to their coat-of-arms the royal fleurs-de-lys of France for services rendered at Poictiers in 1356 by Sir William d'Arfey, who fought that day beside the Black Prince and assisted in the capture of King John of France, who was brought prisoner to England.

All these links with the past combined together to touch her in a peculiarly personal way, and all the more, perhaps, since she knew little or nothing of men, having no male relatives and living nearly all her life in a house of women: men indeed had for her a mysterious nobility, an unquestionable superiority over women, but this belief (which most men of that period sought to inculcate into women) she

didn't seek to analyse. And so, when Father congratulated her upon her appearance as the Sleeping Beauty she was immensely surprised and flattered. But at the same time he took the precaution of congratulating one of her sisters, who looked lovely as Juliet and who had sung the waltz-song from 'Roméo et Juliette' in her sweet flexible voice:

'In fair-hair-hair-hairy dreams I'd live . . .!'

Still more surprised was my grandmother when, some two days later, Father came over to thank her for a most enjoyable party.

'I simply *can't* make it out,' she observed. 'I've *always* been given to understand that it's the very *last* sort of thing that Captain d'Arfey would ever *dream* of doing.'

And she was right; it was indeed most unlike him. A few days later he went off in his yacht to Guernsey; and a little later still Mother was astonished to receive from there a pamphlet by George Augustus Sala dealing with the pleasures of yachting. It was then that a vague idea crossed her mind which she at once dismissed as ridiculous, although she continued to think it odd that Father should wish to interest her in yachting, which was the great passion of his life.

After three weeks he returned to Marsh and she received a letter from him saying that his sister Elisa was coming to stay with him and was bringing her son and daughter, and that he hoped Miss Underhay would come and spend a few days with them, as he doubted his ability to amuse the young people. (A fat lot he cared whether they were amused or not!) Mother went, and Father paid very little attention to her; but the suspicions of his lynx-eyed sister were at once aroused. Aunt Elisa, seeing that Mother was wearing a hat trimmed with yellow and pink carnations that matched her dress, tried to induce her to pick a bouquet of the rare and similar ones which grew in a hothouse, well aware that Father lived in mortal terror of his Scotch gardener, who per-

mitted, since the death of his late mistress, not a bloom to be cut. But Mother, to Aunt Elisa's irritation, refused to commit what would have been a great breach of good manners.

Then she returned home and heard no more of Father. A week later she went to stay with Mrs. Martello, whose eldest son was almost the greatest catch in the county. The knowledge of this visit must have spurred Father to action, for, the day after her return home, she came down to breakfast to see lying in front of her mother's plate a letter addressed in Father's tiny, exquisite, precise hand. It read as follows:

'Dear Mrs. Underhay,

I am writing to ask you for the hand of Susannah, preferring in view of the great disparity in our ages to address myself to you, rather than to her directly. But I feel it my duty to inform you that on my death I should only be able to leave to her one-third of my estate, since under my father's will the remaining two-thirds must pass automatically to the surviving grandchildren; that is to say, to my sister's children. It would be very distasteful to me to ask a lady to become my wife without her being in full possession of the facts of my financial position. And so I leave my suit in your hands for the moment.

Yours sincerely,
George d'Arfey.'

When my Grandmother read this letter out to her daughter, Susannah burst into floods of tears, she wasn't really sure why. Her mother was pleased, and also disappointed that her favourite and eldest daughter had not been sought in marriage; but was gratified at the thought of an obviously excellent match and at the fact that it would be her least-loved child who would be leaving home.

But Mother didn't know whether she intended to accept him or not; for one thing, he had a large beard, and beards

she simply couldn't abide; for another, he wore far too much jewellery, and far, far too many rings on his beautiful hands. In the meantime certain recollections became explained; the astonished expression on the face of Elisa Featherstonehaugh-Brickley, one day when they were all out in the *Infanta* during Mother's visit to Marsh. There was an extremely stiff breeze blowing up and she was at best an indifferent sailor, though never actually sick. Too proud to show any signs of distress, save perhaps by a clenching of her hands or a tightening of her jaw, she wasn't able to prevent herself from going a bit green about the gills. Father, normally a magnificently unobservant man where other people's comforts were concerned, noticed this, and much to the disgust of his sister, who, like all the d'Arfeys, was an excellent sailor, called out gruffly to the skipper:

'Put her about, man! Put her about! Can't you see that Miss Underhay can't stand any more of it?'

Coming from him, it was a concession quite without parallel; no wonder his relatives exchanged pregnant glances.

Susannah wasn't sure; but her tough inner voice of common sense told her that she'd be insane not to marry him, that five penniless girls wouldn't marry easily, and that he had what she at heart preferred to any other quality — namely, difficultness — and also dignity and reticence and his unshakable poise. He would be a hard horse to break in; he was. It was her eldest sister who said bluntly and with rather more good-will than usual (since Father would be a 'useful' brother-in-law):

'You're a perfect idiot if you don't accept him!'

And Susannah knew that it was true.

Intimidated — he who so seldom was — by the Scotch gardener, Father allowed himself to be browbeaten out of cutting the cabbage chrysanthemums in the conservatory, contenting himself with offering her as his first small gift a bunch of weather-beaten roses, slightly browned by frost.

It never seemed to have occurred to him to buy fresher flowers at a florist's. She was still undecided, though in her heart of hearts she knew that she meant to marry him; but she only agreed finally when he had given her his word that he would wear fewer rings.

The following day he called at her mother's with his pocket full of jewellery, telling Susannah that these would be hers and asking her to choose a ring. Later, he bought her a very insignificant engagement ring. She flatly refused to allow the engagement to be made public until a year had elapsed since Violet's death, upon the expiration of which time she said that she would marry him as soon as he pleased. Despite his stiffness and his general shortcomings as a fiancé her affection for him gradually ripened into love, which, despite vicissitudes, was to deepen with the years. She made up her mind as a matter of course that she would have only a small jointure on which to live in the event of his death and went so far as to choose a peculiarly hideous little villa on the outskirts of Bessbridge into which to retire, should she be widowed, assuring herself that she would be able to afford nothing less odious. She needn't have troubled; Father had gone to see the family lawyer in London and wrote to her saying that he had now discovered that after all his estate was entirely his own, to dispose of as he wished.

But Father was showing faint signs of embarrassment, signs apparent only to his fiancée. The truth was that he naturally felt rather self-conscious at the idea of marrying a girl so much younger than himself; and as Mother knew perfectly well, all his men-friends, who would themselves have liked to marry young wives, but who were quite unable to scrap their old, fat and worn-out ones, would tear him to pieces with their tongues out of jealousy. As it was, Mother's age, which was twenty-four, underwent a considerable shrinkage; the whole neighbourhood was buzzing with:

'I say, old feller, d'you know that George d'Arfey's gone and got himself engaged to a girl of *eighteen*? Always said he would, remember, as soon as fat Violet kicked the bucket.'

Father had expected to be launched into a sea of extravagances on marrying a girl who had seldom had sixpence to play with; but instead he found himself for the first time in years with a first-rate cook and a housekeeping-bill which was far below those of Violet at her most modest.

On some points they achieved a compromise, Father jettisoning his concertina, while Mother ceased to strum on the harp 'In a Cottage near a Wood'.

Father would frequently be seized with a longing for London, and off they would go, for three weeks or a month. Once there, Mother might be dragged to the Opera, which she couldn't bear, having ears only for ecclesiastical music, or to a musical comedy.

She was a very average sort of prig at the time of her marriage, although she seemed to slough off her priggishness moderately quickly. There was a good deal of false prudery in her composition one way and another; a few weeks after their marriage Father took her for the first time to the Alhambra — haunt of the delightfully-named 'improprieties' whom Mother took quite seriously — and she remarked tiresomely as they went in: 'But mother tells me, George, that this is the kind of place to which only *fast* women go?'

Father flew into a temper. But when later, both bored, they emerged, Mother observed with faint disappointment:

'I'm surprised that fast women'll put up with anything so tame; it won't take much to turn *me* into a positive *female Mazeppa* at this rate!'

And for the first time Father looked at his young wife with slight consternation. But it was only a gesture, and not true.

She only got a raw deal out of social pleasures. When there were grand parties to go to, he made such a monstrous

fuss about going and was in such a rage all the time that she was thankful to escape from them, completely shattered. When they were in London he left her all day to her own devices, retiring to play whist at the Rag; his friends were not her contemporaries and she had very few acquaintances in town. At night they would dine at the Carlton or the Savoy, seen as an elderly man who seldom spoke to the lively and cheerful young woman with him. Only at times would he be bubbling over with wit and malice, laughing so hard over his own wisecracks before he even got them out that they were almost inaudible. People used to stare at the seemingly ill-assorted pair; and the tables were now turned on Father, who, with the single unfortunate exception of the Cadi incident, had during his marriage to Violet always been accustomed to being taken as considerably that lady's junior, and frequently, indeed, for her son. But now things were altered. Hotel servants would say to Mother:

'Your *father's* waiting for you in the lounge, madam,' or to Father: 'Your *daughter's* just gone up to her room, sir.'

It was not very soothing. On one occasion they were staying at the Carlton, and Mother went down to the reception desk to complain about their suite; there was a new clerk who didn't know her, to whom she remarked indignantly:

'But I have to walk through Captain d'Arfey's *bedroom* in order to get to my *bathroom*!'

'Indeed, madam, that must be *most* embarrassing for you,' said the clerk sympathetically; 'and, tell me, are you *acquainted* with the gentleman?'

A perfectly obscure young woman from the provinces, her appearance attracted attention. Because of her skin, she was one of the first two women to be asked by the Elizabeth Arden of the day to advertise with her name and her pictures a beauty-product. The other was a then famous beauty, a duchess. Mother thought such a form of self-advertisement

vulgar, and refused; the duchess, on the other hand, accepted. The beauty-product in question seems more remote in time to-day than do those lumps of dried-up pigment which are still found adhering to the bottom of faience cosmetic-jars, even now retaining some vestige of their original colour, which are dug up in the plains of Ur. It was that tiny glossy-backed book which contained little sheets of scented, powder-impregnated paper known as Papier-Poudré. A sheet of this was carried folded up behind the little pink oval of the palm where the glove buttoned over, and was pulled out discreetly when no one was looking, to remove the shine from the face and the nose. It was not yet once more an age of cosmetics, and not even a *grande cocotte* would have thought of making up in public.

As well as for Wagner, Father had a mania for leg-shows and musical comedies, which often drove his wife to a frenzy of boredom, although she was pleased enough, once in a while, to see the sensational 'glamour-girls' of the day. They were such fabulous monsters as the policeman-footed Caroline Otéro with her drooling Hapsburg mouth and her sexual *furia*, Liane de Pougy with her soft dove-like beauty, the limber Emilienne d'Alençon, and May Belfort as Lautrec drew her, with her little girl's bonnet of broderie-anglaise, a tiny black kitten in her spiky arms, yowling: 'Daddy wouldn't buy me a *Bow-wow*!' There was the exquisitely lovely Lina Cavalieri, graduating from the stage of the Folies-Bergère to that of the Opéra, with her emeralds as large as gooseberries; there was Cléo de Mérode, King 'Cléopold's' costly strumpet; and Cécile Sorel, whose pattern of baroque gentility was already taking shape. But not even the presence of Marie Tempest could reconcile Mother to such entertainments as 'San Toy' or 'A Greek Slave' and Father refused to let her hear the incomparable Marie Lloyd. . . .

IV

A LUNCHEON AT MARSH HALL

In the early 'nineties, soon after my parents' marriage, some old friends of theirs, Lord and Lady Portmeirion, were staying near us at Bessbridge. Portmeirion met Father one day at the Club there, and said:

'Why, hello, d'Arfey! I've got to go to a blasted meeting of the Archaeological Society at Ucklay to-morrow evening and I thought I'd look in on Mrs. d'Arfey on the way.'

'All right,' said Father, 'do'. He mentioned it to Mother when he got home, but she pointed out that the trains to Morecaster, the station for Ucklay, ran very irregularly, and that it would be much more convenient for Portmeirion to come to lunch, so a wire was accordingly sent to invite him.

The following day some other guests had arrived, when, a few minutes later, a large landau-and-pair was seen coming up the drive. Mother paused, passing through the hall, to greet her guest, who was a great deal older than she was, and was surprised to see get out not only Lord Portmeirion, but also Lady Portmeirion, who was just recovering from a stroke, followed by his valet and her hospital nurse. Lord Portmeirion was extremely susceptible to a pretty face and the nurse was strikingly pretty.

Mother was a trifle surprised when her guest flung his arms round her — he was about the size of Paul Robeson — and kissed her with extreme warmth on both cheeks. This was much more surprising then than it would be to-day; she turned aside from his embrace to help his wife out, took them into the drawing-room and went to arrange for the extra luncheons. She told one of the parlourmaids to serve the nurse's lunch in the morning-room and said that the valet could have his with the other servants. When she got back into the drawing-room Lord Portmeirion led her aside

and murmured – he always spoke very indistinctly: 'My dear, the nurse is a perfect lady, you know, a perfect lady. Might she not lunch with us in the dining-room?'

Mother of course agreed, secretly wondering whether there would be enough lunch for both the Portmeirions and the nurse and went out again to tell the servants; but when the nurse heard the new arrangement she looked as black as thunder, and clasping her hands, said that if Mrs. d'Arfey didn't mind she would much prefer to have her lunch in the morning-room. Mother naturally agreed again and went back to tell Portmeirion, whose face fell; but he said nothing. At this moment a maid came in and asked if she could speak to her; following her out she discovered the valet waiting to speak to her.

'No matter what his lordship says to you, madam, he must on no account have anything to drink.'

It should be explained here that he had formerly been a very heavy drinker, but for the past three years, ever since he had come into the title, he had gone strictly on the wagon.

Mother told the manservant to tell the parlourmaids and they all trooped into lunch.

The maids were very self-possessed and assured young women whom nothing put off their stroke, and for the first course or so all went swimmingly. Pussyfoot Hebes, so far as poor Lord Portmeirion was concerned, they sailed round the table, filling up every glass but his.

During the first part of the meal he bore this very unconvivial behaviour as well as could be expected, with a light frown on his face more indicative of surprise and bewilderment than anger, but after the entrée had been handed round and the various wines that accompanied it were circulating, he pulled his vast bulk out of his chair just as the two maids were passing behind him, and shooting out both his huge hands seized a couple of decanters at random. In those days several wines were served and the table was laid

with a correspondingly large number of glasses; he poured out a large tumblerful of burgundy and filled several wine glasses with sherry. Father looked furious, as he was very proud of his cellar and hated to see any wine, and especially his, treated with disrespect. All the glasses were emptied in a jiffy.

The dining-room, alas, was rather small and the table very large. Since Lord Portmeirion sat with his chair pushed right away from the table it was out of the question for the maids to avoid so immense a man without stepping right into the big Gothic fireplace. Each time that they passed him, try as they might to circumvent him, he would snatch whatever wine they were carrying, preferably champagne, and help himself freely. Lady Portmeirion seemed to grow more and more apprehensive, as well she might, but a certain hilarity descended on her normally dignified Hercules of a husband.

'Fine shellar, d'Arfey, old man; fine shellar,' he rumbled. Ruminating, he reinforced this statement. 'Dam fine shellar, eh my love?' This to Mother. 'Plenny to drink; like lotsher drink. Itsh pity we ain't got 'lil rogue of Nursh to help ush drink it. Thousandsh pitiesh!'

'The nurse is very well where she is, Portmeirion,' replied his wife frigidly. Her words were far truer than she knew.

Father was singularly unsprightly at any gathering unless those present happened to amuse him, but when that occurred his acidulated wit could be guaranteed to send any table into fits of laughter. He liked Lady Portmeirion in a vague sort of way, but she did not amuse him, and it is doubtful if she amused anyone else, either. Portmeirion he was fond of, having known him well for more than thirty years; but not only was he bored by his other guests, he disliked them, a fact they knew and a feeling they reciprocated. He simply settled down comfortably to making a good meal in sturdy and absolute silence.

They duly reached the stage of coffee and brandy, and each time that the latter went round the table, a circumstance which, drunk though he was, Lord Portmeirion was not slow to avail himself of, his wife would lean over to Mother and exclaim in a piteous voice: 'Oh, my darling! Oh, my dear!'

Her husband was carrying on the liveliest possible conversation with Mother, of which she was quite unable to distinguish more than a word here and there. Lunch was drawing to a tolerably dignified conclusion when he rose very shakily to his feet, depositing a ham of a fist on her shoulder.

'Shorry, my love, sh-shorry,' he rumbled, making a plucky effort at coherency: 'jhush thish shecond 'membered; jhush mem-membered. Promished thish afternoon address tempransh meeting at Morecashter; m-mush go; sholemn word of honour. Mush warn 'em of evilish of drink; shockin' example, y'know, my love; shockin' example. Show 'em what happensh!'

My parents thought this was a joke, but Lady Portmeirion turned an anguished face in Mother's direction, and said in a tone of agony:

'Oh, you don't understand, darling! What Portmeirion says is quite *true*; he *has* got to go and preside at a temperance meeting at Morecaster *this afternoon*!'

Father, whose moods were as changing and as capricious as the climate, now surveyed his jovial but intoxicated guest, the broken support-to-be of the Blue Ribboners, with a cold gaze. Poor Lady Portmeirion was on the verge of tears. Father rang the bell. A frosty, decorative maid entered, immediately taking in the whole scene with a practised, disillusioned eye.

'Order Lord Portmeirion's carriage,' said he.

Judging by the look which she gave the colossus, she would have preferred to order him a tumbril. But Portmeirion gave a lurch in her direction, trying as best he could (for he ap-

peared to have an impediment in his speech) to give a frisky impersonation of Miss May Yohe in her newest hit, and catching hold of the unfortunate parlour-maid's long white streamers with an effort – for at his first attempts they proved as elusive as the sinuous floating filaments of a jelly-fish – he burst into what only charity or partial deafness could describe as song.

'Shush! Shush! Shush!' he roared in a voice of brass:

'Here comesh zhe Bogey-Man!
Sho hide your heads, me darlingsh,
For he'll catch you if he can!'

Whinnying like a horse, he started to prance round the table, holding on to the parlourmaid's finely laundered tails and whisking them up and down as though he were a groom exercising a pony.

'Hi, Portmeirion, stop that!' thundered Father, but he need scarcely have bothered, for at that moment Lord Portmeirion fell down flat with a mighty crash into the fireplace.

The luncheon-party rose, leaving Father to revive his fallen friend. Mother hastened into the morning-room to summon the valet, only to find that the term 'morning-room' had become something of a misnomer, since the nurse and the valet were busily engaged in dedicating it, and only too visibly, to pleasures more generally associated with the evening.

Poor Lady Portmeirion, luckily in ignorance of the latest developments, burst into tears as she reached the drawing-room, and kept dropping her gloves and her muff. Father had now joined them, but the milk of human kindness had curdled in his veins.

'It's the last straw that breaks the camel's back,' he murmured acidly to Mother in French, forgetting that she was a wretched linguist and that her very limited command of this language was not only wholly impressionistic, relying entirely

on gesture, inflexion and verve to get it across, but also that her vocabulary was limited to some half-dozen exclamations, such as: '*Tiens!*' or '*Formidable!*' Naturally, therefore, she had no idea of what he had said, but, rapidly assuming a look of vivacious agreement and comprehension, she asked him, a shade inconsistently, to repeat it, well knowing in her heart of hearts that she would be but little the wiser when he had done so. He complied, and with a lucidity and precision of diction which he would not have bothered to bestow upon a compliment. Mother, smiling brilliantly and wholly in the dark, played safe with a mere '*Tiens!*' which won her a suspicious look from her husband. Lady Portmeirion, providentially, had also missed the sense of his remark.

Meanwhile the valet and the nurse had persuaded Lord Portmeirion into his landau, Lady Portmierion followed, and they drove off. The remaining guests gazed at one another dumbfounded for a few seconds until Mother broke the ice by bursting into laughter, in which the others joined. Only Father preserved — God alone knows why — an icy dignity. One never knew what would or would not amuse him — but at last his wife's mirth was too much for him and he joined in too.

Lord Portmeirion duly presided at the temperance meeting, and by an irony of fate succeeded in securing the highest number of conversions to teetotalism ever recorded in a gathering of that sort in Morecaster. In fact, so successful was he as an awful warning, that it was afterwards rumoured that the local sponsors of total abstinence used to grant their lecturers a small bonus in order to persuade them to appear on that austere platform somewhat fuddled. But this was doubtless a libel.

V

BARE FACTS

In those inconceivably remote and halcyon days when bells were responded to with magical promptness by charming, competent women with the poise of duchesses, there was, for an amiable and reasonably intelligent employer, seldom much of a servant-problem. All the same, my parents once or twice had such a problem to face.

It was just after the turn of the century that an excellent cook left Mother to get married. A successor had been engaged from the registry-office that Mother habitually used, but for some reason or other (and it was very unlike her) Mother didn't interview the new servant personally; she was perhaps busy, and the new maid's references were most reassuring.

It so happened that some old friends of my parents were staying for one night somewhere near Exebourne the day that Delia Patrick, the new cook, was due to arrive, and Mother thought that she would gamble on Delia's excellent testimonials and ask them to dinner. In order to be on the safe side, the meal was to be a simple one, with some ducklings followed by ices. Everything possible was got ready in advance, but when six o'clock came and there was not a sign of Delia, who had been expected at midday, Mother began to feel a trifle apprehensive. In some anxiety, she went up to her room to dress.

All the furniture which she couldn't bear to see in the more public parts of the house used to gravitate to her bedroom, which was the size of a band-box, and among it was a peculiarly objectionable little phoney Louis-Seize screen, about four feet high and very shaky on its legs, upholstered in rose-du-Barry, a colour she abhorred: it was always getting in the way and being moved round.

Mother was sitting at her dressing-table in a long frilly peignoir doing her hair with great concentration. Doing one's hair then was no joke, for coiffures were built up over huge frames, known mysteriously as 'rats', and were correspondingly large. Rather abstractedly, she heard the door behind her open, and she saw reflected in her glass a female head, podgy, pasty and hunted-looking, with wisps of dun-coloured hair escaping from under a big rusty black hat. The face's mouth opened mournfully, and a sepulchral voice said, in tones from which all hope and conviction had been banished: 'The Lord be with you!'

Mother was a trifle taken aback at this unexpected greeting, but was also preoccupied with a number of conflicting thoughts – an immediate anxiety for the dinner, for the success of her hair, a wonder as to which particular religious sect the new cook belonged to, coupled with a dread that that probably obscure denomination might not be locally represented, and that that might tempt a possible treasure (and here again she felt a slight qualm) to seek a new situation elsewhere. Courtesy, however, prompted a reply in kind:

'And the Lord be with you, too,' she answered.

'I hope so, I hope so, I'm sure,' muttered the cook, in tones of the gloomiest, most oppressed scepticism.

'I hope you've got everything you want, and just as you like it,' Mother continued. But Delia refused to commit herself and ignored this lead altogether. Mother began to feel herself in the grip of something not far removed from panic, but as she never permitted herself to yield to anything so intangible as an intuition of impending disaster, she forced herself to face squarely what was, she felt it in her bones, a thoroughly unpromising situation. She turned round to have a closer look at the intruder, pulling the laces of her peignoir together in some gesture of modesty, but she need scarcely have bothered. A tag of lace or some scrap of

ribbon must have got caught on a projection of the detestable little screen, for, as she pulled her wrapper together, the screen fell forward on her. She caught hold of it and managed to right it, but as she did so, perceived that Delia Patrick was, save for a pair of stout boots and her hat, stark-naked.

But before Mother had time to speak — and what indeed was there to be said? How clothe such a situation in mere words? — the other's puffy, pendulous lips were mumbling again:

'They're after me! They're after me!'

To-day, in the shattered world in which we live, one may have a fellow-feeling for the cook, an intimate understanding of 'Their' invisible but palpable presence bang in the middle of the landscape of neurasthenia, but in 1900 neuroses were inadmissible as such; one was more or less supposed to keep them to oneself, like one's false teeth or one's sexual leanings. But Mother was made of sterner or less sympathetic stuff, and anyhow she had a dinner-party on her mind. As a concession she did actually go as far as to ask who 'They' were, but the answer was to Delia doubtless too obvious to be worth the making.

'They're waiting all down the drive for me!' she moaned: ' 'ole rows of them!'

And with this she vanished, her heavy boots clumping down the corridor. Mother pulled herself together and rushed into Father's bedroom at the end of the house, where she found him half-dressed and in an execrable temper, wrestling with a white tie. Though the dandyism of his youth had long since deserted him and though he only wore the most disgraceful clothes that he could lay hands on — in spite of the fact that his wardrobe was crammed with excellent unworn suits — yet he was meticulously fussy about the sit and shape of a white evening tie, which would in any case be completely obscured by his voluminous grey beard.

He was standing in front of the cheval-glass in a stiff shirt, smoking a large Havana which he kept transferring helplessly from one hand to the other, while with the empty one he kept fiddling with the creased white rag. There was a powerful smell compounded of eau-de-cologne and burning hair (for he had, as usual on these occasions, inadvertently singed his beard) and he kept swearing softly to himself.

'For God's sake come and do my tie, Susannah! I've already spoiled five.'

But Mother was preoccupied and unimpressed.

'George!' she said wildly. 'The new cook's come, and she's stark-naked!'

But Father, wholly intent on his tie, wasn't listening.

'Susannah! I said, Will you kindly tie my tie for me?'

'George, will you please listen to me a moment?'

'What did you say?' he asked abstractedly, fingering his beard. Mother's serene and equable temper was starting to fray.

'I keep telling you, George; the new cook's either mad or drunk or — '

'But is she a good cook?'

Mother stamped her foot.

'I don't know. How should I know? The woman's stark-naked, I keep telling you, and she's wandering all over the house ... The dinner'll be spoiled — that is, if there is any dinner, which I doubt.'

'My tie — '

'Oh damn your tie, George!' Never before in all her married life had she sworn at Father; and now that she had it was impossible to say which of them was the more horrified. As for Father, he was quite bereft of his powers of speech for a moment.

'Naked, you say?' he asked, after a shocked pause, profoundly disturbed by Mother's infringement on his prerogatives. 'What was that you said about no dinner? Cook naked

. . . no dinner . . . am I going out of my mind? No dinner at all?'

'Does a naked cook sound like dinner?' queried Mother desperately.

'No dinner?' he repeated in dismay, for in those days and in that exquisitely ordered world, meals arrived with punctuality and perfection. The idea that a meal should not appear automatically was as startling as would have been the news that Mrs. Humphry Ward had eloped, say, with d'Annunzio or that Sada Yacco was going to star in 'The Geisha'.

'What?' he roared. 'Give me my trousers!' Mother did so, and he hurried into them. 'Where is she?'

'Heaven only knows,' answered his wife bitterly. 'She may be anywhere by now!'

Swearing forcibly, Father ran down the corridors in the direction of Delia's bedroom. Flinging open her door he disclosed the cook lying on her bed in much the same attitude and condition as the Rokeby Venus. Without otherwise budging, she turned a baffled, bleary eye on him in silence. Mother had followed him. Face to face with a situation in which he had scarcely believed, his aplomb began to ooze away. He felt very self-conscious with Mother's eye on him, but now, he felt, was the time to prove his real mettle, to show to all and sundry his capacity for dealing with a crisis which an inner voice warned him was beyond his powers. His expostulations and protests died away, scarcely framed on his tongue; his natural impulse was to lose his temper with his wife for venturing to be a witness of his discomfiture, but a moment's self-communing told him that this wouldn't materially assist dinner to appear.

'Come, come, my good woman!' he said with a briskness which deceived nobody, not even himself, and least of all the cook. 'You must pull yourself together, you know. This won't do at all.'

Delia turned her head languidly, remarking to the world at large in an impersonal voice: 'I said they were after me.'

Mother watched in silence, a glint of irony in her blue eyes. Father was by this time completely demoralized by the pair of them, but once more addressed Delia in a loud, booming voice which rang singularly hollow.

'Aren't you afraid of catching cold there like that?'

Delia looked at him as though she was unaware of his existence. He hesitated for a moment and then fled down the front stairs, while Mother ran down to the kitchen. 'I'm going to find Chambers,' Father cried. Chambers was the coachman.

In the kitchen Mother found three flustered maids coping as best they could with a complicated scene. On the floor lay a frowsy heap of rusty black garments, crowned by a dirty pair of pink stays, while in the oven smouldered the charred cadavers of what had once been some fine plump ducklings. In a kind of ivy-wreathed arbour which veiled the kitchen-window Father was swearing volubly and busily tolling a harsh, metallic-toned bell, the exact purpose of which no one had ever yet discovered, nor was it known who had caused it to be placed there. The gardeners had long since departed to their various homes and were well out of earshot, and Chambers, who might have been expected to hear it from his lodge, was inclined to be deaf, a fact that Father had overlooked in the heat of the moment.

The violent urgency of the clanging bell made the kitchen confusion worse confounded, no one could hear a word that anyone said, and the brassy dinning in their ears only succeeded in straining taut nerves to the verge of hysteria.

'Stop that awful row, George!' cried Mother. But Father could not hear what she was saying and jumped to the quite erroneous conclusion that she was spurring him on to fresh campanological efforts. His countenance flushed and beaded with sweat, he was trying to recover face after the ignomin-

ious scene in Delia's bedroom. At this moment he gave the bell such a singularly violent tug as to dislodge it completely from its socket, and it crashed to the ground, striking a peculiarly painful corn on his left foot as it did so. Bellowing like a wounded buffalo, he hopped up and down in agony outside the kitchen-window, expecting Mother to run out and minister to him, to soothe his ruffled feelings as was her invariable custom whenever disaster overtook him. But the sudden cessation of the agonizing din and the conversion to absolute Bedlam of a normally orderly household was too much for Mother's sense of humour and she collapsed on to a chair in a paroxysm of helpless laughter. Father hurriedly tried to assume the expression of a stricken deer, in the vain hope of appealing to her better nature, but Mother's intensive training as a good late-Victorian wife had temporarily deserted her. Father revised his rôle rapidly and fell back on his other stand-by in emergency — outraged dignity — and he, to whom at all times dignity was natural, was truly awe-inspiring when he assumed an extra cloak of it.

'Why on earth don't you go and fetch him, George?' said Mother.

With hatred in his heart and a cosmic sense of injustice he started to limp down the drive, stopping on the way at the front door to collect a walking-stick to support and confirm him in his sense of grievance. While Mother set the maids to ransack the larder and see how they could improvise a meal, he found Chambers asleep in front of his fire.

'You've got to come and help me get the cook dressed, Chambers!' shouted Father in his ear. Chambers came to, grunted, and grumbling, followed his employer up the drive.

By this time Father had forgotten his toe and, fortified by Chambers' moral support, was looking forward to rehabilitating himself in his wife's eyes. He marched lustily back to the house, whistling 'Batti, Batti' and swinging his stick cheerfully, oblivious of the fact that he had turned the corner

of the high rhododendron-wall and that Mother was watching him. Glancing up, he caught her eye, promptly stopped whistling, and began to limp painfully towards the back door. His momentary sense of well-being had left him as suddenly as it had come and he was once more a prey to the gloomiest forebodings. Pushing the reluctant Chambers in front of him he marched upstairs to Delia's room.

'Go on, man!' he exclaimed forcibly, as the coachman hung back. 'In you go!'

'After you, sir,' said Chambers with quiet determination. Bracing himself, Father threw open the door, to find the cook still lying naked on her bed in the pose of an odalisque. As the two men entered she gave a blood-curdling scream and buried herself underneath the eiderdown, emitting at regular intervals a series of muffled shrieks. Father and Chambers looked round hurriedly for her clothes, but there was no trace of them since they were still on the kitchen floor, and her box was locked.

'I'll go and see where she's left them, Chambers,' said Father, 'while you stay here and keep an eye on her.'

But Chambers, realizing that he was being left in the lurch with a naked lunatic, bolted down the stairs after his master. Father sighed as he thought of the efficiency with which his former coachman would have dealt with such a situation. Having recovered the clothes from the kitchen, they took them upstairs. Father ripped the eiderdown off Delia, who screamed louder than ever. 'Come on, man!' he called out to Chambers. 'You take one corner of the bedclothes and I'll take the other.' But the coachman, his modesty outraged, hung back.

'Come on!' Father insisted. Chambers gave in and a short three-cornered struggle took place. The rickety iron bed shook and groaned, while Delia yelled in defence, as she thought, of her virtue. There was a heavy thud and the bedstead gave way. Her grasp of the situation was moment-

arily weakened by the unexpected ruin of her couch, but its collapse was too much for Chambers; his morale also gave way.

'If you please, sir,' he said, 'I'd rather hand this job over to someone else. If you don't mind, I'll jump on my bike and go and fetch the constable.'

Father gave his ally a withering look. 'Of course, Chambers, if you let a foolish woman frighten you — '

'I do, sir,' said the coachman firmly, 'and that's a fact.'

'In that case, you had better go and fetch Constable Vincett this instant.'

'Very good, sir.' Chambers gave a sigh of relief and bolted from the room, while Father retired to his to resume his interrupted toilet.

Within about ten minutes or so young Vincett, the village constable, had arrived, and led by father, he hurried into the cook's room. Underworked and uninhibited, he was prepared to enter into the spirit of the thing with gusto, but any hopes he may have cherished about the charms which were to be revealed to him were speedily dashed: he gave Delia one glance and his fresh, frank young face fell. With her body wrapped up like a cocoon in the sheet she lay stranded on the floor in the wreckage.

As the two men seized hold of the sheet she began to utter a series of regular, staccato shrieks, like a powerful steam-whistle, but they were two to one and the sheet gave way. Father pounced on it and threw it out of the window, and looking with distaste at her dun-coloured underwear, he wondered how to begin.

'Try 'er combinations, Captain,' suggested Vincett. Father did so; the constable caught hold of Delia's feet, while Father held out the garment, the cook rolling and kicking like a stranded porpoise.

'Hold her down, Vincett, while I get these damned things on her.'

Vincett's red ham of a hand sank into her suety thighs, but with surprising agility, with the nervous flexibility of the fat, she doubled herself over unexpectedly and bit him sharply in the wrist. There was a general pause for breath; the first round seemed to have been won by Delia on points. She took advantage of the temporary lull to vociferate charges of criminal assault, and at the top of her voice.

'Oo!' she shouted, with a magnificent disregard for truth, 'yer tryin' ter rape me!' She paused, fixing Father with a furious, distracted eye. 'Yes, you are! Both of yer! A girl ain't safe 'ere!'

'Girl!' snorted young Vincett. ' 'Ere, I've 'ad about enough of you. Just you get yer things on, and double-quick too!'

Father pulled himself together and signalled to the constable to pinion her arms behind her back, while he grabbed hold of her feet and began to pull on the combinations; he managed, despite her tremendous efforts to thwart him, to draw them half-way up her legs, but she struggled so violently during the performance that they split.

' 'Ere, you dirty beast!' she wailed, 'you've been an' gone an' bust me trubies now! I'll 'ave the law on the pair of yer!'

Bust perhaps — but they had got them on. And then began the task of buttoning her into them; panting and sweating, both the men had taken off their coats, and, warming to their work, had rather begun to enjoy themselves. Severely handicapped by her struggles, it was the constable who had the inspiration of handcuffing her wrists behind her back, and so providing a chance of putting on her stays. These were of the old-fashioned type that laced down the back, and though Father got her into them fairly easily by dint of Vincett's holding down her legs, it was found impossible to lace them, owing to the immovable position of her arms. They were forced to unhandcuff her and to roll her smartly over on to her stomach and fasten her wrists in front.

It was like trying to capture Ocean in a net, attempting to fetter her liberal bust in its cage of whalebone and coutil, for she was as slippery as an eel, and as muscular, despite her flabbiness, as a leaping salmon. When they laced her too tightly she screamed that they were strangling her, when too loosely she merely slipped out. After nearly half an hour they got her into them, and into her drawers and petticoats. Vincett sat on her legs while Father buttoned on her dress down the back, she lying on her belly among the ruins of the bed; and while in this singularly ill-adapted attitude her renewed charges of rape made the welkin ring. Outside in the kitchen courtyard the maids, who had by now assembled a cold scratch supper, listened in breathless suspense. It was Delia's boots that presented the final obstacle, for it was one thing to put them on, but quite another to button them, and the cook herself solved the problem by kicking them both off, one catching Father in the midriff and the other flying down into the courtyard below. Still, she was clothed, if not in her right mind, and they left it at that. But they removed all the bed-clothes, the curtains and the rugs and anything in which she might conceivably have wrapped herself, in the hope that this might dissuade her from divesting herself of her garments a second time. The battle was over, and a certain feeling of flatness descended. They left her, sullen and apparently tired of screaming.

The guests had arrived, and Mother, powdered, coiffured and looking as though nothing whatever had happened — she was always capable of clever acting at a moment's notice when she thought the occasion called for it — was plying them with cocktails. These were still something of a novelty in England, but she was a staunch believer in the powers of alcohol for making a party go, and an improvised concoction of fine old Haitian rum, old brandy and liqueur-whisky was working wonders. Having herself a head like cast-iron she had no scruples as to the methods employed in putting her

guests into a benign mood. So well had she succeeded that no one but she seemed to feel the slightest curiosity as to when or whether dinner would be served, or what it would be like; sun-burned jowls were growing flushed and noses were turning a delicate rabbit-pink under their rice-powder.

Then Father entered. He sniffed contemptuously at the drinks, for Mother was still in his bad books, but having sipped grudgingly he sipped again; he tried (and failed) to assume an expression of disgust and gulped down the remainder rapidly, his face visibly brightening. He had four drinks, much to everyone's relief in view of his notorious temper, and presently they all went in to a cold supper. It might certainly have been worse, for the caviare was good and the wines were, as ever, impeccable. A profound eupepsia settled like a rosy nimbus on the party; it was a superb night and through the lofty, wide-open window drifted the scent of magnolias and tobacco-plants, and the harbour trembled like quicksilver, lapping softly against the shore of the dim violet island that faced them.

The dining-room door opened, as Mother expected, to admit the stately Gertrude with the soufflé-surprise; but if the surprise was manifest to all, the soufflé was not, for it was the cook that entered. One glance was sufficient to reveal that all Father's activities in the name of decency had been in vain. With a fat grey finger pressed to her lips, as though pledging the room to secrecy, a guttering candle in her other hand, she padded silently down the room, only to clamber through the open window, reappearing at brief intervals as a shapeless, dimly luminous form among the shadows cast by the beech-trees on the lawn.

'That', said Mother brightly, 'was the new cook.' A loud splash cut short any comments that might have been forthcoming.

'God damn it all!' cried Father, 'she's in the pond now!'

The pond was small and overshadowed by a high wall

of rhododendrons. In it a few goldfish and some waterlilies dragged out an obscure, stunted existence, but apart from the lily-pits it was not more than a foot deep. The prospects of a salvage-party left father cold, since he, more than anyone, knew what he was up against and felt disinclined after the peace of the dinner-table to court a chill in the certain hurly-burly of the pond. Across the lawn drifted the sound of splashing, accompanied by a hoarse mezzo upraised in the melody of 'Bedelia', but in a version adapted to their own needs by the Salvation Army:

'Oh Jehovah-hovah-hovah!
I'll be crossing over, over
Over Jordan, Jehovah mine!'

It was a very warm night. Everyone seemed to feel that something ought to be done; the question was what and by whom. It was Mother who saved the situation by a display of feminine guile. After a brief confabulation, she and Rose Gilchrist stepped out on to the lawn, sauntering idly across it in the direction of the pond. As they neared it Rose said in her high, clear voice:

'Oh, and by the way, Susannah, is that your cook over there in the pond?'

The cook was lying flat on her back in the water, kicking up a foul spray with her legs, her face and hair clotted with bright-green slime.

'Oh yes, I expect so,' replied Mother in an off-hand way. 'I expect it is, but after all, if she likes to drown herself, let her. It's really of no consequence to anyone, is it? Besides,' she added, 'we like to keep her there.'

Delia rose to the bait like a salmon to a prawn; with a bellow of indignation she sprang to her feet, looking like a bloated and cracked leaden nereid, the centre-piece of some old fountain in a ruined park; clambered out, livid and bedaubed in the moonlight; and presently made off and dis-

appeared from sight. The women went indoors, and a few minutes later Gertrude, sombre as fate, came into the drawing-room, saying: 'I thought that I had better perhaps tell you, madam, that the new cook has retired to bed.' Her face was as expressionless as a mask.

The following morning found Chambers confined to his bed with a cold; there was in fact an epidemic of minor casualties among the male staff. The head gardener had a sprained wrist; the second gardener was nowhere to be found, and the garden-boy sent a message to say that he had fallen off his bicycle and cut his knee. But this masculine defection was somewhat offset by the fact that Constable Vincett was prowling round the grounds just in case there might be some repetition of the previous night's scene. It was a gloomy morning and rain was falling in torrents. Delia was confined to her room, and Gertrude had sent her up some breakfast by a trembling underling.

Father came down to breakfast in his loudest and most dilapidated carpet-slippers and a militant mood. The slippers had been strictly vetoed by Mother under all circumstances, ever since he had one day insisted on walking with her all the way from the Carlton to her Hanover Square dressmaker, his large feet going slippity-slop in them, much to the amusement of the passers-by. That he dared wear them, even at home, was a sign of final defiance, a challenge to the world at large.

'Susannah!' he said, in a loud, authoritative voice: 'That woman has got to go!' Mother concurred with vigour; the only question was, would she? 'Leave it to me!' He was at his most majestic. 'I shall give her notice myself.'

He strode upstairs to the maids' landing, saying firmly outside Delia's door:

'Delia Patrick! You will leave my house immediately. Here are a month's wages in lieu of notice.'

So saying, he hurriedly pushed an envelope containing

the appropriate sum under her door, and waited – but not for long. A voice infinitely more determined, more inflexible than his answered him:

'I don't take me notice!'

Father, himself a granite tower of obstinacy, was quite nonplussed when confronted by a similar quality in anyone else. Before he had time to think, Delia's voice continued dispassionately:

'Almighty God and Heavenly Father, look down, we beseech Thee, in Thy most infinite mercy on that most miserable sinner, George d'Arfey. Humble the proud and stubborn man and chastise the lustful in Thy name, we most humbly beseech Thee, oh Lord.'

His first instinct was to be furious – and indeed few of us possess either the spiritual humility to relish being prayed for publicly, or the lack of spiritual modesty which can make such a gesture acceptable – but his sense of humour triumphed. He broke into a guffaw, pushed the envelope back under the door, went downstairs and – rang for Constable Vincett. They marched back together to Delia's room; opening the door, they found her lying on her bed, but this time clothed. Vincett turned a cold blue eye on her.

'Are yer comin' quiet or not, cooky?' he asked.

'Don't you cooky me, young man!' replied the lady.

' 'Cos the Captain's given yer yer month's money.'

'Blank me money! I'm stayin' 'ere!'

Young Vincett tried charm. 'Come on, ducks,' he urged; 'there ain't no sense in lyin' there arguin'. The Captain says out, so out it is, so you be a good girl.'

'Blank the Captain!' she commented truculently.

'Use of obscene language and obstruction of the law,' wrote Vincett laboriously in his note-book. ' 'Ere,' said the Law, 'yer ain't doin' yerself no good by carryin' on like that.'

She paused, fixing first Vincett and then Father with a frenzied eye. 'A girl ain't safe 'ere!' she muttered.

The two men abandoned diplomacy and carried her struggling downstairs; they put her box on a wheelbarrow, and Vincett handcuffed her hands behind her back. Mother and Father took it in turns to push the barrow down the drive, while the constable marched his protesting prisoner off Father's property through the driving rain. Once she was off our land Vincett took the handcuffs off and released her. She then sat down heavily on her box and began to count her wages. As they walked back up the drive Father and Mother looked over their shoulders and saw her in the act of removing her dress. They hurried in apprehensively, and a few minutes later a second backward glance revealed that she had already got down to her combinations. In the end young Vincett had to send for the ambulance, while the stately Gertrude, a pillar of outraged property in mackintosh and goloshes, stood over the eccentric Delia with a large umbrella.

A week or so later it became common knowledge that Delia Patrick was bringing an action against Captain d'Arfey for illegal dismissal and attempted rape. Public opinion split into two camps regarding his innocence of the charge. 'My dear, it only goes to show,' murmured some of the old ladies, who, although they never claimed to have found themselves in Delia's alleged predicament, staunchly believed in the face of all evidence to the contrary that all members of their sex were at all times subject to certain risks. Others were more worldly-wise. 'What? When he's married to Susannah d'Arfey? Stuff and nonsense!' Betting in the local was hot, and for a time young Vincett's open derision carried some weight; odds were five to one on Father's acquittal. But as the case drew near it was only natural that the village should wish to make the most out of an infrequent sensation, for a conviction would provide a fund of conversation for years to come, and the odds on the day of the hearing were now two to one on the cook victorious.

The case was brief, but not entirely lacking in incident.

When Delia had taken her stand in the witness box and had taken the oath in a truculent voice, she removed, for it was a very hot day, her long high-necked overcoat. Under it, save for her boots and a chain round her neck, from which hung a cross of bog-oak, she was stark-naked.

VI

THE LAST YEARS[1]

THE last years of my parents' marriage were calm, and for Mother, in view of Father's age and his increasing unsociability, dull. But dullness she had always had to accustom herself to, and she turned with a growing love to the countryside and to the archaeology of the county, of which she knew a great deal.

Marsh was still tolerably isolated, on the fringe of a wild and lonely region, and to the waters of the estuary and to the heathy uninhabited islands there came at that time an incredible variety of bird-life. Five or six times a week Mother would slip out of the house just before dawn, making her way to the pinewoods or gliding through the mists down to the waters of the brackish lake that lay at some distance in front of the house. When I was a little boy there grew in a wood about a quarter of a mile from the house a stocky but very densely-foliaged *pinus insignis* in which there dwelt a great white owl; Mother had fallen deeply in love with it, as had, apparently, the elegant fowl with her. Often, after dusk, she would take me for a walk in the woods past the owl's home; there, she would call softly to it and sometimes, though by no means always, it would appear, a big dimly

[1] Only a part of this chapter was written. It was to have ended with the death of George d'Arfey.

luminous shape among the dark fuzz, with its great hard topaz-coloured eyes staring like hostile moons at us. After a while we would stroll down the sandy path between the firs and the arbutus-trees, Mother in her trailing white dress, a ghost in the dusk, and the owl would lumber out of its house, softly moaning in a hollow sort of voice, and at a distance would fly from shadowy tree to tree like a heavy white frigate, all mainsail, after her, calling and ululating. She treated it as a kind of protective divinity (which is, I think, rather how she thought of it) with deference, formality and awe, and would bring it offerings to propitiate its strange but friendly spirit. It is, I think, uncommon for a large owl to establish social relations with a human being, even when placated with blood-sacrifice — all the cats at Marsh developed neuroses, for the servants had orders to take away from them immediately any mouse caught in their possession, which were at once put in a basket. Mother was a great gardener and had a large number of baskets, each of which was consecrated to a special use and which she guarded jealously, but most precious of all to her was her 'mouse-basket'. I remember the look of alarm and bewilderment on the face of a female visitor on hearing her suddenly exclaim to the stately parlourmaid:

'Gertrude! Gertrude! Someone's taken my mouse-basket again and it was nearly full. Where are my dead mice? I *must* have them!' I should perhaps add that the mouse-basket was an extremely small one.

In the course of her bird-watchings she saw some of the rarest English birds. We used to keep bees — with which, too, she had a mysterious affinity — in a series of white-painted skeps that looked a little like toy Regency villas, but one year all the swarms left their hives and settled in the roof of the nursery wing; soon, both in and out of this part of the house there was always the sweet pervasive odour of honey. It was one summer about twelve months after their

migration that mother caught in her hands that rarest of birds, the blue-tailed bee-eater, on the nursery-stairs, after it had had a presumably heavy meal. It was scarcely frightened of her, accepted some water, and then she let it out. The editor of the *Field* congratulated her upon the accuracy and precision of her observations, saying that if all British bird-lovers were as careful and exact in their notes as she our store of bird-lore would be materially increased. Sometimes she would see flamingoes, perhaps all the way from Tunisia, in the harbour, and one year there nested in an old beech near the lawn a pair of the very rare and scarcely ever seen great black crimson-headed woodpeckers. One year some golden orioles nested, but so many people came to gape at them that they fled the place. For two years running the exquisite fire-crested wren came to Marsh, where mother saw it sitting on a bed of forget-me-nots under a dripping tap to which its open upraised beak was turned. In her room there hung the discarded nest, the loveliest I've ever seen, of a black-cap, woven out of the tail of a blue-roan that we had. She observed, too, the night-calling heron in the sedgy waste that bordered the lake. One year she was sent a present of some Japanese goldfish for the pond. The morning after they had arrived she was lying in a hammock on the lawn sewing when she saw a party of five kingfishers descend from nowhere in a glittering scud of emerald and sapphire on the water, whirring like little jewelled chronometers, darting and pouncing on the fish until they had eaten them all. She lay motionless, scarcely venturing to breathe, until the meal was finished and then they disappeared in dipping arcs of green fire, never to come again.

These contacts — if they can be called that — brought a sort of peace and fulfilment to her spirit, linking her to the rhythms of life and the seasons. I came across a page of an old diary of hers which shows the delicate precision of her observation:

> On a day early in May (1905) I went into our wood just before sunrise; there had just been a thunderstorm, followed immediately by a sharp frost. At that moment the sun rising in splendour below the hill sent shafts of dazzling light into the wood, which was filled with very pale mauve and scarlet rhododendrons in full bloom. The sun, striking through their petals and the iridescent beads of ice that clung to them, filled all the space with an ineffably lovely lilac and rose haze, creating an enchanted glory as it touched the young green of fern and bramble and quivered on birches and larch and on the trunks of the great firs that sheltered them, bringing them into magical life. Surely I can only see this conjunction of rain and frost, of sun and flowers and fresh green once in my life?'

Here, always to hand, was a constant escape from the immaterial cares of her life: in her respite from material ones, those destroyers of life and hope and happiness for nearly all humanity, she was indeed fortunate. As a matter of fact, very soon after their marriage, Father had made over to her everything that he had in the world on discovering how efficient a manager she was and that she was honest. His aim was human enough; it was to save money for her in estate-duties on his death.

Undoubtedly her determination to let him have things all his own way did preserve the domestic peace to a large extent and helped to keep his temper and irritability within bounds at times. She obviously spoiled him outrageously, giving as her excuse the fact that he had suffered so in the past — (had he? I can't tell) — but it is my firm belief that no masculine character can survive intact the endless indulgences shown to it by too soft-hearted a woman. These oblations of the personal will can only breed an ever-growing egoism and undermine self-control in people

not notable for it at the best of times (I speak for myself).

On the other hand, as she pointed out in self-defence, what she achieved by suppressing some of her own wishes wasn't altogether negligible, since she undoubtedly made him happy, until such a time as habit enabled him to take her for granted; and happiness was a state to which he was quite admittedly unaccustomed. For a time, indeed for several years, until his health began finally to fail, he took on a new kind of life, something almost like youth, a kind of belated St. Martin's summer.

As for Mother, there was something very faintly Asiatic in her position at Marsh, only her liberty had not so much been taken from her as abandoned voluntarily by her, for Father was inconsolable, like a spoilt child, if she was away from the place for a single night, and so she ceased ever to leave it without him. He couldn't even bear to spend a night on board his beloved yacht without her, and that she felt more, for she loathed the sea, though much of every summer was spent on it. By way of compensation she was indulged with a hundred unnecessary luxuries and allowed to develop her tastes — as a substitute for 'life'.

VII

THE MOUNTFAUCONS

THE Mountfaucons were the last of a grand English family, still very rich but in rapid decline. Vast wealth and vaster pride had been theirs, and now rot had crept into the roots of the great tree and its branches were dying, its leaves withering: but a fruit tree grown old and barren will sometimes in the last summer of its life bear a huge crop of wonderful fruit.

Old Mr. Mountfaucon, now deceased, the former head of the house, a handsome and pious old man, had had a mania for speculation, and despite incredible luck, such as selling a small country seat, worth perhaps with its acreage some thirty thousand pounds, to a Crimean War profiteer for three times that sum — probably on the one-time glamour of the Mountfaucon name — he had managed both by siring a vast family and by reckless gambling on the Stock Exchange to impoverish them. The fire of life was sinking in the eighteen children, and a neurotic impulse of self-destruction by the most gradual means had replaced it. Nature or fate had tired of them; their purpose had been fulfilled and their day was done.

They could no longer settle down once they had sold Cheveley, and they roamed over England and Europe, here and there building large villas, which progressively declined in size, if not in ugliness. On their annual migrations across the Continent, God alone knows what they suggested to the inhabitants — perhaps a flight of mourning locusts (for their health had gone, and one of the vast brood of brats was always dead or dying), or conceivably a troupe from the Comédie Française in some impossibly Ibsenish or Brieux-esque drama of *le higlif.* They took whole floors of hotels, chartered special trains, giving a temporary lease of life to the continental legend of the English milord, a myth then entering into its decline. These migrations were as purposeless as those of the lemmings; it was flight for the sake of flight, a symptom of the nihilism which was working in their veins.

They didn't want to see things; they wanted not to see them. They were all natural art-haters, and were armed with a warning sixth-sense which advised them of the imminent presence of a Work of Art. Nothing short of a peculiarly violent thunderstorm could inveigle them into seeking refuge in an art gallery, but once inside, no power on earth

could induce them to look at a picture. The female Mountfaucons knew that the pictures would probably, almost certainly, be indecent; the male Mountfaucons, by some slight and disappointing experience, knew equally well that they would not be. The only buildings about which they had any feeling were such historic mansions and castles as were in any way connected with the Family. Approaching any others, whether Chillon or Versailles or the raspberry-pink Winter Palace, they would produce a battery of dark glasses, parasols, sandwich-cases, flasks and a clatter of conversation. Anything which did not in some way reflect their one-time glory was not worth looking at, was indeed to be avoided, and they just shot by in their landaus, droshkys or gondolas without looking. Beauty they didn't mind, so long as it belonged to them, and they had a few beautiful old family things which they valued no more than the many Victorian monstrosities which they had amassed. Generally speaking, out of every epoch they had succeeded in salvaging everything that was least lovely.

They had at one time been great West Indian landowners in the large island which I will call Aneleuthera and had given their name to one of its largest counties; but there, too, they have passed unobserved, their name and their memory no longer even dust. I have combed the Lilyville archives as well as those of the capital for traces of their history there, but not a word survives. Yet Aneleuthera left its mark on them, a stamp still decipherable. My Mother has in her possession a portrait of an old Judge Mountfaucon, painted somewhere about the middle of the eighteenth century: he is an indisputable mulatto. The strain of African blood recurred in them once in half a century or so, and in the generation of which I am writing, in no uncertain form. That I shall come to shortly.

Old Mr. Mountfaucon was distinguished-looking and *racé* to a degree. His wife had been, as a girl in the eighteen-

fifties, an exquisite little blonde; born a Casterby, she was as infatuated with her lineage as was her husband with his. The bearing of eighteen children, however, had bent her almost double. My first memories of the family were as a child, a little over thirty years ago. At this time, Morven, the fourth of the surviving sons, was living idly in his mother's house near Exebourne.

Mother knew his family, but not at all intimately; they had nothing in common, and the Mountfaucons had few, if any, intimate friends. They sought intimacy with nobody. Though Morven was reckoned a confirmed bachelor, Mother was not surprised at his proposal. Throughout her first marriage all the burdens had been placed on her shoulders, all the cares and responsibilities of Father's small estate; she was attracted by Morven, as was every woman, and perhaps still more by the idea that now at last a man of her own generation might take care of her and help her to shoulder some of her burdens. The extreme deference which he had shown to her during both her married life and her brief widowhood led her to regard him as a responsible man, and he had that indifferent guarantee of character, a universal popularity. When younger he was known to have been rather wild, but latterly his conduct, so far as was known, had been sobriety itself. There was in him a strong streak of the candid and the slightly ingenuous, and that, too, endeared him to her. And then he was what Father had never been, a dashing, gallant, buoyant lover, once he had realized that his case wasn't hopeless; his high spirits and gaiety and good humour all corresponded to her own; and although she loved her first husband deeply, her life with him had not been gay and her whole nature had been bent on ensuring his comfort much to the neglect of her own wishes. She didn't feel for Morven the passionate respect and admiration which she had for Father. She realized that this was a somewhat inferior character, but, not unnaturally,

she wished for a little happiness. After a good deal of deliberation she accepted him, agreeing to marry him when eighteen months after Father's death had elapsed.

And now to go back to Morven's family. By this time many of the eighteen children were dead, three or four had married, and only some seven or eight lived on in Holderfield, their huge late-Victorian villa.

The d'Arfeys and the Mountfaucons were to all appearances profoundly dissimilar. The latter were, in the accepted sense of the word, essentially aristocratic. Descended from the Plantagenets and the Stantons of the Middle Ages they were closely connected by marriage with many of the most noble English families; one of their ancestors had been a man of genius and several had been celebrated, not only in their day. The d'Arfeys' descent was more ancient but more obscure. They had tended for a couple of centuries to marry into the same great landed family, and from the marriage of an Elizabeth d'Arfey in the sixteenth century sprang one of England's greatest men; a man, alas, who failed to perpetuate his stock. The d'Arfeys, unlike nearly all the Mountfaucons, were intellectual, nervous, highly-organized people, proud, reticent and rarely ambitious. Gradually, through the centuries, their estates melted away, though they never until this century knew poverty. Less fettered by vast possessions than the Mountfaucons, their tradition of living was wider and more liberal and their sense of social morality much sharper. The canker in their blood was a kind of indifference, a *laisser-aller* and a deep-seated indolence, which derived its sustenance from the fact that they were not economically obliged to work, and the absence of that compulsion bred yet more indolence in them. It was here that their characters touched those of the Mountfaucons, to whom much the same conditions and attributes applied. The only difference seemed to be that ambition had become genuinely extinguished in the d'Arfeys

(at least so far as it ever is) while in the older Mountfaucons it still dimly survived, atrophied and unfulfilled, or taking a shallow and meretricious form, dwarfed and totally misdirected. In the last survivors of each stock the negation of activity had left them a prey to restless, nervous obsessions.

The principal follies and extravagances of the Mountfaucons dated from the beginning of the nineteenth century, and reached their zenith under Morven's father, despite all the efforts of his wife Constantia, that master-matriarch, to control them. In that century considerably more than a million pounds must have been frittered away by them, and Constantia Mountfaucon's drastic economies were unable to make good her husband's constant losses.

He had built in a suburb of Exebourne, as a final refuge for the survivors of his wife's fecundity, that vast villa named Holderfield. This Victorian ant-heap was a spiritual and physical monstrosity. Utterly hideous, it appeared to be indestructible and so contrasted ironically with the rapid physical and psychical dissolution of most of its inmates. Certain new houses become quickly 'charged', while others, like Holderfield, remain a sealed vacuum for half a century. Houses, like people, infect and are infected; and this one, certainly not planned as a love-nest, took its revenge on the people who lived in it. The old couple had loved one another, after their fashion, but their feeling was insulated and unable to release itself from its own coils. One never knew just what it was that had gone wrong, for the Mountfaucons didn't wash their dirty linen in public — or even in private. As a matter of fact, they never washed it at all.

Their line was coming to an end, and the unaired consciousness of this hung like a heavy vapour over the villa, inhibiting every activity within. The mood of the house was a swerving away from life, a sort of nostalgia for death (their feast-days were death's anniversaries), and life and its call survived only in a couple of the Mountfaucon sons, in

whom the flame of living had given a last flicker, a sudden spurt up into the darkness, but too late.

Old Mr. and Mrs. Mountfaucon had as their dearest wish the desire to be respected and to be respectable, and here life didn't thwart them — except indirectly, through their sons. They wore their virtue like a mask — though the old gentleman took it off once for a brief moment — and their terrific sense (it was really a moral conviction) of class-superiority spun itself round them in a tightly-woven, impenetrable cocoon. Their negative talent was for dullness and it multiplied and brought forth fruit; they were able to make a virtue out of necessity. Perhaps they thought that by their very dullness and lack of colour they could cheat Fate into not perceiving them or theirs, that they might pass unnoticed by her. But they were wrong.

At the time of Mother's second marriage Constantia Mountfaucon had been a widow for several years and she ruled over her house and its inmates with a rod of iron. The atmosphere there was charnel. What made the air so unbreathable was the curious unreality of the place, the sense of precarious pretence which it conveyed. It suggested some disagreeable hidden knowledge (of which the awareness just brushed lightly past one, like a dim figure in a half-lit corridor that might be phantom or human) and a general mood of stale secretiveness. Though Mother had to wait until she was married before she discovered it, the ugly and well-guarded secret was dipsomania. This ravaged the men, with the exception of the father and the eldest son, but spared the women. During her engagement the skeletons which littered the Mountfaucon family cupboard might have been said to have been closely wrapped in cotton wool, lest some unwelcome rattling of their joints might have reached her ears. Not a sound nor a rumour of one did she hear. The cupboard door was too solid, the wadding too thick.

The marriage of any of her children seemed to Constantia

a weakening of her power, and she would have viewed any alliance outside the older peerage as a social landslide. Moreover, Morven was her favourite child. She was not pleased at the engagement. She knew Mother slightly and neither liked nor approved of her. Apart from her air, there was the sinister fact that rumour credited her with lovers, in the plural rather than in the singular, since it was quite unable to mention a single man by name in whom she took any especial interest, the fact being that few men appealed sufficiently to her romantic idealism. It was considered that she was fast, frivolous and extravagant: Constantia had after all once been in the world and knew that Mother could not be dressed so well on nothing. But there was another anxiety: when she found out the Mountfaucon secret could Mother be relied upon to keep her mouth shut? Scandal was Constantia's perennial nightmare. Probably, almost certainly, she could not be so trusted. True, if she received a hint, the engagement might be broken off; but the indignity of Susannah d'Arfey jilting a Mountfaucon would be intolerable, and then, the cat would be out of the bag with a vengeance! It was all very painful, very difficult, very unsatisfactory. Poor Morven! One hoped that Mrs. d'Arfey would make him a good wife . . . for being a good wife had been Constantia's speciality. It was a fact that her relatives were seldom permitted to overlook.

Mother with her naturally sanguine and cheerful temperament, and in love with Morven, had accepted the forbidding façade of the Mountfaucon home at its cheerless face value, taking its apparent respectability on trust, although as a cheerful and spirited woman profoundly in love with life (even perhaps more than in love with Morven, who may have only symbolized life for her) she was repelled by it. She knew that her mother-in-law-to-be disliked her, but she had no idea that all that weighed with this lady was whether Mother would or would not sacrifice everything to save the

Mountfaucon face. With a great distaste for self-pity (which she tried, with very indifferent success, alas, to instil into her child) and with natural reserve, Mother managed to help to save the Mountfaucon face for twelve years and with a fair degree of success.

They were married in the early spring, and Morven remarked to her as they left the little country church where in the strictest privacy they had been joined together, in a voice in which malicious masculine triumph was united to a resigned but grudging recognition of his own weaknesses:

'You've put your foot in it all right this time, my girl.'

Without in the least knowing what he meant she was seized by frightful misgivings, which time was amply to justify.

Only her old nurse, who adored her, had prophesied disaster, but her reasons for doing so had no more substance than that mother had left for her honeymoon wearing a huge hat wreathed with red hawthorn: Cassandra's clues may have been as slight. Morven and Mother must have made a striking-looking couple, and a romantic observer might have rushed to sentimental and rosy conclusions regarding its outcome.

My nursery at Marsh was at the top of the front stairs; I was just six years old. It was long after my bedtime when they returned home from their honeymoon and it was about midnight that I was awakened by a series of extraordinary noises. There was a sound of heavy breathing and of some soft, weighty object being dragged along the stone flags of the hall. I sat up in bed and listened; the noises advanced in the direction of the stairs; there was a dull thud, a sodden sort of bump and the panting of breath, followed by a pause; and then another thud and another and another, coming up the stairs towards my room, and gradually slowing down in pace. The breathing came in deep strained gasps, drawn in jerkily. After what seemed an age there was the dull collapse

of something near my door and then I heard whatever it was being dragged with infinite difficulty along the narrow corridor. A door opened and shut; there was silence. All the time — which must have been at least half an hour — I was aware, or certainly by the end of it, by some obscure instinct, of what was taking place. It was of course Mother dragging Morven up to his room dead drunk.

All the Mountfaucon men, with the exception of my step-uncle Edgar, were handsome, and Morven was the handsomest of the lot. As a boy of sixteen he had gone into the Army, but at twenty-five he was forced to resign his commission on account of his liaison with a married woman, of whom more will be heard anon. Besides being an all-round sportsman he had the gift of pleasing. He was the only one of the eighteen children who had ever been indulged, and that rather by his father than by his mother.

Although she set such inordinate store by her ancestry and that of her husband, old Mrs. Mountfaucon had no illusions as to the heredity of either, and how should she have had? Her horror of scandal and at the same time contempt for all that lay outside the charmed circle of Mountfaucons and Casterbys went hand in hand, and she apparently felt that since the family skeletons seemed fated at some time or other to clatter out of their cupboards and dance the Big Apple — even if only *un pomme de Sodome* to step-uncle Edgar's piping — no matter how many times one locked the door, it was preferable that it should be done in her ballroom, rather than in another's. Devoted to charitable works, her sense of general social responsibility was non-existent. Her desire for order concealed nothing more constructive than a wish to lay ghosts. Accepting Morven's marriage with a cold grace, she may have comforted herself for his defection by reflecting that his wife would soon pay a heavy penalty for having dared it. Her sense of morality and responsibility did not lead her to consider that her

daughter-in-law had a young child and that she might reasonably expect to bear her husband others; nor did it lead her to brood over, in that light, his heritage of epilepsy and dipsomania.

I think that the explanation lay simply in the fact that too great a strain had been imposed on her life. The restraints of a lifetime, the hand of inherited order, had weighed on her too heavily. Nature had taken a late revenge, and the alchemy of suffering had changed the discipline natural to her to a furious nihilism which burned fiercely beneath the conventional Victorian mask, and of which she was totally unaware. Despite her restraining grasp everything had, after all, slipped through her fingers – everything, that is, but her sense of power – and even in that her pleasure must have been mitigated by her knowledge of the weakness of those over whom she exercised it. Possessions had run through her fingers like water, despite all her heroic efforts to retain them, and health for the most part, either mental or bodily, she had been unable to achieve.

There must have been a moment when she was compelled to face the fact that all her efforts had been doomed from the start, and the discovery must have poisoned her. In order to buttress up her natural self-confidence (which was considerable) she insisted upon every outward form of respect being paid her in a high degree, and this from the uncritical or the docile she readily commanded; but the inner reality she couldn't escape. Since even the fanatical strain of puritanism in her hadn't succeeded in driving out the disreputable demons of heredity from her children's blood all her weapons had failed her, and she turned back more than ever for reassurance towards an irrecapturable past, to the crumbling shell of a tradition, to the vain pride of the oligarchy from which she had sprung, aware that she was no longer bound to that group by the one essential of wealth. She professed a fervid belief in all the convictions

of the more moral sections of her world, but one wonders what, if anything, she really believed in. Herself, principally, I fancy.

The good looks of her nine sons were matched only by the positively startling plainness of most of her nine daughters. The eldest daughter was my step-aunt Theodosia — or Aunt Dossy, as I was encouraged (though not by Mother) to call her. But I preferred to call her by her full name, which seemed to set a decent distance between us. When I first knew her she must have been a woman nearing sixty, though she looked very much older. In her the strain of Aneleutheran blood was dimly apparent. At night, dressed in bugled black satin, she produced a certain effect, but rather an equivocal one: nature had intended her heavy dark features to express a massive sensuality, but the severity of her upbringing had disciplined this into a kind of rigour, so that she seemed to have two faces, the outer one as though it were a fine mask of wax fitting tightly over the under one. She had the appearance of a very clever, very observant character-actress playing a part a little too emphatically. With her high 'front' of closely packed, seaweed-coloured Alexandra curls, she looked as Clytemnestra might have looked had she lived to be sixty and then been painted by Toulouse-Lautrec. In her long colourless face the most noticeable features were her heavy brows and large eyes, which resembled those of a dying goat, and her big sensual mouth. The faint hint of the Negro in her features wrestled with the decadent (but reformed) Roman matron — and the Roman matron won.

As a mother Aunty Dossy might have been both happy and successful; as an aunt, although kind, she was a distinct failure. Her life was devoted to good works. She was the soul, the pillar, the essence of the Zenana Mission — by correspondence — and must in her lifetime have converted heaven knows how many miles of white calico into shapeless

dresses for the disguising of exquisite Polynesian and African bodies. One can understand her fanatical jealousy of Mother. She had no vices and had apparently read nothing whatever, once she had left the schoolroom, but the Bible, an innumerable series of tracts, and occasionally a work by Rosa Nouchette Carey as an extreme indulgence, but never by any chance during Lent. It was only when she died, several years after her mother, that it was discovered on turning out her room that the two massive bottom drawers of her wardrobe which were invariably kept locked, contained an almost complete and much-thumbed set of the works of Victoria Cross. Her sole surviving sister, my step-aunt Emmeline Hotblack, insisted on pretending that Morven had put them there, as a joke in the worst possible taste. Possibly he had.

No provincial French petite bourgeoise ever indulged herself in fewer extravagances than my late step-aunts. As late as 1917 Aunty Dossy was still wearing dinner-gowns which dated from the middle 'eighties, while her day-dresses and those of her sisters tacked eccentrically between the fashions of that date and those of a decade later, as cut by the scissors of a small Somersetshire dressmaker. They had always since their youth dressed in deep black as an economy, for someone or other was always sure to be either dead or dying.

Her brothers, on the other hand, were elegant and their missionary zeal prompted them to found their own Zenanas. Then, too, their physical appearance gave no hint of their forgotten African ancestor, of whose existence indeed they may have been and almost certainly were ignorant. They were allowed a certain degree of liberty that was forbidden to their sisters once they had reached adolescence, and on attaining manhood were turned adrift. For the Mountfaucon girls the atmosphere at Holderfield was arctic, for all the inevitable closeness of its contacts. In this conserva-

tory where the fires were dying down, the denials, the rejections of love's commonplace expressions were extreme. Constantia Mountfaucon could apparently spread out the ordinary affections of a day over an entire generation, and still have a considerable balance in hand at the end of it.

Leaving Mother newly returned home with Morven from their honeymoon, let us turn to Constantia's husband, Augustus. He was an extremely self-important person, whose dignity had never been completely assuaged since he had left Cheveley and had ceased to be the Lord-Lieutenant of the county in which it was situated. His mania for speculation of every sort was completely undeterred by the fact that the Goddess of Chance had never once smiled on his activities. Every investment that he made failed automatically. His particular passion was for mining stock of every description, and after he had lost three or four hundred thousand pounds during the first ten years of their married life Constantia decided that it was high time that she put her foot down. She made Augustus swear on the family Bible that he would put no more money 'under ground'. He swore volubly, and proceeded to write to his broker, instructing him to put a hundred and twenty thousand pounds into a Welsh mine: within a very short time the money was irretrievably lost. But this misadventure was not without effect on him, for although it didn't in any way moderate his gambling propensities, it did leave him with an acute neurosis. This took the form of causing him to suffer severely from postman's knock. His father had been afflicted by epilepsy and the inherited strain of nervosity resulting from this and from a sound associated in his mind with vast accumulations of bills, with the regular and inevitable news of the failure of yet another and another speculation, caused the familiar noise to have a most unfortunate nervous effect on him. On his hearing it, the muscles of his throat would immediately become constricted

and a kind of local paralysis would set in; he would be absolutely incapable of uttering or of swallowing, and this condition might last from two to four days, during which time he could take no nourishment of any sort. And since any domestic strain, quite apart from the fatal rat-tat, would produce this effect on him, he would lose weight very rapidly and become feeble.

There was only one remedy, which was to startle him violently, and with this end in view his son Albert, the only member of the family with a mildly mechanical aptitude, had rigged up all over the house a series of devices, booby-traps and gins (greatly to his mother's disapproval), most of which functioned with tolerable success at times, but also with an inevitable lack of discrimination, falling alike upon the just and upon the unjust. Indeed, their principal result – though sometimes they did put a stop to Mr. Mountfaucon's muscular paralysis – was to induce neurosis in the other members of the family. Only for the sake of her husband would Constantia have tolerated so flippant a cure.

No one but Uncle Albert knew how to control the battery of arm-chairs with trick legs which would suddenly fling their unsuspecting occupants to the ground, or the sofa which, when one lay down on it, would suddenly rise up into the air on concealed extending legs to the height of some seven or eight feet above the ground. Uncle Albert's time was divided between his workshop and the cellar, and by the time he was twenty-three the cellar proved to be the turning-point in his career. With his death a certain non-mechanical peace descended upon the household, although his inventions lingered on, since nothing at Holderfield was ever thrown away, some gradually falling into desuetude, while others were seemingly endowed with a mischievous, indestructible life of their own, and would suddenly, many years after the death of old Augustus, without apparent rhyme or reason perform an unexpected,

half-forgotten trick, emerging from their retirement like some old conjuror into a brief limelight. Once, when Constantia was a very old woman, Mother had the pleasure of seeing the visiting wife of a suffragan bishop suddenly thrust up into the air on the levitating sofa until the top of her grape-trimmed hat was nearly on a level with the base of the gasolier. The attempts of the Mountfaucons to explain the situation were met with absolute silence, and the lady was only rescued from her predicament by a footman who got her down with the aid of the housemaid's steps. She left the house immediately and never returned.

These inventions apart, there were less complex methods of bringing Mr. Mountfaucon back to normality, and during his attacks the whole house lived in a state of turmoil curiously at variance with its customary dignity, in a din of slamming doors and crashing crockery, as though a Laurel and Hardy farce had improbably got mixed with one of Garbo's stately historical bromides.

On one occasion when no remedy was of the slightest avail Morven seized hold of a hideous and costly Meissen urn, which had been given by the King of Saxony to Augustus as a Christmas present some few years previously, and dashed it to the ground under his father's nose: the cure was drastic but efficacious, lending wings to his father's pent-up powers of speech. As soon as one of these attacks came to their sudden end, Constantia would rush to her husband's side with a large jug of very strong beef tea, with which, against such an occurrence, the larder was always plentifully supplied, for she lived in a constant dread of Augustus' death through inanition during one of his seizures.

Both of them were staunch church-goers and contributed liberally towards the finances of Saint Cunibert's, giving as much as a thousand pounds at a time, much to the irritation of their sons, who could have found other uses for the money. Old Mr. Mountfaucon was a churchwarden and would

collect the offertory in so regal a fashion that he impressed an emotional young lady who habitually worshipped there to such an extent that she made a regular practice of fainting whenever he faced her with the collection-bag, for the mere pleasure of being assisted down the aisle by him.

He did not altogether dislike this at first, as she was good-looking, but after a dozen repetitions its charm began to pall. One Sunday, after popping a half-crown into the bag, and bestowing an exquisite, expiring smile on the collector she collapsed into his arms. It was a hot day and he was in a bad temper, having just received the news that another large investment had failed. True to his reputation as a gallant man, he carried the young woman out into the aisle, but when he was half-way to the door with his burden a fit of indifference or irritation seized hold of him and he dropped her suddenly with a bump on to the encaustic-tiled pavement. He was never known to swear in all his life, but on this one occasion his charge, indignantly recalled to consciousness and an awareness of bruises, heard him angrily mutter:

'Damn the silly creature!'

Leaving her flat in the aisle he marched back to his seat without turning round to glance at her. The lady picked herself up, and when she saw that no one else was coming to her rescue, hurried out of church, and banged the heavy door to. The following Sunday she was foolish enough to put a large button in the offertory bag; Augustus caught her at it, emptied the contents of the bag into his palm, extracted the button and returned it to her with a stiff bow and an Olympian dignity. The congregation tittered and she never attended matins at Saint Cunibert's again.

In addition to being possessed of great distinction and dignity, which made the most blue-blooded-looking of his sons seem hobbledehoys by comparison, old Mr. Mount-faucon was a tower of morality — a leaning tower, it is true,

but a tower that, having leaned once and once only, promptly righted itself, and for good. It was while he was still enjoying his Lord-Lieutenancy during the early 'seventies that he had announced a domestic decision which surprised his wife and horrified the servants.

They were still living at Cheveley, and their county-town was Belchester. My step-grandfather, then a vigorous man in his forties, had never before shown the slightest interest in any detail regarding the management of his house, relegating all such duties, as my Father did, to his far more capable wife. Constantia was therefore somewhat astonished when he suddenly announced to her that in future he would pay the fishmonger's bill in person every Friday. When he returned home after the first Friday visit to the fishmonger's he went up to his room to dress for dinner. His wife thought that she perceived a very faintly fishy odour emanating from his clothes, but correctly ascribing it to his call, she put it from her mind.

The Friday-evening drive into Belchester proved to be a regular institution, and his wife remarked that he seemed to leave Cheveley earlier and earlier and to return later and later. What distressed her was the very faint aroma of fish which gradually began to hang about in their bedroom, though its bouquet was more concentrated in Mr. Mountfaucon's dressing-room. Some three months later she was standing in his room talking to him while he scrubbed his nails before dinner. By chance her eye was caught by a number of tiny glittering objects like sequins in the wash-hand basin; when he had left the room she inspected them. They were fish-scales. She began to turn various things over in her mind, and gradually they began to assume a more definite shape. The following Friday, when her husband had left for the market town, she ordered one of the grooms to drive her after him in the brougham. She went straight to the door of the shop, which the fishmonger was just in the

act of closing, and observed a marked reluctance on his part to admit her. She was far too imposing and important a woman to be refused, and as they entered the shop together he was suddenly seized by a very violent and loud fit of coughing. Behind the marble slab was a window which opened on to an inner sitting-room; and this, veiled by a lace curtain, was lit up by a brightly-burning gasolier. Constantia gazed horror-struck over the still-life of cod and dace, plaice and soles, lobsters and trout, as through the curtain she dimly distinguished, laid out in each other's arms, the Lord-Lieutenant and the fishmonger's pretty, buxom wife.

The scales, so to speak, fell from Mrs. Mountfaucon's eyes. She had heard faint rumours that a buoyant temperament had made of the young woman a fisher of men; but never in her wildest dreams could it have occurred to her that a mere fish-wife — or should it be a fish-mistress? — could have dared to harpoon *her* husband.

Turning to that *mari complaisant*, the fishmonger, she said with consummate dignity, as though she had perceived nothing untoward:

'Be good enough to tell Mr. Mountfaucon that Mrs. Mountfaucon is waiting for him in the brougham.'

So Mr. Mountfaucon slung his hook; Maud Tooker sorrowfully realized that the big fish which she had so skilfully landed had slipped through her net; and Mr. Tooker silently regretted so munificent a patron of his wife's charms.

Heaven only knows what Constantia said to her husband when she got him by himself, but never again did he give her the slightest cause for suspicion, bearing the ponderous weight of her forgiveness with manly fortitude. He took his revenge by causing her to bear seven more children. All things considered, it may be said that he won, and that his revenge turned the scales.

VIII

MY STEPFATHER AND SOME LADIES

Sur le Plage! Sur le Plage!
Men are full of persiflage;
When I take my bain-de-mer
All the boys just come and stare!
Sung by Mlle Gaby Deslys, 1906

ACCORDING to their lights both Augustus and Constantia Mountfaucon had done their very best with regard to the upbringing of their children. Under the ever-watchful eye of Constantia and throughout all the family peregrinations over Europe governesses and tutors had striven to mould the eighteen children. The nine little girls proved to be docility itself, but the little boys, though they had exquisite manners, proved less amenable to discipline. Everything was done to inculcate in them a sense of duty, piety and nice conduct, even to the extent, so far as the boys were concerned, of letting them enjoy themselves – though this, for the little girls, was not considered in any way necessary. An excellent example was set them, but alas, all nine of the boys seemed to be quite incapable of profiting by it: they were not so much disobedient as cheerfully unheeding of precept and pattern.

Much of their childhood was spent in Dresden, where they were constant visitors at Court. The five eldest boys, Edgar, Albert, Vivian, Morven and George, played and rode a great deal with the five little princesses, who had skittishly nicknamed Uncle Edgar 'Mr. Witty Boy', Uncle Vivian 'Mr. Kindly Boy' and Morven 'Mr. Pretty Boy'. I forget the nicknames of the others. Morven was endowed from birth, like the infant in Baudelaire's fable, with the gift of pleasing, and his first nursery-conquest was of the little

princesses. It was to be followed by many others. He was the only one of the eighteen children whom his parents spoiled, more especially his father. Indeed, it would have been difficult to resist spoiling a boy with such charming looks, such high spirits, such constant good-humour and such a lively tongue.

On his sixteenth birthday Morven was seduced by the wife of his crammer, and from that day he always spoke of easy women with a faint nuance of contempt in his tone, since he was too good-natured ever to be openly malicious about anyone except an outrageous bore. He excelled in all forms of sport, at seventeen was aide-de-camp to the German Commander-in-Chief, and at eighteen captained his regimental polo team, one of the crack teams of the British Army. What sapped his character was the fact that he was too easy-going; he always chose the line of least resistance, having, like many rather obstinate men, not much will of his own. Although he knew it and resented it, he couldn't resist pleasure in any form, and despite, or perhaps because of his upbringing, self-discipline was unknown to him. Every other woman he met wanted him and he was often too indolent to say no; they nearly always had stronger characters than he and this helped to unnerve him. He was perpetually in debt from the time that he joined the army and for large sums, which old Mr. Mountfaucon always paid up. Then, also, his mistresses generally had much more money than he had, and that gave him a feeling of inferiority, since he was only capable of living in extreme luxury and so was to some extent dependent on them.

He wasn't more than twenty-three when Thérèse Templeton-Lemonnier, the wife of a brother officer, fell in love with him, and it was on her account that he was obliged to resign his commission. She had been married very young to the dissolute heir to a wealthy peerage (she was about a year older than Morven) and was also in her own right a wealthy

woman. She looked much like Sargent's portrait of Madame Gautreau in the Tate. Tall, slender, fine-boned, she had a superb figure, masses of dark russet-red hair which she wore coiled on the nape of her neck, and thin, beautiful, blue-veined, predatory hands. This elegant female was a splendid rider to hounds. She was also unusually uninhibited and not merely for the relatively demure age in which she lived.

She and Morven fell deeply in love with one another, and he had but little difficulty in extricating her, not only from the arms of her husband, but also from the rather more tenacious ones of her father-in-law, Lord Thimblehurst, who was believed by those who were in a position to express an opinion to be the father of her second child.

Thérèse and Morven settled down together, as soon as he had resigned his commission, in an exquisite Queen Anne house in Wiltshire called Milbury Great Hall, installing in the dower-house Thérèse's aunt, Miss Herminia Lavenham, more familiarly known as 'Auntie Lav', in the rôle of chaperone. In this capacity Miss Herminia, though not far off fifty, could hardly be viewed as an unqualified success, for barely had she settled in than she fell in love with the third gardener, a handsome stripling of twenty-one, whom she promptly proceeded to seduce. Despite her rather youthful appearance there was no doubt that 'Auntie Lav' had reached the age of indiscretion when it became apparent to all and sundry that she was going to have a baby. Far from feeling the slightest embarrassment at her condition, she was openly enchanted; and it was left to Morven and Thérèse to experience novel feelings of awkwardness and affronted propriety.

The fashions of the day were tight-fitting, and Miss Herminia had her dresses more closely moulded to her figure than ever and abandoned her stays, walking about the countryside with a beatific smile on her face, her shoul-

ders thrust back as far as they would go and her fine eyes downcast on the undulating Botticellian line of her abdomen.

Whenever she met an infant in a pram or a go-cart, she would immediately present it with half a crown and address a pleasant little speech of congratulation to its nurse or parents; this habit won her considerable popularity but did not save her from censure. To expectant mothers she would give a genial dig in the ribs, exclaiming:

'That's right, my gel! Breed, breed! That's the spirit! That's the way I like to see 'em!'

After a short while her excursions took on the nature of a royal progress: wherever she went she was overtaken by relays of grinning fathers and smiling mothers, both married and unmarried, but all anxious to receive 'Auntie Lav's' bounty for their offspring.

When her time approached she was in an ecstasy, almost, of pride. The dower-house commanded the village, and since all Thérèse's and her lover's efforts to curb the ebullience of their relative were vain, they decided that it would be advisable to be present at the event, in the faint hope of checking any further displays of high spirits or exhibitionism.

A noted figure in the hunting-field, Miss Herminia had developed in the course of years a voice like a fog-horn. Towards midnight, despite all the efforts of the young pair to silence her, in spite of the adjurations of the doctor not to excite herself unnecessarily, and despite the horrified expression of the local midwife, a powerful contralto rent the night air:

'I'm goin' to have a dear little *Babbah*!'

There was a salvo of cheers from the expectant villagers assembled outside, and from an upstairs window of the dower-house the information was forcefully reiterated several times. Then there was a long-drawn-out, tense pause, followed by:

'I'm *havin'* a dear little Babbah!'

There was a storm of applause and cheering, even heartier than before, followed by a longer and even more taut period of waiting. The tension mounted steadily. Bets were exchanged in low voices, and punters forgot to suck at their clay pipes, while throughout the village other Babbahs howled, deserted in their cribs in unpeopled cottages. Then suddenly a mighty shout broke on straining ears:

'I've *had* a dear little Babbah!'

The applause broke out with fresh vigour, and before long the midwife appeared reluctantly in the window, holding up a small, untidy bundle, which she viewed with evident disfavour. A stony, impersonal, disassociative look in her eyes, and the rigidity of her gesture, implied that she considered herself the innocent sponsor for the entry into this world of a small Beelzebub.

'A male infant,' she announced frostily and slammed down the blind.

There was some more cheering, then winnings and losings over the child's sex changed hands, and the proud father was hauled off to 'The Goat and Sextant'.

Miss Herminia made a rapid recovery, as might have been expected; but the possession of a Babbah of her very own caused her interest in those of others suddenly to slump. The village had been all agog, awaiting her first public appearance and in high hopes of renewed largesse. It was consequently all set to give her a rousing welcome, but when her first Sunday stroll down the village-street didn't produce the much-expected bounty, public opinion turned promptly. All the habitual begetters and bearers of bastards discovered long-dormant consciences and turned up their noses in the air, while those who had a solid reputation for respectability became positively hostile.

Miss Herminia was as obstinate as they come, and the determination of a woman who had more than once put the fear of God into the Masters of the Quorn and the Pytchley

was something to be reckoned with. Once the roughs had turned nasty no power on earth would induce her to placate them; if some village lout shouted out abuse after her in the country lanes, she would wheel right about and, turning on him, would give him a good deal better than he had dealt out, and in his own vernacular too. At last, worried about her rapidly-growing unpopularity, Thérèse and Morven began to distribute money on the sly. They could well afford it, and in time peace reigned once more — a fact which Miss Herminia attributed solely to her own strength of mind and character.

After a while my step-uncle-to-be, George Mountfaucon, came to live with them, and a curious *ménage à trois* started. Whenever one of the brothers went away on a visit he was at once replaced *pro tem* in the affections of Thérèse by the other, and since she never permitted both to go away at the same time she was always sure of an understudy. On one occasion Mrs. Mountfaucon, to give her the name which she had adopted for convenience, had been staying with her father-in-law, Lord Thimblehurst, and on her return home had spent considerable periods alone with one or other of the brothers; she was enceinte, but by whom she had really no idea. None of the three men seemed very concerned and none was able to help her definitely establish the authorship — not that she herself felt a profound interest in the matter. She was an athletic woman, and as far as anyone did in those days, played a fast game of tennis. During pregnancy, her excellent health suffered not at all; she was able to live her life just as usual; the baby was born somewhat prematurely and unexpectedly on the tennis court, after an exceptionally hot set with Morven, George and the vicar of Milbury who must, one imagines, have been slightly taken aback. Morven acted with efficiency and dispatch as the accoucheur, and the baby was a boy. As Thérèse and her husband had never been divorced, and as her two other

children were girls, this boy was the heir to the Thimblehurst title.

Thérèse decided that they had better go away for a few months, that a holiday would be beneficial to them both, so they went off to Christchurch, staying in a hotel close to the old bridge and giving on to the river. Staying there also was a young woman of their acquaintance, a Miss Valentia Cavendish-Vaughan. Now Christchurch, even in those days, was quite a favourite holiday-resort, and the river-bathing, though dangerous in places owing to deep beds of weed and sedge in which one might easily entangle oneself and drown, was delightful. Miss Cavendish-Vaughan was a lively and pretty girl of about twenty-three, a great 'catch' and conscious of her rank and wealth. In all ways but one her behaviour had the modesty, the conventional decorum, that the age demanded, but this one exception was Firbankian in its capriciousness. What scandalized the little Hampshire town, as well as Morven and Thérèse — who were, in spite of, or rather because of their own equivocal position, arch-sticklers for certain outward forms of propriety — was Miss Valentia's habit of bathing at ten in the morning and at five in the evening from the hotel grounds, in full view of the bridge, stark-naked.

At a time when women splashed and frivolled decorously in the shallows, clad in yards of serge and braiding, this young woman could swim like Johnny Weissmuller and dive like any champion. She was locally nicknamed the 'Naughty Naiad', and her exhibitions attracted crowds of spectators, mainly men, to the bridge and to the terrace of the hotel, much to the scandal and resentment of the older and feminine visitors and residents. Complaints were made to the police, who were nonplussed, hardly daring in those favoured days to make a protest of any sort to the bearer of such an august name.

Miss Cavendish-Vaughan stayed there for some three

weeks, bathing regularly every day and afterwards running up the hotel bathing-steps with no more regard for modesty than Botticelli's Venus — indeed, with a gesture the less — until the local magistrates, in despair and hag-ridden by their wives, got hold of one of Morven's uncles, who had long been resident in Hampshire and was a magistrate for that county, and persuaded him to argue with the obdurate nudist. A somewhat proper old gentleman, he reluctantly agreed to do so.

Arriving at the hotel, he was shown into the drawing-room, where he found Miss Valentia in conversation with her newly-made friend, Thérèse Mountfaucon. For a moment he was charmed by the appearance of the two pretty women, but when Miss Cavendish-Vaughan introduced him to her friend 'Mrs. Morven Mountfaucon' he very nearly had a fit. He knew of the existence of his nephew's smart mistress and had heard electrifying stories of her goings-on, but to find that she was openly going about under his own name in a county where he was a widely-known and a highly respected public figure, was more than he had bargained for, and he was as deeply shocked as was Miss Cavendish-Vaughan when, opening his mouth like a fish, swallowing hard, and forgetting the very existence of the Naughty Naiad, he gazed in horror at Thérèse and stammered:

'Am I given to understand, madam, that you have obtained a divorce, and that your union with my nephew is now a legalized one?'

Thérèse looked a trifle guilty, while the Naughty Naiad stared at her erstwhile friend in blank uncomprehending horror, a look which speedily changed to one of outrage, as the latter lady murmured blandly:

'My dear Colonel Mountfaucon, whatever you may understand, or whatever you may fail to, is a matter of total indifference to me.'

Colonel Mountfaucon's feelings on receiving this answer were nothing to those of Miss Cavendish-Vaughan: jumping to her feet, she shook the dust of corruption off her pouf and her polonaise, exclaiming as she glared at Thérèse:

'I have been *grossly* deceived by this *person*, Colonel Mountfaucon! She has *grossly* abused my friendship!'

'And that,' said this person, sweetly, 'is what is called the Naked Truth, my dear Colonel.'

Miss Valentia tugged at the bell-pull, inexpressibly shocked at having been spoken to by a woman not 'properly married', pulled it till a jangling carillon filled the whole hotel, her face scarlet with fury at the irregularity of the situation. She said to the waiter when he came in:

'Tell my maid to pack my things immediately, and have my bill made up. I am leaving at once. I cannot stay in a hotel which harbours women who are living with men who are not their husbands!'

However, if the Naughty Naiad had finished with Thérèse, Thérèse had not finished with her. The waiter told the boots that she was leaving, and the boots told the porter, and the porter told the cabman, who told half the male inhabitants of the tiny town. As soon as Miss Cavendish-Vaughan arrived at the station, she made the unwelcome discovery that half the masculine inhabitants had come too, to give her a hearty send-off, and one which she would have gladly dispensed with. The train steamed in to the accompaniment of rustic cheers, to shouts of: 'Come back next summer, Miss!' 'Don't spend too much on yer clothes!' 'Does yer ma know you're out?' And an amateur penny-whistle duet struck up:

> 'Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh! Anna-Maria Jones!
> Queen of the tambourine, the cymbal, and —
> The Bones!'

Pink with confusion and annoyance, the Naughty Naiad

hastily drew the blinds of her reserved first class compartment, but unluckily for her the train was a slow one and in no hurry to leave the little town. A few moments after she had secluded herself, Thérèse arrived on the platform in great haste, somewhat out of breath and carrying a parcel under her arm.

'Where,' she asked of a lounging yokel, 'where is Miss Cavendish-Vaughan?'

'In there, mum.' And with a grin he indicated the carriage in which Miss Cavendish-Vaughan sat in what she hoped was dignified purdah. Thérèse ran to the carriage-door and threw it open, the onlookers following her like a swarm of bees. Tearing the wrapping off her bundle, she revealed its contents — a smart bathing-dress of scarlet serge, lavishly embroidered with white braid, and with a long pair of bloomers which reached well below the knees. Waving her trophy like a red flag in front of the Naiad's nose, she called out in a clear, sweet voice:

'A present from Christchurch, dear Miss Vaughan!'

The delighted crowd guffawed its pleasure, as the indignant recipient banged the door to. Thérèse returned to the hotel in a state of high satisfaction, doubtless feeling that she had at last struck a powerful blow in defence of public decorum. So far as is known, it was the only occasion on which she ever did so....

She and Morven lived together in various places for about seventeen years until one fine day about the year 1900, when she made the acquaintance of a Miss Charley Wildenstein-Goertz. The two women were soon inseparable, and one day at breakfast Thérèse remarked to Morven:

'The New Woman has come into my life, dear boy.'

If Morven had profited by the benefits of a classical education, he might have remarked that the New Woman, at least in Miss Wildenstein-Goertz's sense of the phrase, was not quite so new as she appeared. In any case, a few

days later, Thérèse Templeton-Lemonnier had left him for ever and had gone to live with her new friend at the Old Well (one assumes of loneliness) near Pangbourne. He was never to see her again, though for a while they carried on a desultory correspondence.

I must now go forward in time for a few years, in order to take farewell of Mrs. Templeton-Lemonnier for ever. Some eight or nine years later my mother married Morven Mountfaucon, but a few weeks before the wedding was due to take place, she was amazed to receive a very cordial invitation from Mrs. Templeton-Lemonnier (whom she had never met) asking her to spend her honeymoon with Morven at Thérèse's château near Eze. Mother was flabbergasted at what she considered, very naturally, impudence, but surprise gradually gave way to a feeling of amusement. To-day such impudence would be remarkable: in 1908 it was utterly unheard of. At first she felt inclined to throw the letter unanswered on the fire, but after a little reflection her demon of malice and mockery asserted itself, and she determined to give Mrs. Templeton-Lemonnier just as good as she had received from her. Without saying a word to anyone she answered it. She was normally, in so far as she knew how to be, a very truthful woman, and any lie weighed heavily on her conscience; in fact, it was necessary for her to produce a more than average piece of feminine casuistry before she could feel comfortably assured that she had not told a lie; but on this occasion she threw conscience and scruples to the winds.

With satanic ingenuity she wrote a perfectly charming letter in reply to Thérèse, thanking her for her invitation and saying how much she had always wished to see the Côte d'Azur, but deeply regretting that she had already accepted an invitation from Elspeth Belsay to spend the honeymoon at the latter's place in Wiltshire. I must explain here that Lady Belsay was a beauty much in vogue at that

time and a particular enemy of Thérèse's and that it was common property that Morven, up to the previous two years, had been her lover for some considerable time. Mother's story was, needless to say, an invention – though Lady Belsay would, like Thérèse, have been quite capable of doing so – and in her letter she further regretted that it was, alas, impossible to fit in all the rest of Morven's old friends – even, she deplored, the oldest. That ended *her* correspondence with Thérèse for good, but Thérèse immediately wrote an indignant letter to Morven, in which she said, among other things:

'I should of course never have dreamed of inviting you if I had realized the kind of woman you are about to marry. I thought when I wrote it that it might rather amuse me to get you away from her while you were still on your honeymoon, but her malicious and spiteful letter proves to me quite conclusively that she is not the kind of woman with whom I should care to have any dealings *whatever*.'

This surprisingly candid letter is still a treasured family archive.

A few months after her ill-omened honeymoon, Mother was returning home to Marsh from London by train. She had that afternoon been to a party and by a stroke of luck had all her best clothes on and was looking very much *en beauté*. She got into an empty carriage and, just as the train was about to steam out, there stepped into it a handsome woman, tall, exquisitely built and with dark-red hair under her severe mannish hat. Now mother had never seen a picture of Mrs. Templeton-Lemonnier and there is no reason to suppose that the latter had ever seen one of Mother, but by some curious flair each realized simultaneously who the other was. There was a long silence which Thérèse was the first to break.

'And so you're Morven's wife?' she asked.

'Well, I certainly hope so,' said Mother with a light little

laugh. There was a faint diminution of cordiality in Thérèse's smile.

'Oh, you need have no fears on *my* account, I assure you.'

Mother was still smiling. 'Oh, no; I haven't.'

Thérèse frowned a little at this. 'Of course, I could very easily get him back, if I were to *try*.'

'Oh, I've always been a *firm* believer in *effort*,' Mother replied. At this the conversation languished a little.

Between ourselves, poor Mother was praying to God that Thérèse would make the effort and prove successful at it, for having discovered that she had got herself married to a charming but quite irreclaimable dipsomaniac, she would have been thankful to anyone who would have taken him off her hands; unluckily for her, however, Morven was in love with her. She would not at all have minded Thérèse's success, but would have gone to the stake rather than let her know it. Mother was an incorrigible romantic by nature in almost every respect, but her romanticism was lightly tempered by experience and a little cynicism, and there was always a point where it stopped dead, like water when a tap is turned off — in fact, sturdy common-sense Northumbrian blood did not flow in her veins for nothing. She hadn't the slightest intention of betraying her real feelings to her husband's ex-mistress, any more than she had of being worsted by her in argument. Thérèse looked at her cynically.

'I only hope you're *happy*.'

Mother gave her a radiant smile, reflecting comfortably that if she, Thérèse, did not by this time know her, Mother, then it was high time that she did.

'That's very sweet and very generous of you; yes, we're divinely happy. You see, happy people are like happy nations; they have no history — and no *past*. . . .'

Mrs. Templeton-Lemonnier settled her high, mannish stock with a jerk and said no more. Mother's retort might

perhaps have been better, but any weakness that it may have had was luckily concealed by the extreme sensitiveness of Thérèse to her past – a change of heart that so often afflicts Bohemians with advancing years.[1]

Thérèse had one last shot.

'I suppose you've found out that Morven *drinks*?'

Mother looked at her confidentially. 'But, dear Mrs. Templeton-Lemonnier,' she murmured, '*so do I.* Like a *fish*!'

It was at this point that their conversation reached a permanent deadlock. Mother gave a yet more dashing tilt to her Zyrot hat and silently entreated her Creator to forgive her lie – a precaution which she never overlooked on the rare occasions when she told one. Her *vis-à-vis* brushed some invisible dust off her mannish suit. At that moment – they were nearing Reading – the train gave a violent lurch and down from the rack fell a parcel of Thérèse's; as it landed on the floor, it came apart and revealed surprisingly nothing but a builder's trowel. It was duly repacked, the train drew up at Mrs. Lemonnier's station, and with a frosty word of adieu she stepped out of Mother's life for good.

When Mother reached home she recounted her adventure to her husband in detail, omitting only her final crack about herself and Thérèse's remark which had inspired it.

'But what on earth was she doing with the builder's trowel?' he asked in a puzzled voice.

'Ah,' said Mother, with faint malice and mischief in her voice, 'I expect that she and Miss Wildenstein-Goertz were going to use it to build the New Gomorrah in England's green and pleasant land.'

[1] By way of illustration: a few years ago an old lady living on the Riviera complained to the police of a man whom she used to see — through a powerful telescope — bathing naked in the early morning, a condition highly offensive to the morals of an elderly Catholic gentlewoman. The case came into court, but collapsed amid the mocking laughter of the president and public alike, when the old lady admitted reluctantly that her professional name had once been Caroline Otéro!

IX

THE BLACK WIDOW

It was about the year 1930 when it at last seemed sure that my step-aunt Emmeline, despite the new lease of life which a certain tragic event had given her (as I shall relate in due course), had at last decided to hand in her checks, a procedure which her relatives, friends and servants were unanimous in thinking that she had indecently postponed.

The Mountfaucon men bloomed at the expense of their sisters with that kind of sudden, illusory splendour which sometimes marks the end of a line, in an Indian summer of physical nobility; it was the women, most of them pallid, with thin brittle bones and heavy charged features, already in youth stamped by oppression and hopelessness, who gave the true answer to what the family destiny was to be. And now the last sister was dying.

I shall try to retrace Emmeline's history, which is in a way linked up with the Mountfaucons' past in Aneleuthera, that island where their long sojourn had left no trace. I suppose they may have had their reasons for not wishing to leave behind too many clues to a remote ancestry, since at home they were rapidly rising to the full zenith of their glory. But Time, or a hereditary strain, works surely and inevitably, and Aunt Emmeline was the spitting image of old Judge James Mountfaucon, the mulatto—so much so that, had she ever wished to travel in the Southern States she'd certainly have been Jim-Crowed everywhere, in hotels, street-cars, restaurants and trains.

As a younger woman she was a small swart creature with kinky hair, a yellow skin and very big, almost maroon-coloured eyes, a little bridgeless nose with very broad, cavernous nostrils, high cheek-bones, a water-melon mouth lined with big flashing teeth, and a flaccid and pendulous

lower lip. As a child, one of my secret longings was to get her alone in an unguarded moment and give this appendage a good tug in order to see how far I could pull it down; I felt sure that it could be stretched below her chin: this ambition I never realized. Her eyes were amazing; so brilliant that they seemed to be lacquered, they had, like Aunty Dossy's, something of the cynical, sexy stare of a goat and bulged out of her yellow face as though some inner pressure were forcing them forth. In old age she became more Negroid than ever, with her head of snowy wool and her liver-coloured blubber-lips. With a square of chequered cotton knotted round her head, she would have passed anywhere in Aneleuthera for an old obeah-woman. But had she been born in a more emancipated age and decided early in life to go to a good dressmaker and to the bad, she might have become one of those freakish minor *poules-de-luxe* of Paris in the 'nineties – a lesser Polaire, whom she somewhat resembled. There was something faintly *fin-de-siècle* about her exotic plainness, and I think she might have just got away with such a career: I am certain that it would have been a career greatly to her liking, once she had overcome her primary inhibitions.

At the age of twenty-eight she fell violently in love with the Reverend Septimus Hotblack, the curate at Saint Alphege's in Langholme. Mr. Hotblack stood five-foot one in his stockinged feet; he was ugly, stone blind, and suffered from Bright's disease, hernia and follicular hepatitis. Aunt Emmeline was determined at all costs to get married and Mr. Hotblack had for years been, so to speak, on the look-out for a wife with some money; he was forty-three. As he was blind, she used to go and read to him – ostensibly Paley's *Evidences*, but, on the strict Q.T., *Cometh Up Like a Flower*. It was in Chapter Four that he proposed and in Chapter Four that he was accepted.

When Mr. and Mrs. Mountfaucon heard of it they nearly

had a fit, vetoing such a union on the grounds that Mr. Hotblack was 'not a gentleman, dear'. Aunt Emmeline fainted, or appeared to. She kept to her bed for a couple of days, refusing all nourishment, and then tottered downstairs with kidney-coloured pouches under her eyes. She did not again refer to Mr. Hotblack, nor, indeed, speak at all. Normally a heavy Victorian feeder, she now merely toyed, like Amina, with a grain of rice, with the result that her cheeks soon fell in, her breasts fell down, her buttocks sagged and she gave at the knees at every step like a spavined horse. The doctors defined her condition as a 'decline', and this grew by degrees into one of those minor but prized family-possessions which were so common in those days, so that Constantia was able to say to some visiting bishop or field-marshal:

'*Poor* Emmeline! Of course she's wonderfully *plucky*, but just the same, I couldn't help noticing how much *weaker* she seemed this morning.'

The situation was saved for her by Honoria Filey, a fantastic relation of Mrs. Mountfaucon's, who remarked brusquely:

'My good Constantia, the girl's dying because you won't let her marry her curate. And you've already lost Sophy, Lettice, Alexandra and Kate!'

They gave in with the worst possible grace. In no time Aunt Emmeline recovered her appetite and grew perfectly well again, but only Lady Filey attended the wedding. It was not until after the death of Mr. Hotblack that the Mountfaucons had any further communication with their daughter: an omission which, later, they were never allowed to forget.

However, in the end it was they and not Aunt Emmeline who took the marriage lying down, for Mr. Hotblack never gave her that opportunity. He had partly married in order to secure an unpaid sick-nurse and was, in fact, barely alive

when his wife got him home after the ceremony and, in that — for her — very uninteresting condition, he lingered on for nearly a year. Young Mrs. Hotblack nursed him through his multiplicity of ailments with a determined, dogged devotion which would have been the death of many a stronger man; it may have been no honeymoon for her, but she saw to it that it was no picnic for Uncle Septimus, either.

A virgin she might regrettably remain — no moral stigma attached itself to that condition in those days — a widow she most undoubtedly was. If she'd dived headlong into the sea of matrimony, she had unquestionably come up covered with weeds; her clothes were, for the remainder of her long life, blacker than Eblis.

It was by a comically ironic chance that Alicia Casterby, the worldly, elegant sister of Honoria Filey, owned the largest deposits of Whitby jet in the country, an ornament still in vogue among perpetual mourners. Alicia would have cut her throat rather than be seen wearing any of it herself, but she was able to shower a black harvest of it on her cousin, who clutched at any symbol of grief or manner of funereal self-expression.

Septimus's funeral was in the ornate mid-Victorian manner. On the hearse inky piccaninnies scrollopped glumly over sundered Corinthian columns; staring and tumescent, they wore tears of black plaster gummed to their inflated cheeks, and their ebony rumps and thighs were high-lit by falling rain. Tufts of greenish-black ostrich-feathers drooped despondently like witches' millinery at the four corners, while a number of mutes, top-hatted, rheumy-eyed, reeking of stale bitter and cheap black dye, tottered wheezily after it on foot. But the widow out-mourned them all. It was her supreme hour of triumph, the vindication of her womanhood. Done up in fluted, ruched and gathered black, like a black-frilled Bradenham ham, she was a funeral in herself.

With Uncle Septimus safe in his grave (*not* the Mountfaucon vault) she was left free to construct her myth, in which she and her late husband played the parts of a Victorian Héloise and Abélard. She feathered her nest with such stuff as dreams are made of, and people who were hardly even aware of his existence during his lifetime were now seldom in a position to forget him. For two pins she would have had him stuffed, labelled and on permanent exhibition – much as the Duchess of Marlborough kept in her saloon an effigy of Congreve.

Her grief was on permanent exhibition, but despite such an assumption of sorrow's trappings, one would have been hard put to it, in the case of so theatrical a woman as Aunt Emmeline, to separate the genuine from the conventional emotion. To dismiss her wretchedness as unreal would be false; to accept it at its face-value would be to ignore the considerable and lasting happiness which it brought her. And yet, nothing so levels out pain as a capacity for effective self-dramatization; and mere repetition of grief may gradually blend with, and even become, ultimately, happiness itself.

To whom, queried Lady Blessington, can one endure to show that one suffers? To everybody, would have seemed to Aunt Emmeline the natural answer. Fashion, already a trifle *démodé*, sanctioned her addiction to her grief; and, as Queen Victoria herself had proved, that particular drug could be absorbed in colossal doses without apparent ill-effects. Aunt Emmeline lived in a state of constant but highly respectable intoxication and, indeed, owed something of gratitude to her stimulant since, without it, she was nothing and with it a definite household personality.

Anyhow, she'd pulled a fast one over her unmarried sisters.

To the haughty Mountfaucons the living Septimus had been nothing more than a vulgar nonentity, a social skeleton

at the upper-class feast, to be, if possible, endured. His death relieved them, but they very soon discovered that such relief was premature. If he had been a bore when alive, they found that they had entirely under-rated his posthumous nuisance-value. Shadows stirred in the house of death, and Septimus, deceased, was the accompaniment on slightly muted strings to Emmeline's non-stop solo.

The brown Lincrusta walls broke out into an eruption of enlarged photographs of his tomb (rose-pink Gothic with gilt lettering and a crenellated kerb with a fancy chain swinging over it) mistily coloured, in ebony Oxford frames, while an alcove all plush-curtained in Emmeline's bedroom — '*in quelle trine morbide, nel' alcova dorata*' — became a permanent shrine devoted to the cult of the defunct. She had wished, on her return to the family nest, to bring all Septimus's belongings with her, and even his wardrobe in its entirety, but here the family jibbed. A modest but representative selection of Septimus was all that they would stand for.

In the alcove a massive chest of drawers did as a kind of altar, on which, against the background of an illuminated address from the members of his first parish, reposed a variety of objects. Among them was a black straw boater, a spectacle-case in olive-wood from the Mount of Olives and hand-painted with a flight of swifts; a gold watch and Albert, suitably inscribed; a copy, in an embroidered linen dust-cover, of *Abba Mikhaili, an Ethiopian Monk who found Christ in Addis Ababa*; a stole, tastefully worked with passion-flowers and Maltese crosses; a copy of the sayings of Marcus Aurelius in limp leather; a chased tea-pot in Britannia-metal, on the lid of which reposed a dove in full flight with an olive-branch in its beak and one wing missing; a coloured plaster statuette of Saint John of the Cross; and a copy of Thomas-à-Kempis in leatherette.

The major bone of contention was a large oil-painting of

Septimus, which no one but Emmeline wished to house. She demanded a place of honour for it among the more illustrious ancestors, all of whom had, alas, been painted by indifferent artists of their day. Finally, after a prolonged family row, conducted in tones of the greatest courtesy and with the greatest possible ferocity, it was agreed to hang his picture (always referred to with brutal frankness by the family as his 'likeness') in the morning-room. This gave rise to a pun; ever afterwards the room in question was referred to by her brothers as the 'Mourning-Room'. Every day for years she sat there a while, her eyes fixed on her late husband, an ivory-backed prayer-book clasped in her tapering negroid fingers, in an attitude of immeasurable pietism. But something was wrong; do what she might, vitality still seemed to flow from her in great waves. Septimus had died during one of those seasons when Paris firmly puts every woman into black and the whole world seems mourning (as well it may); and seated there with her gaze fixed on infinity, she seemed not so much woman waiting for her angel lover, as the coloured *numéro* in a French agapemone on the look-out for a new client. And that, maybe, was what she hoped for.

Yet, because the emotion she had adopted was a creditable one, the female section of the family, at least, appeared to fall for it, hook, line and sinker. The sprightlier males were usually unprintable both about it and its cause. There was, as for most of us, little for it but sublimation, only it wasn't called that in those days, and Aunt Emmeline would have been less happy if it had been. As she grew older, she took more and more to good works and in middle-age nursed Alicia Casterby through many a long illness. She was an active supporter of the local Girls' Friendly Society, and many a fallen maiden was to wish that she had fallen a bit further before she met Mrs. Hotblack, for the latter saw to it that no girl ever got the chance again. As the years

passed, her relatives gradually died off and power flowed into her receptive hands in the shape of substantial legacies. She had always delighted in the company of men and, as she grew older, her gifts to various missionary societies were large enough to assure her some very welcome attentions from a number of desirable clergymen. Her life, on the whole, was a very happy one; later on we shall meet her in old age. Apart from the widowed Constantia, she was by far the most arresting inmate of Holderfield. She owed a great deal to her one-time protectress, Lady Filey, and it is to that remarkable lady that we shall now pay our respects.

HONORIA FILEY

MORVEN had a remarkable cousin, of whom his first memories dated back to the beginning of the 'seventies, when she returned to England shortly after the siege of Paris, in which she had undergone considerable privations. To these her response had been of a totally unexpected nature, even in a nature where only the unexpected was to be looked for.

Honoria Filey lived in Yorkshire. She had married at seventeen and had always ruled her husband, Sir Chalmers, with a rod of iron. Very devout, she was also very parsimonious and very fond of music: indeed, she greatly fancied herself as a musician. She held the theory that gas-lighting, already more than sixty years old, was an impious innovation of Satan and that the Creator would not have permitted candles to have been invented with a view to their being superseded by oil-lamps or by gas. So strongly did she feel on this matter that her death (she was a choleric woman) was caused by a stroke some twenty years later, brought

about by a visit to an exhibition that displayed the latest methods of electric lighting for the home. She had only gone there with a view to registering a forcible protest against the impropriety of this immodest new illuminant, and when she had, with the aid of her umbrella, broken some dozen or more electric lamps, completely terrorizing a gentlemanly salesman, she collapsed on the floor and was unable to move. Morven always declared that her last words were: 'Light! Less light!' And there she died, in a blaze of electric light.

All her life she had saved as much as possible on lighting, despite her wealth, and she begrudged with special bitterness the two candles which in their gilt sconces lit up the music on her Collard and Collard drawing-room grand. In order the better to economize, she invented a contraption which consisted of a round tarpaulin cap that fitted her head like a skull-cap, or perhaps rather more like an old-fashioned bathing-cap, and on to this stout material was stuck a cheap enamel candle-stick with a round rimmed tray in which to catch the grease. Holes had been punched all the way round the rim and through these the candle-stick was lashed with stout cobbler's thread to the cap; an inverted wide cone of stiff brown paper was fixed to the base of the candle, with a view to its catching the flying wax – which, of course, it failed to do.

With this device placed firmly on her head, Honoria Filey would park herself at the piano and would thump her way through the Moonlight Sonata or Czerny's Exercises with considerable bravura, the candle guttering wildly on her head and the wax flying in all directions. The rest of the room would be in darkness, and the shaking candle, tossed about like a plume on her head, would cast extravagant, gesticulating shadows on to the lofty walls, as in the obscurity her friends and relations underwent agonies in their attempts to restrain their laughter.

The exact opposite of her stylish and handsome sisters, she

was a plain and dowdy woman. Not that she was at all indifferent to dress; on the contrary, she too had a passion for it, but bitterly begrudged any money that she was forced to spend on it, and would conduct by post an elaborate bargaining campaign with Lady Casterby for any of the latter's costly Paris dresses which took her fancy, but as to whether they were those of the previous year or models of fifteen or twenty years back she was quite indifferent. Actually, she seldom secured them, for thirty shillings was her top price for a gown which had cost sixty guineas. When she was successful, this aroused the fury of her sister's French maid, who ordinarily secured all her mistress's frocks gratis; so that when Lady Casterby did agree to part with an old garment, it would frequently arrive at Lower Tittenbury Hall, the seat of the Fileys, with every inch of trimming and ornament ripped off it by the indignant Frenchwoman. On such occasions, after writing a nasty letter to her innocent sister, Honoria Filey would set to work to re-trim it. Her ideas had the invention and fantasy of a Schiaparelli.

In those days silks and satins lasted a lifetime, but bonnets and hats did not. Cousin Honoria subscribed to the *Gentlewoman's Gazette* and *The Young Englishwoman*, and would herself copy their latest millinery with considerable skill, but invariably in *brown paper*! Her paper hats she would sometimes trim in an orthodox manner with satin bows, with flowers, scraps of priceless old lace, with paradise plumes or humming birds or ostrich feathers, but at other times she would use, as might Mme Dali, any object which came to hand and which caught her fancy, such as pieces of moss or lichen, sprays of old-man's beard, or arbutus-berries which would fall off their stems with a plop during the sermon; or the brightly-coloured shell of a smallish crab which brought the flies buzzing round her; and on one occasion even a dead bird which she had picked up in the woods and which brought more than flies in its train.

HONORIA FILEY

In the summer of 1867 or 1869, I forget which, there was a peculiarly crazy fashion. Bonnets and veils were covered with every kind of beetle; that at least was the beginning of this mode, but it soon extended itself from rose-beetles with their bronze and poison-green carapaces to stag beetles. The fashion became yet odder. Parasols were liberally sprinkled with ticks, with grasshoppers, with wood lice; veils were sown with earwigs, with cockchafers – always referred to by my Underhay grandmother in presumably Salopian dialect as 'cockhornibugs' – and with hornets; tulle scarves and veilings were sprinkled with strass and diamanté and even, mixed with these, highly realistic artificial bed-bugs.[1] The fashion spread a little from France to England, but it never really caught on here, though, as may be imagined, Honoria Filey seized hold of it with eager alacrity; for indeed had she not thought of similar adornments twenty years before?

One of nature's surrealists, she was not slow to rub the fact well in to her smarter women-friends, including her sister Alicia, as she busied herself with sewing a couple of praying mantises and a handful of bluebottles on to a yard and a half of *point de Venise*, which was to make the 'fall', the *suivez-moi, jeune homme*, on the bonnet which she would wear to Alicia's garden party later in the summer.

When she tired of her animal, vegetable or mineral millinery, she would go to a drawer in her wardrobe where

[1] An account of this strange fashion can be found in *The Young Englishwoman*, in an early summer number in the late 'sixties, the use of artificial bed-bugs being specially mentioned – in, it must be added, a tone of censure. It was about this time that the pince-nez (that, to us, governessy symbol of rectitude) was invented; generally octagonal in shape and fitted with coloured lenses, it became a rage in Paris and most particularly with the *grandes cocottes*, Cora Pearl, La Paiva, Marguérite Bellanger and so on. It is seldom that an object of sheer fashion whose function is simply one of sexual attraction descends the scale, in time completely reversing its original character. My Mother tells me of a fashion much in vogue in the early 'eighties, the wearing of scrupulously accurate artificial flies in the ears! At the same time coloured pince-nez were fashionably revived for a season.

she kept folded carefully away all last year's paper hats from the family crackers, and would sally forth to Matins, ivory-backed prayer book in hand, and usually clad in an immense purple or black moiré crinoline, even as late as the end of the 'seventies, when this elegant garment had been out of date for a decade – a dress which was, in itself, sobriety personified, but which, when crowned with an emerald-green dunce's cap or a puce-coloured Admiral's hat decorated with gold paper lace, assumed a curiously raffish and disreputable appearance. At Christmas time she would bargain ferociously either with some member of the family or with one of the servants who had drawn a cracker creation in which she fancied herself; in a firm voice she would address the kitchen maid or the third housemaid:

'Mary Ann, that cap will look better on *me* than on you.'

And then, taking twopence from her reticule, she would give it to the maid, as the latter handed over the coveted frippery, with a quite serious little homily.

'It does not become *any* of us to dress *above* our station.'

She had never in all her life lost so much as a sixpence, but nevertheless lived in hourly dread of being ruined in some bank crash and, accordingly, kept accounts of varying magnitude with about three-quarters of the banks in the country, besides carrying a very large sum about with her wherever she went, on her person. The rustle of bundles of banknotes as she walked passed relatively unperceived, for she openly admitted to lining her stays with wads of newspaper, since she was too cautious ever to buy a new pair, and the whalebones in the much-mended pair that she had worn for twenty years stuck into her ribs and breasts unless suitably padded. The inside of her voluminous petticoat was hung with small stout silk bags of different colours; blue for the five pound notes, orange for the ten pound ones, violet for twenty pounders, crimson for fifties and green for the hundreds. Built into the wall of her bedroom was a large,

old-fashioned Chubb safe and into this every night on retiring she would lock her petticoat.

During the siege of Paris she had grown accustomed to the elephant steaks and the ragoûts of rat that formed a staple diet for those who could afford them. As a matter of fact, she was just sane enough to appreciate good food, but on her return from France her mania for economy asserted itself more forcibly than ever and she demanded of her excellent but insular British cook a number of dishes which caused that lady to throw up her hands in horror. Bouillons of garden snails and of the little yellow ones that the Romans had, she alleged, introduced into Britain; *râbles*, even of ferret, a flesh-eating animal nearly all skin and bone; and fricassées of ordinary frogs which bore but the faintest resemblance to their French cousins, were too much for the cook. She gave notice; but her employer replaced her by a French cook who was more accommodating. Lady Filey was extremely talkative and fond of company and liked to entertain a great deal, but she had enough sense not to spring any of her home-grown dishes *à la française* on her neighbours, contenting herself with trying them out on such of her poor relations as came to visit her. These unfortunates, with hopes of legacies or at least of substantial Christmas presents, submitted without a murmur (at least in public) to the most shocking attacks of colic and gripe, and one can only hope that in the end they were suitably rewarded.

But to the County she gave excellent dinners, marred only by the fact that no alcohol was served at them; this was replaced by carafes of Jordan Water, a beverage which she bought in bulk from an importer. This, after its long journey — always assuming that it *did* come from the Holy Land — and by the time that it was boiled was indescribably nasty. But Honoria could drink it down in vast quantities with apparent relish, imagining, one supposes, that she acquired automatic merit thereby, as the Tibetan mechanically

revolves his prayer-wheel inscribed with the Lotus-phrase.

She had always had an eye for a fine man, and to such a guest who pleased her eye and her fancy, she would remark in her gruff, amiable voice and quite without humour:

'Nothing like it, Colonel Willoughby, nothing like it! *Wonderful* properties! Keeps you as fit as a fiddle. Keeps you open and loose, open and loose; nothing like it!'

She guarded ferociously the virtue of her favourite pets — and one suspects that it must have been their moral intractability which caused her detestation of cats. When a much-spoiled bitch was on heat, the kennel-maid, acting on her employer's instructions, would thrust the animal into a pair of stout canvas knickers which fastened with a light metal belt, which the dog's admirers were only (and seldom) able to tear off after a prolonged struggle which somewhat exhausted their *élan*. When in the course of nature perseverance sometimes triumphed and a bitch became pregnant there would be a terrific row with the kennel-maid. It usually ended with Honoria roaring out:

'*My* bitches are *all* little ladies! Be good enough to remember that in future, *if* you please! I won't *tolerate* the morals of the barnyard at Tittenbury!'

XI

A BICYCLE MADE FOR TWO

ONCE at Holderfield, when Morven was still a boy, he was awakened in the night by a sudden loud noise. Suspecting the presence of a burglar, he seized a poker and rushed into his parents' bedroom, whence the sound had seemed to proceed. There was no burglar, and his irruption could not have been more untimely.

Nine months later, Aunt Chrissie, a three-and-three-quarter pound baby, was born. She continued to be very small for her age, and in later years Morven used to attribute this to his ill-timed zeal on the night of her begetting.

Aunt Chrissie was not a clever woman, but cleverness was not a typical quality of her family. True, her brothers, or some of them, had boundless vivacity, great charm, a quickness of tongue that was closer to humour than to wit, and a natural capacity for living which, somehow, became deflected and warped – except in the case of Uncle Edgar, who remained jovial and mocking. But these qualities were in no way shared by the sisters, unless – if Mother, that observant woman, was right, and she usually was – to some extent by Christine. Christine was not obviously 'bright'; indeed, she was what was then called a 'backward' child – to be which is sometimes a voucher for later brilliance.

When Mother first met Aunt Chrissie, she assumed that she was in fact a child and spoke to her as one, whereupon Chrissie's sister Theodosia, who was with her, said:

'I don't think you realize, Mrs. d'Arfey, that my sister, Christine, is grown up.'

There was nothing to show it. Was there a deliberate effort to keep the most personable female Mountfaucon off the marriage-market, in favour of her elder sisters?

In the vacuum that was Holderfield, Aunt Chrissie withdrew increasingly into an infantilist world – but one from which, as mother was to notice later on, she made some occasional very sharp sorties. Her only real friend was a battered wax doll named Lily Huskinson, an appalling commentary upon the ready-made emotional life which her spirit was so ruthlessly tailored to fit. With her feelings deprived of any outlet, her face prematurely grew lined, and this eventually necessitated her being dressed as a grown woman; that is to say, she was provided with ill-fitting dresses of black serge, worn with wide black petersham

belts, high collars and black ties. I don't for a moment believe that the provision of such clothes for her was in any way due to deliberate cruelty, since her sisters were no kinder to themselves; having grimly accepted frustration as their human lot they saw no reason to save another from their fate; and they had a genuine moral distaste for elegance. The poor creatures were victims of a puritanism which had gone bad, of unreconciled elements in their own blood, of a latent sensuality for ever straining in leash; and all this had led to a fear of life, a fear of life and of death, of love and hope and charity and desire, and of the lack of them. I dare say they would really have liked to be kind, at least to each other.

It was Mother, as I've said, who never accepted the general belief that Aunt Chrissie was . . . not quite . . . you know. She had observed sudden little flashes of malice, the odd little penetrating remarks that Chrissie sometimes made, remarks that were a little too penetrating for her relations to relish. For instance, Chrissie once said of her mother after family-prayers: 'It is the *idea* of being good that appeals so strongly to dear Mamma . . . but then, the *idea* is less of an effort, isn't it?' In some odd way her rather feeble voice and manner gave it an unexpected force and sharpness. At times she would suddenly make, apropos of nothing, some satirical little crack; but in the Mountfaucon home satire was little relished. Somewhere, heaven alone knows where, Chrissie must have heard the celebrated description of Queen Victoria by Sir Archibald Hamilton; for, one day, at one of those dire luncheons at Holderfield, that house which honoured the formidable Monarch almost like a divinity, she referred to her as 'the old carbuncle set in jet'. Mother happened to be present, and noticed that not an eyelash fluttered, not a flicker came into Constantia's hooded old forget-me-not blue eyes, not a word nor a glance was exchanged; but for a week Aunt Chrissie had all her meals

served alone in her room. Chrissie was intensely sociable and gregarious by nature.

Although life at Holderfield was in grey, in monochrome, was lived in a series of vacant yet pregnant undertones that were both oppressive and very faintly sinister, Christine never became acutely melancholic; she had a means of evasion which will presently appear. Up to the end of the eighteenth century, the Mountfaucons had moderately close connections with the Court; and it seems reasonable to suppose that they were fairly familiar with historical tradition, or, if it is preferred, with historic rumour. In any case, Constantia knew far, far more about life than she ever allowed to appear, since she had made it her rôle to appear to know nothing. Yet she had doubtless heard that at the Court of George the Third it was considered advisable to segregate the royal princesses from the royal dukes, in view of the latter's tendency to liquor. Given the disastrous predisposition of her sons to alcoholism, Constantia may well have thought similar precautions at Holderfield desirable. At any rate, from earliest childhood any signs of undue affection between any of the children were put down with an iron hand; in the nursery, words like 'darling' and 'dearest' were strictly taboo and their use was severely punished; the children were furthermore forbidden to kiss one another or to hold hands. By the time that Aunt Chrissie was born these rules had crystallized into an unbreakable convention, had been accepted as a natural law; but old Mrs. Mountfaucon may have recognized in her youngest child instability and a responsiveness to affection — (which perhaps amounted to the same thing in those grim, hawk-like old eyes that had seen so much) — qualities which might, in certain circumstances, expose her to grave harm. It was a dour remedy — if my interpretation is correct — for a not altogether likely evil; but Constantia, who had suffered, was not a woman to take chances.

During a bicycling craze some more liberal-minded relation had sent down to Holderfield a tandem-cycle as a present for Aunt Nettie, thinking it might be pleasant for her to ride it with her brother Vivian. However, the suggestion was flatly vetoed by Constantia in a curt note of thanks, and the machine rusted away in the stables — not without Chrissie's knowledge.

A few young men came to the house, not so much, alas, to see the Misses Mountfaucon as to visit their brothers. Chrissie had reached — she was just on twenty — an impressionable age which most girls attain at fourteen or fifteen. Charlie Graham and Walter Pakenham used to bicycle over together on a tandem to play snooker or bridge with Uncle Vivian; and Pakenham, an attractive and good-natured young man, seems to have paid her some very mild attentions. Though no more than mere courtesy demanded, they went to the poor girl's head like a coronet to that of a newly-made peeress. To the astonishment of everyone she suddenly asserted herself and demanded of her mother that she be given new clothes. No wish could possibly have been more natural. She asked for muslins and flowered crêpes-de-soie, for the high, turned-up hats with the upstanding ostrich feathers which were in vogue, in place of the untrimmed black straw hats like the vicar's that she and her sisters always wore.

Her mother put her firmly in her place. Chrissie's present clothes were not worn out; they were perfectly suitable; they were black, serviceable and practical, especially since it did not seem likely that God, in His infinite mercy, would leave poor Lettice on earth much longer. Dear Lettice . . . (I may add that the taboo imposed on all endearments was no longer operative when a son or daughter was actually dying, and lapsed automatically when either was dead.) She further added that, what with the War, it was no time for extravagance; but when at last Peace fluttered a feeble wing, there

was the War to be paid for, so *that* was no time for extravagance either.

Poor Aunt Chrissie had a good cry in bed with Lily Huskinson. Soon afterwards Walter Pakenham was killed in South Africa by a confused but pardonably exasperated Zulu, distracted by what had happened to his country. The deed was attributed by the elder Miss Mountfaucons not so much to natural vice as to nudity, and the bedrooms at Holderfield hummed like tops, as the Singer sewing machines turned out more white calico petticoats for Africa than ever, nineteen to the dozen. As Pakenham's image faded a little in the course of time, the symbol by which Aunt Chrissie perhaps remembered him — his tandem bicycle — may have become more vivid in her mind; there the two images may gradually have fused together, for after the war the mere sight of two men riding a tandem would throw her into a fit of nervous depression which would last for days; while the mere sight of a man and a woman together on such a machine was sufficient to provoke an immediate attack of hysteria. The old bicycle that had been given to Aunt Nettie years before lay mouldering and forgotten in a disused harness-room until it was one day rediscovered by Aunt Chrissie, who promptly collected some rags and polish and set to work to clean it. This singularly innocent occupation lasted for about a week, until her sister Theodosia caught her at it and told her that what she was doing was both morbid and unhealthy; and on the following day the cycle was sold as scrap to the rag-and-bone-man.

It was from that time that Christine began to age visibly and rapidly, though a few years later her peaky prettiness did flower again in a brief Indian summer, and painfully, when Uncle Edgar arrived at Holderfield for a Christmas visit, accompanied by his life-long friend, Frank Brinton. Many years before, in the early 'eighties, Uncle Edgar, the eldest of the family, had been sent out to Australia to learn

to manage the Mountfaucon property there. On a visit to Melbourne he had fallen in with Brinton, a penniless adventurer, whose family lived by picking up wealthy young Englishmen. Frank, his hold once established, never let go, and, after Uncle Edgar had stayed just long enough in the Antipodes to establish his cheerful incompetence as an estate manager, the two young men returned to England, never to separate again.

It was not until nearly thirty years later that I saw Mr. Brinton for the first time, and in that interim he had lost all his looks and had spent a vast amount of other people's time and money looking for them, but without success. What the Mountfaucons – Morven apart – really thought of the odd couple Mother was never able to discover. Both men were musical; Uncle Edgar, who was charming and kind, sang beautifully, and Frank Brinton played the piano accompaniment to his swan-song.

Frank Brinton was very tall, and his most noticeable feature was his nose; indeed, the word 'nose' is quite inadequate to describe it; it reminds me in retrospect of a great rose-frilled conch-shell that I once saw a fisherman blowing on the shore of a lonely peninsula in Haiti. It was no mere bottle-nose; it was a jeroboam among noses, and much alcohol must have gone to form it. Coralline in texture, it was profoundly pitted, like a piece of barbaric jewellery, the gems of which had long since fallen from their setting. Its underlying colour was a radical scarlet, mapped with a fine tracery of violet veins, the whole intensifying under the stress of emotion to a deep uniform purple. The application of years of liquid powder to it had caked to a fine pulverous brittleness in its crannies and crevices, discharging when he blew it a faint cloud of white dust. It shone through its coating like a modest bride (but one afflicted with very high blood pressure) through her cambric shift. What was almost as fascinating as this noble organ was his hair; snow-white

and exquisitely waved, he dyed it jet-black — as he hoped — but its hue was a little at the mercy of the seasons: it stood up splendidly to a dull winter's afternoon, but summer sunshine played the very dickens with it. Heavily perfumed, it would change colours like an octopus at feeding-time, and would turn in a flash from black to crimson, and thence to a metallic violet-green, like the shell of a beetle. He dressed as an Edwardian dude, with a complement of ineffably fancy waistcoats and a mass of tinkling jewellery, and his ensemble was in effect not unlike that of a comedian impersonating a bayadère from *Lakmé*.

Attempting to explain the impossible, he used to apologize for his proboscis by saying it had been poisoned by some make-up used by him in theatricals.

'And what was the play, Mr. Brinton?' asked Mother innocently; '*Cyrano de Bergerac*, I suppose?'

It was with this preposterous creature, who had none of Uncle Edgar's charm and kindliness and distinction of manner, that poor Aunt Chrissie fell madly and violently in love!

The poor little woman couldn't take her eyes off him, farded and jewelled as he was, like some monstrous Asiatic divinity. Her face shone as she gazed at him, for never did it occur to her innocent mind to make the slightest attempt to disguise her feelings; she was totally unsophisticated, ignorant and unschooled in the world. The Mountfaucons, or most of them, speechless with fury and mortification, hardly dared to glance at her, fearing lest a single look in her direction should betray their discomfiture to Mother, who was lunching with them. Themselves normally unobservant, they were quite at fault at imagining that Mother was unable to take in all the implications of a situation without so much as raising her eyelashes. During dinner Mr. Brinton, conscious of Constantia's stern eye upon him, conducted himself impeccably, seemingly all unaware of

the gathering tension. After the meal was over they all trooped into the drawing-room, with its assemblage of elephants' feet shod in silver, their stumps upholstered in buttoned maroon leather, and the innumerable brass Benares trays laden with silver knick-knacks. No one spoke a word.

After a silence Mr. Brinton seated himself at the ancient piano and began to play the polonaise from 'Mignon'. Aunt Chrissie's face lit up, and she began to hum under her breath: '*Connais-tu le pays . . . ?*'

Brinton, possibly embarrassed, smiled at her encouragingly, humming the phrase back, but not in Aunt Chrissie's admirable accent. '*Connie-tew ler pie-ee?*'

Entranced, she beamed back at him, repeating the phrase like a careful child at a lesson, in his own accent: '*Connie-tew ler pie-ee?*' Imitation was evidently the sincerest flattery.

Everyone stared at their toes. Thomas' music drifted on; Brinton was no longer looking at his captive, was immersed in his playing, was humming to himself with some appropriateness: '*Je suis Titania . . . !*'

The Fairy Queen's aria tinkled on, with probably no one but Mother even dimly aware of its exquisite appositeness; though *she* only saw her poor sister-in-law as a faded Titania, infatuated with this ancient, enamelled, fantastic Bottom. She wanted to obliterate herself, shrank into her billowing volants of violet tulle, wished that the floor would open and swallow her up. Christine's feeling was so obviously deep and so transparent that to be compelled to be aware of it seemed to Mother to be an indecency, an intrusion, a detestable complicity in what could only result in another's misery; for she knew that her sister-in-law was no more qualified to deal with an emotional storm than a little girl would be. She longed to take her away, to take her in her arms and comfort her, but was fully alive to the fact that it was not such comfort as that which Christine sought. At

last, to an accompaniment of icy adieux, they got away, Mother and Morven; but in the hurry of departure she forgot her muff.

The next day she took the car over to retrieve it, overlooking the fact that her relations-in-law regarded her as the last person in the world to whom they wished their family embarrassments revealed. The drawing-room was empty. She had scarcely seated herself before the door opened and Aunt Chrissie entered, evidently worried; she made no attempt to greet her sister-in-law, whom she usually met with effusion, but came instead straight to the point.

'Have you seen him anywhere, Susannah?'

Mother didn't know what to say; to pretend ignorance as to whom Aunt Chrissie was referring was clearly silly, since that latter assumed as a matter of course that she knew who was meant; and to be too 'understanding' was to assume a complicity in the situation which she felt far from accepting. But before she had time to reply, Aunt Chrissie was saying in real desperation:

'But I *must* see him, Susannah! I *must*! And they won't *let* me! What shall I do?'

Mother was flummoxed. What could she possibly tell the poor young woman? To cast doubts or to raise hopes were equally brutal alternatives; to do either might be disastrous. She temporized.

'Chrissie, dear, do bear in mind that he's old enough to be your father.'

Her sister-in-law looked at her with the expression of a hurt child.

'And wasn't Captain d'Arfey old enough to be *yours*, when you married him, Susannah? And weren't you happy with him? Far happier than with Morven?'

Mother was aghast at the appositeness of Christine's comment, at the justness of the innocent creature's intuitions,

and was at a loss for words: she could only stare at her in silence.

'He *knows* I love him!'

Mother was only too well aware of it. She racked her brains for something, and nothing came.

'It takes two people to fall in love, you know, Chrissie, for things to work satisfactorily. I'm not sure Mr. Brinton's that kind of man . . .'

'But they won't leave us *alone* together, Susannah! He doesn't get a chance to know me!'

Mother took her hands in hers, but Aunt Chrissie jerked them away.

'You're all in it together,' she wept. 'You don't *want* me to be happy!'

'You know that isn't so, Chrissie. You know I want you to be happy; only I doubt if Mr. Brinton would make you happy.'

She felt paralysed by the ineptitude of what she was saying, by the futility of trying to apply reason to the things of the heart. Aunt Chrissie's tear-filled eyes grew wide.

'But he's so *beautiful*, Susannah!'

Near tears herself, Mother could only gape at her; then she tried to rearrange her face in some pattern of agreement.

'You're so *different*!' my unhappy step-aunt continued. 'Men have always noticed *you*. But no one's ever *looked* at *me* till now.'

Mother was inclined to wish to God that some of them had looked at her, but didn't see that telling Chrissie so would help her much. Her sister-in-law looked at her with desperation, her square little jaw set surprisingly firm.

'Oh, I know you won't believe me — but if you could only *see* the way his eyes run up and down me on the stairs!'

It wasn't hard for Mother not to smile at this, for she was feeling more and more embarrassed and at a loss; but with Aunt Chrissie's last remark an idea flashed through her

mind. Her opinion of Frank Brinton was moderately low; she knew him to be inordinately vain and not especially scrupulous, and was well aware that he had no love for the Mountfaucons — Uncle Edgar apart. It occurred to her that he might be amused by playing up Aunt Chrissie's infatuation for him on the sly, so long as he was unobserved. Unlike Flaubert, Mother never delighted in discovering fresh pieces of moral turpitude in people, but the more she fought shy of her notion the likelier it seemed to her to be. By doing so, Brinton would be avenging himself on Constantia and her children for a thousand ill-disguised insults and would be gratifying his vanity, as well as his perverse sense of humour. Unfortunately, these reflections brought Mother no nearer knowing what to say to the victim of his baroque charms. . . .

After Uncle Edgar and Frank Brinton had departed, Chrissie grew more and more silent. Sometimes she was heard talking to herself in her high sweet childish voice, or she would talk to Lily Huskinson about bicycling.

'I *think*, Lily darling, I shall change my fixed wheel; it's so *tiring*, having one's pedals going round all the time.'

Then at a party she was heard saying: 'Mamma is going to put a new front lamp on me, as well as a nice big *tool-bag*.'

This harmless-pathetic mania grew on her unobtrusively; when she spoke to her family on ordinary topics she was perfectly rational, but once when the butler shut the train of her one evening dress in the door, she murmured to him in a mildly reproachful voice:

'Please take care, Ellison, or you'll scrape all the enamel off my mudguard.'

Again, one day when Aunty Dossy was fastening some biblical texts to her bedroom wall with drawing-pins, she happened to have left some lying on a chair on which Aunt Chrissie sat down; bursting into tears, the latter exclaimed:

'Oh, Theodosia! That's the second time this morning I've punctured my back tyre!'

It was all even more embarrassing than Mr. Brinton. . . .

Drink, it was firmly believed in the Mountfaucon family, had the habit of skipping a generation; and certainly there was never a more abstemious couple than old Mr. and Mrs. Mountfaucon. They also believed, though without much assurance, that addiction to alcohol was replaced in the non-dipsomaniac generations by epilepsy! I can offer no opinion as to the validity of this conviction, but since it was genuinely held by the old people it seems surprising to-day that they should have bred so consciencelessly in view of it. To each age its own morality, however. In any case, such drinking as was done at Holderfield — and there was plenty so far as the sons were concerned — was done in secret. No strong liquors were ever served at table after the death of Augustus, who had been a great gourmet; once he had gone the cooking became atrocious.

Aunt Chrissie had, therefore, scant means of working off her libido at meal-times — or at least of working it off agreeably, for the food was at best merely substantial — and special steps were taken to see that she never had the chance of taking alcohol in any form. As a matter of fact, she regarded drinking as exceedingly common and never dreamed, so far as one knows, of indulging herself in it. The gates of all pleasures were closed to her; life held no escape, no compensation, no dreams for her, in the years which followed the confiscation of the bicycle, which had been got rid of, for harbouring, as the Japanese say, 'dangerous thoughts'.

But a friendly under-housemaid took pity on her and in order to afford her a little illicit distraction taught her to cycle on her own machine while the other 'gairls' were away at Bognor for a 'change'. It was all very much on the sly.

Though Aunt Chrissie turned up her nose at drinking, it seemed to her to be perfectly refined and ladylike to eat the

most prodigious quantities of food; in that direction at least she was quite uninhibited. Unfortunately, the extremely plain cooking at Holderfield did not afford her the variety for which she craved. One evening when there was no one about she borrowed the housemaid's cycle without a word and proceeded to pedal off hot-foot to the nearest shops in the suburb of Langholme, some mile distant, where she made a remarkable variety of purchases. Slices of ham, tinned pineapple chunks, swiss rolls, doughnuts, Bath buns, mixed biscuits, sausage rolls, candied peel, foie-gras, chocolate éclairs, bottles of ginger beer and several currant loaves were all packed into her carriers. Adding to these some tinned lobster and salmon, she rode peacefully home, hid the bicycle, and sneaked up the back stairs to her room. The dressing gong sounded, and it was assumed that she was already in her room; the dinner-gong pealed, but there was no sign of her. Constantia dispatched a footman to look for her; he knocked on Chrissie's door, but there was no answer; he tried it, only to find it locked. He came downstairs and told my step-grandmother, who ordered the butler to force the door. This was duly done, and revealed my tiny aunt prone on the floor in a coma, a tin-opener grasped firmly in her hand. Around her lay a mixed débris of empty tins and paper bags, fragments of sausage and pastry, crumbs of cake and empty éclair cases, from which the coffee icing and the cream had been licked, and pieces of orange peel. The mess was indescribable, but for the first time in its existence Aunt Chrissie's ugly room had taken on an air of debauched joviality; it looked like Hampstead Heath after a Bank Holiday; it was perhaps the nearest approach to perfect relaxation that Holderfield had ever known; inhibitions had for once been cast to the wind.

Christine lay in the centre of this shattered still-life in much the same condition as a little brown bear at the Zoo after an orgy of buns; the buttons of her tightly-fitting

corsage strained their threads by her steady expansion; she was blown out like a balloon. Her expression, as she lay there, was rapturous, a general warning not to despise the happiness of others.

For a long time afterwards she was carefully watched; but in the course of time these precautions were relaxed, and she was able to repeat her experience. Her relations reasoned with her, argued with her, preached and moralized at her, invoked the Deity and the doctor and the name of decency and the dietetics of the day and finally called in the vicar: all to no avail. They did everything in their power to convince her of the error of her ways: everything, in short, but to try to understand her or to make her happy. Yet they were not to blame, for the first was beyond them and the second in all probability no longer possible.

She vehemently denied that she had eaten anything at all; and, when pressed, said that they were confusing her with the housemaid's coasting Humber, who was responsible for the whole idea and had put the food into her room in order to tempt and trap her, but she had had no share in eating it.

'What!' she exclaimed. 'Me do a thing like that? A well-brought-up bicycle like *me*?'

Later, she became quite normal again, but was, of course, more closely watched than ever; but, after a long space of time, she again found the means to slip out and go shopping once more. This time her purchases were on a more Trimalchian scale than before.

When at length they found her it was for the last time. She was lying on her bed in an incredible litter, her face smeared with jam and Devonshire cream, with the straw-boater which she had worn for nearly a quarter of a century on the back of her head, with an already faded bunch of pink and blue hydrangeas pinned to it. A fire was still smouldering in the grate, while the tiled hearth was piled up with a

mass of broken glass and charred rubbish of all sorts. On a closer inspection, the fire proved to have been composed of the photographs of all her relatives, and of the innumerable pietistic tracts and works with which her book-cases were liberally stacked. Every single one had been destroyed. Her fragile body, swollen in its hideous black dress, was spotted with crumbs and sherbet powder; but on her face was an expression of unutterable peace and repose; all its lines, all the footprints of time, had been smoothed away. In death she had recaptured some of her childish prettiness — and something more. Written there could be read that quality of absolute cessation from the travail of life, the impenetrable tranquillity that one sees in the mask of 'la Noyée de la Seine'.

XII

ALIX CURSITOR AND HER GUESTS

WHAT was particularly endearing about Mother was her blunt refusal ever to grumble or to indulge in self-pity. This she cheerfully attributed to faith in God: I fancy that a sturdy north-country good sense had also something to do with it.

Morven, when he wished, could be an unusually engaging and attractive man and was in many ways less of a trial than Father. For instance, he was never violently, insultingly rude; he wasn't a spoil-sport and he actually liked his wife to enjoy herself; all the same, she missed Father's curious disagreeable distinction, for ever since she was a girl she had been an incurable amateur of the 'difficult'. Certainly Morven's habits were 'difficult' enough, but they were unrewardingly so; his character was something of a cul-de-sac. Apart from the pubs on the way, the walk was pleasant

enough while it lasted, the architecture handsome, but one soon came to a dead end and there was nothing to do but turn back the way one had come, whereas, with Father, one never quite knew what one mightn't run across.

Deep in Mother's mind lay the conviction that one had to make the best of things and that if one intended to try and do that, one had better do it with one's whole energy. Consequently, once the first months of black despair that followed her second marriage were over and her habitual grip on herself restored, a great deal of her former gaiety returned to her, but tempered now by a faint cynicism, which did not, however, go very deep. Morven was far more sociable than Father and let her do much more as she liked (though she was now far less ready to be restrained) but she certainly felt — and showed — less patience with her second husband. And this was partly because she knew much more about life and about men, whom it is never prudent to spoil, and also because she rightly felt that she had been let down. Then, too, she was angry with herself for her misreading of character, for her obstinate refusal to read the signs; she had always been aware of a certain contempt in her nature for weak men and resented her lack of judgment which had resulted in her marriage to one.

Mature herself, she unreasonably expected a greater maturity in others, and she couldn't help secretly reflecting what a much more interesting and complex creature Father was: but it took a good many years, as well as a great deal besides, to kill all her affection for Morven.

Gradually drink began to undermine his health, but it was not for two or three years that this began to be a serious burden to her. Like Father, he soon discovered that she was a born nurse, and once he had made that discovery, he refused to let her employ professionals.

Life at Marsh had changed its character somewhat. Much to Mother's relief, the yacht had been put down before

Father's death, when his health was no longer equal to long summer months passed afloat. Morven found himself once more in something of the position he had been in with Mrs. Templeton-Lemonnier, not that Mother was nearly as wealthy, but Morven was again able to launch out considerably. In the years that he had lived with his mother she had seen to it that most of his remaining income went towards the upkeep of the family nest, but now he insisted on a huge car, a share in a syndicated shoot and a fishing, and Mother in consequence had fewer *grandes toilettes*. So far as hunting was concerned, his health no longer permitted it, and Father had never allowed Mother to learn to ride, fearing lest she should meet with some accident. She had her garden, her child, her political activities and her exquisite embroidery to occupy herself with — and the study of heraldry. For this remote but pleasing science she had been infected with a passion by her first husband, and she had it at her finger-tips.

Nearly all our neighbours were as unexciting to us as we to them, but there were exceptions, the most notable being Lady Cursitor. It was soon after their marriage that mother and Morven made the acquaintance of the then celebrated Alix Cursitor, a much photographed *grande dame* and intimate friend of royalty, herself queen of a hundred Edwardian charity tableaux-vivants, a dashing amateur actress, and a hostess who entertained with luxury and 'go'. Lord and Lady Cursitor lived some twenty-five miles away from us at Wavency, in incredible style (not all of it good) and in positively Russian extravagance: they were enormously rich.

I first saw Lady Cursitor at an evening party there, when I was a small boy. Divinely dark and most divinely tall, a hush fell on the room as she entered — but 'entered' is the wrong word. She was an apparition, nothing less, and none of the clichés — 'swam', 'floated', 'sailed' — describe the

splendid poetry of her movements. She 'appeared', a majestic, lovely and sumptuous being from another world, a smiling baroque goddess, as though borne on an invisible rosy cloud, her soul as closely woven into her mindless sensual beauty as a sculptured Apsarà, moving without effort, ineffably, unconsciously dignified.

She had something of a massive Rubens woman about her, but her skin had the warm ivory glow that one sees in certain of Renoir's nudes of Gabrielle. As for her laughing black eyes, they were of a less fine quality, and suggested some bold Bacchante painted by Romney, they and the curling tendrils of her black hair. She steered an unerringly adroit course between the great lady and the *grande cocotte*, but the former always won; she was theatrical without being stagey and without ever sacrificing a jot of her splendid poise; she radiated health, vitality, good nature and high spirits — and why not, since she enjoyed everything of the much that life had to offer her?

The first time I saw her, the entire front of her dress was filled with lilies-of-the-valley fresh picked that evening, their waxen bells clustering as low against her magnificent breasts as decency permitted; she was wearing her triple sautoir of pearls that reached her knees, but no other jewel, and her hair, parted in the middle, sprang back simply in rippled wings from her temples.

One can't compare her accurately to any character in literature, for she had neither the impossible nobility nor the brutality of a Balzac great lady and none of the ponderous and intricate intellectualism of a Henry James character; she wasn't mannered, and therefore wasn't Meredithian; but with her sense of fun she did bear a certain resemblance to Oriane de Guermantes, had that duchess ever, time and time again, flung her hats over the windmill, littering the entire landscape for miles round with fabulous Parisian creations. How describe her? She was too large for *chic*, too unaffectedly

voluptuous-looking for supreme elegance; yet, however wanton her looks, each gesture had its own nobility, something as spontaneous as a bird's flight, something which no self-discipline, however rigorous, could ever have achieved.

'I haven't a feature to my face,' she would say to Mother. And it was quite true. Luminous, slightly protuberant eyes like dark electric light bulbs; a big *retroussé* nose, insolent, inquisitive, amused and impudent; and an abundant mouth — these were her features, and she painted them with a bravura suggestive of Mr. Matthew Smith. She was perpetually drugged with her own high spirits, her self-importance, her vanity and splendour; she had a feverish quality, a *furia*, something sensuous and ferocious. Is it to be wondered at, given all this, that I fell madly in love with her?

She was, of course, an exhibitionist, in the jargon of to-day, and for this side of her temperament the Edwardian amateur stage, with its drawing-room comedies (in which she could only play the adventuress, the Peruvian cocotte, the 'worst woman in London', Mrs. Erlynne, or Paula Tanqueray), its Imperial pageants and its tableaux-vivants, was the only possible outlet. On the slightest provocation she would impersonate, and at the shortest possible notice, Europe, Asia, Africa, Boadicea, Britannia or Nell Gwyn. But she was a terrible actress.

The first time my parents met her was on the occasion of a meeting to discuss the question of a public memorial to our late neighbour and mutual friend, Mr. Cedric Grandison. She was wearing a huge black hat trimmed with white bindweed, from which capacious shade she kept darting fiery glances at my stepfather and taking but little interest in the business on hand. Pink granite, grey granite, Portland stone, she voted recklessly for them all in turn, accepting each contradictory estimate, blandly agreeing with every conflicting suggestion. It was only too clear that, having praised Mr. Grandison briefly, she was anxious to hear the last of him,

and to get on (or off) with the living; she had eyes for nothing, for no one in the room but Morven. Her eyes bulged out of her head, stabbing him with their magnificent lightning, her nostrils dilated like a horse's, her teeth flashing and her bust heaving with ill suppressed emotion. It was *Vénus toute entière à sa proie attachée.* In the words of Mathilde Blind:

> The flaming of his feline eyes
> Stirs with intoxicating stress
> The pulses of the leopardess.

The acquaintanceship ripened a little, since Lady Cursitor was at a loose end, in every sense of the phrase, and my stepfather was absolutely her cup of tea. She came over to lunch one day in the summer, wearing a Directoire skirt slit up to her knee and white suede boots that reached nearly as far. After lunch we were driving somewhere in the Charron, and she sat in the back between my parents, while I perched on a strapontin opposite them. Morven was fastidiously dressed in a dark chocolate-coloured flannel suit with a deep red carnation in his buttonhole, the perfume of which caused the superb Alix's nostrils to dilate with unnecessary frequency. We hadn't gone very far when, to my fascination, I observed her rubbing her left leg very gently – Mother was on her right – against Morven's right one, her slit skirt affording her considerable liberty of action. Some instinct prompted me that this was not something which a small boy was supposed to observe, so – though I firmly intended to go into the matter later – I averted my gaze and stared instead out of the window. When at last I glanced back I noticed that this variant of calf-love was proceeding rather more vigorously than before, and that Lady Cursitor's lovely face wore a look of hopeful expectation. My stepfather, on the other hand, appeared rattled. As he withdrew his leg, that of Alix pursued it, like a voluptuous white cat. If legs could purr, undoubtedly hers would have done so.

Further retreat for Morven's leg was now out of the question, since both were now pressed closely together against the side of the car. Nor did he dare cross his legs for fear of exposing the other to Lady Cursitor's provocative massage, but she, feeling that his limb was no longer elusive, assumed that she had at last cleared her first ditch. Her face took on the smug, beatific air of a cat for whom cream is being poured out at the close of a long tea-party.

Engaged, as she believed profitably, in her polite friction, she outdid herself in amiabilities to Mother. We reached our destination, a local cricket-match, and got out of the car; the outside of Morven's brown flannel leg was snowy-white. Mother smiled: she had been watching the whole proceeding in the little mirror attached to the centre of the front glass. Morven sulked for the remainder of the afternoon and busied himself at intervals in brushing ostentatiously the white powder from his trouser-leg, which only inflamed Lady Cursitor the more.

When we got home he revealed to Mother that Alix had been treading on his toe all during lunch. He happened to be wearing new shoes which pinched him slightly, and which had been exquisitely polished, a point on which he was very pernickety. He had borne the gentle pressure on his corn as long as he could, and then, unable to endure it a moment longer, had stamped sharply on *hers*. Both mother and I had wondered at the time why she suddenly dropped, with a crash, the spoon and fork with which she was helping herself to a bombe-glacée. Now we knew!

Light skirmishing continued for some months, without any notable victories, and, very gradually, it all petered out.

It was at Waveney that I had my only encounter with Royalty. King Edward and Queen Alexandra were frequently entertained by the Cursitors, and the episode which I am going to relate occurred a very short while before the King's death. He and his Consort would arrive at Waveney

with a tremendous retinue of servants and detectives and, towards the end of their visit, when the more spectacular attractions of the house-party were exhausted, it was the custom to stage some innocuous village entertainment on which the sun of Majesty might shine. On this particular occasion it took the lugubrious form of drill and exercises performed by the local Boy Scouts, members of an organization that was still something of a novelty. Many neighbours, including ourselves, had been asked over to it.

It was a dull, drizzling morning, but after luncheon a watery sun made its appearance. The Royal party were packed into cars and driven off to a large field, at some distance from the house, where the Scouts were in attendance. Owing to the condition of the road it was found to be impossible to approach the field, and some seventy yards had to be covered on foot, much to the disgust of His Majesty, who remarked in awe-struck tones to his companion, the Junoesque and bosomy Mrs. Fanshawe, tones very reminiscent of those of the Red Queen's Consort: 'My feet are *wet!*' So firmly did his voice disassociate his treacherous and unreliable members from the rest of his anatomy that one felt that they were no more part of his essential ego than were his long gaiters and would be as easily changed as the latter when he got in. However, the King and Queen, the Cursitors and the Princess Victoria and the dashing Mrs. Fanshawe, all picked their way delicately down the slope, and as soon as Royalty was seated the Boy Scouts started to do their stuff; there was a great deal of it, and their lack of inventiveness was matched only by their dogged persistence. They seemed to have been wound up, like so many automata, and their principal lacked the tact or the authority to stop them. They marched, they formed fours, they formed two-deep, they ran in a fluctuating square at the double, they flexed red knees, they brandished grubby flags, they saluted, and they then sang 'God Save The King' in a tuneless

tremolo. A settled look of unutterable boredom touching on despair settled on the Royal faces.

It was just before the singing of the National Anthem that a drop of water fell on Mrs. Fanshawe's hat. That lady turned to His Majesty, saying in a loud voice with the greatest air of disgust and irritation: 'I must have left my umbrella in the car, Sir.'

Before anyone of those in a position to do so had had time to stir (and none of them, it must be confessed, displayed the slightest evidence of intending to do so) King Edward gave a grunt, and the Queen, of all people, jumped to her feet, an exquisitely neat figure in a beautifully cut and not very fashionable coat and skirt and a heavily-veiled toque of Parma violets. She was hurrying up the muddy slope towards the cars as fast as her high heels would carry her, followed at some distance by her daughter, Princess Victoria. Lady Cursitor had sketched a vague gesture of rising, but it remained incomplete. In a few minutes Her Majesty reappeared, carrying Mrs. Fanshawe's umbrella, which the latter accepted with cool graciousness, but quite without surprise. As for the King, he never so much as looked round.

Some while later I had became separated from my parents, the gathering had long since broken up, the party had returned to the house, and Royalty and its friends had retreated to some private refuge. I had wandered alone into a great drawing-room, a saloon with azaleas banked up in porcelain jardinières and with a host of little étagères that carried many tiny, precious, shimmering objects in gold and silver, in jade and malachite and china. I settled myself on the floor with a book behind a large settee and started to read, but without much enthusiasm, since the book was by Maurice Hewlett and above the head of my eight years.

My attention wandered from it after a time and I observed

from my retreat that someone had come into the room; the someone was a short and slender lady whose appearance seemed vaguely familiar, but whose identity I couldn't absolutely place. Her golden-brown hair lay in tight curls low on her forehead, rising high on the crown of her head in a square compact mass, like the flattened coiffure of a caryatid; her dress was mauve and had orchids pinned on to its bosom, while her pearls even outclassed, if possible, those of her hostess. But it was neither her rather brittle grace nor the splendour of her accoutrements which caused me to remark on her as she wandered from occasional table to occasional table, picking up small objects, examining them cursorily and putting them down again. What caused me to regard her with a certain apprehension was the fact that she kept shaking her elegant head from side to side with the automatic precision of a metronome and murmuring in staccato syllables, over and over again, like the response in some litany:

'God save the King! God save the King! God save the King! God save the King! God save the King!'

I was intrigued by this, but also a little uncertain; I had the feeling that I was spying, as indeed I was; and I hoped that the lady wouldn't see me. Unfortunately I suddenly sneezed.

Startled, an aristocratic hand raised its jewelled fingers to a carefully painted cheek, touched a diamond dog-collar and fell again.

'Who's there?' inquired a charming voice, pitched a shade high. I emerged from my hiding-place.

'Please, it's me,' I said politely. 'I beg your pardon.'

'What are you doing there, little boy?' said the lady.

'I'm reading.'

'What are you reading?'

I was rather at a loss, for I had no idea how to pronounce the third word that completed the title of the book, which

was *The Queen's Quair*, nor had I the slightest idea of what it meant. I hesitated.

'Well?'

I looked at the cover, and took a flying leap at the unfamiliar word.

'*The Queen's Quair.*'

The graceful figure gazed at me, as it seemed uncomprehendingly, a trifle bewildered.

'What did you say, little man?'

I was pink with embarrassment, and was by now quite convinced that I had committed some gross solecism of pronunciation (which for all I know to this day, I may have done) and nerved myself once more to a fresh effort. This time I ventured on a different attempt, pronouncing the word 'queer'. But my humiliation was greater than ever when I had done so, since the new effort only produced on the elegant lady's face a look of the most blank astonishment as she echoed my words.

'The Queen's *queer*?'

I nodded, mortified to the very roots of my being, feeling dreadfully immature, inexperienced and unsophisticated. I hoped feebly that the floor would open and swallow me up, but it did nothing of the sort. The lady murmured as if to herself:

'The Queen's queer? Nonsense! She's nothing of the sort!'

I felt sick with ignorance and shame; as a rule I was a great success with ladies, but this one made me feel that I had no social experience of any kind, despite the fact that there was nothing but kindness and graciousness in her manner.

'The Queen's queer?' she repeated to herself with an air of vexation. 'Show me that book, little boy.'

My misery in the blackest of worlds deepened, as a hateful idea flashed through my mind. Mother's eldest sister, Aunt Zillah, that self-appointed censor of family morals, had always bitterly opposed the latitude which permitted me,

within reason, to read anything I could get hold of, and was never tired of saying with gloomy but unfulfilled optimism:

'One day he'll get hold of a really *indecent* book, and *then* what will you say, Susannah?'

Not unnaturally, I had no idea of what constituted an indecent book, but secretly held to the conviction that *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, with its scarifying woodcuts of the more odious forms of sadism, was such, and I never ventured to tell Mother, in consequence, that I had inspected it. But I had had little time in which to examine Maurice Hewlett's book and I began to wonder if it would prove to be that 'really indecent' book about which Aunt Zillah had forebodings. It was a dreadful thought that I might be handing in all innocence an indecent book to this unknown lady. What would she say or do?

The lady raised her gold lorgnon and glanced at the title page, and then, miraculously and to my infinite relief, her expression cleared. A faint smile played about the corners of her mouth, as she gave the book back to me with a light tinkling laugh.

I was thankful that the nightmare was over, that the beastly book seemed to be all right, after all, judging by her expression as she repeated to herself the author's name:

'Hewlett . . . Maurice Hewlett . . .'

She patted my head in the most friendly fashion and turned slowly away, gracefully undulating out of the saloon and still shaking her gold-brown head from side to side, as though she were gently and dreamily acknowledging the plaudits of some invisible throng.

It was some time later that Mother found me. We were crossing the huge hall, and happening to glance up I saw high in the distance a group of people standing near the head of the marble staircase, leaning in aerial perspective over a balustrade like the personages in some gigantic Tiepolo mural; among them were His Majesty, our host and hostess,

the statuesque Mrs. Fanshawe, and the lady in mauve with whom I had had my embarrassing conversation.

'Mummy,' I said, 'who *is* that lady up there with the King? The one in the mauve dress?'

'Darling, you know perfectly well who she is. That's the Queen.'

XIII

THE CAPTIVE BALLOON

THE years succeeded one another placidly enough; once or twice a year one of the Mountfaucons would die, would drop unperceived out of life, modestly and with resignation, and yet strangely, little Aunt Chrissie and big Uncle Vivian excepted, once the breath had finally fluttered from their lips, with the most terrifying expressions on their faces. Even Mother, accustomed as she was to death-beds, was unnerved by the final expression on Constantia Mountfaucon's death-mask, and flatly refused, to the utter horror of Constantia's daughters, to allow Morven to look at her, for in life he had loved her after his fashion. To Mother, who had no reason to love any of them, apart from Christine, about whom she had always felt sentimental and pitiful, and Vivian, who was of such a vast good-nature that no one could do anything but wish him well, their demises were to her little more than an excuse for ordering the *chic* black mourning which so became her fairness. The last war, uncomprehended by us in any of its aspects or implications, was upon us; Mother was living in a whirl of efficient activity, organizing hospitals and clubs for entertaining soldiers (a roaring success, since they called into play all her capacity for making people enjoy themselves); arranging those abominations, flag-days;

or bringing down to Exebourne — or at least cajoling them into coming — West End stars in popular successes to appear for charity; she was in short having the time of her life. I was by now at an expensive and — to me — boring public-school. Back in Exebourne there were left of the once numerous Mountfaucons only now my step-uncle Vivian and Aunt Emmeline Hotblack. On the death of Aunty Dossy, Holderfield had been disposed of and the two survivors had moved into a smaller house near by, named Cumberledge Lodge.

Aunt Emmeline was an ageing woman and soon she would be left all alone, for Uncle Vivian was going rapidly; far more rapidly, in fact, than imagination could have conceived. Of all my step-uncles and step-aunts he and Uncle Edgar (whom I hardly ever saw) were by far the nicest. Uncle Vivian was at this time a man in his middle fifties, enormously tall and fat; Mother called him 'the Captive Balloon'. His mother and sisters, for many years, had been his sheet-anchors, as the poor fellow was strictly forbidden to spend so much as a night out of Holderfield — and this despite the fact that it was he alone who kept them in all their gloomy, costly, upper-class discomfort. And I fancy that by the time that he had moved into Cumberledge Lodge, where he might have enjoyed some liberty of action, he was too tired to care much one way or the other.

At Holderfield he, too, like his sister, had had sublimation thrust upon him; but his sublimation took the form of frequent visits to the local abattoir. This we shall come to presently.

Well-intentioned and very affectionate, he was a man whose natural good-heartedness might have achieved something in life, had he not been brainless to the point of nullity. Such human warmth as Holderfield had ever owned to had been supplied by him, or by Morven, Christine or Edgar. When young, he had been good-looking, and in middle-age he still followed the fashions of his youth, dressing elaborately

and with a great deal of jewellery, like a masher out of 'Pitcher'. He drank secretly but very heavily, until he achieved what I once imagined to be the rather Rimbaud-esque pleasures of delirium tremens. But there was no poetry in the Mountfaucons; no surge of private vision, fantastic or nightmarish or mystical, ever rose to the surface. Had it done so, it must inevitably have left some unmistakable and decipherable trace on their faces, in their eyes, like the faint path beaten out over the uniform surface of a down by the passage of an innumerable succession of small animals; one has to stare closely sometimes to see it, but once found, its message is clear. No surrealist heaven opened its doors for them into a fabulous dream-world, so far as one could judge from their conduct or conversation when delirious — so Mother, who knew enough of it, tells me.

Romantically pale like Morven, or a leaden, rather cheerful red like Vivian, when under the influence of d.t's., they simply moved sullen and lethargic in the prison of their obsession. There were no ramblings, no magical transformations of objects from their natural selves into beautiful or sinister potencies; the violent intoxication of their blood-stream was as flat and colourless as a plate of stale railway-station bread-and-butter. In any case, a wish for hallucination would have been utterly foreign to the prosaic unimaginative Mountfaucon temperament. No drug can unseal the well of the imagination when once the hidden spring that feeds it has dried up; Uncle Vivian once struck out with his stick at a bed of zinnias, whose garish colours plucked at some nerve, but that was all.

After each drinking-bout Aunt Emmeline nursed him back to life and restored nullity, and in the intervals which followed he went on the wagon for considerable periods; but there was no force, no direction, no meaning in his life to lend him the will to drink only in moderation. Living as he did, who can wonder that he sought an escape from his actual

life, even if it proved almost as dull as that life itself? There wasn't a grain of malice in him, only kindness, good-will and generosity; but he no longer had even the sketch of a character.

He lived in a cigar-scented study, in which the only two objects that I can recall with absolute clarity were two late-Victorian photographs in bevelled gilt-glass frames. One was of a Maori belle — he had spent some time in New Zealand — with an incipient moustache and a pantomime-bust, who looked, with her copious chevelure, for all the world like a 1900 advertisement for Edwardes' Harlene or Rowland's Macassar Oil, and which was signed in a dashing Gaiety-Girl hand as follows:

'To Vivian Mountfaucon, yours to a *cinder*, Kia-Ora ! ! ! ! '

The other one was of some Tahitian amourette; the type of Tahitian, I should say, who most excited the painter's ire against the French colonials. She was dressed in a high-collared, leg-of-mutton-sleeved dress in broad stripes, with a papery-looking hibiscus lolling over one ear, and over one arm fell a flower-starred *pareu* as might a shawl. This was inscribed:

'A mon *chair* titi coco, Moumou, *mil* baisez ardens et cordialitez, de la par d'Arua Viaré.'

Each lady looked capable of making mincemeat of Uncle Vivian; though I'd have much preferred, as doubtless he did, to be minced, however fine, by Arua Viaré or by Kia-Ora, rather than by Constantia Mountfaucon or Emmeline Hotblack.

His later visits (when he had returned home to Holderfield) to the slaughter-house were explained by his mother and sisters (it is surprising to me that they ever admitted to them; but then, even if they were alive to-day they would still not have heard of psycho-analysis) by the surprising theory that they were, in effect, purely nostalgic, though that wasn't the word they used; that only in the bloody reek of the abattoirs could he recapture something of the first fine care-

less rapture of Wagga-Wagga, of the stockyards where he made his pile; in fact, that sentiment and feeling drove him back into those of Langholme.

Packed off to the Antipodes at the age of seventeen, it seems to me probable that his untried, unformed character underwent a profound shock, perhaps even completely deflecting his sexual sensibility, in a way too radical to be scarred over in the ordinary way; and that this in time grew into a psychological lesion. But a sentimental journey, no! That's really too much to swallow.

It was a hot summer during the first world war, a superb June unbroken by showers. He had been ailing for some time; an old abdominal wound which he had received from a crazy steer just before its slaughter had been troubling him and had had to be reopened. He had been drinking more heavily than ever and had fallen into a condition of profound moral depression, a state of things scarcely remedied by the unjovial but unfailing presence of Aunt Emmeline, hovering round his bed like a saintly ghoul, and conferring with the local doctor, who assured her that there was nothing to be done, that Uncle Vivian's cirrhosis was far, far too advanced.

One splendid midsummer's evening he fell into a deep coma from which he never woke. The following day was sultry and oppressive, with a steadily rising temperature and a charged, electrical atmosphere; it was obviously desirable that the funeral should take place as quickly as possible, in view of the delays which were so probable during war-time. Uncle Vivian's huge frame had swollen to an enormous size and it was impossible to find locally a coffin large enough to fit him properly; the largest one available proved a very tight fit.

Towards nightfall the heat became intense, falling like molten metal from a copper-coloured sky and refracting off the parched earth, held in by the thick fir-woods that

encircled the house. A chapelle-ardente had been arranged in the billiard-room, which had just been redecorated with a white satin wallpaper in a way that had been calculated to hold the maximum light for his failing sight. The laden air and the clotted scent of lilies and tuberoses made the atmosphere unbearable.

It was a little after midnight that Aunt Emmeline was roused from her sleep, as were the servants, by a loud report, a violent bang. Drowsily waking, they thought of gas-mains bursting, of burglars, or of a most improbable air-raid. But curtains hastily flung back revealed only a serenely silent night-sky and there was no smell anywhere of escaping gas, no burglar under any bed, and the house was as silent as the grave. It hardly seemed worth the trouble to search it from garret to cellar; probably one of the dogs had knocked over a stool or something. The household trooped back to bed.

Five or six hours later, just as the housemaids were starting to pull back the shutters, Aunt Emmeline was awakened once more from her sleep, this time by a loud scream. She flung on a dressing-gown and hastened downstairs, to be faced by Loveday, the snowy-haired family butler, with the pale refined intellectual face of a Grand Inquisitor (for him, too, Fate had a startling surprise in store).

'What *was* that, Loveday?' inquired his employer anxiously, for the imperturbable man seemed embarrassed.

'One of the gairls, madam, has been taken faint, I am given to understand.'

'What's the matter with her?'

There was hesitation in his voice and manner.

'Well, madam . . . poor Mr. Vivian. . . .'

She clutched at his arm: 'Go on, Loveday! Tell me quick!'

'There's been a dreadful accident, I'm afraid, madam.'

'Oh God! What *is* it? What's *happened*?'

'In the billiard-room, madam. . . .'

The truth was that Uncle Vivian had exploded.

XIV

THE BUTLER WILL CARVE

SOME time after the misadventure which I have just related, a sensational event occurred in the life of Aunt Emmeline Hotblack.

For several years she had been confined to her bed with an obscure rheumatic complaint which had resulted in a more or less complete spinal curvature; she lay there in her brass bedstead looking, with her toes nearly in her mouth, poor woman, not wholly unlike a whiting waiting to be fried in bread-crumbs. All her relations, and in particular her own nieces, were hopefully expecting her imminent demise. (Since I was but a step-nephew and she disliked me heartily, I entertained no such hopes and was not disappointed.) It really seemed quite impossible that she should last much longer. Conventional to the last, she wisely extracted the maximum amount of pleasure from her wealth, assuring each relative separately and in the strictest confidence that she had left him or her her entire fortune. Some were credulous, some merely hopeful, and others were openly cynical about it — she justified their cynicism for them amply.

She was in her seventy-fourth year, and looked if anything older; certainly she had become more negroid in features than ever; she was as yellow as cheese and sere and shrivelled like a leaf. She had always been a small woman, and now, painfully and grotesquely twisted up, her limbs shrunken with age, she seemed like a big, malevolent doll, and combined a brittle frailty with a curious emanation, still, of life and power. Her big maroon-coloured eyes with the little flecks of gold in them were unchanged; brilliant, suspicious and always with a faint hint of amusement in them, they now blazed like full dark moons in the sunken craters of her face.

Her far-too-many servants waited on her hand and foot, with the greatest assiduity, for they, too, were kept by their employer up to scratch by constant hints of very considerable favours to come. Her technique was simplicity itself, for if by some chance the butler should chance to offend her (a rare thing for any man to do) she would send for, say, the cook, and make it quite clear to the latter that the butler need expect no remembrance of her; but that if she, the cook, continued to do her duty she might reasonably expect a large legacy. And, without in any way committing herself, Mrs. Hotblack managed to instil into her voice a note which seemed to say that such a legacy might be the very largest one of all; one indeed of such proportions as to make all others seem quite trifling by comparison. But Loveday, the butler, was an excellent servant, who gave his mistress few grounds for complaint. Her method was mostly employed in keeping Mrs. Abchurch, the cook, and Mademoiselle Virgilie Hédiard, her maid, in fine fettle and in permanent rivalry. They showered small attentions on her.

It was ten years after the war, but at Cumberledge Lodge the severest of rationing still persisted: this was a purely voluntary measure (though one which Aunt Emmeline was the first to encourage) instituted by the cook herself, in order to curry favour with her employer. Housemaids, parlourmaids and between-maids, accustomed to a rising scale of living, and a relatively recent improvement in conditions, seldom stayed long enough even to indulge the most optimistic of them in the hope of a share in my step-aunt's posthumous lottery; after a few months their health would give way and they would totter off in search of a new situation. But Mademoiselle Hédiard and Mrs. Abchurch were adamant; hopelessly undernourished on a quite inadequate supply of the cheapest food possible, they lost weight and acquired nerves in the soundest of causes; it seemed clear to them, as it did to the remainder of the family, that Aunt Emmeline

couldn't possibly last much longer, that it couldn't be long now to the Great Divide, and then what a beano for the lucky inheritor!

As she lay in bed waiting for the final reckoning, she counted up everything that she could see; washing, lumps of sugar, the currants in the rock cakes, the number of pieces of vegetable in the Irish stew on her plate, and week by week issued (since the cook had virtually encouraged her to do so) fresh ukases to the staff calculated further to reduce their consumption of food. The two women joined in with a will; each economy effected was duly reported to her in the hope that it would finally clinch the matter of the will, and every ounce that these once buxom women lost in weight seemed to bring them a day nearer to their goal. Vying with one another in parsimony, they tottered about the house like skeletons; and so burning was Mrs. Abchurch's mystical faith in her ultimate victory that on one or two occasions she even succeeded in lighting the flame of competition — though it soon flickered out — in the breast of some housemaid as yet unskilled in worldly matters.

'And after all, Miss Eddyard,' the cook would say to the lady's maid, 'who knows? The lucky one *may* be you — and poor madam is looking very, very frail, you know.' And as she spoke, she would be once more cutting down the margarine ration for the servants' hall.

Only Loveday held out. Knowing his employer's penchant for men, he had no doubts that he would be the one to secure the chief prize, forgetting that he was as old as she was, or nearly so.

'A man needs to keep his strength up, Mrs. Abchurch,' he would say, invariably insisting on having specially prepared meals cooked for him, considerably richer in nourishment than those hungrily consumed by the rest of the staff. And this was duly reported both by the cook and by Mademoiselle Hédiard to Aunt Emmeline and marked up against him.

'Though I don't see why 'e 'as to bother, an old man like 'im, Miss Eddyard,' the cook would say. ''E 'asn't anything to do, really. What does 'e want to bother about 'is strength for?'

Aunt Emmeline lay in bed and asked herself precisely the same question. Why did he worry about his strength? Her curiosity and that of Mrs. Abchurch was soon to be assuaged. Meanwhile she grew frailer and frailer; she could no longer keep down her Benger's or her Brand's; her doctors talked of giving her oxygen, and only hesitated because to do so seemed so hopeless. The tension in the servants' hall became terrific. Even those rank outsiders, the new housemaid and the new between-maid, felt themselves involved in the excitement.

The English and the French doyennes exchanged their dreams.

'Un *cher petit cottage* at le Cannet for me, if I 'ave ze luck,' said Mademoiselle Hédiard.

'What I fancy,' said Mrs. Abchurch, 'is my very own dream-bungalow at Peacehaven, dear.'

But Loveday kept his wishes to himself, and no one had any inkling as to what they might be. His severely detached expression and his cold inquisitorial eye did not invite inquiries. No one knew what he did with his spare time, or where he went on his days off; but he was known to venture occasionally a very little flutter on the turf, and he was a prominent figure as a sidesman at Saint Botolph's, a small, obscure church in the Byzantine style, which was considered 'fast' not only by Aunt Emmeline, but by the rest of the 'low' staff as well. It was particularly unpopular with Mademoiselle Hédiard, who felt that it was infringing in its 'highness' on the rights of the Catholic Church. It was also known that the butler was musical, and he had once admitted to Aunt Emmeline that he had been a choir-boy in his youth. The organist at Saint Botolph's was tubercular, and when he fell ill and was unable to continue his work it

was Loveday who coached the young choristers; he was also a very useful figure at every sort of outing; at the Sunday School treat, for instance, despite his age, he would organize the games and sports, and more particularly those that the girls went in for. He had his favourites like anybody else, the pretty, chlorotic Brownie, eleven-year-old Nesta Repuke, and little Caprina Bumby, who was perhaps a year younger. He had once or twice been seen on a Sunday afternoon after the Children's Service, strolling with Nesta in the less-frequented parts of the pine-woods that fringed the outskirts of Langholme, and unbending from his habitual gravity enough to slip a mint-humbug into the child's mouth from time to time. Apart from these fragments of information the man's private life was an enigma; yet not a breath of scandal had ever attached itself to him.

Aunt Emmeline Hotblack was growing weaker and weaker. At the other end of England her nieces were sending off light-coloured frocks to the dyers. The doctors gave her a week at most before she finally rejoined the late Septimus in the vacant lot by his side which had been awaiting her for so many years.

It was about half past ten on a crisp winter's morning that the front door bell of Cumberledge Lodge rang; the parlour-maid was in the hall dusting and went to open it. She was met by a heavily-built man in a dark blue suit and a bowler.

'Does anyone by the name of Loveday live here, Miss?' he asked. Registering all a well-trained servant's contempt at this form of address, she looked the man up and down coldly.

'Mr. Loveday is the butler here.'

'I'd like to have a word with him, if you don't mind.'

'If you'll wait I'll go and see if Mr. Loveday is engaged or not.'

She was about to close the door, leaving the man in the porch, but somehow he had insinuated himself past her and

was standing inside the vestibule; she gave him a look and vanished in the direction of the butler's pantry. After a few minutes the swing-door opened and Loveday appeared, with his carefully waved and brushed white hair, in his morning-coat and striped trousers, peering short-sightedly at the stranger. On the first landing Annie the parlour-maid leaned over the banisters to try and catch what was going on. She caught plenty. The lumpy-looking man was saying in the gentlest voice possible:

'I think you know a little girl called Nesta Repuke?'

But Annie was staring at Loveday, whose body was suddenly shaken by a violent nervous spasm; his wild light eyes were starting out of his head and he didn't seem to be listening to the stranger, who was now saying:

'I think you were out with her in the woods for a long time on Tuesday evening last?'

Loveday's body drooped in ghastly despair, as though the bone was turning to wax under the spare flesh; he seemed to shrink into himself, and bent now in a sudden extremity of age he started to shake at the knees. Inexplicably, at the same time, a look as though of relief crept into his face; something that he had been anxiously awaiting for a long time had at last happened.

'Well?' asked the stranger.

But Loveday didn't answer him; he was smiling faintly to himself and seemed hardly aware even of the other's presence. The man in the blue suit had put his hand in his pocket and had pulled out something shining that clattered a little; he took a couple of paces towards the old man, when quick as light the latter's hand darted out from behind his back, not quivering now as the visible one had been, but firmly. There was a loud scream from the top of the stairs as something flashed with the cold sunlight on it like a thin gold bird, like an arrow of light in the old man's hand, darting across and up his body. A fearful scarlet sprang from his

throat as he gave very softly at the knees, falling with the stiff lightness of the very old on to the carpet at the feet of the detective. There was a long suspiration of air from the severed wind-pipe, a gurgle like that of the last bath-water running away, and Loveday was dead.

Annie's shrieks rang through the house, causing a happy consternation in the servants' hall, where it was optimistically assumed that she had at last discovered her mistress dead in her bed. But such dreams were speedily shattered. Annie was screaming outside Aunt Emmeline's door like a steam-calliope; and this was too much for my aunt. What *was* going on? She made a terrible convulsive effort to move and actually succeeded in rolling out of bed on to the floor; and there her voice, long accustomed to command, was even more powerful than that of the parlour-maid.

Mademoiselle Hédiard ran to her assistance.

'What in heaven's name's the *matter*?' gasped Mrs. Hotblack. The maid, horrified to see her mistress lying on the floor, blurted out what had happened, which she had only that minute discovered for herself, and was highly indignant at being thus distracted from the tragedy.

'Get me to ... the top of ... the stairs!' my step-aunt managed to order. The maid tried to protest, but something in Aunt Emmeline's eye quelled her. She succeeded somehow in trundling her, rather as one trundles a hoop, into place; but once there, an effort which must have cost the sick woman agonies, she was furious to discover that her line of vision was impeded by the group of hysterical women clustered round the dead man's body. The detective was telephoning for an ambulance, and the seduction of little Nesta Repuke was amply avenged; but this Aunt Emmeline did not learn about until later. In the meantime life and vitality had come back into her eyes.

'Get out of the way!' she shouted. 'I can't see what's happened!'

Torn between sulks and hysteria, the women moved away, while my step-aunt, propped up in the arms of her maid, gazed and gazed. The detective put down the telephone and turned to the servants.

'Don't stand there gaping! Get a sheet and cover the poor devil up!'

Aunt Emmeline started to try and pulverize him with a look, but he had gone to the telephone again and she recollected that one should not display too great an excitement in the face of death. She turned to Virgilie Hédiard: 'Get me back into bed!'

The kitchen was enjoying a surfeit of strong emotions, and it was only later that the comforting belief got about that the effect of the shock would just about polish Aunt Hotblack off. It was left to Mademoiselle Hédiard, when she came down from the sick woman's room, to strike an unpalatable note of Gallic realism calculated to cloud the prevailing optimism.

'Whatever is it, Miss Eddyard?' asked Mrs. Abchurch anxiously, catching the grim irony reflected on the former's face. 'You don't mean to tell me that poor madam's — ' She broke off and then continued: 'I knew all along that a dreadful thing like this 'appening would be too much for 'er poor 'eart! Oh, my poor madam!' And she relapsed into tears, while the Frenchwoman gazed first at her and then at the floor in ruminant cynicism.

'I am afraid that you are jumping to conclusions too much, Meesis Abchourche,' she said with a narrow smile on the wrong side of her face.

'Now whatever do you mean?'

'Do you not think that *poor* madame' — the adjective heavy with bitter irony — 'ees suffering from shock at thees dreadful ting?'

'Why, of course she is! Why, it stands to sense and reason, Miss Eddyard.'

The Frenchwoman looked at her impatiently.

'*Vous croyez?*' she snorted. 'Suffering, ees eet? Mais, nom de dieu, elle s'en *régale*, madame! Eef eet ees shock that *poor dear* madame ees suffering from, eet ees not ze kind of shock zat you mean, Meesis Abchourche.'

'Whatever *do* you mean, Miss Eddyard? I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about.'

The Frenchwoman stared at her, furiously contemptuous of her dull-wittedness.

'*Poor dear madame*, Meesis Abchourche, ees suffering from ze kind of shock which 'as made 'er order for 'er déjeuner a nice bit of *mince*, very, very soft, weez plenty of petits pois and pommes sautés. Poor dear madame, 'oo 'as not eaten a piece of meat for five years! And 'ow does zat strike you, madame?'

The cook's face slowly unfolded itself into a dawning look of intelligence and horror; after a long silence she murmured in a low voice.

'You mean to tell me, Miss Eddyard, you think it done 'er *good?*'

The superior French instinct for reality had the poor cook quite hypnotized.

'Just so much good, *ma chère*, zat she 'as asked me to tell you to go down to ze cellar and see eef you can find a bottle of ze Mouton-Rothschild zat Monsieur Vivian used to like.'

Mrs. Abchurch's sunken face had turned the colour of suet.

'But she's never in all 'er life *touched* a drop, to my certain knowledge, dear. A regular blue-ribboner, if you ask me; and no wonder either after what used to go on 'ere.'

The two women fell silent as they took in the full horror of their situation. Mademoiselle Hédiard was of course perfectly right; Loveday's suicide did indeed give Aunt Emmeline a new lease of life. It was poor Mrs. Abchurch who was rapidly heading for a nervous breakdown, having, thanks to the meagreness of her own cuisine, no reserves of vitality

on which to fall back; and even the French maid's tougher fibre didn't preserve her from delayed shock.

But Mrs. Hotblack became a new woman, growing positively jovial; and Mother, calling one day on her sister-in-law, actually surprised her with a lip-stick in her trembling fingers, in the very act of painting her huge African mouth. It certainly afforded her, as mother remarked afterwards, plenty of scope for decoration. Some workmen were busy pointing the outside of the house, and there were no net-curtains to my step-aunt's bedroom. A very young and nice looking workman gazed in at the two women for a moment, and a look of indescribable coyness overspread the elder woman's Ethiopian features, giving her something of the air and pathos of a blonder King Kong, but seen through the wrong end of a telescope, as she whispered to Mother:

'Susannah, dear, would you be so very kind as to draw the blinds down? I should hate to think that I was putting ideas into the head of that *nice* young man out there.'

There wasn't a shadow of irony in her voice or manner, as with a trembling hand she patted her false kinky 'front' into place, and pulling out her pearls over the collar of her flannel night-gown, threw a last tender glance in the direction of the ladder. . . .

The new lease of life which Loveday's suicide had given her enabled her to cut her housekeeping bills down still further, although her own personal expenditure went up, both on romantic literature and to some extent on cosmetics. True, she never recovered from her spinal curvature, but from being a fried whiting she became a devilled one, leading her relatives and retainers yet further up the garden regarding the ultimate disposal of her fortune. Hoping against hope they all hung on; but then so did she. She lasted for several years and then suddenly died one morning without any warning at all. Her nieces got a little money and Mother got a fairly substantial legacy, but the bulk of

it went to various missionary societies, while her unfortunate servants got nothing at all, with the exception of the gardener, who received two hundred and fifty pounds, scoring most unfairly over the others on the basis of sex-favouritism.

Worn out and hopelessly devitalized by their long and self-imposed privations in the cause of economy and robbed of all their dearest hopes, the indoor servants were by now far too enfeebled to put up much show of resistance. Mademoiselle Hédiard soon followed her late employer to the grave, while poor Mrs. Abchurch, realizing at last that her dream-bungalow was after all only such stuff as dreams are made of, hurried down one night to the kitchen after the rest of the staff had gone to bed and put her head in the gas-oven.

I should like to think that Aunt Emmeline's ghost was unquiet, yet somehow I profoundly doubt it. As a matter of fact, in the years that have passed since her death, I've learned to feel a certain affection for her. Her dynamism had never been afforded any real outlet; and she knew that the world knew as well as she did that her marriage was a mere mockery. She was grotesque and preposterous and unlovable, but somewhere buried in her lay a real temperament which had never had a chance of development. She was the last but one of the Mountfaucons, for her nieces were hers only by marriage.

It was some little while after Aunt Emmeline's death that Morven's health began to fail, ravaged by his own habits, for which he was possibly not altogether to blame. Mother was resigned, good-humoured, if somewhat less patient with him than she had been with Father. She had by now accustomed herself to the idea that he was incapable of any effective effort to break with habits of such long standing. A woman herself of considerable strength of will, she wasn't well qualified to understand (though she could tolerate it gracefully) weakness in others, since it was unattractive to her. To

bear with it sympathetically all her deepest feelings had to be aroused, and on these Morven could no longer play. She refused to divorce him, for she disapproved of divorce, but gritted her teeth and settled down to 'do her duty'. Her good nature robbed this forbidding task of much of its usual sting.

Her nature, in so many ways like glass, was in one its contrary, so far as her second husband was concerned. Just as some huge lens cools from its surface inwards, coldness gradually irradiating to a still molten core, so her feelings for Morven very slowly turned to marble at their centre, chilling the secret places of the heart, but leaving the exterior personality unchanged. Yet the latter years of their life together *were* calmer; Morven did drink less, conceivably owing to a drug which his wife, with the cook's connivance, caused to be slipped into his food.

He died quite suddenly one summer in his sleep, his face untouched by death's traditional quietude.

EPILOGUE

WHAT law is it that causes the doom of a family? Life is far too complex to be explained by any mere economic analysis.

Is it that desires fulfilled throughout long centuries leave the will without *élan*? Does inherited experience accumulate, as it were, in the transmitted blood-stream, at last clogging the veins with ambitions that have been accomplished and are dead? As the stock of a fruit-tree will gradually become sterile and stunted if it is not crossed with new wood, so perhaps in old families the spirit shrinks and withers, unless the parent-stock is renewed, spiritually as well as physically, at the propitious moment. In that case,

it would seem that my Mother's health, vitality, and soundness of character might have been sufficient to revivify the dead wood — unless, as I think, the moment when it might have been possible had gone. Perhaps if she had married Father when he was her own age, while he still loved life — if he ever did — things might have been different. I can't tell; I saw her fighting the past, his habit of loneliness, pride and the egotism of age.

While all her energies were set on life and on creation and on quite reasonable ambitions for her child, it seems that those twin impulses which we all possess towards life and towards death were in Father's case in due course exactly poised, and that the weight of the past upon his own experience had brought him to their equation — knowledge of the vanity of things; and that knowledge insulated him against activity.

With inactivity came the decay which his energetic wife was powerless to stop, and then old age. If he had possessed only what every human being on this planet needs — a margin of security and nothing more — if he had thus been compelled to work, he might have achieved something in life; but as it was he succumbed to indifference. He had refused to participate in man's struggle against Nature and against Fate, to try to pit his weak will against their colossal power, and, by taking the line of least resistance, helped them, aided already by vast and imminent social changes, to end the ancient family. His fate and that of his family were no more than the destiny of the dinosaur; poor brute, it couldn't help the pattern in which nature had chosen to mould it.

I have in my nature the same split which was in my Mother's, a division between paganism and puritanism. With half of my mind I can't see why Father shouldn't have yielded as he did to his aristocratic impulses in a world where social justice is the merest abstraction; and I feel only

regret that he refused to extract *more* pleasure out of life. With the other and puritan side of myself it seems to me that human society has paid an inordinate price for the existence of countless families like mine, destined at best only to 'come into' money and cultivate their sensibilities and their egotism. I feel, too, a certain regret that he didn't pull himself together and come to grips with what one is pleased to call reality. He lived in a golden age, without being able to perceive it — an age, of course, that was golden only, like any other, for those whose pockets were lined with gold — and, fortunately placed as he was, he might have plucked the last rose of summer without being disgruntled.

As a doomed specimen myself, I vastly prefer him to that average enemy of art and passion, the Little Man; but am still, nevertheless, the prisoner of my muddled morality. An insistent voice reminds me that in the suburban by-pass world of modern life lie the hidden seeds of genius, of potential creation, to which opportunity has so often been denied. I know only too well that no society which denies opportunity is civilized. (And I remember that it was a d'Arfey who created opportunity for one of England's greatest men of genius.) But when I reflect upon some of the things that opportunity calls into being, I shudder. . . .

Father's uniqueness lay in the fact that he was by temperament profoundly an aristocrat, of a now almost vanished species that even in those days was nearing extinction. As Mother remarked, even his arrogance was completely impersonal. He was implacable in his refusal to come to terms with Money, to accept as an equal (or even as a human being at all) someone whose only claim to distinction lay in vast wealth, if it was recently acquired and did not wear the softening patina of age. Was his hostility, his cold, detached insolence, his refusal to be placated, and that of men like him, a final gesture of defiance at the avalanche which was already overtaking them? I think he felt that he was himself

a repository (as my romantic Mother thought when a girl) of a dim, noble, chevaleresque tradition, of which the precise nature had become obliterated by time. He had perhaps in his imagination endowed a lost pattern of living with a nobility which he could not have exactly defined and which was probably illusory in any case. But was it not that he and his forebears had indeed actually acquired a certain liberality of mind, not through the inheritance of a nebulous and antique tradition, but through the simple fact that centuries of wealth and security had humanized and refined them?

If, as I think, the Mountfaucons perished as a result of their refusal to value the true things of the spirit, it seems to me that almost the converse had happened in the case of the d'Arfeys. The elder Mountfaucons had at best substituted for spiritual laws a rigid moral rule-of-thumb, allowing their psychic and emotionally creative life to wither away, until there was nothing left for them but extinction. In the case of the d'Arfeys, however, selection, nature and tradition had all worked together in an effort to make them exist and function on a fairly high plane; this seems to have been the blind, underlying purpose behind their destinies.

When Father, gifted as he was, denied by his inactivity and indifference the moral claims of the tradition in which he believed more than in anything else — even if it was only an illusion — he was denying life. It is not for me to blame him, but he was incurring a penalty against which there is no appeal, as some have already discovered and others have yet to learn.

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