Hugh Walpole

# THE SEA TOWER

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This ebook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the ebook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the ebook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a FP administrator before proceeding.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

*Title:* The Sea Tower
*Date of first publication:* 1939
*Author:* Hugh Walpole (1884-1941)
*Date first posted:* Apr. 12, 2017
*Date last updated:* Apr. 12, 2017
Faded Page eBook #20170432

This ebook was produced by: Al Haines, Cindy Beyer & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at http://www.pgdpcanada.net

# THE SEA TOWER

## A LOVE STORY

BY

HUGH WALPOLE

LONDON
MACMILLAN & CO. LTD
1939

COPYRIGHT

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
BY R. & R. CLARK, LIMITED, EDINBURGH

FOR

ATHENE SEYLER

WITH

LOVE

Sta' come torre ferma, che non crolla
Giammai la cima per soffiar de' venti!

DANTE: *Purgatorio*

# CONTENTS

## PART I
## THE BRIDE


| CHAP. | | PAGE |
|---|---|---|
| I. | The Wind | 3 |
| II. | The Characters | 21 |
| III. | Joe's Heart and Mind | 37 |
| IV. | Biography: One Fine Lady | 54 |
| V. | Cat's Back | 72 |
| VI. | Peacock | 90 |
| VII. | Soul of This Captain | 115 |
| VIII. | Christmas Party | 131 |


## PART II
## THE MOTHER


| | | |
|---|---|---|
| I. | Sea Within the Sea | 161 |
| II. | Three | 179 |
| III. | The Deadly Blow | 195 |
| IV. | The Sin is Here | 217 |
| V. | The Captain says Good-Bye | 237 |
| VI. | Over the Edge | 251 |
| VII. | The Evening | 265 |
| VIII. | The Night—First-hand Account from Christina | 276 |
| IX. | The Joke | 298 |

# PART I
# THE BRIDE

# CHAPTER I

## THE WIND

DRIVEN by the angry, threatening wind, they found the waiting-room. Christina stopped for a moment at the sight of its bleak ugly unfriendliness.

Joe kissed her.

'Don't worry, darling. There's no one to see. And if there were, it wouldn't matter. After all, we're married.'

He held her close against him, and she could feel the hard circle of his watch and the strong deep beat of his heart. The wind tore at her skirts.

They sat down on the bench and stared at a poster of a girl in a bright bathing-dress. She was little better than naked and as brown as an Indian. They both stared like children. A sulky little flame struggled to die in a wedge of sodden-looking coal. There was a torn newspaper inside the grate. A train whistled.

'Do you think the luggage will be all right?'

'Of course. I've known that porter almost since I was a baby. Cold, darling? Come closer.'

He pressed her to his side. His big hand cupped her breast. He kissed the back of her neck.

'I love you . . . I love you . . . I love you.'

She didn't respond: she sat rigid, staring at the girl in the bathing-dress. She whispered, as though to the girl: 'Someone may come in.'

'All right. . . . Just tell me—I don't need to know—just tell me. . . .'

She didn't reply.

'Come on. Tell me. . . .'

'You know. You don't need telling.'

'No, I don't—after last night.' He burst out laughing and jumped to his feet. He began to dance about the waiting-room, making ridiculous steps, humming to himself. He was radiantly happy.

Her serious gaze turned from the poster to her husband. He was over six foot high, black hair, brown face and hands, his mouth large and boyish, his body broad, muscular, everything that the girl in the poster would like.

Christina knew, now that she had been married to him for a week, that his whole body was brown. Her mother said, at the very first, that he was just like an Italian. His family had been, however, English for centuries and centuries: yes, but there had perhaps been foreign blood once. Many ships had been wrecked on that Glebeshire

coast. The Fields had lived at Scarlatt in unbroken succession for five hundred years.

Christina thought of these things and then suddenly she smiled: that quick shy smile, sprung in an unexpected moment from her gravity. He looked like a little boy, dancing.

'Got to dance to keep warm. Come and dance too.'

But she wouldn't do that.

He sat down on the bench beside her again and once more put his arm around her.

She asked: 'Do you think they'll like me?' (Dozens and dozens of times she had asked this.)

'Of course. Of course. You're not frightened, are you?'

She spoke rather hurriedly.

'Yes, I am. You know I am. I can't help being shy. You remember the first time you met me you said how shy I was.'

'No—the second time.'

'Well, the second time. You said "How shy you are!" and I said it was because I'd lived so much alone with father and mother.'

'Not forgetting sister Anne.'

'Oh yes—Anne. I'm glad they've got her. They won't miss me. Sometimes I used to think they didn't know whether I was there or not.'

'Your father's a terrible dreamer.'

'Yes, he is, and it's a good thing, because then he isn't hurt or sorry about anything.'

He took her hand in his.

'Look here, Chris darling. You're not to be frightened of anything. I'm there to look after you, aren't I?'

'Oh, listen! there are the bells!'

Very faintly from behind the blurred dusty windows came the sweet rocking murmur of the Cathedral bells.

'Yes. All my life I've heard them.' His voice was grave now. She was looking at him, as often in the last three months she had looked—seeing him again and again as though for the very first time. 'Twenty years ago, when I was tiny, we'd come in with mother when she had to do a day's shopping. We'd take that slow train—it isn't altered, you'll be in it yourself presently—stop at every little station. We knew them every one by heart—St. Luce, Ferney, Little Goswell, Gorton Sands, Perry Mount. Then there'd be the shopping, lunch at the George, and then a toy each from the Market-Place. Mother would give us anything.' He laughed. 'She still would and

does!'

'She's kind, then!'

'Kind—I should say so. Of course she likes to have her own way. We let her think she runs the lot of us. That keeps her happy.'

Christina held his hand more tightly.

'She *must* have been angry when she'd heard you'd married.'

'I expect she was for a moment. The very last thing any of them expected. I'm not like Congreve, though—I've flirted and that sort of thing. Mother must have expected me to marry one day.'

'Oh, I do hope she'll like me!'

'Like you! She'll adore you. Everyone will.'

'Congreve is a funny name for a man.'

'Yes—that was father. He used to read a lot in those days when we were babies. Congreve and Wycherley and all sorts of old boys.'

'Doesn't he read any more now?'

'He thinks he does, but I'm afraid he's frightfully lazy. Mother and I have spoiled him. I look after the place, and mother looks after the house.'

'And Congreve paints?'

'Yes—awful pictures *I* think they are.'

'Does he ever sell them?'

'He used to try to. He even had a show in London once. He doesn't bother any more. As long as there's a place to sleep and food to eat he's all right.'

'And then there's your aunt.'

'Aunt Matty. Yes, she helps mother. And then there's the Captain.'

'Captain Green?'

'Yes—the Captain. We never call him anything else. As soon as you see him he'll tell you he's leaving next week. But he never does. He just hangs around.'

'Everyone seems very lazy.'

'Yes. I suppose they are. I never noticed it till I went up to London. Three months is the longest I've ever been away from home.'

None of this was new to her. She had asked about them all again and again. Only now, with every minute they were growing closer. An hour in the little train and they'd all *be*! She had feared the dentist in just this way as, her hand in her mother's, her knees faltering, she had advanced up that threatening street, a hot, dry, heart-hammering panic and a relief that at last the long-dreaded climax was upon her!

How foolish though to feel this about Joe's family, for Joe would be with her, always at her side: and, after all, it would not be for ever! Later, after a month or

two, they would have a home of their own! This led her to say:

'If you manage the place and the others are all lazy, what will they do when we go away to live by ourselves?'

He kissed her.

'They'll just have to get along somehow.' Then he added: 'I haven't a profession, you know. I've always looked after the place and been too busy to learn anything else.'

There was a silence. Then she said:

'Do you mean we'll be living with your people for ever?'

'Of course not. If I can look after Scarlatt—and I do it jolly well, I can tell you—I can look after somewhere else. Besides, father's got plenty of money. He'll help me when the time comes.'

'Where do you think we'll go to?' She did not as a rule ask questions, but now, as though something told her that this was the last hour of their intimacy together, she was compelled.

'We'll go wherever you say.'

'I think Wiltshire would be fun.'

He laughed.

'Why Wiltshire?'

'We've got a sketch in the drawing-room of Stonehenge. You've seen it. The Downs look so wide—as though nothing stopped them.'

'You wait till you see the sea. You've never really seen it.'

'No. Only Brighton once with mother.'

Why was she asking questions to which she already knew the answers? Only this about Wiltshire she had not said before. It was perhaps this grimy, cold, shut-in room that made her long for those cloud-shadowed Downs, those timeless stones!

The door opened. A porter, the wind howling around him, stood there.

'Train's ready, Mr. Field. I've put your luggage in. Train's up there on the right.'

They walked along, hand in hand. The wind drove right down the platform as though it were rushing on some urgent mission. She saw the lights of Polchester blinking below her. It seemed that they didn't like her. Then, out of a sky mottled with evening cloud like the tumbled wings of huge birds, the Cathedral bells rang the hour. There was no one on the platform: from the melancholy stranded train a few country faces looked out. There was a truck standing there with two calves, huddled together, head to rump, under netting.

In the chill, silent, little carriage they sat close together and, when the train at length started, at once Christina began, hurriedly, as though she had no time to spare.

'Joe—we've been married a week and it's been like heaven. I never dreamt that anything could be so wonderful. But now I'm frightened. I feel as though it's all going to change.'

Joe turned to look at her. Yes, she was like a frightened child, her brow wrinkled, her mouth a little open. Her beauty, he thought triumphantly, no one in the whole world could deny: he never read poetry, but from somewhere he remembered some words. He had thought of them the first moment that he had seen her, standing up in front of the fire in her parents' old-fashioned drawing-room, so tall, slender and fair. 'Our girl white as snow, the one speckless lily since the world began.'

He had longed, at that very first instant, to put his hand through that gold hair, to clasp and protect that slim child's body. Her fairness was not chill, for, when she smiled, all her face lit with pleasure and friendliness. Her eyes were clear as flowers touched with the sun. Had you told him before that eyes could be like flowers he would have laughed at your affectation, but now he knew that it could be so. Her body was a child's body, firm and sweet and strong, but in this last week it had become a woman's body, her boy's head, with the curls crisp at the back of her neck, lying, in utter trust, in the hollow of his strong shoulder, his hand between her breasts.

There had been nothing as yet in his life to approach in ecstasy those long hours when they had lain, enfolded together, without speaking—and beyond the window there had rumbled the first trams of the early morning. Now again they would lie so, but in his beloved home, and it would not be the trams but the sibilant whisper and stealthy withdrawal of the sea, the sudden turn and splash of the wave on the rocks below the Tower.

Then, looking at her, he realized that his mother would not like Christina to be so tall. His mother disliked tall women.

'Of course you feel frightened, darling. I know *I* should be in your place. But there's nothing whatever to be frightened of.'

'Perhaps there isn't. But, Joe . . . I want you to remember one thing. I've hardly ever been away from home before. I've only really met father's and mother's friends, except the girls at school and they don't count. Perhaps,' and she smiled, 'if I'd met more men I wouldn't have fallen in love with *you*.'

'Oh yes you would. We were destined for one another.'

'All lovers think that.'

'Ah, we're not like other lovers.'

'All lovers think that too.'

She was serious again.

'I want you to understand one thing. It isn't easy for me to say.'

'What is it, sweetheart?'

'You're always complaining that I can't say pretty things. Well, I can't. But now —just because I feel as though I shan't get another chance—I want you to remember this.'

'Remember what?'

'Remember this moment. In the train going to Scarlatt for the first time. Whatever happens afterwards, whatever people may say or do, I love you for ever and ever. Joe, I do, I do. I can never change. Nothing can alter it. I know it. Whatever you are, whatever other people make you, even though you hate me, I'll love you for ever and ever.'

'Hate you!' Joe threw his head back and laughed. He tried to kiss her but she would not let him.

'No. This is serious. I don't know much about life yet, but I do know that men aren't like women. Love isn't to them what it is to women. Women only want one man and when they've got him they want nothing else. That isn't what I've read in silly novels or people have told me. I feel it in myself. And so if you change or get tired of me *I* shan't change.' She paused a moment, then added: 'Of course if you tired of me I wouldn't hang on to you. I wouldn't keep you if you wanted to go. I might be ashamed of you or despise you, but I'd always love you.'

'Darling, you're trembling.'

He caught her into his arms and held her as though he were defying all the world.

In his arms she felt safer, but not very safe. It was dark because now, at the beginning of October, they had changed from summer-time. She always hated it when that change arrived, for with that turning of the clock-hand, light and heat seemed to slip away from the world. So now it was dark beyond the windows and, to the beating of Joe's heart, with eyes half-closed, she could see pictures.

She touched his neck and he laid his cheek against her hand. How comforting that warmth and strength of the fleshly contact of two lovers! But she had heard a girl tell once how 'You wake up in the morning and it's all gone. You don't want him to touch you any more. The very idea gives you goose-flesh, if you know what I mean.' Then what was Love? Its very essence seemed to reside in this gentle, almost casual touch of cheek and hand. But—when *that* was gone? What remained? How had she been so sure that she would love Joe for ever, as she had just said? She knew, she knew! She had known from the first instant, when, half asleep, half reading some novel, she had sprung to her feet at the sound of the opening door and the voice of the maid saying, 'Mr. Atcherley to see Mrs. Foran, Miss Christina,' and

behind fat, rosy-faced, stupid Tom Atcherley there had been this stranger—tall, dark, handsome like an actor in a play. He had not been like an actor for long! In ten minutes he had become someone human, a boy who was bashful when he made a call. Not bashful with her, though. Almost at once he was telling her about his home in Glebeshire, right on the sea with the Tower five hundred years old, and how the sea dashes up to the very windows. Soon he was telling her about himself, how he'd come to London for three months' instruction in farm planning and building—some very modern course. It had been his mother, he said, who suggested it. He had spoken of his mother almost as though he were still a little boy.

They had told one another afterwards that they had fallen in love at that very first meeting. A week later he had proposed to her and she at once accepted him. Her father and mother had dreamily received him, as though they had known him always. Only her sister Anne had objected. Anne didn't like men in any case, but especially she didn't like Joe Field. He was too good-looking for her and too sure of himself. Did Christina realize, she asked, what living with Joe's family would mean?

'It's only just at first,' Christina had answered.

'Just at first! That's what they always say. He hasn't got a profession, has he?'

'He manages estates.'

'Manages estates! If he's managed his father's estate well they won't let him go. And if he hasn't he won't be able to manage anyone else's.'

It hadn't mattered what Anne said. She thought men disgusting and told Joe so. How Joe laughed!

'If everyone thought as you do the world would come to an end!'

'An awful pity that would be!' Anne retorted.

Her friend, Miss Pitcairn, came and inspected Joe. Miss Pitcairn was dressed just like a man, with a stiff white collar and brass buttons to her waistcoat. She liked Joe and was glad that Christina was going to be married. She had been jealous of Anne's love for Christina. Now she would have Anne all to herself. She clapped Joe on the back.

'Treat her well, old fellow,' she said. 'She's worth it.' But she really meant, although she didn't say it: don't bring her back to her family again.

They had a very quiet little wedding. The night preceding, Anne held Christina in her arms and cried over her. Christina, who was kind-hearted, bore this patiently but disliked it. When Anne was sentimental she seemed to be acting against nature.

Two days before their departure for Scarlatt, Christina received this letter from Mrs. Field.

Dear Daughter—We eagerly await you and long to make you feel that you are now one of the family. From the picture Joe sent us I know that he is a very lucky man.

Your expectant,

Elizabeth Field.

A strange letter—something old-fashioned, something regal too. She imagined Mrs. Field as a tall, vastly commanding woman.

She murmured into Joe's waistcoat: 'You've never shown me a photograph of your mother.'

'No,' said Joe. 'You'll see her soon enough.'

Christina, as though she were seeing her now, sat up, straightened her hat, patted her curls, took out the dark-blue vanity bag, examined herself seriously in the little mirror, applied some powder, sighed and said:

'I see your mother as very tall and commanding.'

'Why?'

'After that letter she wrote me.'

'As a matter of fact she's short and plump.'

They didn't talk for a while. There was a small dust of constraint between them.

'You must let her know,' Christina said at last, 'that I'm not at my best at first. I shan't be for a week or two. I can hear them all saying to one another: "*Whatever* he saw in her."'

Joe took her vanity bag from her.

'Look at me, Christina.'

She looked at him.

'Do you love me?'

'Yes.'

'Do you trust me?'

'Yes.'

'Do you think I would let any harm or unhappiness come to you ever?'

She smiled, her whole face lighting up.

'Not if you could prevent it.'

'Very well, then. Don't talk nonsense.'

But she realized that she was now, in very truth, most terribly frightened. She had not been able to see the names of the stations as the train stopped. They were as usual abominably lit and this little line shared with its bigger brothers and sisters the British determination that no name of any station shall ever be visible to the eye of

any anxious traveller. She did not, therefore, know where they were, but they must be dangerously close.

She saw them all standing there in a group awaiting them: Mrs. Field, Mr. Field, the Captain, Aunt Matty, brother Congreve—waiting as judges wait, grudging from the very first that their beloved Joe had given himself to a stranger, determined not to like her or receive her as one of themselves. Why had not this all seemed to her terrible in London? It had in fact not seemed terrible at all but rather an exciting and original adventure in Joe's company. She was trembling. Her feet were cold stones, her head a burning fire. And she did what she always did when her shy integrity was invaded: she put on her armour—her armour of pride, of silence, of remoteness.

Joe looked at her.

'Darling, what's the matter? You're like a statue of Joan of Arc.'

But she did not smile.

'Say something to me. This is a great moment for me—coming home with my bride.'

'Whom they are prepared to detest!'

'No. No. You'll find them charming. They are kind, warm-hearted. . . .'

The train stopped with a little bump.

Joe said: 'We are there!'

In the road outside the station a car was waiting, but Christina had no eyes or ears for it. She stood transfixed, her eyes up, staring into a sky in which stars, it seemed, were being wildly blown about, while thin white scraps of cloud rose and fell. The wind was roaring in her ears, but it was not the wind that she heard. It was the sea. The sea was pounding and crashing, as she fancied, at her very feet. Surely only a yard away it rang a gong like a diabolical angel, commanding her, trying to force her will, while into her nostrils every scent of freshness and power was blowing; the aftermath of rain, the wet decay of autumn leaves, the sharp salt pungency of the sea, a wistful scent like that of some broken flower.

She was gloriously excited, she who had never known the sea. She wanted to follow the pull at her body and run. It was dark but yet there was light in the air: light of the wind-blown stars and the pale thin clouds. There was a moon somewhere, and, although she knew they were not there, she could see the towering waves crashing through the trees, and the broken starry glitter of the moonlight on that invisible sea.

Joe's touch was on her arm.

'Come, darling. The car's waiting.'

She sat very close to him now.

'How far is it?'

'About ten miles.'

She was summoning all her reserves. She would *not* be frightened. She would not allow them to think that she was afraid of their behaviour. She did not care *what* they said, nor *how* they looked. Oh, but she did, oh, but she did!

This first impression was so dreadfully important. If she did not impress them at once she would never impress them. She realized then that Joe also was nervous. She could not say how she knew except that they were so spiritually close. He was afraid for her sake but also for his own. He did not want them to think that he had made a mistake.

Almost furiously she said:

'You're afraid of what they'll think of me!'

'Of course I'm not.'

'It doesn't matter what they think of me. If they don't like me we can just go away—can't we?'

'Yes. Of course.'

She was not satisfied with his answer. She was almost crazy with nervousness.

'You promise me?'

'Promise you what, darling?'

'That we'll go away if they don't like me.'

He said jokingly:

'It's my home, you know.'

'Yes, of course—I'm very silly.'

And she was. Her older self within her told her that she was behaving like a baby. This was the way to bore a husband! Had she not told herself over and over again that she would behave like a mature woman, be subtle, wise, adroit? Was she being subtle and adroit? Most certainly not.

She put out her hand and rested it on his warm firm thigh for confidence. He laid his hand on hers. His voice was trembling as he said:

'Just about here, in another minute or two, we are almost on the sand. The road skirts it. If I open the window a second you'll hear the sea.'

Hear it! It broke into the car like a tornado, splashing its thunder all over them. There was a wonderful rush of sea-smell, and a freshness that was like a new world, that had never been tested before, blowing itself into existence.

He closed the window.

'Up to ten years ago there used to be a bridge here. Hundreds of years old. A great-uncle of mine coming back drunk one night drove his horse over the bridge when the tide was up and was drowned. We're nearly there. Oh, it's wonderful to be home again. Why, I've been away three months!'

'It's more to you than anywhere.'

'Yes. There's no place on earth like it!'

The car stopped. They rolled in through some gates. Almost at once there was a tall door with an arch over it, lighted windows, and as the door opened she smelt dank rhododendrons and heard the sea again.

She was standing in the hall behind Joe. It was dimly lit. She saw a stone staircase and a large plaster cast of St. George slaying the Dragon. Somewhere a dog was yapping.

'How are you, Simpson? Everything all right?'

'Yes, sir. Thank you.'

'This is my wife, Simpson.'

'How d'you do, ma'am?'

'I'm very well, thank you.'

Christina looked at a severe uniformed woman with a face of a moral self-satisfied horse. From the very beginning she disliked Simpson.

'Is my mother in?'

'Yes, sir. In the drawing-room, sir.'

His voice was joyful.

'Oh, we'll go along then.' He ran forward, calling: 'Mother! Mother—where are you?'

Christina followed him. Inside the drawing-room she stopped. It was all that she could do not to cry out. The long room was beautiful: faded, even shabby, but beautiful. The deep-rose curtains, the soft wine-coloured carpet, the wallpaper of dove colour—all were shabby. Between the gilt frames of the pictures there were, once and again, little tears in the paper. The two big armchairs, one on each side of the fireplace, covered with heavy rose damask, were worn on the arms. There were tall lacquer screens, a long bookcase filled with old tattered volumes; three tall white vases filled with chrysanthemums. Everything was old: even the flowers seemed ancient. But the effect of the room, softly lit, was beautiful, colours dim and deep, rose and faded purple and dusky gold.

In the middle of the room was standing Queen Victoria. Well, wasn't it? So absurdly like in the black silk dress with the white ruffles, a large brooch on her bosom, her soft grey hair parted in the middle, her round pug-like face, the little soft

boneless hands.

Joe's arms were round her.

'Dear darling mother! How are you? Have you missed me?'

She detached herself. He turned eagerly.

'This is Christina, mother.'

She felt the soft firm lips on hers, and the sweetest, kindest voice in the world said:

'Welcome, my dear. We all welcome you.'

She was held back by those short strong arms. She was examined. Then Mrs. Field said:

'Why, how beautiful you are, my dear! . . . And how tall!'

# CHAPTER II

## THE CHARACTERS

'And now, dear, I must show you everything.'

Mrs. Field was standing beside Christina in the hall under St. George and the Dragon.

At breakfast there had been Christina, Mrs. Field and Congreve Field. Mr. Field, it seemed, had *his* breakfast always in bed. Captain Green, as yet invisible to Christina, had gone off with Joe early to visit the farm. Joe, dressing, had been so impatient to be out and away that Christina had pretended to be asleep lest she should feel hurt by his abrupt answers. So weary had he been last night that at once, after kissing her, he had fallen asleep. She had awaked at six, and at six-thirty he had jumped up, was out of bed, in the bathroom and back again with his shirt on.

He had looked at her.

'I'm awake,' she had said, smiling.

Breathlessly, as though he had been running, he had said, kissing her:

'Look here, darling, I must be out and see the place. There'll be a thousand things to do. I shan't be back till the evening. You won't mind, will you? It will be a fine chance for you and mother to know one another.'

Only yesterday he had said: 'Showing you everything will be the great thrill of my life.'

She said now: 'Of course, I understand.'

'You have another hour's sleep.' He kissed her again, murmuring tender words in her ear, and then she pretended to be asleep.

The dining-room was vast, and white flakes were peeling off the walls, which were hung with very bad pictures of defunct Fields. Three dogs, two setters and a Sealyham, sat slobbering on their haunches, and were given scraps.

Congreve Field was tall and dark like Joe but very thin, very pale, with a big white Roman nose. No one spoke very much. Mrs. Field read her letters and once or twice smiled at Christina. She had a sweet smile and there was a dimple in each cheek. She drank her coffee, carefully wiped her mouth, said: 'At ten o'clock we'll have a look round, shall we?' and disappeared.

Congreve stared at Christina, then apologized.

'Forgive me, but I'm a painter, you know.'

'Yes, I know. Joe told me.'

It's been a terrific shock to us, Joe marrying,' he said. 'But now I've seen you I

don't wonder.' Then he too disappeared.

So there she was with her mother-in-law. Very nervous. She looked up at St. George for help, but saw that, oddly, there were some bird-droppings on his left cheek. How *could* that be, she wondered. Mrs. Field wore her black dress with a white soft collar and white edges to her sleeves. Almost like a uniform. She was so smart, clean, neat, that Christina thought of the new pin, but in her fresh rosy cheeks were the dimples, and her rather red fleshy lips were formed in an adorable little pout. Over her neatly parted hair she wore a black bonnet. On her hands were gardening gloves. Her small body was tight as a drum and yet softly rounded—feminine too. She carried herself regally, walking with her head up, challenging, her brilliant eyes looking into everything. She moved from the hips, her square back as straight as a board.

'The old house was burnt down in 1830,' she said. 'Only the Tower remains. Very old. Part of it is Norman, but the base is much older.'

Turning a corner of the terrace, leaving the flower-garden behind them, they faced the full blow of the sea. A lawn ran to a stone wall. Beyond the wall there was a rough path and then a little sandbank that ran to a beach. Through the thin light-spun mist the sea swayed like oil shifting when its containing barrel is shaken.

On the right, standing forward on a huddle of rock that ended the beach, was the square Tower. Because the mist was sun-drenched the Tower had a pearl-shiny colour as though in its heart was hidden the sun that the mist reflected. The sea to-day was so still that only a rhythm like the soft purr of a cat measured the silence. Narrow slits of windows like the strokes of a pen broke the silver-pearl parchment of the walls.

'What is it used for now?' Christina asked.

'Odds and ends—lumber.'

'Has the sea had no effect on it at all?'

'None. It's as strong as time.'

Mrs. Field said this with pride and satisfaction. Such strength was admirable. They turned back to the garden. Mrs. Field asked some questions.

'You're an only child?'

'No. I have a sister.'

'That must be some comfort to your parents. They must have thought you very young to be married.'

'They were glad to see me so happy.'

'Ah, yes. . . . Joe is a dear boy. It must have all happened very suddenly, did it not?'

'I think we fell in love at first sight.'

'Yes . . . Joe is very handsome, isn't he? I always expected him to marry. Now Congreve is quite different.'

There was a pause, so at last Christina said: 'Yes?'

'Congreve will never marry. He is entirely devoted to his painting.'

'It must be wonderful—to paint!'

'It gives him great happiness. He had a show in London once and could, I think, have done very well, but there seemed to him something vulgar in that success. Now he paints only for himself.'

They came upon a gardener, a strong, cross-looking man, with huge shoulders and a surly mouth.

Mrs. Field spoke to him sharply.

'The rock-garden above the pond is looking very untidy, Curtis.'

'There's a lot to do, ma'am.'

'What's Harry doing?'

'He's in the houses this morning, ma'am.'

'I want the rock-garden well kept.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

As they walked away she smiled. 'It's a difficult garden. There's the sand and the wind. Everything has to be strong to live here. It is, of course, very exposed. Only certain flowers will grow.'

She took off her gardening gloves. She put one little plump pink hand on Christina's arm.

'I do hope you'll be happy with us, dear. Do you think you will?'

'I'm sure I shall.'

'That's right. What are your tastes? Do you play games? Are you domestic? What do you like best?'

'I'm afraid I'm nothing very much. I did help in the house at home.'

'That's right. I'm sure you'll find plenty to do here. Of course Joe is very busy most days. He looks after the whole place and very good he is at it. My husband has a heart and mustn't exert himself.'

They were now standing by the criticized rock-garden. Like many other things inside and outside the house it appeared only half cared for. There was something curious here, for Mrs. Field herself was so perfectly ordered and well kept!

Christina looked back at the house. Mrs. Field said:

'Yes. It's very ugly, isn't it? The fact is that 1830 was a very bad period in English taste. The Fields of that time had no taste at all. But we've all grown very

fond of it. As you will too, my dear.'

No, Christina thought with a sudden flash of conviction. Whatever else happened she would never be fond of that house. The mist was clearing and now the sea was sparkling blue; gulls cried in the air. But the house even now was ugly, sulky, knowing its bad shape and shabby colour and hating the world as an ugly, self-conscious, lonely human being does. The Tower, now against the blue sky, was resplendent in contrast.

'How beautiful the Tower is!' Christina cried.

'You will see how attached to the house you will be,' Mrs. Field repeated. It was almost a command. Then her hand rested on Christina's arm again.

At luncheon Christina met two more members of the family. Mr. Field was astonishing to look at, for his head was covered with beautiful white hair, but above his black eyes were jet-black overhanging eyebrows. He was very tall and as thin as a diviner's rod. He had rather that air as of one who hangs above suspected hidden water. 'If Mrs. Field dislikes tall persons,' Christina thought, 'what a trial Mr. Field must be to her.'

He was languid and lazy. He greeted Christina without interest. He said: 'Sorry I wasn't at breakfast. Got a heart, you know.'

She said that she was sorry.

'Yes. Damned bore,' he said.

He was very handsome and dressed elegantly in dark brown with a red tie. A monocle hung on a black chain across his breast. He paid no attention to his son Congreve, who also paid no attention to him. Mr. Field never spoke again throughout luncheon.

The other member of the family new to Christina was Matty, Mrs. Field's sister. 'It's too obvious,' Christina thought, 'that she should be called Matty, for she is the typical old maid of all the novelists. She is Miss Bates all over again.'

And so she seemed. She was short and plump, eager, and ceaselessly talkative.

'The dear, kind Sheppersons! Too good they are, too kind. They met me just as I came out of the post office. "Why," they said, "we must drive you." "Oh no," I said. "It's the merest step, and a little exercise . . ." "But we insist," said they. Clara Shepperson is always too good, with all the trouble she's taking just now over the District Nurse, buying her a car and getting her taught to drive. *Such* an excellent woman, Nurse Baker, although she *is* a long time learning and still has that "L" on the back of the car. Something to do with a clutch, she tells me. It won't move as quickly as it ought to. So into the car I had to get, willy-nilly, and off we went. Such a very handsome car. "Dear Mrs. Shepperson," I said, "such a very handsome car,"

and she explained that it was a new chauffeur—they'd only had him a week, but he seems a very worthy man with a good wife and two little girls who will go to the school in the village for the present. "Do tell me," Mrs. Shepperson asked, "how is Miss Thompson?" As a teacher, of course, she meant, and I was only too glad to tell her that . . .'

Throughout the meal Christina had a sense that something was waiting to be said. What was it? Not precisely an apprehension, not an enquiry, but a suggestion . . . Mrs. Field was kindness itself. The meal was good and plain. Once Mrs. Field said: 'No, Archer. Not the apple tart.' Mr. Field had been going to help himself to a substantial portion. Now he waved the plate away.

'Mr. Field is on a diet,' she explained to Christina. 'Such a bore for him.'

'What are the dogs called?' Christina asked. The two setters were called Daniel and Lion. The Sealyham was called Snubs.

'He's very snobbish, self-satisfied, arrogant,' Mrs. Field said, as though she rather liked those qualities in him. He paid Christina no attention whatever. He seemed to be in some kind of alliance with Mrs. Field, who, however, threw him no scraps.

'I like most Sealyhams, but not this one,' Christina thought. There were three now she disliked, the maid, the gardener, the dog.

Congreve got up before the end of the meal and left.

'He's gone to work,' Mrs. Field explained. 'He mustn't miss the light.' Afterwards she said: 'Now, dear, you'll amuse yourself, won't you? I have to go into the village about one or two odds and ends.'

She did not offer to take Christina with her.

The dining-room was now quite empty and everything silent, so Christina went up to her room. She stood there and saw that the sea-mist had come up, blotting everything out. It spun in the wind, like a huge spider-web. Her room was cold and, greatly to her own surprise, she began to cry. This was extraordinary, for she had scarcely ever cried in her life before. Nor could she say that she was desperately unhappy: it was rather the sudden separation from Joe. For weeks they had been constantly together, and during the last week had been without a break in one another's arms, spiritually when it had been too public to be so physically. She had not realized beforehand that there would be this sudden change. That had been foolish of her, because, of course, it was bound to be so. She must reckon with his whole family and already she had been made to feel that they had a great claim on him. They also claimed that part of him in which she could have no share, the Joe that had existed before she met him—years and years of Joe: she had known him for

three months only.

She must be wise. Oh! she must be terribly wise! But she was crying also because of her inexperience of people. She had known very few and they had always been kind to her; now, perhaps, they would not always be kind. Moreover she was quite inexperienced in love. She had never been in love with anyone before. Joe, absent, acquired a kind of added glory and also an added apprehension. Suppose that he did not really love her! Of course, of course he did. She had the evidence of the nights and days to prove it: but that might be, might it not, only physical love, and when physical love quietened, why, then . . .!

She dried her eyes and resolved she would never cry again. It was true that they were all kind to her, and of course they had their own lives to which she must suit herself. It would even be natural if they resented her a little, but so long as Joe was at her side nothing mattered. Joe must be away from her often during the day. And suppose that they remained here for months and months? That *must* not be. She must be clever and subtle, influence Joe without his knowing that she was influencing him, until one morning he said: 'Darling, we must get away. We must live by ourselves.' Every married couple lived by themselves.

She stood up, resolving to be wonderfully wise, subtle, intelligent. She had a secret plan and purpose. She would be charming, friendly, useful, but, in reality, living only for the day when Joe and herself should escape. Escape! Already she was thinking of escape when she had been in the house only one night.

She had ceased to cry, but she had an overmastering impulse to find Joe, to seize him and say to him: 'You do love me, don't you? Say you do. Say you do. More than anyone on earth. You will give them all up for me. Say so! Say so!'

Idiot! Idiot! The way that silly girls behave in novels, the way to disgust husbands, kill love, ruin trust and confidence. Nevertheless she cried out aloud in the cold room: 'Joe! Joe! You do love me, Joe, don't you?'

She would go out, in spite of the mist, and investigate a little for herself. She put on a water-proof and went downstairs. The house was as silent as a dead house. No one to be seen. No one to be heard. She went on to the terrace, liking the wet mist on her cheeks. To the right, above the rock-garden, there was a building by itself. She opened a door and looked in. She stopped and said breathlessly: 'Oh, I beg your pardon! I didn't know——' For it was a wide studio with a glass roof, and Congreve Field, in a stained white smock, stood there, staring at her.

'Come in. Delighted to see you.'

'I'm disturbing you.'

'Not at all. All the light's gone anyway.'

She looked about her. Against the white walls pictures were piled, their backs only visible. From where she stood by the door she could see clearly the picture on the easel. It was of a naked man and woman, embracing, a pale blue sky and a white pillar behind them. The woman's face was a white mask; the man's back and thighs were white like death. Congreve stood regarding her very cheerfully and with the greatest admiration.

'Sit down. That's the only comfortable chair. How do you like my picture?'

'They are like ghosts—but I don't know anything about painting.'

'Ever heard of Picasso?'

'No. I haven't.'

'That's the ghost of the ghost of Picasso. In his blue period, you know.'

'Oh yes.' Christina smiled. 'You see—I know *nothing* about painting.'

'I see you don't.' He came and sat near to her, drawing a shabby little stool, from which the stuffing was protruding, near to her.

'I want to apologize at once,' he said. 'I think you're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. But you need have no fears. I shan't want to make love to you. I'm like my pictures—bloodless. I have no sexual life of any kind.'

Almost without knowing that she said it, she murmured:

'Oh, I'm so sorry.'

'You needn't be. I never had very much, but when you've been here a month or two you'll understand why I have none at all now. I'm perfectly happy,' he added quickly.

She said nothing.

'That will seem impossible to you—because you are very young, and, I suppose, madly in love with Joe. When you're older you'll know I was right. I have surrendered myself completely and so I'm happy.'

'What have you surrendered to?' she asked.

'Ah—ah—that too you will find out later. If you look at that picture it may seem a symbol to you later on. . . . How do you like us all?' he asked abruptly.

'I can't say,' she answered lightly. 'I've only seen most of you once, and Captain Green I haven't seen yet at all.'

He had been looking at her intently.

'I know what you've been doing. You've been crying. You've powdered your nose since, but your eyes are bright with the reflection of tears.'

'Yes, I have. It was very silly of me. I wasn't unhappy exactly—but it's the first time Joe and I have been separated for a long time.'

Congreve nodded.

'I know. And you've been thinking you'll never see him again. In a sort of way you won't.' The fright in her eyes amused him. 'Not as he's been the last week, I mean. You've been his sole horizon since he married you. But of course that couldn't go on.'

'No. It couldn't,' she agreed.

'If I'd been you,' he added, 'I'd have made the honeymoon last just a little longer.'

'Oh, but this is still our honeymoon!' she cried.

He looked at her almost maliciously.

'You've walked into the Enchanter's Castle. Nothing will ever be quite the same again.'

'I can walk out again.'

'With Joe?'

'Of course with Joe.'

'Any time you like?'

'Any time I like.' She looked at him defiantly.

'Any time you and Joe like, you mean?'

'Any time Joe and I like.'

'But suppose Joe *doesn't* like?'

'We're married. We like the same things.'

He got up and went over and looked at his picture.

'By Jove, you *are* young!' he said.

Her heart was beating tumultuously. And for no reason at all. She stood up and faced him.

'I wish you'd tell me what you're hinting at all the time. It's perfectly simple. Joe and I are married and love one another. We've come here for some months to stay with your mother. Later on we shall have a home of our own.'

In spite of herself, her voice was shaking.

'Don't be angry,' he said, laughing. 'You mustn't take anything I say seriously. I'm quite meaningless—except to myself. All I mean is that it is very interesting to me—even exciting—to see you arrive here, to speculate on what will happen, to observe my brother now that he's a married man. . . .'

'You speak,' she said, 'as though there's something I ought to be afraid of.'

'Isn't there always something we ought to be afraid of, all of us?' he asked.

'I needn't be afraid of anything,' she said stoutly, 'so long as I've got Joe.'

'Well—supposing Joe's afraid of something—or someone?'

'Joe's afraid of nothing on earth!'

'Isn't he? He used to be. Perhaps marriage has changed him. That's what I want to find out.'

She went to the door.

'Good-bye,' she said, smiling. 'I'm not afraid of *you* anyway.'

'Of course not,' he answered. 'Nobody is.'

She slipped out into the sea-mist and there in the heart of it, like a wreathed Triton, was Captain Timothy Green. She knew at once that it was he. His physical appearance was all that it should be: short, square, fearfully thick about the shoulders, chest like a barrel, thighs like bolsters, buttocks out determinedly rearwards, thick neck out determinedly frontwards, little bright blue eyes, the fair eyebrows bushy, face weather-beaten. Yes, the sea-captain from Conrad's novels, M'Whirter or another. And Christina, thinking of them, felt, almost as though with her hand, the soft plush surface, a kind of false iridescence, shining and stretching over the hard true bone of sea experience. Then, when he spoke, the voice was all wrong, for it was soft, rather high-pitched, eager to be liked.

'I know who you are,' he said, grasping her hand. 'Joe's wife.'

'Yes, I am—and you're Captain Green.'

'I'm Timothy Green.' He was grinning all over his face so that his blue eyes almost disappeared, the corners of the eyes ran to wrinkles and his large ugly mouth showed his strong white teeth. 'I'm lucky to catch you. I'm off next week.'

'Oh, are you?' Christina said: they were moving towards the house. 'I'm sorry.'

'Now you can't say that,' he answered, laughing, 'when you don't know me—don't know me a little bit. The fact is, Mrs. Joe, I've been idling here for months. Yes, idling. That's the word, I'm afraid. You see, Mrs. Joe, it's so pleasant here. Everyone's so kind to me. Your husband and I are brothers—that's what we are, Mrs. Joe, although I'm a lot older. We're brothers. We'd die for one another if the call came.'

He looked laughing into her face, the beads of sea-mist glistening on his nose and roughly shaved chin.

'I ought to be jealous of you, Mrs. Joe. The last thing we any of us thought of was of Joe marrying.'

'Don't be jealous, Captain Green,' she said. 'Joe isn't a man to change. He'll be just as fond of you.'

'Women make a difference—anyway where men are concerned. I'm a widower, you know.'

'No, I didn't know.'

'Yes, I'm a widower. And I find it hard enough sometimes. At my age. Forty-

five. I like women. I always have. Yes, I'm a widower these three years, worse luck.' He gave a profound sigh.

Christina had noticed that a new note of protest, almost of anger, had crept into his voice. He looked, for the moment, greatly troubled, his brown forehead all wrinkled and a white line showing under his strong brown curly hair. He was wearing no hat. He had a bald patch almost like a tonsure.

'I'm very glad indeed that I should have just a few days with you. When you love a man as I love Joe and that man marries, why, then it's mighty important to you the kind of woman it is. Now I have seen you—forgive a rough sailor—I don't blame Joe. I don't see how he could have helped it.'

'Thank you, Captain Green.'

'Now look here, Mrs. Joe—Tim, Timothy, *not* Captain Green. Am I Joe's best friend or am I not?'

'And my name's Christina.'

'Fine. Pretty name. I like it. We'll shake on it, shall we?'

They stood close together, her hand within his large strong rough clasp. It seemed that he did not want to let it go.

But she had suddenly realized something. If Captain Green was here that meant that Joe too had also returned. Joe was back! Joe was back!

Wildly, almost triumphantly, she cried: 'Joe must be back!'

'Of course. He's in the house!'

She broke from him and ran, pushing back the heavy front door, through the hall, through the drawing-room door. There she paused. It was Joe's voice that she heard.

On one side of the fire Mrs. Field was sitting, her body a little forward, her hands busily moving at some sewing. Opposite, Joe, still in his riding clothes, was seated. He was reading.

'Lovely she looked in the perfect tea-gown that she had chosen for his allurement. Her little throat, bubbling with laughter . . .'

Mrs. Field looked to the door, smiled, held up her hand for silence.

Christina stole softly to a chair, sat down and waited.

## CHAPTER III

### JOE'S HEART AND MIND

Joe's state of happiness was complete. Three days after their arrival at Scarlatt, walking, with the Captain, across the early-morning fields, he could say to himself: 'For the first time in my life I know perfect happiness. There is not a flaw anywhere. I am in love. My love is returned. I am in the place that I adore. There is love, work, vigour, health in me, around me, everywhere.' These words did not form, of course, in his consciousness. Only as he strolled forward he whistled, a little awry, 'Drink to me only,' which was his favourite tune.

Shortly before six that morning he had woken to find Christina, her back curled up against him, lying towards the open window through whose dim shadow came the soft lazy purring of the sea. He encircled her with his arm, drawing her closer to him, kissed the back of her neck, buried his face in her hair. Then she turned and lay in the fold of his arm, staring up at the ceiling.

'Slept well?' he asked her.

'Yes. Very.'

'You know—I've slept steadily—ever since we said good-night. And yet I've been awake too. What I mean is that, through my sleep, I've been conscious of my happiness. I don't suppose there's anyone as happy as I am in the whole of England.'

Now he wanted her to say that she was as happy as he. But she did not speak, nor did she move. So he kissed her eyes and said:

'Are you happy? Although I know you are—say so.'

She turned towards him and drew herself into his arms until her heart beat on his heart. Still she did not speak.

He whispered into her ear:

'Say you're as happy.'

'I'm as happy.'

'Say it again.'

'I'm as happy.'

After a while she said:

'Does your mother like me?'

'Of course. She adores you.'

'How do you know? Has she said so?'

'I haven't asked her.'

'Then she hasn't said so on her own account.'

'One can see it. Everyone adores you.'

'Simpson doesn't. Snubs doesn't.'

'Of course they do. If they don't, what does it matter?'

He moved as though to get out of bed. She pulled him back against her.

'Listen,' she said. 'I thought I loved you in London. I thought I loved you in the train. But that was nothing at all to the way I love you now.'

He held her off from him a little, looking at her.

'I don't know why you do,' he said. 'I'm so ordinary. I'm not clever. And you're so beautiful. Congreve is simply crazy about you. He says you've given him new life, a new sense of beauty. Last night he said it—that all his ambition's rising again.'

She hadn't heard. She was thinking something out.

'Joe, I've discovered something. I always thought I was a meek and mild little thing. I let Anne do what she liked with me. Now I know I can be fierce, selfish, cruel.'

'You!' He leaned over her, stroking her face with his hand.

'Yes. If anyone tried to take you away or come between us. I've read in novels about women murdering for their husbands. It always seemed such nonsense. Now I know it isn't.'

'Who are you going to murder?'

'Nobody. But I could.'

He got out of bed, stripped, and did exercises. She watched him as the light grew ever stronger about him.

He strode with the Captain over the fields to the top of the hill. He always paused at the little gate that perched on the ridge between the hedges. He always paused and looked back, for this was the view that was the very heart of his fancy. How he had thought of it again and again in London. Once, he remembered, he had stood half-way across Piccadilly and been almost killed—seeing the house, the terraced garden, the sea-wall, the saffron-shadowed strip of beach, the long silk-flowing sea, and the Tower, pale and strong, defying old Neptune. Then, to the right, the coast curved on; there were the Duntrea Rocks, Colder Bay, the thin hook-nose of Colder Point—and from this swaying sea all the land leaning back, the brown, red, purple-shaded fields, hedges like elastic string and houses like upright dominoes. Now, this morning, there was an autumn-honey air and the gulls flying like

scraps of paper.

A thought struck him. Christina ought to be here seeing this, standing here, leaning on the little gate and his arm around her. Another thought. Christina had wanted, every one of these three mornings, to get up and come with him. Although not a word had been spoken, that was what she had wanted. And he had known it. A further thought. He had not asked her because his mother would not have liked it.

He turned from the gate as though something had hit him. He caught the Captain's arm.

'Come on. We can't dawdle here all day.'

'All right,' the Captain said, laughing. 'It's your stopping-place, not mine.'

*Why* would his mother not like it? How did he know? She wouldn't like it because he'd told her often enough in the past that he didn't want women hanging round when he was on a job. He had told the Old Lady that because she'd suspicioned he'd been talking with her arch-enemy, Mrs. Lavinia Peacock, or that girl, Betty Goos, he'd had a bit of flirtation with. But his wife? Wasn't that different? Of course it was. And Christina should come with him. Would she not love it, the early morning freshness, the grass damp with dew or crackling with frost, the animals friendly and unsuspicious, the coffee and bread and butter at Dewlap's? Would not Christina love it? Sharing, she would fondly fancy, his work. . . .

In olden days the Old Lady had sometimes walked with him. But it had not been a great success. She had wanted everything done *her* way, dear Old Lady. She could not help herself. She was made that way, to see clearly what was right; but naturally she could not know everything. Sometimes her ideas were very odd indeed. She had not enjoyed it. And then—how like her!—when she had decided not to come she had wanted him not to go! Why couldn't he have breakfast at home like any other sensible man? He could go the rounds later in the day. There had been quite a battle about it, he remembered—a scene or two—but for once he had been obstinate. Those early-morning hours were everything to him and he couldn't get through his work properly without them. He gave in to the Old Lady about most things: about this, no.

There had been, he was now remembering, a number of battles just before his departure for London. In one of her tempers she had said: 'You shall go to London and see that Scarlatt is your home.' And, by Jove, she had been nearly right. With every added week in London he had longed for Scarlatt more; and not only Scarlatt but also the Old Lady herself, because there was no one like her, no one he loved. . . . He pulled himself up. There was Christina. And if he had not, by so miraculous a chance, met Christina, he would indeed have come rushing back to

Scarlatt swearing to the Old Lady that he would never leave it again. Even as it was, in that first meeting with his mother again, the kiss on those soft cheeks, the scent of her freshness and age-old motherliness, the surrender of her little strong dauntless body to his arms, in that instant he had, for a second, forgotten Christina. Christina whom he loved with so passionate a longing, desire, fulfilment. Well, it was lucky that they two were friends. They had taken to one another at sight. He had known, of course, that they would.

They were turning down the deep lane to Dewlap's.

'Well, then, Tim, old boy,' he said. 'What do you think of my wife now you've seen her?'

The Captain stopped and looked at him; there was a quizzical look, and a tenderness too in his eyes.

'I've been waiting for you to ask me that,' he said. 'I thought you would. And what can I say but she's the most beautiful creature I've ever seen in my life?'

Joe grinned like a pleased boy.

'Yes. She's lovely, isn't she?'

'Lovely!—and I know something about women.' He pointed down the lane in the direction of the invisible sea. 'Two passions of my life—the sea and women. I've failed one and the other's failed me. That night my wife left me—and me off to the West Indies in the morning as I've often told you—I swore I'd be done with them, for what but cruelty and unkindness had they ever shown me? And what had the sea been to me but just the opposite? Kind and faithful and rewarding. Yet here I've been six months now just because your mother likes to keep me, and I so feeble that I can only murmur "Next week I'll be off. . . ." Yes, staring out to sea from the top of the Tower. But your mother's a woman, even though she's an old one now, and she has a power over me no man could ever have. And all my backbone waters away. And I eat my meals and run her errands.'

'My mother's not such a tyrant as all that,' Joe said, smiling.

'Isn't she? Well, maybe you don't know your mother. Oh, there's other things of course. There's a boat and there's fishing and there's yourself I've grown fond of and there's women in Polchester. . . .' He turned and spat into the hedge. 'All the same I was going next week. By God's holy throne I was. For one thing I can't stand your brother, as you know well enough. And then that girl comes, the lovely child, as fair as the sun on water; if she weren't your wife, Joe, my boy, I'd have to make love to her.'

Joe put his hand through the Captain's thick arm and they went on walking down the lane together.

'I want you two to be friends, Tim. I'm fonder of you than any man alive. But aren't I lucky? Aren't I? Aren't I? To think that it should happen to *me*! Anyone so beautiful . . .'

'Aye,' said the Captain. 'It's a wonderful thing to happen to a man, a happy marriage—as wonderful as commanding a ship or discovering a piece of land no one's ever seen before. Yes, you're lucky, Joe. She's good as well as beautiful. I've been watching her. How could a man with two eyes help it? She loves you and is going to try to love your family too—not so easy, the second of these.'

'What do you mean? Are we a difficult family?'

'Difficult! Yes, I should say you are in a way. At least . . . Oh, your girl will manage you all, I haven't a doubt.' He paused as though he had something to say. Then changed his mind.

'But women—they're extraordinary, as you'll find out before you've been married six months. They'll be all sweetness in bed and all contrariness the very next morning. They'll fight for their lover with a courage no man can summon, then tear that same lover to pieces. When they're fine there's nothing in this world finer. When they're bitches there's nothing so low they won't sink to. They've no truth, no honour, no fairness in them, and they're saints, here and there, like the angels in glory. I thought sometimes of the peaceful and grand place the world would be with only men in it, the restful, peaceful place, just going about your work, riding, walking, sailing a ship, telling a tale, having a quarrel that *is* a quarrel with a word and a blow all above board. No sex tearing your loins, and a quiet sleep at night. Yes, and then my eye takes a turn and it seems a dead world with the one thing out of it worth all the rest. A lovely woman like your wife, Joe, and all the values go up. There's a fire in the sky and your heart beats like a hammer.'

Joe knew that the Captain liked his own voice and he had not been listening. Now he passed through the Dewlap gate, crying: 'Henry! Isaac! Where have you got to?'

Dogs began to bark, some children ran out. They went into the farm kitchen and soon they were drinking coffee and eating bread and bacon while the flames leapt in the stone fireplace, and you could see through the window, beyond the line of fields, the band of silver light that was the sea.

It was homely and most pleasant with stout Mrs. Dewlap and long, thin, brown-faced Dewlap himself, dogs, cats and children. Then old Dewlap, Dewlap's father, came in. He was stone blind and helped himself along by touching familiar things, the case of the clock, the shelf, the pot of chrysanthemums, the ledge of the window. By that last he stayed, leaning forward and staring out as though he saw the little walled

garden, the great barn, the fields and the sea: and maybe he *did* see them, for he had known them by heart before he was blinded in the War.

Emma Dewlap bustled about paying special attention to the Captain, whose exaggerated and poetic way of talking always fascinated her. Also he had his ways, when no one was looking, of pinching her fat arm or bosom and, once and again, of kissing her. He had told her once that she smelt of blackberries and cream, which pleased her. On the other hand, he cast at times a glance on their elder girl, Lucy, seventeen and not so bad to look at, and this she did not like and would smack his face one day if he tried any of his games.

Joe, who had been away so long, had plenty to talk over with Dewlap. The lectures and discussions in London had fired his brain.

'Soon, Mr. Joe,' said Dewlap, 'you'll know so much you'll be managing a richer place than this.'

'I'll never leave here, Isaac,' Joe said. 'This is the only place in the world for me.'

The Captain cried: 'Mind, Joe, you're married now. Freedom ceases with marriage.'

'For shame, Captain,' Emma Dewlap said. 'You to be talking against marriage.'

The old blind man in the window said: 'The gulls are inland. There's a storm blowing up.'

How had he heard their cry? To Joe's fancy it seemed that the wide kitchen was suddenly filled with that complaining shriek.

'We must be moving,' he said. 'We've to be back to the house by midday. I'll come and see the calves to-morrow, Isaac.'

They climbed the lane and the Captain said: 'The Dewlap girl's growing.'

At the top of the lane, standing and looking at them, was Mrs. Charles Peacock, Lavinia. She was a gaunt woman, dressed in faded tweeds, carrying a riding-whip, an old black hat, her sparse grey hair caught into a tight bun at the back of her bony head. She had bright blue eyes, a long nose, high cheek-bones, and a figure as straight up and down as a man's.

Her husband, Charles Peacock, had left her long ago. She had money of her own and lived in a house, Bagge Hall. Some five years ago a young man, called Eastlake, had come to live in Bagge Hall. He was a pretty young man and was known in the district as the Canary. He went about with Lavinia Peacock everywhere. The Peacock and the Canary. Bagge Hall was nicknamed the Aviary. Everyone assumed that they 'lived in sin.' It was known that they quarrelled and Lavinia's temper was something remarkable. Last year the Canary had departed. He

told his friends that he had a job in the Air Ministry. However, the great point about Lavinia Peacock was that she was Mrs. Field's mighty and abiding enemy. The feud was an old one now—no one knew its origin. The two ladies rarely met, but what they said about one another was a wonder—for it seemed that there were always new things to say.

Joe himself liked Lavinia—men did for the most part—but he knew that it was a perilous matter to talk with her. Birds carried the news to Scarlatt within a day and a night, and then . . . oh, but there was trouble!

So now he touched his hat, and the Captain gave a roguish grin and they would have passed on. But Lavinia had something to say.

'Here, Joe, wait a minute. I must congratulate you.'

He grinned.

'Thanks, Lavinia.'

'I hear she's lovely. I'm really delighted.' Lavinia had a deep, almost masculine voice. She always spoke as though she saw a joke.

Joe said: 'Thanks ever so much,' and took a step forward.

'Here, what's the hurry? Afraid your mother will see us? Why not bring your bride to tea one afternoon?'

Joe looked sheepish. 'Well—you see, Lavinia—it's like this——'

Lavinia laughed heartily and slapped her thin thigh with her riding-whip.

'Afraid of the Old Lady? I'm ashamed of you, Joe. You're not a baby any longer. You're a married man.'

Joe, furious that his mother should be mocked, said: 'That's all right, Lavinia, I must be getting on.'

She looked at him with warm kindliness. 'I didn't mean to tease you, Joe. There's no one alive wants your happiness more than I do. You ought to know that.' She turned on her heel and strode away.

'Old Dewlap was right,' the Captain said. 'There's a storm coming up.' Then he added: 'Mrs. Peacock's a bit in love with you.'

Joe had turned and, looking out to sea, found that the world had changed. A dirty-white cloud, speckled with dark spots like a shredded newspaper, was spreading over the blue. The sea ran in a grey shadow, trembling, it seemed, with chill. The bare autumn trees seemed to quiver in some melancholy anticipation. The early morning had been too bright, and Joe, very young and conscious of weather, had lost his first joy, as it seemed, in the bottom of the lane. He was angry, too, with the Captain.

'Oh, drop it, Tim! Why is your head always crammed with sex? Can you never

think of anything else?'

'I'm a natural man,' the Captain said. 'Sex is the finest flower in the garden until you've plucked it. That Dewlap girl is growing pretty.'

Joe turned and swore at him. There were times when he hated Captain Timothy Green, when he saw him only as a lazy, lecherous, worthless loafer. The Captain knew it. He put his hand through Joe's arm.

'You're right to swear. There's half of me as rotten as a garbage-can, and there's half of me as sweet and generous as Saint Francis himself. I say to myself, looking at myself: "Timothy, my son, why can't you watch where you're going and think before you speak?" A little thought and I'd be a picture of a man, for I'm as sweet inside as a nut and I hate the Devil as fiercely as any saint. But what sort of a life is this for a man, middle-aged, in his full powers and no woman of his own to hold in his arms? It's my own woman I'm hungry for, and yet I don't want to be tied. What do you make of that?'

'What you want,' said Joe crossly, 'is to leave here and go back to work. It's because you're idle that you think of women so much. Get back to the sea. That's where you belong.'

The Captain drew a terrible sigh.

'I know. I know. You were never more right. Another week, just to look at your wife a little, and I'll be off.'

But Joe was filled with fears. He hadn't wanted to be talking to Lavinia Peacock so soon after his return. He didn't want a quarrel with the Old Lady. He wanted to be well with all the world now, in his great new happiness. He didn't know why, under this dirty cloud that had swallowed the whole sky, he should suddenly feel an apprehension so acute that he stopped and looked behind him as though someone were following him.

From where they now walked they could see again the house, the gardens, the Tower. But now colour was drained from the scene: the house was squat and hideous, the Tower menacing. What if something had happened to Christina? How absurd! And yet he began to walk swiftly, his arms swinging, his head up. The Captain grinned.

'Hi! Hold on, young fellow! There's time enough!'

But Joe didn't answer. He saw now only Christina, his darling, his wonder, his wife and child and friend. She should come out with him another morning whether his mother liked it or no. Had he not, that very first day, left her although before he had insisted that he, and he alone, should show her the place? Shameful! Shameful! And she had not reproached him with a word nor a look. She, so generous, unselfish,

sweet-hearted!—his Christina, his darling, deserted by him so basely. Maybe, even now, she was crying her eyes out. And, at that terrible thought, he ran down the steps into the garden, up more steps into the house.

And so it was that, in the hall, he brushed against his mother, had not a word for her, but cried out: 'Christina! Where's Christina?' and was up the staircase in a twinkling.

Christina, however, was quite pleasantly seated on the bed in their room sewing a button on to a blouse. She had been that morning with Aunt Matty into the village, and very pleasant it had been. Joe had never left her mind, but she had felt in no way uneasy. She would see him at luncheon and then perhaps in the afternoon. . . .

He was upon her. He had thrown her back upon the bed; his arms were round her, he was kissing her eyes, her cheeks, her hair. His arms stiffened, he gazed down at her, adoring her. He was panting.

'I thought something might have happened to you. I ran all the way home.'

'Why—what could have happened?'

'I don't know . . . I haven't been looking after you as I ought. I've left you alone. . . .'

'But of course you have to. You've got work to do.'

The gong for luncheon sounded.

'There's the gong. I must brush my hair.'

Standing up, they embraced until they were indeed one flesh, one heart, one soul. But it hurts to make love standing, so Joe said:

'Let's not bother about lunch.'

'Of course we must. What will your mother think?'

'Yes. There's the Old Lady.' And now he remembered that he had brushed past her very rudely in the hall.

So they went down. Everyone was at table except Mrs. Field: Mr. Field, Matty, the Captain, Congreve. Everyone was very gay. Even Mr. Field said to Christina: 'A nice colour on your cheeks, my dear. This place suits you.' The Captain actually said, quite pleasantly, to Congreve: 'How's the painting?' Everyone smiled and the dogs raised melting eyes to the table.

Mrs. Field came in.

It was exactly, Christina thought, like the old days at Guy House when Miss Hussett had neuralgia. The whole class had sat there shivering. Now she had to control her merriment, for surely there was something exquisitely absurd in the immediate freezing of these four grown men. There was a mortuary silence as Mrs. Field took her place. It was not so much that she was angry as that she was a

remotely offended Queen of Heaven. . . . It was not only that she was silent but that her silence had a thousand voices all expressing royal anger. Her chair became a throne. She helped herself to soup as though she were ladling penalties for all mankind.

Then Christina laughed.

It was Aunt Matty's face that provoked her. Aunt Matty looked so surprisedly dismayed. It was the very last thing that she had expected, this angry entrance. She had been prepared with an eager account of her morning village adventures. Everyone was so happy. She hated that anyone should be unhappy. Her face was a ruin of her expectations.

After Christina's laugh there was a quite dreadful silence. Then Christina said:

'Oh, do look at Snubs! He's slobbering with greed.'

A poor attempt. Then Mrs. Field said:

'I'm still waiting, Joe, for you to wish your mother good-morning.'

Joe got up, went to his mother, kissed her cheek.

'Good-morning, mother dear.'

Then he went back to his seat.

'You seemed in a great hurry just now when you came in.'

'Was I? I wanted a wash after grubbing about all the morning.'

'Yes. I've told you before that all that running about early is quite unnecessary. I'm sure your father agrees with me.'

Mr. Field put his monocle in his eye, looked languidly at his son and said:

'I don't know how you can do it, Joe—getting up so damned early.'

Joe said: 'Sorry, mother. There's a lot to see to after being away so long.'

And then Mrs. Field was, in the tick of the clock, warm with human love. She beamed upon them all.

'I expect you're right, Joe dear. It's a good thing that there's somebody to take the place seriously. Well, Christina dear—and what have you been doing with yourself? I hope somebody's been entertaining you. I had so many letters to write. . . .'

A spiritual sigh of relief, soundless but shaking the air, beat through the room. Aunt Matty began her account of her progress.

# CHAPTER IV

## BIOGRAPHY: ONE FINE LADY

Mrs. Field was born Elizabeth Clowes on January 29th, 1874. Her father, Mr. Stephen Clowes, was a successful solicitor in Polchester. Bessie Clowes' memory went back as far as perhaps her second year when her stout, rubicund, bewhiskered papa sat, with his legs spread and his stomach protruding, throwing her into the air and catching her again. Although now sixty-three years of age, Bessie Clowes remembered perfectly the whiskers, the warm thighs, the rocketing laugh, the thick heavy hands that pinched her legs. She remembered also that she was not, in the very slightest degree, frightened—for how could she be? She adored her father and he adored her. So far as she could tell, in the innocence of her childhood, she was the only person who counted for anything in his life. Grown to full age, her dear father dead, she understood that there had been 'ladies.' Her father had in fact a Polcastrian reputation as 'gay.' It was true enough that he loved his little daughter, just as it was also true that he despised his wife and never even considered Bessie's younger sister Matty. Matty was a weak, colourless little thing, always eager to please; it is to be feared that her sister Bessie tyrannized over her from the very first—bullied her also a little.

In any case from the very earliest years Bessie Clowes learned to despise women. Her mother seemed to her a weak poor creature. In aspect she was thin, ringleted, pale-faced. And, although she said nothing to anyone about it, she was always in pain.

Bessie could not have been more than seven or eight when, one day at dinner her father saying to her mother: 'Pooh, Marianne, mind your own business,' the child beat with her fists on the table: 'You shan't speak to my mother so,' but, even while she defended her mother, looked at her contemptuously for submitting with such meekness.

And, although she rated him for it, she worshipped her father's haughtiness, intolerance, loud laughter, physical energy. Bessie Clowes does not, possibly, sound a very charming little girl. She was not, however, uncharming. She was self-willed but not mean. Her father spoiled her, but she loved him. She despised her mother and sister, but was often kind and generous to them. She had no *small* faults. She demanded to have her own way, but she could love passionately, give generously, behave fearlessly. When she was sent to the girls' school at the top of Orange Street, on the opposite side from the Church, she was, at first, most unpopular and spent

her entire time in fighting, raging, being punished and, in private, crying herself sick for her father.

The girls at once discovered that she lost her temper in a moment and that the simplest way to rouse it was to laugh at her small stature. She was nicknamed Mrs. Tom Thumb. During all this time of persecution she murmured no word of it to her father.

'Are you happy, my love?'

'Oh yes, papa. Of course I'm happy.'

Then public opinion changed. It was discovered that Bessie Clowes was no coward, that she played games well, that she was not a sneak, that she was a good capable leader. She soon had much authority in the school. She made, however, no intimate friends and none of the mistresses liked her. She too plainly scorned them all.

Her love for her father grew into a passion so all-devouring that it tortured her. He, busy with affairs, both public and private, being a man who in any case thought of himself so persistently that he saw everyone—wife, children, mistress, friends, clients—as through a glass darkly, realized his little daughter's love now chiefly as a pleasant tribute to himself. Because he liked everything feminine—except his wife and younger child—he enjoyed kissing his little Bessie, feeling, with his large hand, the rapid beating of her heart, holding her close to his solid thumping chest. He was as fond of her perhaps as of any human being save himself.

But when one morning he was found dead in his bath of heart failure Bessie was, for a while, herself desperately ill. No one knew what was the matter. They had always said that she was a 'hard' child. They added now, rather grudgingly, that 'she must be grieving for her father.'

Quite suddenly she was ill no longer. She was strong, reserved, hard, a woman. She was seventeen years of age and the year was 1891.

She quickly took a prominent place in the little Polchester world. She dressed to suit her figure, very plainly and a thought old-fashioned. She refused the extravagances of the large hats, the puffed sleeves, the pinched waists. Her mother died; Bessie and Matty lived in a pretty house with a walled garden near the Cathedral. They had ample means, for Mr. Clowes had left a considerable fortune. Bessie was on intimate terms with the Cathedral set, Archdeacon Brandon and other important men. Indeed she always preferred the company of men and was considered by other Polchester ladies rather daring in the things that she would say and hear. She was, in fact, something of a 'character.'

She studied herself closely and without any sentimental bias in her own favour.

She knew that a deep spiritual blow had been dealt to her by her father's death, but a more serious blow followed when, in the passing of time, she learnt his true character. Gossip, then letters and documents accidentally discovered in a drawer, proved to her that he had been dishonest in business and lecherous in morals. His adventures in love had been for the most part conducted out of Polchester, largely in Drymouth. He was a very prudent man. One bundle of letters, every word of which she read, were of the grossest indecency. Here he had not been so prudent.

She did not, however, after these discoveries, disown him. She befriended him in her mind and even wished that, while he had lived, he had been in serious trouble, so that he might have come to her for help. She considered the women whom he had loved fortunate, and at the same time despised them for their weakness and was jealous of them for the intimacy that they must have shared with him.

She also obtained from these letters a rooted hatred of sexual adventure. At the same time she longed fiercely for the emotions that she had known for her father. She had a passion within her like a fire, but not a sexual passion. She longed to have someone of her own, someone whom she might possess and love and never let go.

Because she had means, proposals of marriage were made to her. All of them seemed to her ridiculous. Of all the men in the town she admired the most Archdeacon Brandon because he was a tyrant and a despot. Had he been a bachelor she would gladly have married him although he was so much older than herself—married him and then possessed him. When she was not crossed she was kindly, gentle and generous. Her sister was, of course, her slave and worshipped her. She knew her own faults: her temper, her imperiousness, her desire to possess, and she had no great conceit. She was, however, altogether unaware of one very serious lack: she had no sense of humour either about herself or anyone. When people laughed she laughed too, but never knew at what they were laughing unless it were at some obvious physical awkwardness. She was deeply conscious of her own small stature and fiercely sensitive to any allusion to it. She knew that herself and her sister were called 'the little Miss Clowes'.'

She was lacking in all aesthetic sense and like others in the same case was, on the whole, pleased about it. She liked a picture to tell a story, music to have an obvious tune, a book 'to have a good plot'—but the arts did not concern her. Artists who were unsuccessful she thought ridiculous; when they made money she 'wondered how they did it.' If she met one she regarded him with quizzical kindness and expected him to behave oddly in some way.

Then, at long last, appeared Archer Field. She might have met him years before, because he had always lived at Scarlatt, which was not very far from Polchester.

When she met him he was handsome and energetic. He came for some Christmas dance in Polchester and was at once attracted by the little neat girl, her hair parted down the middle, in a plain white dress. He called her 'the Quakeress' and, being clever, well-read and 'Ninetyish, considered that there must be plenty of sensuality under that ordered demureness. He danced with her during most of the evening and only at the close discovered her identity. When he heard that she had money he was pleased.

On her side she really fell in love with his good looks. Then it was time that she should marry. She liked the idea that she should be mistress of an estate. It would be pleasant to live on the sea and yet be near Polchester. Archer Field was bold and a little impertinent. It pleased her to think that she would tame him.

So she married him and took Matty with her to live at Scarlatt. Here she was happy and contented, and, for a year or two, as agreeable and good-natured a woman as you would find anywhere in England. There was plenty to be done at Scarlatt and she found a man, Morgan, to manage the estate. Archer protested, but she persuaded him that he would be much happier in his library arranging his books. She dominated him at first by treating his physical ardours with a tolerant elusiveness. His embraces were to her those of a beseeching child. She surrendered to him as a mother allows her infant to disturb her hair or dress. Side by side with Morgan she gained complete possession of everything and everybody. Morgan, who was a capable rogue, thought her a fine woman, and, out of sheer admiration of her character, was honest for longer than he had ever been before.

Then, after three years of marriage, Congreve was born. In a moment everything was changed. She had a difficult delivery but triumphed in the pain; she had known for nine long months what a glory was coming to her.

At the hour of Congreve's birth her husband ceased to have any meaning for her. With the first tug of the child at her breast she was a sanctified woman. She knew for what she herself had been born.

Congreve was a delicate baby and needed much care. His mother fiercely willed it to live and soon it looked to her for every source of vitality.

Two years later Joe was born, this time a lusty squalling fighting baby and at first rebellious. This rebellion delighted its mother and she fought it every inch of the way. As the boys grew she became the only figure in their lives. They disregarded their father from the very first.

Joe was her kind. He was gay, matter-of-fact, physically strong, handsome. Congreve was very different. He was more feminine, given to moods, silences, noticing lights and colours, disliking rough behaviour and loud voices, deeply

sensitive, walking by himself. But she did not know which she loved the better.

Because Congreve was difficult and strange she was gentle with him, would read to him, until she could have cried with boredom, bought him picture-books and his first paint-box. She was proud of him for being 'different,' and when Archer once, in a temper, said that he was more like a girl than a boy, she rated him for a fool and asked whether he did not know that all men who had ever amounted to anything had had much of the feminine in their temperament. She rejoiced that her two boys were so different. It would have been dull had they both been alike. With Joe she was a straightforward friend and companion and soon he came to her for everything.

Archer made what seemed to him a vigorous attempt to regain his relationship with her. But he had nothing with which to hold her. He threatened physical infidelity and she laughed. He attempted to practise it but had not the temperament. He said he would manage the place and would dismiss Morgan, but he was, by now, too lazy. He was still in love with her because he had never possessed her, and so, because he wanted what he would now never obtain, she sapped his vitality.

A day came when the two small boys were lost. They had escaped their governess, the stupid Miss Hart, and wandered to some distant beach. Bessie Field knew a terror and a horror on that dreadful afternoon that showed her something of the passion that possessed her. The boys, when they were found, were frightened at the loss of her as desperately as she had been frightened by the loss of them. They clung to her for weeks after, as though, without her, there was no meaning in life.

They were now charming little boys, both good-looking in their different ways. She became their absolute friend and companion. She had never to punish them, for one sign of her displeasure and they quaked for fear: fear, not because they were afraid of her, but because they hated to give her pain. No wonder that they loved her! She saw to it that every facet of their personalities was fed by her and by her alone. She was a different person with each. Congreve liked to tell her of his dreams, imaginings, visions. She listened with sweetness and patience. Privately she thought them baby-nonsense but was assured that he would grow out of them. Joe was quite different. He liked the companionship of other boys and she saw that he had it. Whenever there was an especially foolish mother in the district she invited her, with her children, to Scarlatt. When Joe had his first fight with little Paul Hamley of Bassett, two years older than Joe, was his mother not proud? He was awarded his first bicycle for this.

The brothers were never great friends with one another. Congreve was fiercely jealous of his brother, and sometimes Mrs. Field was most loving to Joe only in order that she might see that flash in Congreve's eye and his pale cheek flush.

The time came when she must face the problem of school and here she gave herself some sharp, honest, deep self-examination. About Congreve she felt no uneasiness, but Joe, she knew, ought to go to boarding-school. He was exactly the boy for a boarding-school, strong, sturdy, fearless, rejoicing in games and all outdoor exercises. She saw herself with the utmost clarity. She knew that she would be doing her son a wrong if she kept him at home. Without any compunction she kept him at home.

She engaged for them a tutor and this strange young man influenced the boys' development very considerably. He was called Tatham Flutley, an absurd name and an absurd creature. He was fat and flabby like an unhealthy potato. He was not over cleanly. He was effeminate in voice and movement. But he was just what Mrs. Field wanted. He became, at once, her fellow-conspirator. At first sight of her he seemed to understand everything. It was as though he had said, with one wave of his lackadaisical flabby hand: 'Mrs. Field, I understand perfectly. Nothing matters in life to you but your two boys. And we must see to it that nothing matters to them but yourself.'

He was a mysterious creature. He wrote for his own pleasure and showed no one what he wrote. He was so very clever that Mrs. Field could not understand why he was only a tutor. She asked him one day. He replied: 'I have no ambitions. Why should one have? Everything is so very ridiculous.' He had a strange power over the two boys. Although he hated exercise, and never played a game in his life, loathed to bathe in the sea or trust himself to a boat, yet Joe respected him. He did exactly what was intended; he strengthened in every possible way their absorption in their mother. It was as though with his fat ugly hands he thrust them further and further inside her spiritual being.

One day he said to her:

'Mrs. Field, if I'm impertinent tell me so.'

'I certainly will,' she answered.

'Tell me one thing.'

'What is it?'

'When the boys grow up and find their own lives what will you do?'

'Really,' she said, grinning at him. 'Do you think I don't love them enough to be unselfish?'

He nodded his head. 'Yes. Of course.' He looked at her exactly as though the two of them had just sworn an oath together.

By this time she was a mature, settled, assured middle-aged woman. She dominated everything in Scarlatt completely. She was known in the neighbourhood,

in spite of her small stature, as Boadicea. She had made herself a 'character,' already wearing her black dress with white collar and cuffs, a sort of uniform. Morgan had been replaced by an excellent man, Santley. Santley was admirable but did not yield to her quite as Morgan had done. She was never sure whether he admired her or no. The first crisis with her boys arrived when she discovered Joe, in the vegetable garden, kissing the little kitchen-maid. For a swift moment she hated the little kitchen-maid so deeply that she could have struck her dead there and then among the cabbages. She was, however, quiet and restrained. She discovered that both the boys had confused ideas about their sexual nature, so she quietly instructed them. From that time *her* personality, *her* love for them, *her* wishes dominated their sexual instincts.

During the remaining two or three years of their boyhood she knew once again a happiness similar to the first years of her marriage. The three of them were wrapt away from the rest of the world. She was so kindly and gentle to everyone that the world wondered.

Joe was much with Santley and discovered a natural talent for estate management. He adored his home and his mother. He wanted nothing else. Unlike Congreve, however, he was aware of the attraction of healthy young women, and healthy young women were aware of him, for he was handsome and strong.

Congreve cared nothing for women but was determined to be a great artist. His mother allowed him to go to London and study. As she watched the train that contained him steam out of Polchester tears dimmed her eyes. She knew her blissful years were ended. It was her first test. She was certain, however, of victory. Like many another she believed in God when she needed Him. Now she prayed:

'Oh, God, bring Congreve back and keep him here safe with me for ever.' And: 'Oh, God, if Joe must marry, make him marry someone I can love who will live with him here in peace for ever.'

By 'someone I can love' she meant someone who would surrender to *her* love just as her sons had done.

God heard her first prayer, for, after two years and a one-man show, Congreve returned. He had been back, of course, for holidays before. He meant *this* return to be a holiday too, but his mother built him a studio. He stayed three months, six months, a year. He could not leave her.

Joe's difficulties were other. He was healthy, vigorous, a strong animal. He could not altogether sublimate his passions. She decided that he must marry and proceeded to select a bride for him. This was not easy. She searched Polchester and the neighbourhood, but the submissive girls he would not care for and the

independent girls would not do. She found a handsome girl, daughter of one of the Polchester canons. Her name was Katherine Heron. She spent some weeks at Scarlatt and at first it seemed that all was well. It was clear, although she was proud and carried her head high, that she was deeply in love with Joe. Joe was beginning to care for her. All that was needed was that she should care for Joe's mother. Mrs. Field gave her all her affection. She poured out her charm. She subdued her possessive mastery.

Then quite unexpectedly one evening Katherine Heron said: 'Why don't you let Congreve go and paint in London?'

'Oh, my dear, he doesn't want to.'

'He soon *won't* want to if you don't let him go. And then he'll become a rotten painter. And then he'll be nothing at all. It would do Joe good, too, to get away for a bit.'

Mrs. Field, her fingers trembling a little on her lap, said: 'My dear, I think you must let their mother judge. . . .'

'Why? They're not children!'

There was an eloquent silence and then Katherine Heron, who was accustomed to say what she thought, burst out:

'Oh, Mrs. Field! I *am* so sorry. . . . Have I been tactless? I'm always interfering. . . . Do forgive me!'

Katherine Heron went back to Polchester and was seen at Scarlatt no more. But, a little later, Joe sitting beside his mother, her hand in his, she said:

'Joe, I want to ask you something.'

'Yes, mother.'

'Do you think I absorb you and Congreve too much? Do I prevent your doing what you want? I love you so dearly that it's a little difficult for me to see fairly. Tell me honestly.'

He put his arm around her and drew her closer to him.

'Darling mother! Of course not.'

'No. But let's not be sentimental. Be honest. Are you happy? Have you the kind of life you want?'

'Happy! I should say so! I've everything in the world—the place I love best, work I care for, and you! I don't suppose there's such a lucky man anywhere!'

They kissed.

'Yes, but you'll marry one day. You must. It's right. I want to be a grandmother.'

'Oh, there's plenty of time for that. Of course I like women. It's only natural. But there'll never be any woman to compare with *you*! I don't know how it is, but when

I'm away from you I'm restless, uncomfortable. . . .'

However, he was also a little restless *with* her. She couldn't but notice it. So she ventured on Test Number Two. She sent Joe to London for three months. She had no doubt of the result. His letters to her proved it. He was enjoying himself, the lectures were interesting. . . . He had met a wonderful agriculturist called . . . He had had a most amusing night at the theatre. . . . 'All the same, mother, I doubt whether I shall last the three months. I miss Scarlatt like hell. I'm always turning round wanting to tell you things and you are not there. . . . The fact is, mother, I miss you damnably and your photograph on my mantelpiece isn't enough. . . .' Then came the letter announcing his engagement.

This, she knew at once, was a blow comparable only to the death of her father. The letter had come with the second post and the little pile was handed to her by Simpson as she sat at table with Archer, Congreve and the Captain.

'Second post. It's late. Nothing for you, Captain. . . . Ah, a letter from Joe!'

She tore it open eagerly, a smile on her lips. A snapshot fell out on to the tablecloth and lay there disregarded.

'. . . She is lovelier than anyone you ever saw.' (Dear Joe! not very clever of him!) 'I'm sending you a picture. . . . Of course it's only a snapshot.'

She picked it up and looked. One of Christina standing on the little lawn in front of the house, laughing, holding a biscuit up for a puppy.

Mrs. Field smiled on them all.

'Great news. Joe is engaged.'

It was at the Captain that, for an instant, she looked. He was the most penetrating. He would understand. What was he doing there anyway? She felt a sudden rage against him. She had met him in Polchester six months before, asked him to stay for a week-end. Joe had taken a liking to him. She herself had been amused by him, enjoyed her power over a man so animal and masculine. If he wished to stay, why not? She slowly mastered him. He became weak and lazy under her force even as her husband had become weak and lazy.

But now in a flash she realized (because she was indeed no fool) that you never get anything for nothing and that the Captain's surrender to her had given him a knowledge of her that bound them together. He saw instantly what this news meant to her.

They had all cried out: 'Joe engaged! Whoever to? Who is she? What's she like?'

The snapshot was passed round.

'By Jove, she's lovely! . . . Joe's a lucky fellow. He'll be bringing her here!'

'They're to be married at once,' Mrs. Field went on. 'Then he'll bring her down here.' Her voice was steady and calm.

'That's a bit hole-and-corner, isn't it?' Archer Field said. 'Why can't they have a decent wedding here?'

'I don't know. You must ask Joe.'

Yes, that was the worst blow of all. They were to be married at once. Was Joe afraid lest she should prevent the wedding? Was it the girl's influence? The girl . . . the girl . . . Christina . . . Christina. . . .

All that night she lay awake. She called all the resources in her nature to her aid. After all only the inevitable had happened. She had known that Joe would marry. She had herself urged him to do so. The hurt, the dreadful hurt, was that he had chosen his wife without consulting her. He had been thrown, she could tell, completely off his centre. She had not been there to hold him steady. That the girl was beautiful she could see from the photograph. She was very young. She would be very easily influenced. Mrs. Field sat up in bed, listened to the sea crooning, as it seemed, submissively at her feet. There ought to be no trouble about the girl.

When she saw Christina she realized instantly that the snapshot had done her poor justice. She was the most beautiful human being Mrs. Field had ever seen, and with that realization came the queerest mixture of feeling: pride that Joe had won a creature so lovely, fierce jealousy and a stirring, wounding fear. It was not only that the girl's body was of perfect grace, her fair colour shaded and blended to an exquisite gradation of pale gold, ivory shadow, faint rose, but that in her eyes and mouth there was much sweetness and in her forehead a grand honesty. Mrs. Field realized all these things. As she kissed the child she thought: 'You shall be mine.'

Those first days were strange indeed. She loved her, she feared her, she hated her, she was compassionate for her youth, tender for her child-like submission, jealous of her love for Joe and Joe's for her. She knew that there was power here. The girl was no nonentity. She would not easily be subdued.

Then came the laugh. Mrs. Field had been hurt, and rightly so, at Joe's brushing past her with not so much as a good-morning. She was not only hurt; she was in a raging temper. She had long ago learnt that it was in her nature to have raging tempers, and that raging tempers put one at a disadvantage. Indulged, they weakened power, authority. Therefore when the temper uncoiled in her, like a snake raising its cold and scaly head, she drove it down. It was still there. It coiled, its tongue flicking, its eyes on the watch. Controlling it, she assumed a fine and

commanding austerity. In fact she sulked imperiously. She had learnt long ago that these grand silences disturbed everyone around her. People hated them like hell and anyone who loved her would do anything to shift her into kindliness again. Wisely she did not apply them often—only when the thing that she really wanted to do was to stamp, shout and tear someone's hair. As she sat there in regal majesty she enjoyed the contrast of her icy indifference and imprisoned fury. There was a consciousness, too, of a poor little girl vilely illtreated. She thought of her father and of how angry he would be to see her treated so. She was sorry for herself and proud of herself. She was altogether tremendous. And then the girl laughed.

Later on that same afternoon, she came into the drawing-room where Christina and the Captain were waiting for tea. She had a son on either side of her. Her arms were round their waists.

She smiled upon them all.

'Tea ready? Splendid! You pour out, Christina dear. There! . . .' She seated herself. 'Thank you, darling. . . . Yes, Joe dear, a scone. And a little blackberry jam. Now you are here, Christina, I can begin to be the old lady I really am.'

# CHAPTER V

## CAT'S BACK

'I ALWAYS liked it the old way.'

'Liked what, dear?'

'They always had nice titles to the chapters telling you what they were about, and when people were talking, the author put in "he said" or "she said" so that you knew just who it was. Now it's very difficult indeed to know where you are. I said to Miss Laidler, "But surely you must have Mr. Adrian's novel by this time. I've waited six weeks now and of course I can't come into Polchester *every* day just to enquire." "We'll let you know when it's in," she said, as she always does say, and offered me instead something by that man Rose, who always has such queer people in his books. You remember, Bessie, there was one about an old Colonel, who beat little boys. "Oh no, Miss Laidler," I said, "that won't do at all." There's never anything queer in Mr. Adrian's novels, nothing practically but English scenery, and his characters always behave like ladies and gentlemen, so I had to come away with this book and one by Mr. Beverley Nichols, which I'm almost certain I've read before. And now I can't make out who's talking or why all the people are so unhappy. I met Miss Ridehouse in the train and she entirely agreed with me and wished we had a Dickens to-day. All the same,' Matty said, brightening up, as always in the end she did, 'it's such a lovely day and you would never dream it was November.'

The Cat's Back! The Cat's Back! They were all standing gazing out of the long windows. The Captain, Joe, Christina. Matty sat reading her novel. Mrs. Field was writing letters. Joe had his arm around Christina's waist. It was eleven in the morning.

'We were thinking,' Joe said, 'of rowing over to the island, Christina and I. Taking some sandwiches.'

'I'll come with you,' the Captain said.

'Oh no, you won't,' Joe answered. 'We'll be to ourselves to-day, thank you.'

The little island was called the Cat's Back, and quite naturally, for there the Cat was, its back hunched, its paws spread out. The sun was shining in its eyes. Little more than a rock it was, not more than a mile across, and a good aim for strong swimmers, although, when tides were strong, it might take an hour to row over to it.

Mrs. Field looked up from her letters.

'The Fauntleroys are coming to tea this afternoon.'

Major Fauntleroy, Mrs. Fauntleroy, fat, foolish Cissie Fauntleroy.

'Well, they can just do without us for once.'

Mrs. Field turned round from the writing-table and looked at them standing close together, the sun enwrapping them.

'I ought to have told you before, Joe. Major Fauntleroy wants to talk to you about his vegetables. They aren't doing as they should. He asked especially whether you would be in. I said that you would.'

'Oh, well . . . we'll be back.'

His mother waited a moment. Then she said:

'It's hardly worth it, is it, Joe dear? It takes nearly an hour to row over.'

'Not my rowing,' Joe said, laughing.

'Why not another day when you can have all the time till dinner?'

Joe went over and gave her a kiss.

'You old bully! Look at the sun! Do you really think there's going to be another day this year like this?'

She put her hand on his arm.

'I thought we might go and see the Dewlaps this afternoon. It's a perfect day for it and Mrs. Dewlap wants . . .'

Joe grinned back at Christina, then shrugged his shoulders.

'All right, Old Lady.'

Christina heard the whole room singing in her ears: the clock, the fire, the chrysanthemums, the setter's mumbled groan of pleasure as he turned over on the warm sun-drenched carpet.

She had been in the place a month now and every day had driven her nearer to this moment. It was as though she had come to a high fence. Over it she must go or remain for ever in the wrong be-shadowed field.

She said: 'I want to go, Joe. It's a perfect day. We may never get another.'

Mrs. Field had taken up her pen again, but her little hand stroked ever so slightly Joe's arm.

'Of course you'll get another,' she said. 'Why, Christina dear, you don't know what it's like down here. We get day after day of this Indian Summer.'

'If Joe's busy I'll take you,' the Captain said.

'No, thank you very much. I want Joe to take me.'

There was a silence, then Joe said: 'We *can* be back by tea all right, mother.'

'Much better choose another day, dear,' Mrs. Field said. 'Christina naturally doesn't understand yet all the things you have to do.'

Christina said lightly: 'We'll be back for tea, I promise you. I'll get my things, Joe.'

After she was gone Joe said: 'You don't mind, mother? Christina seems awfully set on it.'

Mrs. Field was busily writing.

'My dear Joe, you're not a child. I can't make up your mind for you.'

'All right,' Joe said, like an excited boy. 'We'll be off. Back for tea, I promise you.'

As he went out he heard Matty saying: 'I'll go with you to the Dewlaps', Bessie. Only wouldn't this morning be better because . . .'

The quickest way to the little beach where the boat was lay through the Tower—in at one door and out straight to the sand, on the other. Inside the Tower it was always dusky. There was a smell of cold stone, apples, sea-birds' droppings. In the far corner some worn stone steps ran crookedly to the upper floor. Into the stone wall there was cut a big cross with some half obliterated words beneath it. 'DEUS VULT —' could be read. In here the sea sounded as though you were already part of it, and when there was a storm the noise was deafening. Once and again in the rhythm of its murmur there was a checked pause, as an instrumentalist may, for an instant, raise his hand from the piano. The dim light wavered like a shutter opening and closing. There was always movement at the heart of these very old stones.

They went through the further door and on to the beach. Together they pushed the boat into the shining trembling water.

Joe took off his coat and began to row. Christina looked back as though to make certain that they had left the shore. Then she said:

'Joe, was that awful of me?'

'What, darling?'

'Making you come when your mother didn't want us to go.'

'You didn't make me.'

'Well—contradicting your mother, then.'

'No. It amused me rather. People don't stand up to the Old Lady very often.'

'I had to. After all, we are married, aren't we?'

'I should say we are.'

'Joe—what will happen if your mother and I disagree very often?'

'Oh, but you won't.'

'I do hope not.'

She said no more. As the boat pushed forward, singing its own song of the creak of the rowlocks, Christina felt such a freedom as she had never known before.

Two gulls were flying overhead. They came close to the boat and with their sudden cry her heart leapt up. 'We're leaving the shore! We're leaving the shore! We're leaving that house!'

She stared at Joe who, with his shirt-sleeves rolled up, looked her own homely husband—and homely in the sense of *belonging* to her, to her alone! She would give him up to nobody. Of course not. Was he not her husband? But—to be safe—she must take him away from that house.

Leaving the shore they left also that strange group of people who were pressing in upon herself and Joe. It was on her lips to cry: 'Suppose, Joe, we don't go back? Now we're this far let's go on!' But she did not. She was beginning to learn subtlety, a thing she had never known anything about before. She had realized by now that things weren't as easy as that. Joe loved that place and he loved his mother. It was right that he should, but it wasn't right that he should not belong to her, or that they should not belong to one another.

She shivered.

'Cold, darling?'

'No. It's as warm as midsummer.'

Why was she afraid, then? This was a different fear from the one that she had known in the train. She had always been shy about people. That had been a natural nervousness. But this was quite different. She wasn't shy of Mrs. Field, Congreve, the Captain. She could stand up to any of them. Her love for Joe had done that for her. What she *was* shy of was entering into new worlds. The Captain often looked at her so strangely, Congreve talked to her as though she were not a human being, and Mrs. Field . . . Did Mrs. Field not like her? What was Mrs. Field *really* thinking?

'I'm not clever about people,' Christina thought, looking up into a sky that had no substance. 'I'm accustomed to being straightforward. I don't know what any of them are *thinking*. And all the time the only thing I want is to be alone with Joe. We ought to be having a honeymoon, away from everyone, quite alone. Perhaps I'm being selfish, unkind. What *is* happening? Every day I know less where I am.'

She looked back and saw the Tower. It seemed to be following them. Alone, of everything on that shore, it was coming with them.

Then Joe surprisingly spoke her own thoughts.

'It's nice getting away from them all.'

'I've been feeling that, but I didn't think *you* would.'

'Why not? Aren't we just married? We ought to have gone away by ourselves first for two or three weeks.'

'Why didn't we, then? I'd have loved it.'

'I wanted to see the place again. And it would have hurt my mother.' He said then anxiously, like a child: 'You're fond of my mother, aren't you?'

'Of course I am,' Christina said.

'Because you're the two people I love most in the world. You *must* be fond of one another.' There was a little anxiety in his voice. Then unexpectedly he chuckled. 'I didn't think you'd stand up to her like that.'

'If there'd been any real reason for your staying——'

'No, you're quite right. There wasn't. But mother likes her own way.'

The boat went swiftly. There was not a ripple on the water. Soon they were approaching the island. They were near enough now for it to be a real place. On its rocky central hump there was grass growing. There was a tiny beach of silver crystal sand.

This island was real but this world wasn't. A thin mist—not a haze, for that would be summer heat, but an autumn mist—made the air a very faint Chinese gold, that gold with a rosy shadow, so unsubstantial that it cannot be termed physical colour, and yet it is there transmuting the hard black rock, the scrolled curl of the white line on the sand, the sharp stones that lie with smooth edges where the constant waves have washed them. She looked back and still the Tower was there, pale and ghostly now like a tower in a Canaletto print.

The boat grated on the little beach. Joe helped her out. They sat down where they were, close together.

'We'll have lunch soon,' Joe said. 'I don't know why I'm so hungry.'

Christina put her hand in his.

'Joe, I feel as though this were fearfully important. These hours here, I mean. If we don't settle something out here we'll never have the chance again.'

'Settle what?' he asked lazily.

'I don't know,' she said. 'That's the dreadful thing. We've got to hit on it by chance.'

'You're being very silly and very solemn,' he said. 'Everything's all right, isn't it?'

'Of course it's all right. But it mayn't always be. Everything will depend on this moment.'

'That's rot,' he said. 'You like to analyse everything. I don't. I take things as they come. . . . Are you sorry you married me?'

'Of course not.'

'Do you love me as much as you did in London?'

'More. Every day more.'

'And I love you every day more. See? So that's that.'

He leaned over on his side, looking up at her.

'What is it like to be so beautiful?' he asked her.

'What do you mean? What is it like?'

'I really want to know. You're so simple about it. Men must have been staring at you for years and years and wanting to take your hand and kiss you. Of course there are lots of girls who are pretty, but your beauty, Chris—it's so astonishing. You must have had to *deal* with it long ago. I mean, you must have had to face it as a condition of life and decide how to behave, just as if, on the other hand, you had a squint or a hare-lip or something.'

As he wanted to know she tried to help him.

'Oh, of course I know I'm nice-looking. The first time I knew it was when I was about fourteen when a nasty old man who had come to tea said: "You're lovely, my little dear," and tried to put his hand down my back when mother wasn't looking. After that, it went on all the time, and honestly it's been more of a bother than a pleasure. But now, for the first time I'm pleased, because I've given it, for what it's worth, to you.'

He kissed her and they lay side by side, cheek to cheek. Then she sat up, brushing the sand out of her hair.

'The fact is, Joe,' she said, 'that we're both awfully young, aren't we? And we're both very ordinary too.'

'Ordinary!' he cried.

'Of course. Not remarkable in any way. You're good-looking too, but our looks will go. We've got nothing else but our characters. We know nothing about music and painting and literature. We don't talk cleverly. We've no original ideas. We're like millions of other people. We're just beginning together, two very commonplace people, and that's why, if it's worth our being alive at all, we've got to be especially kind, unselfish, brave; it's our only chance.'

'Aren't you preaching a bit?' he asked her, grinning.

'Perhaps I am,' she answered. 'But I can see already that later on our lives are going to be filled with day-by-day things. There'll be children, you'll be working, I'll be running the house. We'll be up in the morning and in bed again before we know where we are. But *now*—on this island—while we still care passionately for one another, there's a kind of pause. We can look ahead and swear that whatever happens we'll try to be specially decent, because if we aren't there'll be no point at all in our being alive.'

'Except to have fun,' Joe said.

'That's not enough reason for living,' she answered. 'Because there will be

plenty of things that aren't fun as well. It's those we'll have to deal with decently. . . . Shall we swear to be as good as we know how?'

'I swear!' Joe said, holding up his hand.

'So do I,' said Christina, holding up hers. 'And now we'll have lunch.'

'No. Wait a minute,' said Joe, standing up. 'You didn't hear anything, did you?'

'No,' said Christina.

'I thought I heard someone speak. Someone saying "Swear."'

'Like the ghost in *Hamlet* when he goes underground,' said Christina, laughing.

'No. Honestly.'

He stood listening.

'It was the waves.'

'There aren't any to-day. Except there's a little cave the other side. I'll show it to you after lunch. The sea runs in there and makes an echo. This is a very rum little island. I'll tell you about it after lunch. I could have sworn I heard someone.'

Christina said: 'Perhaps the Captain came after all. He may have swum across.'

Joe cried excitedly: 'I'm going to swim! I'm going to swim! Of course it's November, but people swim here at Christmas time. They do really. Can you wait ten minutes for lunch? Won't you come swimming too?'

'No. I'd be frozen. I'm not used to it as you are.'

He threw off his clothes and stood there, his arms crossed before plunging in. She knew him so intimately now, every curve and line of his body, that it was astonishing that she should find him so beautiful. There might be five hundred naked young men standing in line in front of her, and Joe would be the most wonderful, the most beautiful, and this although now she could not see his face where surely all the true personality resided.

All the male world under thirty, that took exercise and was out constantly in the open air, would have this same health, vigour, symmetry, and yet, to her, Joe was the only human being, full, crowned with *her* humanity from head to toe. It was this moment of complete union at which she was wondering. She was not touching him, but they were joined by the lambent air, this sun-crossed, salt-sparkling silence, these rocks that watched so gravely, and the fragments of glittering sand that trickled hotly between her fingers. He waded out and the smooth water parted in ripples a pale glass-green. Almost at once he was in deeper water and his thighs were covered. Then he struck forward and, a moment later, only his head was visible.

At once she was curtained in loneliness. Everything drew in upon her, the single sound the shy whispering friendliness of the tide advancing, hesitating, running back. Alone like this she was afraid again. She felt once more the warning of her own

weakness, her ignorance of life, of her own character and beliefs, of her courage, of everything—even her honesty. Marriage itself should be a sufficient problem for her: how to keep her love and Joe's sincere and honest, how to make their relationship to one another so valuable that no person, no force could separate them. In that clear light she saw everything very clearly, too clearly perhaps. Human beings were never held together long by physical attraction. She was frightened by what Joe had just now said to her. He was clearly blinded by her beauty. She knew that she was beautiful and she wished that she wasn't. If she was plain, Joe would see her as she was, but if she *had* been plain Joe wouldn't have married her. She honestly, and quite humbly, believed that she had qualities—qualities of sincerity, pluck, kindliness. But if she hadn't had any of those, if she had been trivial, false, cowardly—Joe would have loved her just the same, simply because her nose was straight, her colour fair, her body slim. He was, as he had said, simple. He didn't go into motives. When he had held her in his arms sufficiently often he would be open to attack from any quarter. His mother! Christina knew now very clearly that his mother's influence was something deep in the very marrow of his bones. It had been created nine months before his birth. He was swimming now in this fair water, as though in his mother's very being. If his mother would realize this, but would realize also that he must have this other marriage relationship as well, all would be right: Christina was not jealous of that filial bond. But would his mother surrender any part of him, and if she would not, what would Christina do? What would she *do*?

She rose to her feet, she stretched out her arms. Why, she would fight to the last ditch, the last wall, the last bullet.

'Joe! Joe! Joe!' she called, and the voice echoed her: 'Joe! Joe! Joe!'

Warm, exquisitely happy, they ate their luncheon.

'It's very good,' Joe said. 'That's because Simpson loves me. I can do anything with Simpson.'

'She doesn't love *me*,' Christina said.

'No, I don't believe she does. I wonder why.'

'She hates your marrying. I caught her looking at me yesterday over the potatoes as though she'd put strychnine in them!'

Joe laughed, stretched his arms and yawned.

'That bathe has made me sleepy. Simpson thinks Congreve and I belong only to mother. She worships mother just as the Moabites worshipped the god Baal. . . . And now come. I'll show you the rest of the island.'

They climbed the few rocks and stood on the sandy grass-grown summit. Christina felt the quick change from the view of the near-by shore to the isolation of the limitless ocean. This tiny fragment of rock and boundless waters beyond it, waters that had no care for anything human, that surged indifferently beneath the two small fragments clinging there. So God must see them. And yet she loved Joe and had in her heart such mysteries of joy, longing, self-sacrifice, wonder.

'Very trite!' she said aloud.

Joe enquired.

'I was thinking platitudes. . . . I told you just now how ordinary we are—and yet—oh, Joe!—eagles have no such longing!'

But Joe wasn't listening.

'We used to come here as kids again and again. The island seemed enormous then. For a long while we believed it was a real cat. We could feel it raise its back. When the sun shone it stretched its claws. Silly things, kids. . . .'

The sun still blazed as though it were summer. The ocean trembled and a lake of purple shrank to a river while a forest of little white flowers sprang up over beds of dancing green. A wind was rising. A spurt of spray, so white in the sun that it seemed an announcer of some news, hit the rocks beneath them.

'I have a feeling,' Christina said, 'that we shall never come back here again.'

'Of course we will.'

'Not for years and years, then. I shall look across to it and think of to-day and long for it.'

'Come and see the cave.'

The cave was small and its mouth *was* a little like that of a cat yawning.

'I took my clothes off when I was about ten and went right in. Only a child could make it. I was fearfully excited because I brought back a skull—a sheep's, I suppose—and ran round to the beach to show them all at tea, bare as I was—and didn't they scream! Only ten too! I asked mother afterwards what the trouble was. She said ladies must never see gentlemen without their clothes on. I asked why and she said because their bodies were different. That devoured me with curiosity and I went everywhere then hoping to see a lady without any clothes on—which shows you how careful you must be with children.'

'And did you?' Christina asked.

'That's telling,' he answered. But as he led her down to the little beach again he said: 'But we always *did* believe that there's someone alive on this island. That's why I pretended I heard that voice a little while back.'

'Did you really pretend?' she asked.

He didn't answer.

Only, when they were on the beach again he said: 'Do you believe in God, Christina?'

'Yes. At least I believe in some life that isn't physical.'

'It must be, mustn't it?' Joe drew her close to him. 'It's damned rum, isn't it? Life, I mean. I'm never much good at thinking. I go a certain way and then my brain stops—but why should I like the sea to be so green, such a lovely colour? Why should I care, I mean, whether it's green or just a dirty grey? . . .' He shook his head. 'I hate thinking, but marrying you has made me. . . . Here . . .' He drew her down. 'Let's have a snooze . . . I'm most awfully sleepy.'

So, queerly enough, was she. They lay down, their bodies stretched out, their heads in the sand, and, almost at once, were asleep.

But just before they slept he murmured:

'You will be nice to mother, won't you?'

'But of course.'

'She's been so awfully good to me. You don't *know* how good—ever since I was born. I love her so much—I love her. . . .'

His voice trailed off into a kind of spider's-web, which spread over the whole island. The web was made of silver, but without warning a large man appeared, tore the web with his hand, and voices cried: 'You mustn't. It isn't decent.'

Centuries passed and the man waved his hand again, crying: 'You *think* this is the real thing. It isn't at all. You watch.' Christina watched, and exactly as you take the large silver-plated cover off the dish that contains the Sunday joint so the man took the cover off the island. He removed, with one single gesture, rocks, sand, tufts of grass, silver beach, and instead there was a pink trembling jelly something like inside the shell of a crab. On this trembling surface nothing could stand. The sea was rising. The island floated like a cherub's posterior. Somewhere drums began to beat. At first very softly, then more loudly, then with a deafening uproar. A seagull came swooping down and screamed in Christina's ear: 'Now you'll need all your pluck. Can't you hear the drums beating? You'd better be off. Discretion is the better part of valour.' Then, without a moment's warning, Christina was struggling in the water, which was as black as ink and pierced with fish-bones. Struggling with her was Mrs. Field—black dress, white cuffs, bonnet and all.

'One of us has got to go,' said Mrs. Field, 'and it won't be me.' The drums roared for execution.

With a start Christina woke. The sound of the drums had been the beating of the sea. It was almost dark and bitterly cold. Over the shore there was hung an untidy

ragged strip of yellow sky. Little white horses leapt on the grey sea. She shook Joe.

'Wake up! Wake up! It's cold!'

He stirred. He grunted. He looked up and saw, in the dim light, that she leant looking down on him.

He raised up his arms.

'I was dreaming of you, Christina! I love you. I love you as no husband ever loved wife before.'

She knelt down beside him.

'Let us love one another for ever and ever.'

'Like this . . . like this.'

'No. Not like this. But better and better.'

'I swear, Christina, that I will love you for ever.'

'Joe . . . Joe . . . Joe darling.'

'Christina . . .!'

Suddenly she sprang to her feet.

'My God . . . the Fauntleroys!'

He didn't move, looking up at her. 'Darling, I can hardly see you. But like that—the ghost of the island—too lovely to be real. . . .'

'No, Joe. Don't you remember? The Fauntleroys. We promised your mother we'd be back for tea. We've forgotten all about them.'

He too sprang to his feet.

'Oh, Lord—so we have! It's getting dark. . . . What time is it?' He looked at his wrist-watch. 'Heavens! It's nearly half-past four. We've been asleep for hours. Come on, we must hurry!'

They climbed into the little boat and launched it. The sea was not rough, but the wind played with it. The tide was against them.

They made very slow progress. Not a word was spoken. It was a quarter-past five when they pulled the boat up on to the beach. They ran to the house.

In the hall were Mrs. Field and the Captain.

'They've just gone,' Mrs. Field said, and moved towards the drawing-room.

Joe, his voice beseeching, followed her.

'But, mother—we're most awfully sorry. . . . It was the silliest thing. . . . We went to sleep. . . .'

The door closed.

The Captain, grinning at Christina, said: 'You are naughty children, it seems.'

'Oh, look!' Christina cried hysterically. 'Bird-droppings on "St. George and the Dragon"! Where do the birds come from? Clean it! Clean it! You've got nothing

better to do!’ And rushed violently upstairs.

# CHAPTER VI

## PEACOCK

Mrs. Field was deeply shocked by Joe's missing of the Fauntleroys. For one thing she approved of Major Fauntleroy. He had something of the same ideas about life as she. Discipline. Treat 'em rough. Never show when you're beaten. Remember that any one Englishman is worth two bloody foreigners. These old-fashioned dicta did not seem to her old-fashioned.

Once, even twice, Fauntleroy had said, looking at her over those drooping moustaches upon which crumbs of toast and biscuit sometimes hung: 'It's not like Joe to be late.' It was not. Joe had never broken such a promise before! And once the Major, looking at Mrs. Fauntleroy with a sudden fierceness as though he were seeing her truly for the first time, remarked: 'Marriage. Marriage, my dear Mrs. Field, makes changes.'

Meanwhile, at her own heart, there was an ever-increasing pain. This pain was physical. A hand, soft but strong, was pressing her heart and making it difficult for her to breathe. With this physical pain there was a mingling of anger, apprehension, and sorrow for herself. Joe had never broken his word to her before.

As she sat there, smiling regally at Mrs. Fauntleroy, who was a shapeless pale woman reminding you of soft herring's roe, over and over again, her enemy, her threatener of peril, of woe, of disaster (the enemy that we carry, all of us, in our souls) whispered to her: 'Can't you remember how, even until the other day, he would rush home so that he should not be late, how he gave up the Prestiss' tea-party for you, would not go to the Polchester dance? Oh, many, many things. . . .'

'I don't think,' Mrs. Fauntleroy was saying, 'that Mussolini cares for anyone but himself—that's *my* view.'

It was of course the girl. Only the girl. She had persuaded him and at present could make him do as she pleased. Well, that was natural enough for the moment. She was beautiful, and Joe had been married for so short a time.

'I particularly wished to ask him about the potatoes,' said the Major. 'I'd been saving up quite a number of questions.'

'Unluckily,' said Mrs. Fauntleroy, 'Alick came in just too late yesterday to catch all that that nice gardening man was saying on the wireless. And, as a matter of fact, he did say something about potatoes that very day. I do like him so much, don't you, Mrs. Field? He's so quiet and well-behaved, just as though he were one's own gardener.'

'I *am* disappointed, I must confess,' said the Major, getting up from his chair and looking like a pink rhinoceros who had unexpectedly taken to plus-fours. 'He must have found out a lot of new things in London—including a wife. Ha! Ha!'

'He did,' said Mrs. Field quietly.

'How do you like her—eh? What do you think of her? I hear she's a stunner. Quite a beauty! Well, well—we must be going, I'm afraid.' He went to the window. 'Clouding over. Such a lovely morning too. Sea getting up a bit.'

They had been gone but ten minutes when the culprits arrived.

She felt a grim pleasure at Joe's self-humiliation, nor did she let him off lightly. He stood there in the drawing-room, a small boy brought to judgment.

'The ridiculous thing is that we went to sleep. 'I can't understand it. Never done a thing like that before.'

She sat there grimly, her back very straight, wanting to kiss him: yes, and to torture him a little. She loved to see his big strong body and his look of anxious distress. He was her baby: she had rocked him in her arms; she had bathed him, laying him in her lap, stroking the smoothness of his limbs, tickling him until he wriggled with delight, kissing his soft eyelids. . . .

'My dear Joe, you're your own master,' she said.

'No, but, mother, I always keep my promises. You know I do. I didn't want to go really. It was Chris . . .' Then he pulled himself up. He was not going to be disloyal to his beloved Chris.

'Quite,' Mrs. Field said. 'I understand perfectly. It was only that the Fauntleroys were surprised. He was so sure——'

'Oh, I know. His beastly vegetables. But it's you, mother. . . .' He knelt down beside her, put his arms around her, rubbed his cheek against hers. 'Don't be angry, mother darling. Come on, forgive me. Come on, you wicked old woman. Don't be cross. You mustn't. You mustn't.'

And she forgave him. Of course. Of course. How could she help it? She loved him so dearly, him and Congreve. They were all that she had. Her whole life. Everything. She kissed him. She looked into his eyes, smiling.

'Dear Joe . . . Dear, dear Joe.'

Upon that same afternoon the Severings came to tea. Mr. Severing was a gentleman of private means, who lived some five miles away in a nice little house overlooking the sea. He was a mild man of some fifty years with an anxious moustache and hair going bald on the top in an uncertain fragmentary fashion. He

was altogether uncertain, timorous; had he ever had any vitality it had by now been sapped by Mrs. Severing. She was a slim taut woman with grey hair, very neat, very talkative, very silly, and conscious only of her husband in all the world. They were a devoted pair, so devoted that they were never apart, day or night. He had been once delicate, pains in the head, an uncertain stomach. He was quite well now, but Mrs. Severing waited for returning symptoms as she waited for the weather report. Dick was affected by the weather and 'a depression is advancing over the North Atlantic' was to Violet Severing more dreadful than the massacre of a million Chinamen. She ran her house beautifully, although her servants hated her for her ill-advised mixture of friendly intimacy and sudden storms of prying severity. They were the especial friends of Matty, who thought them both quite perfect. Matty was beyond the price of bar gold to Violet Severing because she would listen eagerly for hours to anecdotes, experiences, characteristics of Mr. Severing. Mr. Field liked Mr. Severing and when they came to tea Mr. Field would appear, sit near to Dick Severing, and occasionally offer a remark, such as 'I see the *Queen Mary* was an hour late at Southampton yesterday' or 'They are behaving shamefully over that Coal Bill,' to which Dick Severing with a nervous fleeting smile would reply 'Quite' or, if it was the summer, 'Yes—and I see Warwickshire were all out for a hundred and fifty.' Fishing and reading the cricket reports were his two great pleasures.

Mrs. Field despised the Severings, but was annoyed with them if they didn't come and pay their punctual calls. She knew why they had come to-day. It was that they might see with their own eyes the new Mrs. Field. They had been away in London and reports about Christina had greatly excited them. Congreve also was present, why his mother did not know. There had been something very peculiar about Congreve during these last weeks. She was not at all happy about him.

'Oh yes, London,' Violet Severing was saying. She spoke always with excitement, smiling, bursting with good feeling. She was the perfect County lady. She had also an inexhaustible interest in anything that might possibly affect her husband. 'Well, you know, time simply flew—didn't it, Dick? Ever so many people to see. The Rockings—Spencer Rocking was Dick's pal at school. We were both struck by his looks. He might be Dick's father, but he's been bothered lately by rheumatism in the left shoulder—and Dick was telling him that he had a twinge or so in that same shoulder last year, but of course we were awfully careful about diet—weren't we, Dick?—and I'm afraid Spencer—he's most dreadfully stout—would never bother. He simply hasn't the character. We went to several plays. What did we see, Dick? Oh, that funny musical thing with that funny little man in it and the tune that is all the rage—and a Shakespeare—one of the historical ones, and Dick thought it rather too

long.'

'Oh dear!' said Matty, gazing at her friend with such pleasure that it was a joy to see her. 'That's what I do miss—a play. I haven't been to a theatre for years and I was saying to Mrs. Fauntleroy: "There's nothing like a play, is there, a really good play," I said, and Mrs. Fauntleroy was so wonderfully kind. "We'll have a little jaunt," she said. "Just you and I. We'll go to London and do the plays." Oh dear!—so very good of Mrs. Fauntleroy, even though it's only a dream.'

'How did you find the traffic?' Archer Field asked Dick Severing. 'Pretty damnable, isn't it?'

'Quite,' said Dick Severing. 'Often most confusing.'

'Oh, Dick was wonderful about the traffic,' Violet Severing exclaimed. 'Just as though he'd lived in London all his life. I'll confess that I *do* hesitate, but Dick would take me by the arm and say "Now, Violet," and he was always right. He knew the exact moment. But London isn't at all what it was. Is it, Dick? I remember only ten years ago when Dick and I——'

She broke off. Joe and Christina had come in.

Yes. Violet Severing didn't speak. She sat there, staring, her little mouth open. She forgot, for a moment, that she was a County lady. For she had never seen anyone so beautiful as Christina in all her life.

They were all, at that instant, silent. Mrs. Field, realizing what Violet Severing felt, even as she said, 'Ah, Christina. Come along. You don't know Mrs. Severing, do you?' looked at Congreve. His serious absorbed gaze stabbed her heart. It was exactly that. Her heart felt a pain so sharp that her breath was caught and, for a second, she raised her little hand as though to protest against the thrust.

The girl's beauty was a challenge to herself and a warning of the gravest, most serious danger. This was the moment, when Violet Severing stopped in the middle of her sentence, that Mrs. Field, with active, positive consciousness, realized for the first time the acuteness of her danger. Christina's unself-consciousness, as she shook hands with the Severings and then stood waiting for her cup of tea, enforced that peril. The girl was not conceited, nor arrogant. She was not to be flattered. No power was to be gained over her by entrapping her own care for her beauty. Her beauty was unanalysable. It was a beauty of form and colour, lying somewhere in the smooth brow, the long curve of the cheek, the balance of the neck, the soft gentleness of the eyes, the whole carriage of the body: and in the colour that was shaded, the hidden flame that burns behind the gold shadows of leaves and petals and beaten metal. Unanalysable. Possibly fugitive. The colours would darken, the body thicken, the boyish curled head grow heavy, but then it would be too late. The

mischief would be done.

Nor was she a fool. She had character, and Mrs. Field recognized that and admired it. She had no liking for fools. Even now, in this short time, the shy awkwardness of the first days was leaving Christina. She was less of a child than she had been a month ago. She took her cup of tea and as she took it looked up and smiled at Joe. For that smile Mrs. Field, for the first time, hated her.

Even Severing, in his mousy indeterminate way, couldn't keep his eye off her. Violet Severing saw that at once, of course, but it did not alarm her. She was as sure of her Dick as she was sure of her God. She kept both of them in her pocket.

They didn't remain, however, very much longer.

'You will come and see us, won't you, Mrs. Field? Joe is a very old friend of ours. I'd like you to see our little place although it's nothing to shout about.'

'Mrs. Severing,' said Congreve, 'has the best appointed house in all Glebeshire.'

Violet didn't like Congreve at all. He frightened her. She was sure that he was always laughing at her, and he looked at women as though he considered painting them in the nude but felt for them no physical passion. Violet was in reality a prude but hated to seem behind the times. As she said good-bye she almost forgot Mrs. Field in her excitement at Christina's beauty. That hair, the fair curls, the complexion that *seemed* so natural although there must be, of course, the cleverest application of paint and powder, that simple silver-grey frock, not even very smartly cut. For a swift astonishing moment Violet felt a poignant regret: at her own middle-age, her well-appointed house, her dry skin, her thinning hair—'I too was young once,' she thought. However, she gathered Dick under her arm and marched away.

Five yards from the house she said: 'Mrs. Field will hate such a lovely girl marrying her Joe. Boadicea's got a job on there.'

Dick didn't answer. Sometimes he was quite rude to his Violet and behaved as though he wished for his freedom—little flutters of rebellion which Violet very quickly soothed.

They were alone.

Christina said: 'Look here. I want to say something. May I?'

'My dear,' said Mrs. Field, smiling. 'Why, of course.'

Mrs. Field was sitting in the chair with the upright back, busy with her sewing. Christina came over, surprisingly bent forward and kissed her cheek, then took a chair close at hand.

'You're angry with me—because we were late for tea yesterday.'

'Angry?' Mrs. Field gave her a quick friendly look. 'Why—no, you don't understand——'

'Oh, I'm so glad!'

'You don't understand, dear. I was cross with Joe for a moment because he'd promised——'

'But not with me?'

'Of course not!'

'But you should have been. It was my fault. It was lovely there and we fell asleep.'

'Most natural. I always say it's a very funny little island. Most unexpected.'

'No. But I want you to say that you forgive me.'

'There's nothing to forgive.'

'There is. There are several things. And there will be more.'

Mrs. Field paused in her sewing and then, very gently, patted Christina's cheek.

'My dear, I'm an old woman. I've lived a long time and learnt a lot. I know that Joe is married now. I remember my own early married life, and when one's in love one can't always be thinking of other people as one can when one isn't in love.'

'Of course Joe and I are in love,' Christina said. 'More and more. But you're his mother, he's lived here always. He owes you everything.'

('She's explaining him to me,' Mrs. Field thought.)

'But it's about myself. I had never been away from home before I married. I expect I've been spoilt, had my own way too much. You've all been so wonderful to me and I want to say—don't think me silly—but there's nothing I won't do—I can love you if you'll let me—as Joe does—be a daughter. . . .'

('Love me,' Mrs. Field thought, 'as Joe does.')

'I put things so badly. I'm really very shy and distrustful of myself. I suppose I don't like showing my feelings. But I *had* to say this to you. You must have thought me so selfish, but I won't be. If you'll let me I'll help you, as I helped mother.'

('As I helped mother,' Mrs. Field thought. 'The girl's a fool after all.')

'I'm very young,' Christina went on. 'Young for my age, I think. I've got an elder sister who's always rather bossed things and that's kept me back perhaps. Anyway,' she went on cheerfully, 'marriage is teaching me a lot already. Husbands want looking after, don't they?'

Mrs. Field bit off a piece of thread, looked into the fire.

'Of course they do,' she agreed. 'It's a splendid thing for Joe to be married. He's been far too long at his mother's apron-strings. He's so good-natured that he spoils one.' She paused, then added: 'It's sweet of you to speak to me like this. I

don't suppose any mother finds it quite easy at first to give her son up to someone else. That's a lesson every mother has to learn.'

'Oh, but you're not giving Joe up!' Christina, very happy now, cried. 'He's yours as much as ever he was. I don't see how a man's feelings for his wife should interfere with his feelings for his mother. They're quite different, aren't they?'

'Quite different,' Mrs. Field agreed.

When I have children I'm going to try very hard not to be possessive. I know it will be difficult because I love children so much.'

'It *is* hard,' Mrs. Field said, nodding her head, but then one mustn't expect life to be easy.'

'No,' said Christina. 'I know the time must come when Joe won't love me as he does now—perhaps as much but quite differently. Men are very different from women, aren't they?'

'Very,' Mrs. Field agreed. 'And I think if married people don't have children, then things are very difficult later on.'

'The great question,' Christina said, looking very serious, 'is where our children are going to be born. I think that's very important. I incline to Wiltshire myself, although Joe hasn't come to any decision yet.'

Mrs. Field let her sewing drop on to her lap. She sat without moving.

'This must be your home, dear,' she said at last, 'for a long time to come.'

'Oh, of course,' Christina said. 'It will always be our home. But then we must have our own home too—our very own, I mean, that we make ourselves.'

There was a silence.

'Have you talked to Joe about it?'

'Oh yes—I don't think he minds where we go as long as I'm happy.'

Mrs. Field said nothing.

'You see,' Christina said, laughing, 'I must strike while the iron's hot. While he's in this beautiful mood.'

'And how soon,' asked Mrs. Field, 'do you think of leaving us?'

'Well, I thought we might stay here until the spring—if you don't mind. You'll be sick to death of us by then. Of course Joe has got to get a job, but there are a lot of things he can do and I really don't mind how little we live on.'

Mrs. Field raised her hand and shaded her face from the fire with it.

'There'll be time enough,' she said.

'Oh yes, and you can come and stay with us. You will, won't you?'

'I will. Certainly. And now, dear, I have letters to write.'

She kissed Christina and walked over to the writing-table.

She sat, alone in the room, at the writing-table and tried to still her agitation. That was the first thing that she must do, for she could not think with any clarity while her heart was hammering in her ear and her hands were shaking. She steadied one hand, as it were defiantly, by pressing it flat on the shining surface of the table. She was not going to be beaten by one of her hands.

She turned her body half round and faced the room. She was never sentimental about places unless they had been connected with herself for a very long time. But this room had been. The faded colours, the faint discolorations on the walls, the old brocaded chairs, a tear in the carpet near the door—all these had been there surely for ever: they were the eternal, nay, immortal, background to the two figures—the babies crawling, crowing with delight, tumbling forward and howling with alarm, the two small boys, resting sturdily on their square legs, the two boys on the floor at her feet while she read them *Treasure Island*, boys, not so small, asking for some favour, Congreve's eyes filled with tears, Joe, thick-set, bulky for his fourteen years, saying: 'I don't care not having supper'; Joe, creeping in, pyjama-clad, standing, looking at her with that half-doubtful, half-roguish glance: 'Mother, I'm sorry'—and then running to her, throwing his warm strong arms around her neck, pushing his chest, like a little animal butting, against her bosom, her hand pressing his warm pulsating body close to her heart; giving Congreve his first paint-box, seeing him stroke each fat shining tube with his finger, his eyes wide with wonder, saying in an awestruck whisper, 'Oh, mother . . . mother.' She pulled herself up. She was crying. A tear, like an impertinence, was stinging her cheek.

Above all things she detested sentiment whether in herself or another. She angrily brushed her eyes, then, her face hard as rock, the dimples, the soft roundnesses fled from it, she began, coldly, resolutely, to think.

In the first place, let her not blind herself, hers was no unusual story. There had been plays and novels, yes, and millions of women in actual life who had suffered just as she was suffering. Why then did she feel that hers *was* an especial case? Because of herself, because she had given *everything* up, her soul, her entity, her inner being, to the love of her sons. Maybe every devoted mother felt this. Ah, but she, Bessie Field, was an unusual woman. She had never been like other women. She could have been a world-ruler had she been a man—a Hitler, a Mussolini. She had been often surprised at her sure knowledge of the exact feelings, motives, reactions of those two great men. But she was a woman and all that she had in the world was two sons. To these she had surrendered everything: her ambitions, her health (she was as strong as a camel), her husband, her private pleasures. And gladly. She regretted not a thing. But was she, after all this, going meekly to

surrender her boys? Of course she was. Every mother had to surrender her sons when the time came. Yes, every ordinary mother. *But there was something especial in her case.*

It was at this moment, when the dark spirit inside herself whispered this to her, that the room seemed to change, the very table at which she was sitting magnified. No ordinary woman, no ordinary room, no ordinary table. Before—at her father's death, on the day of her marriage, when her first baby for the first time nuzzled at her breast, she had known this same feeling of magnification. Every woman born into this world believes herself to be an especial woman, born for some peculiar destiny, but Bessie Field had had no vagueness in her certainty of the thing she was born for: she was born to be the mother of her sons.

Her consciousness of this, at these exalted moments, was a queer mingling of opposites: of tenderness and anger, of pride and humility, of love and hatred. She shared with Hitler and Mussolini the sense that she was dedicated by God for some great purpose, and she shared with them, too, the intolerant resolve of holding to what she had.

She was calmer now. Her body no longer trembled. Joe and Christina had been already discussing the date of their departure: somewhere in Wiltshire would be best, would it? 'You must come and stay with us often. . . .' 'I don't mind how little we live on.'

Ah, but Christina didn't know Joe yet. What could a child like that even dimly surmise of the hold a mother could have over her son? And it would be good for Joe to remain there. This place was his charge, everything for which he cared was here. And then there would be Joe's children, born here, growing here, making this place their home. . . . What could a girl like Christina do against these tremendous influences? Reassured now, her head up, she walked about the familiar room. The door, ajar, was pushed open and Snubs came in, moving with all the self-satisfied sturdiness of his Sealyham blood. She patted him. He looked at her. She looked at him. They understood one another perfectly.

She was possessed with a driving vitality, and any uneasiness there might be must be settled, and that quickly. She was uneasy about Congreve.

On an afternoon of pale winter sunlight she broke all her rules, pushed open the door of his studio and looked in. He was deeply absorbed in his work and at once she began to apologize.

'Darling, you know I *never* come in here. You're not to stop or speak or anything. I shall simply stay a few moments.'

He did not stop, which was unlike him. She had a wild desire to tear the studio

down, throw the pictures into the sea. How ridiculous of him to work with this seriousness, as though it mattered! He would never be a painter of importance and for a long time now it had seemed that he had realized it. Why this new energy? She waited. She felt one of her fierce tempers rising and she quieted it, biting her lip. She had broken her own rule because she knew by now how deeply it exasperated her to see him seriously engaged on this nonsense. She sat on a little stool, her hands folded, and waited.

The light faded. He stopped, turned round, came to her and kissed her. She could see that he was greatly excited.

'The light's gone. Damn! Well, mother darling, it's something to see *you* there, doing nothing.'

'What are you painting, darling?'

'Nothing. Everything. A mouse-trap.'

'A mouse-trap!' She was standing beside him, close to him. She looked at the canvas, her head on one side as though she would be critical. But it was difficult to be critical, for there was only an outline of a female form. . . .

'You haven't got very far.'

'No. I never do. There! That's enough for the time—and enough for ever!'

He put his arm round her.

'It's your lovely daughter-in-law.'

'Christina!'

'Christina—who has bewitched me.'

'Congreve! What nonsense!

'Oh, I'm not in love with her. None of that folly. But listen—

> Yes, I will wound Achilles in the heel,
> And then return to Helen for a kiss.
> O thou art fairer than the evening air,
> Clad in the beauty of a thousand stars,
> Brighter art thou than flaming Jupiter,
> When he appeared to hapless Semele,
> More lovely than the monarch of the sky
> In wanton Arethusa's azured arms,
> And none but thou shalt be my paramour.

She has made me believe again that I can paint—and that belief, mother, if I can only keep it . . .'

'Why,' said Mrs. Field, 'Christina doesn't know anything about painting!'

'Not a blessed thing—any more than you do, darling. She knows nothing about anything except that she's in love with Joe. But she's honest and single-hearted.

She'd have made a splendid heroine for one of Trollope's interminable novels. She hasn't the remotest notion of what's going on in our wicked, evil minds. But she makes me believe that I can paint, mother. She has given me a new impulse . . . There! Forget it! It's all nonsense. Except her beauty. Except her beauty.'

He looked at her curiously.

'Is she happy, do you think?'

'Happy?'

'Yes—with us. It all must be so strange for her. She must want so badly to be alone with Joe.'

'A wife can't be always alone with her husband. That's ridiculous.'

'Yes, I suppose it is. I know nothing about it—nothing about love, nothing about women, nothing about anything. . . . Come on. Let's go and have some tea!'

They went across the darkening garden, arm in arm. Across the sky, over the leaden sea, there was a band of gold and above the gold a single star. An owl hooted. She felt a melancholy so deep that she shivered.

'Cold?'

'No.'

He started, shouting 'Tea! Tea! I want my tea!' towards the house.

But, on that same evening, she had them as she wanted them, as she loved them, seated about the drawing-room with its faint rose and white for so fair a background: yes, all—Archer, Joe, Congreve, the Captain, Christina, and Matty.

She sat in her chair and felt all her maternal love and charity spread out over the whole world. This was what she really was, the mother of them all; yes, even of Archer and Matty, for neither of whom she cared very much.

It was infrequently that she had them all together around her like that, for Congreve would often be out playing chess with the parson of the village, and Archer would be in his room reading, and the Captain—oh, the Captain chasing some girl up a dark lane as likely as not.

But to-night—there was Congreve, his long white nose jutting out over a drawing-pad on which he was lazily sketching. And Joe, his legs stretched out, he staring into the fire; Christina, in a white dress with panniers, sitting close beside him; Archer hunched forward, his monocle swinging; the Captain thick, broad-backed, his ugly face screwed up in the light of the fire; Matty sewing (she sewed very badly) and looking up every now and again to give her sister a little quick smile of love and friendliness. These little loving smiles of Matty's often irritated Bessie Field to

exasperation.

Not to-night though. She was loving them all to-night, and in her head was spinning her plan for keeping, holding, *embedding* Joe and Joe's children and Joe's grandchildren. And the first part of the plan was sweetness to Christina.

'I remember when I was a little girl,' she was saying, 'we'd go picnics to Bodenneth. Do you remember, Matty? We'd go in a jingle and have to walk the hills behind the fat pony. It would take all day. We'd be at the beach by noon, and then bathe, then eat, then the older people would bathe and we'd paddle and shrimp, then tea and the drive back. A hot summer evening, the flies buzzing and the pony flapping his ears, the sound of the wheels on the road, the last look back at the sea, which would be like curdling milk in the distance, the gathering dark, the first lights in the farms, the smell of the hedges—don't you remember, Matty, how lovely and exciting and slow it was?'

Ah, now it should be like that, and she a young mother and Joe and Congreve walking sturdily beside her up the hill to rest the pony: and then, quite unexpectedly, Joe slipping his hot sticky little hand into hers!

Archer surprisingly spoke.

'What a sentimental woman you are, Bessie! But, like all women, crying over the past. The past! It's all nonsense! There never was a good past. Ask the Tower! It can remember a lot of things—young John Trefusis, for instance, being hung, slow-tortured and starved to death for kissing old Endicott's daughter. Queen Anne's time. Endicott was Squire here, Trefusis the schoolmaster's son in the village. He was hung from the large ring just inside the Tower door. It's there now. Naked he was, and the Squire whipped him till the blood ran in streams. He was two days dying and they could hear his screams right out to sea. No one in the village durst do a thing. It's all in Cooper's Glebeshire book. This very place and this very Tower.'

Archer got up, his black eyebrows beetling down upon them.

'Humans! They're a bad, cruel, cowardly lot, always have been and always will be. There's insanity and cruelty in every pile of old stones.'

'That's so like you, father,' Joe said; 'because there was one bad lot in Anne's time, so everyone's bad. I like human beings—on the whole they make a decent show of it.'

But Archer Field did not care for talking. He found a book in the shelf by the window, sat down away from them all and began to read.

Mrs. Field said:

'As you're going to make your home here, Christina, you mustn't let Archer frighten you about the Tower. I'm sure you love it.'

Joe laughed.

'Good for you, mother. I don't know that Congreve and I do love it. You've shut us into it once or twice, mother, to make us good. I remember when I was small thinking it had a voice threatening me. It was only the sea, of course.'

Now that wasn't good of Joe! She was irritated again just when loving them all was so pleasant! What was stirring among them all to make them speak, think, act as they never did before?

She shook her finger at him, smiling.

'Joe, that isn't right of you. You and Congreve were never punished save when you deserved it. Don't you agree, Christina, it was for their good? Haven't I given you an excellent husband?'

Christina put her hand on Joe's for a moment.

'Indeed you have. I'm glad I wasn't there to see him punished, though.'

The irritation persisted. She knew that she was showing it in her voice when she said:

'Now, Joe, put me right with Christina. You've been making me out a tyrant.'

Congreve looked up from his sketching.

'So you were, darling. So you are. So you ever will be.'

They were laughing at her, of course, teasing her, but, for some reason, she did not wish to be teased in front of Christina. And she hated to be laughed at.

There was a silence and everyone was aware of it. Snubs, who was always eager in his perceptions of the discomforts of human beings, looked round on them and then yawned, then licked his hinder parts. Mrs. Field called out, more sharply than she intended:

'Don't, Snubs—manners, manners!'

And so Christina, all unwitting, eager that everyone should be happy, began:

'Anyway, there are some very nice people round here. I made friends with the most delightful woman this afternoon.'

'Really, dear?' said Mrs. Field, beaming upon them all before she turned to her sewing again. 'Turn down that shade ever so slightly, Joe, dear, will you. It's a little bright . . . and who was that?'

'A Mrs. Peacock. I had walked out to those rocks beyond the beach and was taking the short cut Joe showed me. We met in that little lane. She stopped and held out her hand and said: "You're Joe's wife, aren't you?" We walked back almost as far as her house. We took to one another like anything. Why haven't you told me about her, Joe?'

No one said a word. Christina went happily on.

'She said she'd been chaffing you, Joe, about your marriage. She told you to bring me to tea. I said I'd love to come. We fixed Tuesday.'

The Captain had got up while she was speaking, had gone over to the window and was tapping the barometer.

'Going down like anything.'

Then Christina realized. She looked round on everybody.

'Hullo! Have I said anything wrong?'

Mrs. Field said quietly:

'We don't like Mrs. Peacock in this house. She's not a nice woman!'

Christina flushed. 'Oh, I see! . . . Well, I liked her and she said she was a friend of Joe's.'

'So you've been seeing her again, Joe, have you?' Mrs. Field grimly enquired.

'We met quite by chance the other morning when the Captain and I were coming from Dewlap's.'

'What's she done?' Christina asked. 'What's the matter with her?'

'She's not at all a nice woman, my dear.'

'No—but what's she *done*?'

'A young man lived with her a long time,' Joe said. 'Mother doesn't like her.'

'I don't know,' Mrs. Field said acidly, 'why you should put it all on me, Joe? She's certainly been most offensive to me personally, but we none of us like her. I don't think it's quite loyal to me, Joe, that you should still be friendly with her. I'm disappointed.'

'No, but look here,' Christina broke in. '*I* started this. I don't see what Joe's done wrong. He met her by accident. He couldn't help——'

'That's quite all right, dear,' Mrs. Field said. 'Joe's perfectly able to defend himself. I'll only say that I'd rather she wasn't a friend of anyone in *this* house. You're very young, Christina, and you've only been here a little time. You can't know the people round here as we do.'

Christina laughed.

'I may be very young, but I'm not quite an infant. And I still don't understand what the poor woman's done. I must say she seemed awfully jolly—and living with a man you're not married to isn't so very awful. I may do the same myself one day if Joe's tiresome.'

'Oh, drop it, Chris,' Joe said crossly. He could feel his mother's anger as though her hand trembled against his cheek. Joe's irritation irritated Christina.

'Oh, all right—but you're all making a fuss about nothing, it seems to me. I liked her and I shall go to tea if she asks me. Why shouldn't I?'

'Because I wish you not to,' Mrs. Field said. 'This is a personal matter. You're my son's wife and I wish you to have nothing whatever to do with someone whose life is a disgrace, who's been personally abominable to myself.'

'But I think that's stupid,' Christina answered her hotly. 'We all make our own friends. Naturally we don't always like the same people.'

'Then,' Mrs. Field said, her voice trembling, 'it means nothing to you that she's my enemy, my——'

'But enemy!' Christina answered. 'That's ridiculous! She spoke of you ever so nicely. She asked how you were and whether——'

'Thank you,' Mrs. Field said. She was walking to the door. 'I don't want to know what she said *or* how she behaved!'

At the door she turned.

'You aren't making things easy for us, Christina. We're all trying our best. If you thought more of others sometimes, it wouldn't be a bad thing.'

She went out. Snubs followed her.

There was a grim silence.

Archer Field got up, closed his book, said:

'That was unfortunate. But you couldn't have known, could you?' and he went out.

Christina, standing up in front of the fire, her snow-white skirts spreading out on either side of her slim body, looked very rebellious.

'I don't care! I must be allowed to choose my own friends.' She looked at the three men. Then she realized that the Captain was staring, Congreve was grinning, and Joe was angry.

Joe said: 'I wish you wouldn't irritate mother like that. After all she's years older than you are and has lived here all our lives. Lavinia Peacock and she are deadly enemies—have been for years.'

Christina, dismayed at Joe's anger, covered her unhappiness with indignation.

'I couldn't have told that, could I? Why didn't someone warn me?'

'We hadn't a chance,' Joe said. 'I wish you'd be nicer to mother, Chris. It isn't too easy for her, having an unexpected daughter-in-law——'

Christina, knowing that tears were not far away, her voice trembling, cried:

'I see! She hates your marrying, Joe, that's what it is! You, all of you, grown men, behave like babies, do exactly what she tells you. Well, I'm *not* a child although she called me one. I'm my own self and I've got my own character. I'll make my own friends just as I please—I'm not afraid of her even though you all are!'

She walked, slowly, with all the dignity that she could command, across the floor. In her heart was dismay. She looked back at Joe once. She had never seen him angry before. Then with her head up, but seeing the handle of the door mistily tripled, she turned it and went out.

# CHAPTER VII

## SOUL OF THIS CAPTAIN

EVERY morning of the year Captain Green bathed in the sea: if he was anywhere near it, that is to say. Cold, the kind of weather, late drinking the night before, pleasant or unpleasant wenching, these things meant nothing to him. He was brined and weathered and tanned: 'I've a lot of the seal in me,' he would say. So, on this morning, a fortnight before Christmas, he ran down the stairs in pyjamas and a water-proof, passed a maid on her knees scrubbing, ran out across the garden into the Tower. It was raining steadily, light feathery rain like the distant chatter of birds.

Inside the Tower it was dark, but he quickly slipped off the pyjamas and did some exercises. Although despising professional nudists because he thought they made such a fuss about nothing, he himself loved to be without clothes. His body was white and firm, his skin as smooth as silk. Many a lady in her time had said: 'However do you keep your skin so soft?' Although thick and heavy in build he was not fat. His belly was flat, his thighs hard as iron. He liked to stand rigid on his toes and pass his hands down his body, feel its smoothness and its strength. He was as fit an animal as existed. He was like an animal, standing on his toes in the dark, sniffing, as he always did, every morning, the odours of the Tower—damp and decay, cold stone, rotting wood, birds' droppings, but here there was strength greater than his own, a fine age, independence, scorn, sureness of survival, that he would love to have for himself.

He hadn't any of those things and he might pass his hands over his bare body as often as he pleased and yet give himself no reassurance. Being a healthy animal wasn't enough: in fact it was a damned nuisance.

He opened the little door and ran down to the beach, his toes curling on the sand.

The darkness was thinning. The sky above the sea had a faint glimmering light against which the sea lifted a blacker wall. The rain fell on the water with a hiss and the roll of the thin white wave on the shore murmured in unison.

He delighted in the sting of the cold air on his body, and as he stepped forward the icy clutch of the water at his ankles, then his knees, then his thighs, was like the comforting hands of a friend. Deep enough now, he dived forward, struck out and was, as all day he wished to be but never was, an accepted part of life, received, acknowledged, even blessed. After a while he turned and floated. His head back, he looked up into a sky that, in its darkness, seemed alive with vigour. Powers were

moving there. He felt the rain on his face, drops cooler than the general laving of the salt sea.

The rain was like a message from the sky, as though the heavens approved of him, and he was one with those heavens in the work that they were now engaged upon, withdrawing the darkest folds of sky, allowing a grey texture to proceed with a distant promise of light, then breaking up the thickness so that shreds and fragments of almost silver pallor played with the dark, extended, withdrew. A shadow of light appeared on the sea surface, illuminating the water spotted by the rain like seed springing from soil. As he lay on his back, his knees drawn upwards, his flesh was cold and marble-hard. His body was compact as though wrapped in steel. All sexual personal vitality had shrivelled to nothing and another more important personal life had taken its place, unself-seeking, its destined fate settled without his own struggle and settled to his liking.

When he struck out into the sea again and felt the light about him strengthening he was, for this moment, reassured about life, unafraid, gladly eager to take what came. Often, in these morning swims, pushing out into the limitless sea like this, he had thought that he would go on and on, until at last, wearied, he would sink and so vanish.

Death was often in his mind, for he had made a mess of his life, brought it, with all its opportunities, to nothing at all. It would be perhaps still worth living were it not for this sting of sex that was for ever aggravating him, leading him into folly, betraying him with relationships that were worthy only of a fool or a sot. He was neither, so why could he not deal with this absurdity?

At such moments as these, when, for a happy instant, he was free of sex, he could see so clearly what life might be without that nonsense. He could be a hard, active worker in the world, doing some good with his vigour. In actual fact he was lazy, worthless, preoccupied night and day with one senseless thing.

And now he was caught again. He lusted after his best friend's wife. Whenever he was near to her his body pulled him towards her. He could not see her without, eagerly, foolishly, desiring her. Foolishly indeed, for every kind of disastrous and miserable self-betrayal hid, waiting, in any contact with her. She was only a child, simple, ignorant, unformed. Her beauty was a meaningless thing except for her husband: let her lovely mouth be marred, the lip broken or torn, and all his desire would be gone.

He turned and started for the shore. He must go away. But he could not. He had to look at her, be near to her, listen to her, wonder that form and colour should remain so perfectly unbroken and unchanged.

He had an affection for this family. They had been very good to him, but since Joe had brought his wife home, there had been disturbance everywhere. It was not only for himself that there was great danger, but for all of them, and for the girl herself perhaps most of all. As he touched the sand and stood up, feeling the cold raindrops on his shoulders, he was acutely miserable. His brief moment of impersonal freedom was over. He was a slave again.

Inside the Tower light was now stealing from old stone to old stone. He stood there drying himself, his wrinkled, brown, weathered countenance unexpectedly topping the clear whiteness of his body. His hands, brown and weathered like his face, resembled gloves. He thought that he was just the one never to wear clothes because he never felt cold, never caught cold. He slapped himself on thighs and chest, then ran round and round the old Tower, wearing only his bathing-slippers. A beam of light suddenly struck through the little window and he ran up the rough steps and stood, looking out to sea and rejoicing, as though it had been done at his personal order, because the light was running in streams over the field of the sea, and a blue, wet and shy and trembling, had broken into the luminous grey sky.

A few hours later he was standing at the top of the old steps again, clothed now and in as right a mind as he was ever likely to be. He was looking down at Christina Field, who was standing in the doorway.

'Can I come in, Timothy?'

'Of course. It isn't *my* Tower, you know.'

His heart was racing and hammering. He turned for a moment to look through the window at the sea. That's what he *should* be doing! Swimming out and out until he was lost, until he sank, until he vanished for evermore.

'No,' Christina said, 'but you are here much more than anyone else.'

'I love it more than anyone else,' he said, coming down to her. There was an old packing-case in the corner. He turned it over. 'Sit on that, Christina.' He loved to say her name. He used to repeat it to himself when she wasn't there. He sat on the lowest stone of the stair.

'Won't that give you——'

'No, it won't. Besides if it does I have an infallible instant cure. In fact,' he said, grinning at her, 'I have a cure for all ills but one.'

'And what's that?' she asked.

'Love,' he answered, staring at her.

She liked him very much with his sturdiness and brown wrinkled face and bare

patch on the top of his head. Besides he was Joe's best friend.

But she smiled no longer. She was intensely serious as she leant towards him, her hands clasped.

'Tim, I've come for advice. I'm really in trouble and I don't know who to ask but you. Congreve would laugh, Matty's too kind, Mr. Field wouldn't be bothered.'

'There's Joe.'

'Joe's cross with me. That's part of the trouble. Already he's cross and we've been married such a short time.'

'The first year of marriage is always the hardest,' the Captain said, grinning.

'It isn't only Joe, of course. It's Mrs. Field as well. And I don't mind Joe being cross because he loves me more than ever. But he's unhappy and he's unhappy because of his mother.'

'Yes. He is,' the Captain said.

'Now isn't it ridiculous?' Christina asked. 'Or isn't it? You see, Tim, I know very little about people and I never dreamt that anyone would behave as Mrs. Field is behaving.'

'How—behaving? She was sweet to you after breakfast to-day, patted you on the cheek, wanted to take you with her——'

'I know. But I can't believe it any more. She was furious with me for talking to Mrs. Peacock—absolutely furious. I'm always offending her in one way or another. Tim, it's as though she were trying to make a prisoner of me, with Simpson and Snubs to help her. I'm beginning to imagine all kinds of things. Now first I want to know. You've been married. Do all mothers-in-law behave like this? Am I only going through a normal regular process? If so, I won't mind.'

'I never had a mother-in-law,' the Captain said. 'Things were difficult enough without that being added.'

'You haven't answered my question. Is it quite natural—all that's happening?'

The Captain paused. Then he said:

'There are two unusual things in your case, Christina. Most daughters-in-law aren't as nice to look at as you are—most mothers-in-law aren't as devoted to their sons as Bessie Field is to Joe.'

'You mean she's jealous?'

'Of course she is.'

'But she knew Joe would marry one day.'

'Yes, but she wanted to choose the bride herself. I've heard that she had a girl to stay here once, a Miss Heron, who was just right for Joe, Mrs. Field thought. Then when they were growing fond of one another the girl was too independent, so Bessie

sent her packing.'

'Oh dear!' said Christina, feeling a moment's sharp jealousy of that unknown girl.

'Now, mind you,' the Captain went on, 'I have the greatest admiration for Bessie Field—and liking too. She's a most exceptional woman. That's the trouble. The only things in the world she cares about are her two boys. You must have noticed how the house is rather shabby and the grounds a bit of a mess. If she hadn't her two sons she'd put that all right in a moment. But there are some women—lots and lots of them really—who live only by, in, and for their children. We're all a bit crazy somewhere. That's *their* craziness. I suppose the day she heard Joe was engaged to you was the worst of her life.'

'How awful!' Christina said.

'I'm not telling you this to exaggerate things or frighten you. But you *have* got a job here, and you'd better realize it. It's the more difficult because, until you came, his mother was everything to Joe—entirely everything.'

'What am I to do, then?'

'Do you want my advice?'

'That's what I came here for.'

'Give in to her on all the unimportant things. Don't fight her. Don't argue. Only if it's dead necessary.'

He was looking at her intently and, for the first time, realized the colour of her eyes. They were golden-grey; the iris about the edge a soft old-gold or golden-brown, gradually melting towards the pupil into a warm grey—very lovely, with a purity and sincerity that belonged only to very young things: they were the eyes of a child and very beautiful to him.

'Go on,' she said. 'I'm listening.'

'Well,' he said, himself now leaning towards her so that they were almost touching, 'I would urge you to be a little more clever, a little more subtle. You've got, you see, everything on your side. You're married to Joe and he loves you. Let his mother have all that she wants at present. Give her as much of Joe as she needs. Joe's yours. You needn't grudge her anything.'

Christina's eyes were suddenly fiery.

'I don't grudge her anything. But if I do as you say it means I've got to give her myself too—my opinions, my friends, everything I do and think. I've got to *be* and *do* just what she wants me to be and do. I can't, Tim. I never have given up my own honesty to anybody.' She paused and smiled. 'Does that sound priggish, do you think?'

'No. Not priggish. But you're too simple about it. You say yourself you're young and inexperienced. Here's a chance for you to practise and learn something about men and women.'

'But that's being false,' Christina answered. 'Pretending to be what I'm not, to say what I don't believe!'

The Captain grinned.

'Oh Lord, aren't you young? We are all liars sooner or later. We have to be to get through life at all. But I don't want you to be double-faced. Now, here am I, who've never thought of anyone but myself all my life long. You're finer than I am and so I'm asking you to think of others just now more than yourself—of Joe, his mother, perhaps of all of us. For our sakes as well as yours.' He bent forward yet further and touched her hand. 'I don't want to alarm you, Christina, but there might be trouble. Bessie Field isn't quite normal in that one thing—her love for Joe and Congreve. She wants to do right, but she's always been boss and has a hell of a temper and might go even a little cracked if she thought you were taking everything away from her.'

Christina now had indeed the anxious, frightened face of a child.

'I don't see,' she said in a half-whisper, 'why it should all be like this. I wanted to love her, for her to come and stay with us——'

'To stay with you?' the Captain broke in quickly. 'Why—you're not going away?'

'Sometime, of course. We've got to have our own home.'

'Lord! You didn't tell her that, did you?'

'Yes. I took it for granted. Joe and I aren't going to be here for ever!'

'No. But whatever did you tell her for? She'll never forgive you! Oh, Christina, you're too simple, too crude!'

He felt her hand quivering beneath his. His hand closed on hers. He found that he was trembling all through his body. As though he were pulling his body up from the stones by the roots, he rose and walked away from her.

'Now be clever. Wait your time. Reassure Bessie, so that she isn't afraid of you.'

She gave him the loveliest smile.

'I'll try,' she said.

He was back in the Tower that same day, in the early afternoon. He was gazing now out of the other window, the one that looked to the larger beach, the garden,

the house. He leant on the ledge, staring. He was very deeply troubled.

Until the failure of his marriage, in actual fact until that morning when he had woken up to find that his wife had left him, he had been on the whole an optimist. He had been happy at sea, and at home, although he had been unfaithful to his wife, he had loved her. Her farewell letter to him had been a stinging amazement. She had written that she was so sick of him and his lies, self-approval, and conceit that she could endure it no longer. That anyone who had lived with him so intimately could see him as so poor a creature was a fearful blow to him. All his self-confidence seemed to leave him. It had never been very strong. He found, when he was at sea again, that he had changed. He was forever doubting himself. His words and actions were over-emphasized because they were surface words and actions. Standing now at the window of the Tower, looking out, he thought of a melodramatic novel about India he had been reading in bed last night when he couldn't sleep. The words 'suddenly' and 'bloody' occurred again and again as though the author were trying to beat up the live vitality that wasn't there naturally.

'Next time there's the word "suddenly,"' he had thought, 'I'll throw the damned thing away,' and a moment later he had done so. Now his own life seemed like that—full of 'bloody' and 'suddenly' to keep his courage up.

He wanted to get away from this place and he couldn't. He looked out now on to the cold grey winter landscape and it was like a fantasy. The sea, steel-plated with an edge of white foam, a line of seaweed high up the bare little beach, the sea-wall, then the garden, ugly now and naked with a few hiding, secretive Christmas roses, a few last chrysanthemums, then the ugly house, the dun fields rising about it, the gaunt trees on the sky-line, and through it all the rhythmic drum of the sea. Drum-drum, drum-drum . . .

Then the watcher saw a figure. It was Congreve, who came out of his studio and stood looking out to the sea. Although he was some way away he was very real to the Captain, who detested him. He hated Congreve's sexlessness and his satisfaction with it. The man furthest from the sexless man is the man who has known physically hundreds of women. The devoted husband who has loved only his wife understands very well the sentimentality of the abnormal man. But your normal lecher is very virtuous. The Captain detested Congreve's self-satisfaction as a passionate lover of music resents someone who says, happily: 'Well, music means nothing to me.' Then the Captain, because he had become a lazy idler, resented Congreve's bonelessness. It was like seeing himself in a mirror.

Anyway, he hated him.

He perceived that Congreve was watching for someone. He stayed motionless,

then moved against the corner of the studio so that he was scarcely visible. Another figure appeared. This was Christina. She came out of the house, running. The Captain thought that she was running *from* someone. But she stopped and stood on the terrace, also gazing out to sea. A third figure appeared. This was Mrs. Field. She stood in front of the Tower, not very far from the Captain's window. She was looking into the garden.

She saw first Christina, and it seemed to the Captain that her little round body in its bonnet and gloves stiffened. Her back had a way of achieving a straight line, like a ruler. Then she saw Congreve. She took a step or two forward, then settled again. She looked first at Congreve, then at Christina. All three figures were quite motionless there in that grey-dun garden as still as though it were painted, and beyond it the indifferent beach and the drum-drum of the sea. The three figures had dream-reality a reality so much more intense and convincing than day-reality.

The Captain watched the three figures and the figures watched one another. Nothing moved at all. The Captain knew that this was a crisis for him. His inner demon was saying to him: 'Leave them to their own trouble'; but his better spirit (such a nice friendly creature, but nervous often) told him that he must speak to Mrs. Field. Interferers always got cursed by both sides, but after Christina's talk with him he felt as though he might explain things to Bessie Field, show her that the girl was only a child, could be easily influenced. Might he not avert some catastrophe? He was fond of them. They had been good to him. Bessie knew that he understood her. In a kind of fashion she trusted him. Oh, bah! . . . Nonsense. What would he get for his pains? They'd all turn on him. . . .

'Now,' he said to himself, 'if the girl moves before I count a hundred I won't talk to Bessie. If she doesn't, I will.'

The girl didn't move. She stood there on the terrace looking out to sea, and Congreve, from his studio, watched her, and Mrs. Field watched them both.

The Captain counted a hundred. The girl didn't move. He slipped from the window, out of the door.

'Why, Bessie,' he said, 'and what are you staring at?'

She started, then looking at him a little quizzically said: 'Considering the weather. Joe's driving me as far as Wistons.'

'Come in here a minute.'

She followed him.

'You seem very mysterious.' She was friendly, equable, at peace, it seemed, with all the world. She was a queer figure for the Tower, in her bonnet, a black silk wrap with tiny red roses over her shoulders, her grey gloves. She stood there, grinning at

him. 'Yes—and what is it, Timothy Green?'

'I don't know. Probably I'm a fool to say a word—only you've been very kind and hospitable to me, I'm very fond of Joe, and—it's about Christina.'

'Oh . . . has she been complaining to you?'

'No. Not complaining. But she's afraid she's offended you. She doesn't know what she's done.'

Bessie Field patted him on the shoulder.

'Now, Tim. You've lived long enough. You ought to leave women to settle their own affairs. Christina and I will manage all right. She's a charming girl.'

But now he would not be put off.

'Let's be real for once, Bessie. We know one another very well by now. You've made me your fetch-and-carry and in return I know you better perhaps than anyone at Scarlatt.'

Bessie smiled.

'You're being quite unusually solemn. I know what it is—you've fallen in love with Christina.'

'Of course. I fell in love with her the moment I saw her. What decent man wouldn't? But that's nothing to do with it. I only wanted to say, Bessie, that she's only a child. She's had no experience; we're all strange and odd to her. Be kind to her; be patient; let her settle down.'

He *was* in earnest; he looked at her very honestly, trying for once to do his best for everyone.

'I don't think,' Mrs. Field answered slowly, 'you can say that I've been unkind to her.'

'I didn't say——'

'Oh yes, you did. You implied it anyway.'

He saw that her anger was rising.

'You've been our guest for some while. But our private affairs are still our own.'

'Ah, now you're angry.'

'Angry? Never less so. . . . Joe's waiting for me.'

He put his hand on her arm.

'Wait, Bessie, a moment. I may be only a guest but I'm a human being too. You're one of the finest women I know, but don't be hard on that girl. She's Joe's wife——'

'She oughtn't to be!' Bessie Field broke in. 'She's not suited to be Joe's wife. She's not the right wife for him at all. That at least I've discovered in the weeks she's been here!'

'You know that isn't true!' he cried.

'Oh, do I? Don't I know Joe better than any of you? He's my son, isn't he? I've not been against his marrying. I've wanted him to marry. But a woman, someone who could guide and help him.'

'You'd have hated nobody more!' he broke in hotly.

'Not a pretty ignorant doll——'

'Doll!' he cried. 'Doll! Why, she has as much character as you have yourself, Bessie.'

He was frightened then. Mrs. Field looked him in the face with eyes so intent that they had the sightless determination of the witless. In that flushing moment her intelligence was hidden and hooded by her emotion. She was not insane but she had sprung into the region where there are no rules, no cautions, only purpose. Her two little hands inside the gloves moved for a moment like live things, quite separate from her body.

'Remember, Tim,' she said quietly, 'that I love my son and will watch over him and guard him as long as I am able. Unfortunately he has made a silly marriage. That's because he was taken in by a pretty face and I wasn't there to warn him.'

'What are you going to do then?' he asked her.

'Look after Joe. See he comes to no harm.'

'Isn't he old enough to look after himself? He's a man, you know.'

She smiled again.

'You men! To your mothers you're always children. You know that, don't you? Now I must go. Wistons is quite a way.'

He had done no good, only harm. He went across to the house and, as he went, felt afraid, afraid for himself, Christina, for everyone.

'What I *ought* to do,' he thought as he climbed the stairs to his room, 'is to get out of this house at once—to-night.'

# CHAPTER VIII

## CHRISTMAS PARTY

'I THINK,' Christina said, 'that, after Christmas, I'd better go home for a bit. I write every week, but that isn't the same.'

It was a week before Christmas and the Fields were giving their annual dance. Christina and Joe were dressing. Joe had just pulled his dress-shirt over his head; Christina was sitting in front of the dressing-table brushing her short curly hair. She was staring into the mirror.

Joe said: 'You know that's rot.'

'Why?'

'You've got to stay here.'

'Got to?' she said. 'Why "got to"?'

He did not answer.

'This is a good time to talk, I think,' she said. 'We've been putting it off. You've been cross with me for weeks—except at night. We make it up every night and begin again every morning. And we never speak of it. We've been married for nearly three months——'

'I'm *not* cross with you, Chris.' He looked at her perplexedly.

'You behave as though you are. Never mind who's cross with who. The plain fact is that we're never happy except when we're by ourselves. And that's what I propose—that, after Christmas, not only I go away for a little but you go away too. And—we go away together.'

'Oh,' said Joe. 'We couldn't do that!'

'Why not?'

'Oh, everyone would think it so funny!'

'Your mother would, you mean!'

He looked at her, his forehead frowning. Then he said:

'Chris, I don't want to make you angry. Only I must know one thing. Why do you dislike mother so?'

Christina held out her hand.

'Joe. Come here for a moment. Take my hand. That's right. I don't dislike your mother. I'm afraid of her.'

'Afraid of her! Mother! Why, she's the sweetest, kindest——'

'Yes, I know. All the same I'm afraid of her.'

He broke away from her.

'You're not to say that! You were right just now. I *have* been annoyed with you and that's the reason. Why do you have to be always annoying mother, saying things that irritate her, talking to people she doesn't like, angry with Simpson because she didn't come when you wanted her for something, scolding Curtis about some flowers? Chris, honestly I don't want to be unfair. You know I love you more than anyone in the world, but I *do* think you're selfish. You forget that mother's been running this house for years and years and Simpson's the best servant we've ever had. Mother has her feelings like anyone else. For instance I like Lavinia Peacock myself, but I don't see her simply because mother hates me to and I owe the Old Lady something, after all she's done for me.'

Christina sat thinking. Then she said:

'Look here, Joe. You remember the day we went over to the island?'

'Of course I do!'

'That lovely day! I said to you then: "What will happen if your mother and I don't get on?" Do you remember?'

'Yes.'

'I saw it coming then. Now it's come. Your mother and I *don't* get on.'

He was, in a flash, angry as he was sometimes, boyishly, without thinking first.

'If you don't, it's all your fault!'

'Not all of it. Some of it. I'm no angel and, as I keep telling myself and everyone else, I'm very inexperienced about other people. I've never met anyone like your mother before. There's nothing new in the situation of course. Mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law—All the same I'm sure your mother is exceptional. And I'm sure of another thing: however I'd behaved would have made no difference.'

'Of course it would. If you'd been . . .'

'Do me justice, Joe. This last fortnight haven't I been behaving perfectly? Giving in to her, agreeing with her, wanting to please her. Ever since the Captain——'

'Tim! What's he to do with it?'

'We had a talk one day.'

'Oh, you did, did you? What you need to go complaining——'

'I wasn't complaining. Anyway that isn't the point. Will you agree that I've done my very best——'

'I don't know. The other day when you spoke to Simpson——'

'Simpson hates me. She has from the moment I entered the house. You admitted it to yourself. I understand Simpson's point of view. She'd have hated any woman who married you. The fact is, Joe, there are too many women in this business.'

He looked now so dejected and miserable that her heart ached for him. She

went to him and held him close to her.

'I've learnt a lot in a very short time,' she said. 'There's only one condition your mother will accept your wife under, Joe—complete submission. If I gave in to her entirely, surrendered you, myself, my opinions, my children when we have them—then she'd be the sweet lovable old lady she can be. But I can't surrender and I won't.' She looked beyond him to the window. 'Loving you has grown me up. I told you in the train coming here that I'd love you always, whatever happened. So I will. And, loving you like that, I'm not going to give you up for anybody—and I'm not going to give myself up either.'

He kissed her passionately.

'No. No. You're right, Chris. You mustn't.'

'And I see your mother's point of view too. Unfortunately she's cut everything out of her life but you and Congreve. If she loses you, she loses everything. The silly thing is she needn't lose you at all. If she'd accept it that you and I are husband and wife who love one another, and that we must have *our* lives that nobody can touch, then we'd both love her and everything would be all right. But she *won't* accept it.'

Joe got up and walked to the window.

'It makes me seem pretty weak.'

'I don't think it does. You love her. She's part of you. You're part of her. You love me too. There's not a man anywhere who wouldn't be in a fix.'

She went back to the table and began to brush her hair again.

'I think I could deal with it,' she said, 'if I weren't afraid of her.'

'Why are you afraid?' he asked.

'I think your mother may come to hate me. She may even do something violent. Unless I can find some way of managing her. I even understand that too. I told you in the train that if anyone tried to take you away from me I could do anything—knock them over the head or throw them into the sea.'

'Here, we must get on,' Joe said. 'People will be arriving.'

He put a hand on her shoulder.

'I tell you what it is, Chris. It's up to me. I've got to be cleverer. I'll manage the Old Lady. You see if I don't.'

'Try not to be cross with me. It hurts so.'

'I'll never be cross with you again.'

When Christina came downstairs she was astonished at the gaiety presented to her. The house was transformed. The drawing-room—the only room that she loved

—was filled with people. It had been cleared entirely for dancing and in one corner near the window was the orchestra from Polchester—piano, violin, and saxophonist. In the hall, in front of the 'St. George and the Dragon,' was a large Christmas-tree brilliant with lights. The stairs were festooned with holly.

These delights were, by themselves, ordinary enough, but there was something more—a real sense of gaiety so that, even now, when the party was only beginning, there was no stiffness nor shy hesitation. The cause was Mrs. Field. In a black silk dress with a sprig of diamonds at her breast she looked the queen of all possible ceremonies. She was in her element; she was gracious and kindly; regal but also human. She was happy because she was the First Lady of this particular land.

Christina stood for a moment in the doorway with Joe, and, at once, there was that moment of suspended wonder that her beauty roused. Many there had never seen her before. Perhaps their customary once-a-week surveyal of beautiful film stars made a loveliness as perfect and unself-conscious as Christina's the more wonderful. They were aware, too, it might be, that here was a transitory beauty. Only for a little while could this be untouched, unassailed. The Captain even wondered whether she were now as perfect as she had been on that day when he had first seen her coming from Congreve's studio. Already more human, nearer mortal man, the more desirable for that, and as eager to be kind as she must ever be: but that first astonishing surprise could never be repeated.

She saw some acquaintances—the Fauntleroys, the Severings, the Reverend Mr. Power, the clergyman of the parish—and moved towards them.

She found Matty in Paradise.

'Oh, my dear, how beautiful you look! So simple too—that white dress, so perfectly simple. And so many friends—you will meet everyone. Oh, dear Mrs. Thursley, how are you? And Mr. Thursley. This is too delightful. I was hoping you could come, for I heard about your cold. I said to Bessie only this afternoon, "I do trust Mrs. Thursley's cold—" but it's better. I *am* so happy because at this time of year . . . Why, Mrs. Rawlings—and you've heard from your brother? Isn't that splendid! All the way from India, although of course everything is so close now, isn't it?—closer and closer—I always say "No, I haven't been to the East, but there's really no need, for the East is coming to me." And he's coming home? Is he indeed? Ah, next year, that is, the year after next, but we're almost *in* next year so it will seem like nothing at all, simply nothing at all. . . .'

There was Congreve, very distinguished, and there was Archer, very handsome with his white hair and black eyebrows, and really for once putting himself out to be pleasant, rather pathetically, so Christina thought.

And here was Mrs. Severing.

'Oh, now that's too bad of you! You promised to come to tea with us.'

'I don't know how it is,' Christina said, 'but time simply flies here. But I *am* coming. Let's name a day now, shall we?'

'Indeed we will. How perfectly sweet of you! I must ask Dick. Oh, Dick! Here's Mrs. Field and she wants us to fix a day for tea.'

Mr. Severing, looking very unhappy in his evening clothes, murmured something about 'next Tuesday—or possibly Wednesday.'

'Yes, what about Tuesday? That isn't your billiards afternoon? Dick goes to the Institute and plays billiards one afternoon a week and the men do so enjoy it. Ah, no—that's a Friday. We were afraid Dick mightn't be able to come. Oh, nothing—a touch of lumbago—once and again—when the wind's the wrong way—but most fortunately for us he woke this morning without a touch. We were really quite anxious because we had been so looking forward . . .'

The orchestra struck up. The dancing began. The Captain said, 'Christina, what about the next dance?'

'The next but two. First Joe, then Father Field. I promised him this afternoon.'

A long while to wait, and he thought he would allow nobody to precede her. He moved about, picked out the women with any looks (there were not, in his opinion, very many), wandered into the dining-room, had some 'cup', walked into the hall and there found Congreve. For some reason he felt less hostile to him than usual.

'Aren't you going to dance?'

'Oh, I suppose so, later on. I hate dances. I shall stay for a bit and then creep away.'

The Captain leaned against the stairs.

'The drink's quite good. That's your father's doing.'

'Well, don't drink too much. No, don't be offended. Why is it we're always quarrelling?'

'I'm not offended,' the Captain said, grinning. 'You're quite right. Drink goes to my head. We don't quarrel, do we? Of course we don't like one another, but that's not the fault of either of us.'

'Don't we like one another?' Congreve smiled. 'I don't dislike you, Timothy, and you'd like *me* if I cared for women, and I *might* care for women if it weren't for the Unicorn.'

'The Unicorn?'

'Yes, the lovely white Unicorn—its horn tipped in red. The beautiful Unicorn that comes once a year to find its beloved, and then, its mating over, back to the desert.

The Unicorn that cleanses the poisoned waters. And by God they are poisoned just now, are they not?'

'I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about,' said the Captain.

'Oh yes, you have, Timothy. You're the only one in this house who *does* understand. You're not of the company of the Unicorn yourself, but at least you neither patronize nor pity those who are.' He glanced back, for a moment, to the open door and the dancers within. 'She's lovely to-night, is she not? And all the more lovely for being married to my stupid brother Joe.'

'I think a little less lovely.'

'Ah, that's because you're jealous. Listen, Tim. . . . She's performed a miracle. She's made me believe I can paint again. Later, come across to the studio. Nobody's seen it. She waiting naked under the tree, and the Unicorn coming to lay its head in her lap, and the Enemy—the Evil Ones, the Shadows, in the dusk with their nets and spears. I'm alive again. I was dead and now I'm alive.'

'Funny, that,' the Captain said, 'because you're not in love with her.'

'Not in the least. But her beauty is the more creative because I want no contact with it. Listen, Tim. . . . I shall have to go back to London again!'

'Go back! But—your mother——'

'I know. I've been thinking about nothing else for days. You're not to breathe a word——'

'Of course.'

'You might. Just to make mischief. You hate me so.'

'That's part of your feminine mind, Congreve. Unlike you I'm a man, not a woman. I may hate you—although hate's far too strong. But I don't make mischief.'

'Well, you're not to tell anyone then.' Congreve was close now to the Captain, his long white nose thrust forward, his long white hand drooping in the air. 'I've *got* to go. I'm all alive again. I can *be* something. I know I can. That girl showed me.'

'Yes, but how will you live? You've not a penny save what your mother allows you.'

'There's a fellow—well-known portrait painter—grand studio in Portland Place. He's wanted me to live with him for years. He'll give me bed and board. And then I'll make money quite quickly. Picasso and his imitators—that's the thing. I can do little Picassos by the hundred *and* sell them. And meanwhile slowly Myself is being born. Myself. Myself.'

'Here, Congreve, don't get so excited.'

'No. But it *is* exciting. When I thought everything was up. I thought I was dead. Then that girl steps into the studio one morning. I look up and see her—and it isn't

she—it's the Unicorn with its lovely strong horn tipped with red.'

'Damn you and your Unicorn! What I want to know is what the Old Lady is going to say to this.'

Congreve was in a moment like a boy: his affectation, his shrilling, had dropped from him. He gazed at the Captain with the troubled eyes of a child.

'I know. That's the awful thing. I love her. I wouldn't hurt her. And yet I've got to hurt her.'

'I should say you have! Why, if she loses you—that as well as Joe's marriage—she'll go crackers. It would be a bad business.'

'I know it would. It's awful.' He laid his hand on the Captain's arm. 'But don't you see, Tim, what the hell am I to do? This thing, now it's working in me, is stronger than being alive. It *is* being alive. You don't know what it's like to be an artist.'

'I know what it is to want a woman you can't have. I suppose it's the same kind of thing.'

'It is. It is. You're right. You know what I feel for my mother, Tim. She's been everything to me and Joe. And when I was away before, I just had to come back. But this time it's different. I believe in myself as I never have before. It may be all nonsense. It probably is. But I've got to go and try. Anyway,' he added gloomily, 'she's got Joe.'

'I don't know whether she has. I think she's beginning to think she hasn't.'

'Yes. She and Christina aren't getting on too frightfully well, are they? What a mess it is!' He looked at the Captain with a quick suspicion. 'Look here! You're not to tell a soul!'

'I've told you I won't.'

'Not even when you're drunk.'

'Not even when I'm drunk.'

They had encored the last dance. Mrs. Field went over to the orchestra.

'You must be tired. Have a good pause after this one.'

The pianist, a thin middle-aged lady in an ugly red dress, looked up at Mrs. Field with devotion. For ten years now she had performed at the Scarlatt party. She adored Mrs. Field.

'Oh no, Mrs. Field. Thank you so much. We've scarcely begun, have we, Mr. Adamson?'

The violinist, a stout little man, said:

'You can't tire *us*, Mrs. Field.'

'You're so good. Playing better than ever.'

They had been playing. Now the dance was over. The pianist, Miss Strickland,

said:

'It's so good of you to invite us year after year. With all these jazz bands——'

'How are you getting on with your private lessons, Miss Strickland?'

'Oh, well, you know what it is, Mrs. Field. I suppose one mustn't complain, but things aren't too good really. Girls don't learn the piano as they used.'

'No, I suppose they don't.'

'What I say, Mrs. Field, is that we live in a world of machines to-day. That's what I think. Nothing human nowadays. Don't you agree with me?'

'Indeed I do. We all have to make the best of things.'

Miss Strickland nodded her head violently. 'Yes. That's right. No use getting downhearted.'

Mrs. Field smiled on them as though she were their mother. She *felt* like their mother. She felt herself to be the mother of all here to-night. This was what she loved, to be making everyone happy, to be giving them what was good for them, and to have the power to do so.

She did not feel herself to be small and dumpy to-night: rather she was commanding, a benevolent power. And there was poor Archer, doing his best in his own way. He came up to her for a moment.

'Going well, isn't it?'

'Very well, Archer.'

She gave him her friendliest smile and he showed her how happy he was, giving her his dog-like gratitude. Poor Archer! He loved her so much. She gave him all that she could in return.

Then Congreve passed her. She stopped him.

'Enjoying yourself, darling?'

He caught her hand for a moment.

'How awfully well you do these things, darling!'

Well, there was Congreve. He at least would never marry, would never leave her. No girl, however lovely, could seduce him. He was hers for ever. For a moment her eyes dimmed because she loved him so much; in a way more than Joe. He was more completely hers, and because of his temperament which isolated him from the world he needed her more. She saw that plain Miss Crowdy, daughter of old Mr. Crowdy who wrote books about sea-shells or something, sitting all by herself with that look of determination-not-to-mind on her face. She went over to her.

'And who's your next partner, dear?'

'Well, Mrs. Field, I'm resting a little. I enjoy it all the more if I don't dance too often.'

'Nonsense, my dear. And you're such a good dancer too. Mr. Featherstone!'

A stout young man with a face red and moist was passing.

'Yes, Mrs. Field?'

'You know Miss Crowdy, don't you? What about the next one?'

'Well, really, Mrs. Field. Ha, ha! Yes, indeed. Delighted.'

She next came upon Mrs. Thursley, who at once began:

'Dear Mrs. Field! What a delightful evening! And your daughter-in-law! Well, really! Perfectly lovely! a vision!'

'She *is* pretty, isn't she? We're all so happy about it,' and she reflected that Mrs. Thursley with her lovely white hair and mechanical smile managed on every occasion to say the unpleasant thing.

'We positively thought Joe was never going to be married. I'm sure all the young women in the county have tried for him. We were sure that if he did marry it would be you who chose his bride for him. A more devoted son I never saw. And then he goes to London for a week or two and picks up that beautiful creature. You *must* be delighted.'

'We are. She's perfectly charming.'

Now they were all dancing again. Christina was dancing with the Captain. She smiled at Mrs. Field as she went round.

Mr. Power, the clergyman, was speaking to her. A stalwart, robust man, he boomed in her ear like a gong.

'I must congratulate you on your new daughter. Quite exquisite. Dear me, yes.'

'We're all very happy about it,' said Mrs. Field.

'You must be. You must be indeed. Now, Mrs. Field, what about a dance? I promise not to tread on your toes.'

'Oh dear me, no! I'm much too old.'

'Old! I never heard such a thing. None of us are old these days.'

'Well, I've quite given up dancing.'

'Now that's too bad. Won't do at all. Try once again.'

'No, really, thank you, Mr. Power.' She *must* escape from Mr. Power's thunder. 'I must just see that the supper . . .'

'Quite. Quite. Delightful party. Delightful party.'

But she did not go into the dining-room. She opened the hall-door and went out on to the terrace.

It was one of those nights, common in Glebeshire around Christmas, when a kind of Italian warmth and scented air and peace lies like a blessing over land and sea. The sky was as full of stars as a lawn is of crocuses after a night of mild rain.

'The Queen of Heaven has more stars to-night than She knows what to do with,' an old Roman Catholic priest had said to Bessie Field once in Polchester.

She remembered that now. Stars sparkled at one another as though in childish showing-off, 'My sparkle is better than yours.' And a shimmer, as of endless Milky Ways not quite visible to the naked eye, trembled above the sea. The air was so still that the sea had drawn very close to the house. Mrs. Field was so deeply accustomed to warfare between sea and land, was always expecting the sea-wall to give way, had seen so often waves wavering like gigantic snakes up to the very top of the Tower, had lamented so many many times the ruin of flower and plant, that there seemed something false and dangerous in this gentle, melodious sea-voice, the long dark swing of the sea, the scent as of sea-pinks and warm sea-shells, friendly, kind under the crackling mirror of stars. 'Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes . . .'

She walked, gathering her black silk wrap a little closer about her plump shoulders, up and down the terrace. Why must people, fools, idiots, blundering asses, taunt her about that girl?—'Your lovely daughter-in-law'; 'Quite exquisite'; and that malicious Thursley woman with her '*Such* a devoted son!'

And the girl, as she passed her, had seemed radiant with happiness. Not only radiant but triumphant! Had there not been something in that smile more than happiness? A taunt! 'Do you see me, the sensation of the ball, the possessor of your son, soon the owner of this house? What can *you* do against my success?'

A melodramatic question. Bessie Field could laugh at nonsense, melodrama and sentimentality as well as another, but unfortunately what seems sentimental melodrama to the onlooker appears often enough poignant reality to the actors.

Mrs. Field stopped. She stared at the sea.

'It appears to me I've got to make a choice. Either I give over this place, and Joe with it, to Christina. She has character and personality. She hasn't come here to be a nonentity. I become at once an old woman. It means that my life is finished, I subside with Archer and Matty into the chimney-corner. I can hear Christina, "No, mother, not potato—you know what happened the last time." Even as I speak to poor Archer. "No. Not a drive to-day, mother dear. The wind's too cold. I've asked Doctor Harbottle to drop in and have a look at you."

'The things in the house changed; furniture, pictures altered. And the grandchildren that I've counted on possessing! With Christina there? No, indeed. "Not just now, Joe darling. Don't bother Granny. She's asleep."

'"No, it's all right, Christina. I can take him for a bit."

'"He'll only worry you. He's going up to Nurse, aren't you, Joe?"'

The other alternative: Joe and Christina go to live elsewhere as the girl has

already threatened. At that imagined picture such a love for her son rose in Bessie Field's heart that it choked her. She put her hand to her heart. She would lose Joe for ever—simply that. Once he had been away from her long enough, under Christina's care, in another house, with others' land to care for, with children of his own—why, he would never think of his mother save at Christmas perhaps, or a birthday.

She knew then—and had known it before—that her love for her son was as deep and dark and unreasoning as any other selfish passion—lust, greed, ambition, fear. She did not wish it to be otherwise. She had been born, as she had known when Congreve was for the first time at her breast, for just this one thing: and without that one thing she would die.

Then, in that warm air, under that great galaxy of stars, with the sea whispering in her ears, she knew such a hatred of Christina that she was herself astonished. She had never cheated herself about her nature. She knew that she had a temper that could be demoniac and, for many many years now, she had trained it to obey. But her love for her sons had always seemed to her a quite normal natural impulse shared by millions of mothers the world over. So that this discovery that she could hate anyone took her with a shock of astonishment. She had never hated anyone before: but then never before had her very existence, all her joy and activity and tenderness and salt and savour been threatened. She would fight this threat to the last inch of ground.

She looked from the purple-dark skein of sea to the stars, and it seemed for a moment that they had no brightness. It was as though she were blind.

'Supper! Supper! Everyone, supper!' she cried, and in they all trooped. There were thirty-six chairs for thirty-five persons. Someone was missing. Old Miss Gaskell had gone home; she had a return of her tiresome indigestion. Mrs. Field was at the head of the table; in its centre was a small Christmas-tree blazing with lights, gay with silver and gold. Large crackers of crimson lay about with holly berries and tiny Father Christmasses. . . . And what a noise! Everyone was talking at once, for everyone was happy, partly because they had been asked when others had not and partly because dancing was exciting and partly because Archer Field had made the 'Cup' extra strong. Small causes and large results. Archer Field had made the 'Cup' extra strong.

Christina had Joe beside her. She did not know that ever in her life had she been so happy before. In earlier days there had not been a great many parties, and when

there had been she had enjoyed them entirely beyond their actual merits. But to-night had been Joe's party. She would have been abnormally stupid had she not realized the admiration she had roused to-night, and it was the first public admiration since her marriage. She had been honest enough when she had told Joe on the island that men's pleasure in her good looks had been more of a trouble to her than a triumph. Now it was her gift to Joe; it had excited her beyond all precedent because she saw how deeply proud he was of her. As they danced that last dance together, most truly one soul, one flesh, his whispered love, her return of it, had had a deeper reality and truth than either had known before.

True love, if you are lucky enough to discover it, is distinguished from any other love chiefly by this—that it surprises its possessors with its constant, unending progress. There is no close to the discoveries it affords. Its history has, indeed, no end.

Christina and Joe were, both of them, so truly young and inexperienced that any kind of life must be new to them. It was their supreme good luck that the best kind of all was offered to them first.

Was it the happiness illuminating him that gave this supper, after a while, a hint of wildness, of febrile excitement? Was it simply Archer Field's 'Cup'? Or was it the sense of danger that can charge any air, stir the quietest room, ruffle a window-curtain, tap a door, shake a picture crooked on its cord, send, as Keats knew, a flutter through the carpets on the floor?

Dick Severing broke a wine-glass, pushing it with his elbow. Its tinkle of destruction stilled for an instant the clamour of voices.

'Oh, it's unlucky!' Mrs. Thursley cried, and everyone laughed.

Stout, young, red-faced Mr. Featherstone jumped to his feet.

'I have a toast,' he cried. 'The new Mrs. Field! Joe's beautiful bride!'

Everyone was standing save Christina. They sang 'She's a jolly good fellow!'

'Speech! Speech!' they cried.

She stood up, her hand on Joe's shoulder.

'Thank you all very much. You've all made me so happy. I haven't been here very long, but you've made me feel I'm among friends. Joe and I thank you very much, and when we have our own home we do hope you'll come and see us. You'll all be welcome—even though you all come at once!'

Everyone laughed. Joe had to make a speech, Archer Field and then Mrs. Field. How they cheered and clapped!

Now there were the crackers. They were big ones and made a great noise. Very clever the paper caps were, for in the front of every one was the head of an animal

—cats and dogs and monkeys, cows and donkeys and lions. What laughter and clapping of hands when it was discovered that Archer Field had a donkey's head in the front of his. A very gay cap indeed of gold paper, and a red band with the donkey's head in black. He looked quite idiotic when he put it on over his white hair. He went 'Hee-haw! Hee-haw! Hee-haw!' and how everyone laughed! He stood up and brayed. But he was doing it for his wife, to amuse her. He didn't often amuse her although he so often wanted to, but he now had his own 'Cup' inside him and so he had courage and cried 'Hee-haw, Bessie! Hee-haw!' In his eyes was a longing that she should be amused. And she was. She laughed and clapped her hands and then said:

'All right, Archer. That's enough.'

'I'll keep it,' he said to Mrs. Fauntleroy when he sat down. 'It's an unusually good cap, don't you think? I shall put it away in a drawer.'

At the end of supper the Captain knew that he had drunk too much. One more glass and he would be behaving foolishly. He always reached a point when his Best Friend inside himself said, very clearly: 'Now, Timothy, that's enough.' If he stopped now he would be all right. He could walk steadily, speak clearly, simply feel happy and contented. But directly after his Best Friend, his Worst Friend spoke:

'Nonsense! Another glass won't do you any harm. Be jolly while you may. You can only live once—in fact you'll soon be dead. What a cowardly thing! Afraid of another glass. Nonsense!'

However, to-night his Best Friend won. He rose from the table, without drinking any more, and feeling very happy. This happiness was a wonderful thing because, for most of the ordinary day, he didn't feel happy at all. He had missed his way—life had taken the wrong turn. Why he could not tell.

But now he was completely reassured. He was a fine fellow and everyone thought so. Soon he would be back on the sea again, doing splendid things. Everyone loved him and he loved everyone. It was true that there were many plain women here to-night, but they couldn't help that, poor things, and no man was fortunate enough *always* to be in the company of pretty women. It wasn't natural.

Over everything shone the loveliness of Christina. *That* was his peril. *That* was why he must drink no more. Another glass and *not* to kiss Christina would be a problem. There was no true reason why he should *not* kiss Christina, simply in a brotherly fashion of course. Everyone knew that he was Joe's best friend, so a kiss would be the most harmless. . . . But he must not. He was sober and he knew that it

would be a fatal thing to kiss Christina. There was something strange about this party to-night. It was as though everyone and everything was urging him to kiss Christina. Why were all these people concerned in the affair? What had they to do with him? 'Kiss Christina! Kiss Christina!' they cried as they danced around. Well, he was damned if he would!

'I'm not going to kiss Christina,' he said to Joe. They were standing near the door, watching the dancers.

'I should think not!' Joe said, laughing.

'Why the hell shouldn't I?' the Captain cried. He was looking a little dishevelled. His hair was somewhat disarranged around his bare patch. He was hot. His dress-shirt was crumpled.

'Why shouldn't I?' the Captain said. 'She's so lovely. I'm your best friend, aren't I?'

'Of course you are,' Joe said.

'Well, then, there's no harm in my kissing her.' The Captain became very grave. 'Look here, Joe—it wasn't very tactful of her to say that, before everyone, about your going away to live.'

'We shall, I suppose, one day.'

'I know, but better not to mention it. Here, come and have another drink with me—a little one.'

Joe looked at him. 'Tim, you've had enough. Take my advice. Leave it alone.'

The Captain nodded his head profoundly.

'You're right, Joe. Perfectly right. I'm just right as I am. Very happy. You're happy, aren't you, Joe?'

'Of course I am. Happy! I should say!'

'I'm most awfully glad. You're my best friend, Joe. I love you as much as a man can love another man. Do anything for you.'

'That's all right,' Joe said. 'I'm sure you would. Mother wants me. She's been signalling.'

He went off. The Captain stood there, leaning against the wall, considering. His mother wanted him. She was always wanting him and always *would* want him. Yes, always. Funny things, mothers. He couldn't remember his. Died when he was a baby. He'd never had a mother's love. No, by God, he hadn't. Damned shame. His eyes filled with tears. He wiped them with the back of his hand. He went into the dining-room and had another drink.

After that, all was lightness and jollity. Nothing was very clear to him except a little conversation which he overheard between poor Miss Crowdy and old Miss

Batten. Miss Batten was, or aspired to be, the literary goddess of the neighbourhood.

'I always take in the *Sunday Times* myself,' the Captain heard Miss Batten say.

'Oh, so do I!' cried Miss Crowdy enthusiastically. 'Father says it lightens all his Sunday. But what I want to know,' Miss Crowdy went on with great seriousness, knitting her brows, 'is why the man who does the plays always writes in French?'

'I understand,' old Miss Batten said, 'that he was a great friend of Sarah Bernhardt's.'

'Oh, indeed,' said Miss Crowdy, nodding her head as though now the whole universe was explained to her.

'Yes—and since her death he's never been quite himself.'

'How very very sad!' said Miss Crowdy.

The Captain, for some dim reason, found this very absurd. He chuckled and chuckled. 'Sarah Bernhardt! Sarah! But she's been dead a long time! A very long time. . . .'

And he heard Christina saying:

'It's our dance, Timothy. I couldn't think where you were.'

They danced once or twice round the room, the Captain smiling and smiling. He led her afterwards to a little room, round-shaped, filled with old books in leather and gold, with a globe of the world and a bust of Lord Chatham.

The Captain said, staring at the blue-painted wooden globe: 'I'm in love with you, Christina. Isn't that dreadful?—and you married to my best friend!'

She got up. 'Tim, you've drunk too much. Don't stay about. Go to bed. You told me the other day——'

'I didn't tell you anything, Christina. All I've ever said to you has been lies. I'm just a simple man in love with you. I want to have you in my arms. I don't give a damn for Joe.'

He rose, stumbled, fell on his knees, caught her round the waist, thrust his head against her breasts, reached up his hand, pulling down her head.

Christina tore his collar from its stud, then slapped his cheek good and hard. The Captain caught her hand and began to kiss it while with his other hand he struggled to pull her down to him.

While she fought she saw the dark brown knob of the door turn. Instead of the door there was Mrs. Field. The door was closed again.

The Captain struggled to his feet. His cheek was bleeding because Christina's wedding-ring had cut it. Part of his chest was displayed and a ragged edge of pink vest beneath the white shirt. He looked at Bessie Field and nodded.

'The executioner,' he said, and stumbled out, kicking his legs against the globe.

The two women were left alone. Christina did not cry. She sat in the heavy red-leather armchair rearranging her dress. In spite of herself she trembled.

'I shouldn't tell Joe,' Mrs. Field said, smiling.

'I'm going to him now,' Christina answered. 'There's very little to tell. Timothy unfortunately is drunk. He didn't know what he was doing.'

'He knew very well what he was doing.'

The two women looked at one another. What Christina saw in Mrs. Field's face was dreadful.

Christina murmured: 'Why, you're glad! You're glad this happened. You've wanted this to happen.'

Mrs. Field answered: 'It's nothing. You're right. When Timothy's drunk he doesn't know what he is doing.'

Christina was still staring at her. 'But that's dreadful. . . . You're glad. Of course. You want to ruin me.'

Mrs. Field patted her for a moment on the shoulder.

'My dear, you're absurd. Like a girl in a film. Aren't you? Of course you're upset, but the Captain—well, the Captain's the Captain. He'll have to go. He ought to have gone long ago.' She laughed, then kissed Christina on the cheek, taking her by the hand.

'There! You look as though nothing had happened. It's your own fault a little, my dear, for being so beautiful. Now come. We'll join the others. I shouldn't say a word to anyone if I were you.'

But Christina gently withdrew her hand.

'You go. I'll stay here for a minute or two.'

'All right then. . . . But the Captain must go. He's behaved like this once too often. And he'll be ever so sorry for himself in the morning. As a matter of fact Archer *did* make the "Cup" a little too strong. I warned him. Don't be too long, dear, or people will wonder.'

Mrs. Field went out.

Christina sat down and stared at the bust of Lord Chatham. Yes. Now she was frightened, frightened as never before in her life. She was in danger—danger of losing Joe, even, fantastic though it sounded, of losing her life. Yes, if she stayed. If she refused to go away. But she must stay if Joe stayed. She must not separate herself from Joe even for a day. She must make him understand. But how could she? Whom would he believe? And danger . . . in *these* days . . . danger . . . between women!

She walked to the door, opened it. She looked out and down the passage as though she expected to see a lurking enemy. She heard coming from the dining-room the strains of 'D'ye ken John Peel?'

END OF PART I

# PART II
# THE MOTHER

# CHAPTER I

## SEA WITHIN THE SEA

'Joyce's *Work in Progress*,' Congreve was reading aloud, 'will be understood by very few. It achieves the apex of the endeavour, forwarded by Mallarmé and Laforgue, to express with a new language thought and emotion experienced by new men. The old language cannot suffice.

'As the Arts have always been intended for the few rather than the many, this achievement of Joyce's—how lovely the inscrutability of his murmuring river and the cries of the washerwomen!—surpasses the old familiarities of Homer and the only too-articulate commonplaces of the Shakespeare drama.'

'God!' said Congreve and he threw the book on to the floor of the studio. There was no one there to keep him company; only, on his canvas, the faint silver-shadowed nudity of the girl under the tree waiting for the Unicorn while the enemy, the men with the arrows, the nets and the spears, lay concealed behind the bushes.

He stood looking through the window at the Tower which advanced, retreated, retreated, advanced through the living, running webs of soaking sea-mist, thinning, thickening, the hidden sea pounding within it.

They had had days and days now of this mist—warm, sometimes sun-shining, often coldly spinning like a menacing spider-web, again hardening into lines of driving rain, and after that, for hours, scattering into glittering sparkles of golden sun-web—but, for days and days now enveloping the whole world, confining it, wrapping it away, giving the sea's boom a rhythmic echo of drums.

Congreve had been born into it, had eaten and drunk and slept in it, been cradled in it, been wept over and kissed by it—this warm sea-mist that was like nothing else the world over, with the razor-edge of the black rocks appearing, the seagulls' lost cry and primroses in their season under the high dripping hedge. It had been part of his life and now for the first time in all his life he hated it.

He had never before felt that it imprisoned him, but now, because he was on the verge of escaping from it, it held him.

He had intended to slip away this very week. He could not bear to be facing his mother any longer. His love for her ate into him like an acid; he felt that it was really devouring him as the old melodramas say that love *can* do. If he stayed another month he would never go. And yet, on the other hand, his art was increasing within him every hour. He was learning, for the first time in his life, the lesson that all artists learn: that it isn't, for the artist, the question whether he works well or ill, but whether

the creative impulse is strong within him. That is not, of course, the question for anyone who from the outside considers the art when it is made, but for the artist this absolute necessity of release is all-dominating. Congreve felt now, unceasing, unremitting, this absolute necessity; this necessity that is the cause of so much bad art in the world and of so much joy to the artist.

His love of his mother was, on its own side, quite as active. The one necessity seemed to rouse the other. If Joe's wife went away, then the necessity to create might die down again. Congreve could not tell. He did not even want to know. It was such rapture for him to feel this impulse. He had not known it for years and he realized quite steadily that it was his mother who had dulled it. He did not blame her for that or love her the less. He only thought: 'How my mother would hate Christina if she knew what Christina has done to me!'

He had a sort of desire to take his mother away with him in his pocket. He had even thought of saying to her: 'Come away with me to London, mother. We can live together there. Leave this place to Joe and Christina. You know they've taken it from you, whether you like it or no.'

But he knew what nonsense that was. His mother would not allow that Christina and Joe had taken anything from her. Away from this place she would droop and die.

How his mother would hate Christina if—

He stopped and stared through the window at the swinging Tower.

'My God, she *does* hate Christina! She hates her like poison.'

He stared at the silly book on the floor and kicked it with his foot.

'Poor little mother! . . . Damned bad luck for her.'

Inside the house, on the afternoon of that same day, Congreve was reading to his mother. Bessie Field loved to be read to by her sons. While she sat there, listening to their voices, they serving her, she loving them, she felt the relationship to be perfect.

They read according to their own tastes and characters. Joe read melodrama, detective stories, old novels that he and his mother knew almost by heart. They had their especial favourites—*Bleak House*, *The Queen's Maries*, *The Woman in White*, *The Eustace Diamonds*, *Moths*, and *Aurora Floyd*. And he read any new book by Dorothy Sayers, James Hilton, Francis Iles.

Congreve read Virginia Woolf, Aldous Huxley, the author of *The Orissers*, and often a French novel. Congreve used to think that his mother had a very good taste in French literature and had often wondered to himself how it was that she knew nothing, and cared nothing, about music and painting and yet could appreciate so readily the novels of Virginia Woolf and Huxley and Mauriac, Henry de Montherlant,

Marthe Bibesco. He asked her one day. 'Anything with real people in it,' she said. 'I'm interested in people. We don't see enough here. And then you read French so beautifully, darling.'

Then one day he suddenly decided that she didn't understand a word of Virginia Woolf or Marthe Bibesco. He tested her by reading one day exactly what he had read the day before. She was perfectly satisfied. She had not been bored. She had listened to every word.

He realized then that she loved to have him there, seated close to her, reading the things that he himself admired. Had he read what she really liked, the detective story, the placid narrative of domestic life, he would have been restless, ill at ease, doing something only to please her. And so she was happy too, just as she was happy for him to paint his absurd pictures so long as he was doing it under her eye in her house.

This discovery startled him and, after that, he tried to escape from the reading.

'Look here, I'll read the kind of thing Joe reads.'

She became a delighted conspirator.

'Poor Joe! I let him read nonsense because that's what he enjoys. You and I like something better.'

He tested her once in the middle of Colette's *Vagabonde*. At the end of a chapter he laid down the book and said:

'I'm a bit puzzled, mother. Now what do *you* think Colette means there?'

But she was equal to him.

'What does she mean, darling? Why, exactly what she says. Don't be so stupid.'

They grinned at one another.

'I know I'm stupid. All the same . . .'

'Read on a bit. You're asking your questions too early.'

To-day he was reading from Jean Giono's Regain;

'*Comme on arrive sur le dos du mamelon, on entend le ronron sauvage des genévriers. C'est, là-bas, de l'autre côté d'un petit val. La terre est nue. Il n'y a, au fond de ce pli, qu'un vieux peuplier. On remonte de l'autre côté sur un sentier qu'il a fallu tailler à la barre à mine. Plus d'herbes; seules, quelques touffes de thym, un plan de sauge et son abeille: la roche gronde sous les pieds. On monte, on tourne, plus de village, plus de peupliers.*'

As he read he was aware with an acute poignant sharpness of the desertion that he was contemplating. This would be possibly the last time that he would read to his mother.

She sat there, her face gentle, kind, happy. Her little boneless hands moved at

her sewing. She had the air of listening to every syllable. Once and again she nodded her head as though in especial pleasure at a sentence. He knew that she was caring for none of it, understanding, probably, none of it—only wrapped in the delight of his voice, that he was there serving her, that he was hers for ever and ever.

A horror, mingled of his love for her, her domination of him, and her swiftly approaching sorrow, hidden from her so utterly, seized him.

'*Dix pas, et puis, pour revenir, c'est trop tard: les grands genévriers bouchent la route, derrière. On est en plein dans la terre libre. C'est le plateau: voilà le plateau!*'

Disgust seized him. He paused. The impulse, almost incontrollable, caught him to throw the book on to the floor and cry: 'Drop this nonsense. I'm going to London this week and am never coming back. That's what I'm going to do and you can't stop me!'

She looked up. 'Go on, dear, unless you're tired. How beautifully he writes!'

The audience, consisting of Christina, the Captain, Joe, had its humorous side, for not one of them understood a word of the French. After a while Archer Field had come in and stood, near the window, looking rather furtively at Bessie, rubbing one foot against the other, a habit his wife could not endure. Congreve, before he continued his reading, looked round on them all and said:

'Do you know—I can't think why—this afternoon makes me think of the finest play I ever saw in my life. . . .' Then, as nobody made an enquiry: 'Tchekov's *Three Sisters*. Very moving in the last act when the husband who bores his wife so exquisitely puts on a false beard to console her for losing her lover.'

Archer, without moving, said: 'Silly ass!' His eyes searched anxiously his wife's face, and his lips were ready to smile. Joe, who was out of temper, thought: 'Affected fool! Always showing off. Implying he's read all sorts of things we haven't.'

Congreve continued to read. The gentle rhythm of the French prose lapped the body of the Captain even as the sea might do. He sat there, staring at Christina although he pretended not to do so. He was profoundly miserable and had been so ever since the Christmas party. Christina had borne him no malice for his conduct, but on the day following they had exchanged a few sentences that had disturbed him deeply.

'No. No, Tim. Of course I'm not angry. You had drunk too much. We'll never think of it again. But, Tim——'

'Yes, my darling. Do you mind my calling you that? Because I'll never be laying a finger on you again.'

'Of course I don't mind. Tim——'

'Yes. What is it?'

'Mrs. Field was *glad* you behaved badly. She wanted you to. Why did she?'

He didn't answer her. He looked at her moodily. What was he doing in the middle of all these people who didn't belong to him, to whom he didn't belong? There was something bad breeding here, something evil, and he must go away and be rid of it.

But as he looked at her he loved her not with physical desire but with his better, nobler soul. She was only a child, and had things been otherwise how he would have loved to be her protector, to guard her from all earthly harm! That should have been his life, the thing that he was born into the world to be. And so he had missed it: missed everything he had been meant to be! Missed for ever the Eternal 'Bus to Heaven, by God!

'Do you know what I think, Tim?' Christina had continued gravely. 'I think she hates me now and would do anything to separate me from Joe. That's why she hopes you'll misbehave with me and make a scandal.'

He had done his best gravely to reassure her—paternally, an old wise man of the world. Bessie Field wasn't like that, she was really good and kind; it took her a bit of a time to be accustomed to a daughter-in-law. But Christina, looking at him, with all the gravity of her gold-grey eyes, had shaken her head. No. Mrs. Field might be all he thought, but not in this case. She was going to drive Christina away and keep Joe.

'But she won't,' Christina cried. 'I'll die first.'

And after that they'd not said another word.

Now looking at her across the faded drawing-room carpet he drank in her beauty. There was no law against that. The colour of her golden curls! The colour of imprisoned sun, or that strange half-dark amber so mysterious at the heart, or turning now to a gold so light, above the faintly dusky nape of the neck, so light a gold that it vanished into abstract light as you looked at it. And her eyelids, as she looked down to the dove-grey shadows of her lap, weighed down like ivory, above the pale-rose of her cheek: these colours, this delicacy all so exactly made for himself, he her true guardian, not that simple, unperceiving, handsome baby, mother-bred, mother-imprisoned, mother-blinded boy! She had been right in what she had said. That was now Bessie Field's game—to urge him on to some scandalous attempt on the child that Joe might be revolted with her. Joe! Joe! It all turned now on Joe. How truly did that boy love her? What would he endure for her? How strongly was he interfibred with his mother? Who would win?

He, Tim Green, must at least be defeated whichever way things went. He loved the child, but one step nearer and he would bring ruin both on himself and her. But he could not tear himself away. He *could* not! What must he do? Challenge Bessie Field? Open Joe's eyes? Do nothing at all? Yield to all the serpent-nest of temptations? *What* must he do?

Congreve was reading:

'*Ils sont assis dans l'herbe haute. Le vent prend élan et les saute. Ils sont au calme. C'est bon. Sur ce plateau si plat, si large, si bien tendu sous le soleil et le vent, on n'est à son aise qu'assis. La chaleur de la terre monte dans les reins; les herbes sont là tout autour comme une peau de mouton qui tient chaud et qui cache.*'

Christina felt the sea-mist pressing closer and closer upon the house. From where she sat she watched the thin spirals of spider-web drive past the windows. How silent the world, how close, how cruelly pressing upon the senses! The only sound was Congreve's voice, so carefully pushing forward the French words, embracing each one with his careful, superior aestheticism.

She had learnt French at school but she did not understand a word that he was saying. What was it all about? Did Mrs. Field really understand it? Was she truly so clever?

But this was only on the surface. Her honest preoccupation was, as it had been ever since Christmas week, with her own situation. She was sitting near to Joe and yet she was far from him. She was loving him with all her body and all her soul. As he sat there, his hands in his pockets, his legs stretched out, of what was he thinking? —for he also did not understand a word of French. She tried to catch his eye so that they might exchange a smile, but he would not look at her. She knew that he was unhappy. Their plan had not turned out as he had expected. She was not a success here. But was that *her* fault? He knew in his heart that it was not, but he would not allow a word or a thought of criticism of his mother. So that brought her back again, as everything always brought her back, to the puzzle, the terrifying puzzle of Mrs. Field. Nothing had frightened Christina more than that short conversation with the Captain, for she had realized instantly that *he* scented the danger. It was not only her inexperienced imagination there. Something threatening *did* lie here. She had seen it in his eyes. She had seen, too, that he could not help her—was prepared rather to run away lest he should increase the harm he had already started.

What *was* the danger? After all this was a modern world of trains, telephones, breakfast and afternoon tea. Here was Christina, her loving husband beside her, her new relations around her. She, Christina, had done no harm to anyone. Why should

anyone wish to hurt her? And yet her knowledge of her own danger was now as certain to her as though she had received absolute warning from a sure authority by letter.

'This is to warn you that if you do not leave here by next Monday evening 6 P.M. you must take the consequences.'

Somehow she must impress Joe with her own awareness, but she must do this without any possible criticism of his mother. There was nothing now that she could say to Mrs. Field that would help. She could not say that she would return to London, because she had no intention of going. She could not promise to do just what Mrs. Field ordered her, for her promise would be false.

It was then, sitting there so quietly, listening to this rhythmic flow of the French sentences, that she began for the first time to hate Mrs. Field. What right had she to threaten the love and happiness of Christina and Joe? Christina could have been devoted to her. She had had the opportunity to keep her son and win a new daughter. She had preferred this revenging possessive selfishness. Very well, then! She should have what she was afraid of. She should lose Joe altogether. It was her own fault. . . .

Christina raised her head. The clock was striking the hour. Mrs. Field looked up. She looked at Christina and Christina looked at her. They smiled. They had engaged in battle.

'Now I think that's enough, Congreve darling. It's six o'clock. Most interesting and you read so beautifully.'

Archer Field, who had come forward near to her, gave a low comic bow.

'We are delighted that Your Highness is satisfied.'

'Now, Archer, don't be a fool.'

His eyes besought from her a little friendliness. She got up and rested her hand on his arm.

'Joe, dear, come upstairs with me for a moment. There's an account about that plumbing. It seems to me *far* too large. If they're as expensive as that we'll have to change them. But they're the *only* good plumbers in Polchester.'

Joe got up, stretched his big body, yawning.

'I'm afraid you've been bored.'

'I have. Frightfully.'

'Why did you stay then?'

'Oh, I don't know. For want of something better to do.'

Congreve looked at him maliciously.

'Pity you never learnt French at school, Joe.'

'You *do* read beautifully, Connie,' Joe said.

Congreve hated to be called Connie. But he said nothing. He stood there looking at Christina as though he were waiting to speak to her.

'And what are *you* going to do, dear?' Mrs. Field asked Christina.

'I shall write some letters, I think.'

'Ah, yes. You've just got nice time before dinner.'

Christina saw that she was alone in the room with Congreve.

'And what do *you* think of my French?' he asked her.

'I expect it's excellent. The little I learnt at school isn't much use, I'm afraid.'

'A bit of humbug, isn't it?—reading for an hour and more and none of you understanding a word of it.'

'Your mother does.'

'Oh no, she doesn't—not a syllable.'

She looked at him, standing there, his nose so long and pale in the electric light, his thin nervous body moving backwards and forwards as though he were performing a sort of spiritual callisthenics.

'I expect you think I'm a pretty good humbug altogether.'

'Oh no, I don't.'

'Naturally you don't like me. You take Joe's view of me.'

'I like you very much.' Then she said with a childish spirit of independence that delighted him: 'I don't take my views of people from *other* people.'

'Don't you? That's unusual.'

He smiled charmingly. He came up to her and held out his hand.

'Shake hands.'

She placed hers in his and they stood hand in hand, she looking at him, laughing a little nervously.

'Don't be frightened. I told you the first time I met you—I'll never harm you.'

'I'm sure you won't.'

'The fact is, I'm going to tell you a secret.'

She waited.

'It's really a secret.' He looked about the room. He lowered his voice. 'A real secret. You must swear that you'll never tell a living soul.'

She took her hand from his.

'I must know what it is first.'

'No. You can't.'

She saw how very serious it was.

'Can I help you if you tell me?'

'It's something I'm going to do. You're responsible.'

'It's something you're ashamed of.'

'No. Not in the least. You're responsible for my doing it.'

'If I'm responsible I ought to know.'

'Yes. That's why I'm going to tell you.'

'All right. Tell me.'

He was staring into her face.

'I mean it. You're to swear to me that you won't tell a living soul.'

'Very well. I won't.'

'Not Joe.'

'No. Not Joe.'

'No one alive in the world. Ever.'

'Very well, then.'

He paused. Then, bending his long nose towards her, said:

'I'm going away. In a day or two. To London.'

'No! Oh no!' she cried out.

'Hush. Someone might hear. I'm going very soon. In a week probably. And I'm never coming back.'

'Oh, you mustn't! Your mother——'

'I know. It will hurt her terribly. But there's nothing else to be done. So long as I thought I'd never be worth a damn as a painter it didn't matter. Mother's a darling. I'd do anything to please her. But as soon as I saw you something woke up in me, something more important than any human being. I don't mean that I'm going to be a good painter. I can't tell. Perhaps I am. I have hopes. You've made me hope.'

'I!' She was aghast. 'I've done nothing.'

'No. Nothing except exist. I told you that first day in the studio that I'd never be in love with you. I'm not in the slightest. But from that first moment of meeting you I realized that, whether I'm a good or bad artist, I've got to *try*—that otherwise I'm dead, buried. I *was* dead. I tell you, Christina—' He came very close to her. 'These last weeks I've been so happy that I could sing, dance, anything crazy. I'm going to London and I'm going to be free. Here I'm a slave. When I was in London last I was still a slave. I had to come back. But now you've freed me. . . .'

She broke in: 'You mustn't! You mustn't! You owe everything to your mother. She's more important than anything you can do. Already she's unhappy about my marrying Joe. Now this will simply break her heart. And she'll blame me——'

A curious cunning look masked his face.

'I don't care if she breaks her heart and yours and everybody else's. I love her and now I'm going to be free of her.'

'You must tell her! You must tell her!'

'I *shan't* tell her and you won't either. You've given your word.'

She caught his hand.

'Congreve! Please! Don't you *see* what you'll do! Things are bad enough as it is. It will ruin everyone, your mother, Joe, me. Oh, Congreve, please! please!'

'Most mothers,' he said slowly, 'would want their sons to be free—if that made them happy.'

'Your mother isn't——'

'No. My mother isn't—That's why I've got to go.'

'I'll break my promise. You shouldn't have asked me.'

'You *won't* break your promise. I know you better than that. You don't break promises. You never have and you never will.'

She turned from him and stared about the room.

'This is awful. Things seem to get worse and worse for me. I'll tell Joe.'

'You will not tell Joe. Besides, how will it help things? No one will change my mind. There'll only be a fearful row.' He smiled at her derisively. 'You shouldn't be so beautiful. It's your fault.'

He went out, carefully, as it seemed on tiptoe, and he closed the door very gently behind him.

She stood looking about her as though prison doors had been suddenly closed on her. She felt like that. What had she done to deserve all this trouble, and, more practically, how could she prevent some intolerable scene? Her immediate impulse was to find Joe and tell him everything, but Congreve had been right in that. A promise to her *was* a promise and Congreve had trusted her. But how monstrous it was to say that she had been to blame! They talked about her beauty. How idiotic! As though there were not thousands of pretty girls in the world! As though, also, she had done anything with this wretched beauty. Any looks she had she had given to Joe and in any case the *looks* were not the important thing. The important thing was that she and Joe should be left alone to develop their lives together, to love and understand one another.

As she stood there gazing out at the disgusting sea-mist she looked like a young angry child, who had been punished with some lonely judgment of bed and no supper. It was *nonsense* this whole thing! Joe and she loved one another and wanted to be alone together. Others insisted on involving them in some dangerous

trouble for which they, the lovers, were in no way responsible. 'I'll take him,' she thought, 'wrap him up in a bag, carry him off to the train and never let him come back.'

No. That was not all. She was aware of a deep, unbidden, unexpected distress for Mrs. Field. This business of Congreve! It would be terrible for her. She would . . . And there she was standing inside the room, demurely, a little, almost timid smile on her soft fat face, her grey hair so beautifully parted, looking at Christina.

'Have you finished your letters, Christina dear?'

At sight of her Christina could feel nothing but tenderness, a longing to comfort. She moved towards her impulsively.

'No. . . . I don't suppose I'll write any. I've been thinking . . .' She put out her hand as Congreve had done to her. 'I don't know what's been going wrong. I'm sure it's been my fault. But I want you to forgive me whatever I've done. I want you to love me.'

Mrs. Field took the girl's hand, drew her towards her, kissed her.

'My dear, of course I love you. There's nothing wrong.' She put her arm round her waist. '*You* haven't been to blame. I was distressed perhaps when you said that you and Joe might go away. . . .'

The soft hand tightened. It pressed into Christina's soft side. It moved upwards, and, for a moment, touched the soft curve of Christina's breast.

'Wait. Wait. At least let your first child be born here. We can all be so cosy together. You, Joe, Congreve, I.' She sighed. 'I don't know that I have very many more years . . .'

But the eyes! They were staring into Christina's as though they would swallow her up! They were eyes without boundary of vision and were intense with heat that was animal more than human. Not personal enough to be evil. Christina had seen a cat look so when crouched, staring, blinklessly, at the bird on the tree.

'And now, dear, come with me while I find Matty. That is if you are really not going to write any letters.'

They went out of the room together, Mrs. Field's arm round Christina's waist.

# CHAPTER II

## THREE

EVERY morning now, she woke with fright and apprehension. She would lie for an instant wondering, and then the question shot up, clear from the mists of sleep: Was it to-day that Congreve was going?

She slipped out of bed and dressed without waking Joe. At the beginning it had been he who had slipped away. Now he appeared, for the moment at least, to have lost interest in the place. He was unhappy: a man moving, bewildered, in a situation that had caught him by surprise. He would stare first at his mother and then at Christina, as though puzzling what the matter was. The Captain, too—Joe could not understand 'what was biting' the Captain. They had been the best friends in all the world, loved one another like brothers. And now the Captain was always for going away by himself, made jokes no more, laughed no more, looked at Joe as though he had done him an injury.

Something was going on, but Joe could not conceive what it might be, except that Christina and his mother did not understand one another. And that must be Christina's fault.

Joe was not one for asking explanations of anything, and women anyway were so peculiar that explanations would only be a waste of time. So he was silent and even sulky, because he was suffering badly and he hated to suffer. . . .

Christina crossed the lane from field to field, mounted the little rise, and there, looking out to sea, was Lavinia Peacock. Mrs. Peacock was fond of a ride and a walk before breakfast and so she had told Christina. They had met once and again in this way, and of every meeting Mrs. Field had been informed by that surly gardener Curtis, who had eyes in his head and always told Mrs. Field everything.

Christina was no coward about Lavinia Peacock. By now she liked her better than any woman she had ever known, and soon she would be going to Lavinia Peacock's house whenever she pleased. 'Soon—when everything was settled.' She would have been to see her often enough as it was, but Lavinia Peacock had stopped her.

'My dear, why have the devil of a row right at the start? I understand. I know you and Joe are my friends. Wait until you've got your foot inside the house door more firmly.'

There now was that fine thin woman, spare and straight, with her head up sniffing the sea and watching the fingers of light tear the grey clouds into ribbons, while the

white line on the shore caught the sun and the edges of the rocks sparkled with black fire.

Christina had hitherto told her very little of her troubles, but to-day she did not wait.

'Lavinia, I'm frightened. I want your advice.'

Mrs. Peacock had been frightened in her own time; she already loved this girl who would have made the right daughter for her. She said:

'Do you think you'd better?'

'No—perhaps not. I won't if you don't want me to, but I'm frightened—I don't know what's going to happen next.'

'What is it?'

They stood close side by side, watching the fields move into sun.

'I can't tell you. At least there *is* something I can't tell you.'

'Then if you can't tell me . . .' Mrs. Peacock put her hand through Christina's arm. 'Let's walk down into the lane. Why irritate Boadicea more than is necessary? Anyhow don't be frightened. There's never *anything* to be frightened of. One can stand the very worst. I know.'

'I *don't* know. What I mean is that I don't know anything at all. I seem to have been thrown right out of the school-room into a perfect devil of a mess. Even *you'd* find it a job, I think. And I! I never dreamt that I'd have anything more to deal with than marriage, and now marriage is the least of it.'

'Well, what is it?' Lavinia Peacock said again.

'Joe's mother means to get rid of me. I don't know how she's going to do it. I don't believe *she* knows. About a week ago I was told about something, something that can happen any minute, something that will break her heart and that she'll blame me for. I can't stop it and I can't tell anyone about it.'

'Umph,' said Lavinia Peacock. 'Don't be afraid. I won't ask you. I know already. Nothing could be really bad for her except that Joe or Congreve should leave her. It can't be Joe, so it must be Congreve. He's going to London to paint and he confided in you. Didn't he tell you that you'd inspired him? I'm sure he did. Poor Congreve! He's been kicking against the pricks for a long time but hasn't known it. You showed him. He's a simpleton, poor boy. His mother's never allowed him to be anything else. Good for him! I'm glad he's going at last. But I quite see—Boadicea will be—yes, very unhappy. I give her *that* credit. And—yes again—in the devil of a temper.'

Christina said: 'Never mind what it is. But tell me. This is what I want to know. Tell me about Mrs. Field. I *must* know. What can she do? What's she going to do?'

Lavinia Peacock laughed. 'Yes, I know Bessie. No one can hate you as Bessie Field hates me without your getting to know her thoroughly.'

She turned and suddenly kissed Christina.

'Yes, my dear, you're right. It's serious. This is the worst thing that's ever happened in the Field family.'

'Why? I've done her no harm. I wanted her to like me. I could have been fond of her. I . . .'

'The thing that Bessie Field has feared ever since Congreve was born is about to happen to her. Subconsciously at least she's never for a moment ceased to fear it. Oh! I know all about it! I've loved in my time and now I'm as stripped and bare as the withered trunk of a tree. See the sun! It's pouring like a fountain into the hollow of the field!'

She waited. She was choosing her words. She put her arm round Christina's waist.

'I've grown very fond of you even in these few meetings. Indeed I'll tell you something that you may think impertinent.'

'No, I won't,' Christina said quickly, under her breath, almost like a child.

'The other night—lying in bed, not sleeping, I was thinking of you as though we belonged to one another and that you were the only soul in the world now I had any connection with. I prayed to God, although I don't believe in Him, not to take you away from me. Everyone *has* been taken away. I prayed to be allowed to keep you.'

'And so you shall,' Christina said, 'always.'

'Well, then,' Mrs. Peacock said, hurrying on as though she were shy of her sentiment, 'I'll try and explain Bessie.

'I don't hate her myself. I never have. Only years ago when we first met I refused to surrender my liberty. I was younger then, I was having the great love experience of my life. I was damned if I was going to have this comic little woman telling me what I should do, whom I should like, how I should behave. I warned her but she wouldn't listen, so then I told her a few things about her husband, her sister and her sons—that she was a bloodsucker, a domestic vampire, that if she didn't let those boys go out into the world away from her they'd be no good for anything. Finally that she was as good as a murderess.'

Lavinia Peacock laughed.

'Yes, my dear, *that* was a scene! One winter afternoon in that beastly house. You hate that house, don't you?—all except the Tower. Well, had it been the good old times, she'd have ordered her slaves in and held me down naked over a red-hot

fire. I called her a murderess—a good old melodramatic word. But it wasn't so unreal that snowy afternoon. She'd have killed me if there'd been a good undiscoverable way of doing it. I'd touched her on the raw, you see, and quite right too. Who was she to say I was too old for a man——?' Lavinia Peacock stopped. Her thin bony face was grey against the early January light. 'Never mind. That's over. That's dead. That's gone. I've said I've borne her no grudge. But, because of that hour, I know, Christina Field, that you've got to take her seriously. I told you I touched her on the raw. That's something to her credit. Plenty of people haven't got a raw to be touched on. They don't care enough, they can't feel enough, they haven't sufficient eggs in a large enough basket. But when anyone *does* care enough, especially a woman, that anyone can at moments be near madness, or over the line if it goes far enough. *Moi qui parle*—I've known it. A year of such blinding, stifling, searing jealousy that I *was* mad, as mad as anyone in an asylum. Oh, I didn't go about muttering to myself, with straws in my hair: nothing like that. I was just quiet and busy about nothing. But I *could* have murdered—either myself or another. What's this madness? Nothing but taking just one step further—the step that takes you into a country where every sound, every movement, every smell, every tiny action means only one thing. It's the ordinary normal world suddenly turned completely to one purpose. Something or someone must be stopped, put out of the way, silenced. That done, all will be right again. I don't say Bessie Field is mad, but I say she could be if you took her boys from her. She isn't a bad woman—she's even a good one—but she lives for one thing and one thing alone. It's as though you were saying to her now, "Bessie Field, I want your heart. Give it me, please.""

'But I don't,' Christina cried.

'No. Of course you don't. But it's the same as if you did. Look! . . . There's the young Dewlap. News will be at Scarlatt in half an hour. Rotten luck. Good-bye. Good-bye. Let me know—a message somehow. . . .'

Once she was out of vision she seemed to Christina—or rather, the lingering accent of her voice, her words hanging as it were over field and hedge, seemed—unreal, a little highly pitched. Lavinia Peacock talked always as though she were in a play, herself dramatized by herself.

'All the same,' Christina thought, 'that's true what she said. You take one step and you're in another world where everything is turned to one purpose. She's taken the step. She has only one purpose—to be rid of me.'

Not that Bessie Field, later in the morning, seemed to have any purpose,

walking, Snubs at her heel, towards the Tower. She wore her grey bonnet, ribbons tied beneath her chin, and her gardening gloves.

She moved slowly, her light rounded little body obeying the impulses of her tiny feet. She had called up to Joe, who had been looking from an upper window: 'Come down. I want to speak to you.' For something had to be done. The girl had been meeting Lavinia Peacock again—before breakfast. They had had a long intimate conversation. They had embraced. The Dewlap boy had seen it all. She herself had been told of it half an hour ago. Lavinia Peacock . . . her deadliest enemy . . . they had embraced.

Bessie Field, sauntering along, waiting for her son, was conscious this morning, for the first time, of a slight nervous throb just above her left eyebrow. It was not precisely painful—that is, you could not confidently say 'This is a Pain.' It was rather like the pressure of a thumb upon the place—a slight ache, a faint neuralgic twinge, but chiefly and most importantly, a reminder—someone reminding her of something she must not forget. The pressure was irritating and it had the effect on her that once and again she would shake her head as though she would shake the pressure away—also perhaps as though she would say to the Reminder 'You need not go on recalling it to me. I know what it is that I have to remember.'

It made her too a little angry, this pressure. She'd had headaches in her time; after one of her outbursts in the old days she would have headaches for a week. But they had been her own headaches and *this* pressure came from outside, exactly as though someone were walking close to her and gravely murmuring, while he pressed with his thumb: 'You can't let this pass, you know. You must do something about this. You've been neglecting it too long.'

It was irritation that she felt rather than anger, but an irritation that seemed to pervade her whole body. Why should anyone remind her of anything that she already knew so well, namely that something must be done about this girl—something must be done if only to stop the pressure above her left eye—for it would not stop until the annoyance that caused it was removed. It would increase; already she could sense the aliveness of all her other nerves, waiting, listening like strikers ready to act in sympathy as soon as they received the order.

Joe had joined her. He put his stout arm through hers. She opened the wooden gate that had 'Private' in large white letters on it and walked down to the beach below the Tower. The sand was like the thick white honey that you buy in jars with bees on the outside. Strands of seaweed lay gleaming as though newly painted. Two gulls walked in the sun on the very edge of the lazy line of foam. About once a second the milky-blue water sighed 'Ah—alas!'

'I think I'm going to pull the Tower down, darling,' Mrs. Field said.

'Mother. . . . Of course you're not!'

'No. Not really. But I've always hated it so—since I first saw it.'

'Why?'

'Because it's always hated me. It's supercilious, conceited, wishes me ill. That reminds me. Joe, you'll *have* to speak to Christina!'

Joe's face took on that sulky, obstinate mask that she knew so well and perversely loved because it made him a little boy to whom, after scolding, she gave chocolates. She loved him so much that the pressure on her temple increased and her hand, within the gardening glove, trembled.

'Let's talk this over sensibly. After all it's serious and concerns us both. I don't blame Christina if she dislikes me. That's not *her* fault.'

'But, mother, she doesn't.'

'Of course she does. That's been clear from the first. But I don't blame her for that. When all's said, she's very young. She's had no experience. She adores you and she wants to take me away from you. That's all quite natural. She's not old enough to understand the special relationship we have, you and I. It isn't *her* fault that we should care for one another as we do. I understand all that and I think anyone can say quite fairly that I've been very patient these last months, although sometimes it hasn't, frankly, been at all easy.'

'I'll tell you what, mother,' Joe said, kicking the sand with his foot, so that a thin pink mist, cherished by the sun, rose above his boot. 'There's been a lot too much talking. That's my idea. We've been here over two months and there's been nothing but chatter. Even Simpson's been doing her bit. Why does Simpson hate Christina so?'

'My dear, a servant!'

'Oh yes, I know. But she's been with us for years and she isn't even like a servant. She knows more about what's going on in this house than anyone else does.'

'I don't know that Simpson dislikes——'

'Oh yes, you do, mother.' He raised his head and stared at the sea. Now that his mother had started it they might as well have the whole thing out! 'And there's another thing. What about Tim Green?'

'Well—what about him?'

A gull was looking derisively at Snubs. Snubs gave one complacent glance up at his mistress, then sneered at the gull.

'Christina came and told me at once the night of the party that he'd tried to

make love to her. I'd have thrashed him within an inch, but she pleaded for him—said he was drunk . . . then he came and apologized to me himself. I understood that he really *was* going away this time—but he hasn't gone! And so—if he doesn't go soon I'll make him.'

'He hasn't bothered Christina again?'

'No. He'd better not.'

Mrs. Field sighed.

'So much of the trouble comes from Christina's beauty. It isn't her fault that she's lovely, but there it is—she *does* upset people. That will be your trouble, Joe, I'm afraid, for years to come.'

'Christina can look after herself.'

'Oh, of course she can. She has *plenty* of character. Plenty. What she *hasn't* got—and that time will correct—is experience. She doesn't understand how other people feel. For example—no, Snubs, don't touch that dirty thing. Come here!—she's been having confidential conversations with Lavinia Peacock again. They were together this very morning—embracing.'

'How do you know?' Joe spoke sharply.

'The Dewlap boy saw them. He told Curtis.'

Joe said nothing. He stopped, turned towards the sea, his legs spread, his eyes to the sea. He stared and stared. At last he spoke thickly.

'That's too bad. . . . She promised me she wouldn't.'

His mother put her hand on his wrist, drew him round, walked on with him.

'No. No. You mustn't be cross with her. She has every right to her independence, to make her own friends. But she might—and this you might tell her—be a little more discreet about it all. Getting up early in the morning to have intimate conversations with a woman who hates me like poison, confiding in her, asking her help in all probability, against me—so publicly that even the Dewlap boy . . . I . . . I . . .'

She broke off: the words choked in her throat. She put up for a moment her gloved hand to her eyes.

Joe was in a panic. Of everything in the world, ever since he could remember, he had hated most to see his mother cry. It seemed to tear at his bowels. It made him feel sick, ashamed, and roused in him so passionate a desire to protect his mother that he wanted to strike somebody—anybody!

'Mother! Mother!—no, please, *please* don't! Don't mind—don't be unhappy. Christina simply didn't realize——'

'I told her—you remember—before them all——'

'Yes. I've told her too. I'm afraid she *is* obstinate about some things. Spoiled at home. Mother—darling—darling—darling mother!'

She slipped her hand in his.

'Oh, Joe! what a darling you are! And mind now,'—she threw up her head bravely, her eyes were sparkling, her cheeks dimpled, Snubs gave a short staccato bark as though in sympathy—'I'm not complaining. Not a word of complaint from *me*! Christina is simply young, inexperienced. She doesn't realize how she can hurt. Yes, and she has been spoilt a little perhaps. You'll educate her. You'll show her. She's a little tactless, too, perhaps in talking so much about leaving here. As a matter of fact a year or two with me—' she gave her warm little chuckle and pressed Joe's arm—'Isn't that conceited? But I really could help her.'

'Of course you could, mother. You're just what she needs. But don't you worry. I wear the trousers all right—Christina may have her ideas, but she won't do anything without me. Don't you worry, little darling. You do worry, don't you? Well, you needn't.'

They had reached the late morning-purple shadow of the rocks. He took her in his arms and kissed her.

But, later in the afternoon of the same day, he did *not* kiss Christina.

'See here. I want to talk.'

'Let's go into the Tower then.'

'Very well.'

There was a dusky glow in the Tower and the last rays, like a pointing hand, struck the 'DEUS VULT . . .'

They stood a little apart from one another.

'I'm glad,' said Christina, 'that we *are* going to talk—because this can't go on.'

'No, it can't,' said Joe. 'Mother's very upset because you talked to Lavinia Peacock this morning.'

'Oh. . . . That's it!' Christina drew a long breath. 'How did she know?'

'Young Dewlap saw you.'

'Well—that's the first thing. Joe, do you know that I'm watched and followed now wherever I go?'

'Nonsense!'

'It isn't nonsense. If it isn't Curtis it's Simpson. If it isn't Simpson it's Matty. Poor dear, she doesn't know what she's doing but she does it all the same. Every word I say, every place I go.'

'Oh, damn!' Joe suddenly cried. 'Damn! Damn! Damn! This is awful. You're getting hysterical. You're behaving like a silly child. You're someone different. You aren't the girl I married.'

'I am,' Christina said quietly. 'Exactly the same. There's only one difference. I didn't know, when I married you, that you were so dreadfully under your mother's influence. If you don't take care our marriage is going to be completely ruined. That's what your mother wants. She's doing everything to make it so.'

He came closer to her.

'If you say that again——'

'I shall say it again. It's true. Your mother wants to separate us. She shan't. Until you tell me to go I shall stay with you. I love you and I'll fight and fight.' Her voice trembled. Then, quite unexpectedly, she laughed. 'The nonsense! As though anything or anyone could separate us!'

Joe said nothing.

Christina went on: 'I'm safe in this Tower. When I'm here I can see things in proportion. You love me and I love you. Let's start on that as a fact that can't change.'

Joe said slowly: 'I don't know that it can't. These last weeks something's been happening to me. I can't attend to my work. I'm not sleeping properly. It's all horrible. What you want to quarrel with my mother for——'

'I don't want to quarrel with your mother. Why should I? I've done everything I can to make her like me, short of surrendering to her completely.'

'Oh yes, you have, haven't you?' said Joe furiously. 'You like her so much that you go out and kiss her worst enemy in front of the whole countryside.'

'Worst enemy!' Christina said scornfully. 'What nonsense! People as old as your mother shouldn't have worst enemies! And it isn't that at all. I know now that whatever I did your mother would find it wrong. She's determined to. She was glad Tim tried to assault me on the night of the party. She thought that it would make things worse between you and me. Can't you *see*, Joe? Are you blind?'

He was furious. 'By God, you shan't say that! That's a filthy thing to say. My mother's not like that. What's happened to you? What have you changed into? You say you love me, but you won't do the least thing to please me.'

'I won't surrender myself. I won't become just nothing to please your mother. I won't give you up. Those are the things I won't do.'

'Very well.' He turned away towards the door. 'I'll manage you. I'm your husband. You'll do what I say from now on.' He turned back and looked at her. She was unbelievably beautiful, a shadow of gold and grey in the dusk.

‘I’m free,’ she said. ‘I love you and I’ll do anything to please you, but I’ll stay free. Whatever your mother does I’ll stay free. And you’ll have to let me, Joe, because you love me. If you didn’t it would all be easy enough. If we didn’t love one another I’d go away and everything would be settled. But your mother can’t separate us. She can’t and you know it.’

He stood there, looking at her. She thought that he was going to move to her and hold her in his arms. But he didn’t. He opened the door and left the Tower without a word.

She remained, thinking. She was quite alone. She had never been alone in her life before, and it seemed to her in that dusky place that the powers of darkness were marching towards her, silently through the evening garden, while not a leaf nor a flower moved. Only the sea, rhythmic, relentless, murmured its supreme indifference.

## CHAPTER III

### THE DEADLY BLOW

Mrs. Field woke up one morning crying like a child. She was sobbing bitterly; tears poured down her cheeks.

'Oh dear! Oh dear!' she was sobbing. 'Don't take him away! Leave him with me! He's all I have!'

Dark men, wearing masks, were dragging Joe in chains up a black moss-covered hill. Joe was not attempting to resist. At the bottom of the hill his mother wept and cried for pity.

Sitting up now in bed and throwing off some of the mists of sleep, Mrs. Field thought that there was someone in the room. Quite often of late, when walking in the garden or sitting alone reading, she had fancied company. She had a suspicion that it might be Simpson.

Since Christmas Simpson had been very much with her. Simpson had been in her service now some ten years; she was no beauty with her sparse grey hair, her scrawny neck, her heavy horse-face with the wide distended nostrils—but what a good servant! Without Simpson Mrs. Field did not know what she would do. She had devoted herself ever since the day of her arrival to Mrs. Field and her sons. Her devotion was really extraordinary, for it excluded everyone else in the world. She had, it seemed, no relations nor connections. She came from Norfolk. She had never been married and, as she told Mrs. Field, detested men. This detestation excluded Archer Field, whom she tolerated but despised, and, of course, Joe and Congreve, who were young men when she first arrived at Scarlatt. She devoted herself to them because they were Bessie Field's. She shared Bessie Field's emotions about everything and everybody.

'Why, Simpson,' Mrs. Field said once. 'I believe you'd do anything for me!'

'I would, ma'am,' Simpson answered. 'Including murder.'

The other servants were frightened of her. She made no friends, unburdened herself to no one. Sometimes she could be seen walking along the beach, an austere stern figure. She would slave day and night for the two boys. They did with her what they pleased, and they alone, in all the world, teased and laughed at her. When they did so she seemed to like it. These were the only occasions when she was seen grimly to smile.

Bessie Field had always trusted to her and talked to her as though she were her familiar spirit. Nevertheless Simpson had at times frightened her, for Simpson was

utterly uncompromising. Her hatred of Lavinia Peacock was, for example, even stronger than Bessie Field's. In the old days of witches Simpson would have cast spells on Lavinia Peacock and gladly seen her wither away in torment.

Anything to do with sex especially stirred Simpson to disgust. The idea of sexual love between man and woman was to Simpson horrible. If all women saw as clearly as she did, she often said, men would have a poor time. 'If all women *looked* as she did,' Mrs. Dewlap once said, 'men'd 'ave a poor time indeed!'

And yet there was something sexual in her jealous possession of Bessie Field. Some kind of fire burnt here, smouldering in a banked-down blistering heat. She was neat, clean, tidy to a mania, and looked, in her spotless uniform, like a servant of the temple attending on the high-priestess, Mrs. Field.

She was a woman of few words and, it seemed, no pleasures. She was the only human besides Mrs. Field to whom Snubs, the Sealyham, paid any attention. Sometimes he would go out walking with her.

Lately Mrs. Field thought that Simpson had grown very much closer to her. She seemed to be so frequently present, standing there, waiting. Mrs. Field had complained to her of her neuralgia, and also of a palpitating heart.

'I feel it in my left temple, Simpson, just as though someone were pressing his finger upon it. It's as though I were being urged to remember something. Very peculiar.'

'Nerves, ma'am.'

'Do you think so? And then my heart at night—when I lie down—especially on my right side. It hammers with my breathing.'

'Nerves again, ma'am. The trying time you're having just now.'

'Trying time, Simpson? What trying time?'

'That's not for me to say, ma'am.'

Bessie Field's dreams were constant now. Often, as on this particular morning, she would wake crying—lost, desolate, abandoned. It was then, before the mists of sleep had quite cleared away, that she would fancy that someone, a stranger, was standing in the corner of the room and was saying, in a soft and beautiful voice: 'But I shouldn't endure it any more if I were you. I shouldn't indeed.'

Then, when Simpson brought in the tea and said:

'I hope you've slept well, ma'am.'

'No, Simpson, I haven't. Such terrible dreams.'

'I don't wonder, ma'am.'

She found now that she thought of Christina all day long. She did not wish to. She could not help it. There was some very especial relation between them; they

were both intensely aware of it. Nothing but kind words now passed between them.

'What are you doing this morning, dear? Would you care to go to the village with me?'

'I'd love to.'

'I may look in at the Institute. They have a cinema show on Thursday night and they want me to preside.'

'What fun! What's the picture?'

'I don't know. Perhaps a Garbo picture. That's what the men like best.'

'Yes. Or Dietrich.'

'Well—in about half an hour?'

'Yes. In about half an hour.'

'That will be lovely.'

When they were alone with one another they talked all the time, brightly and quickly. When their bodies touched they were both deeply aware of the contact.

Joe was delighted with this friendliness and congratulated himself upon it. He became intimate with Tim again.

'No need for you to go yet awhile, old chap. We don't want to lose you.'

The Captain was very silent these days.

'Oh, don't you think so?'

'No, of course not. You're a great help to me about the place. I was saying so to mother only last night.'

'And what did she say?'

'Oh, she agreed.'

'Oh, did she?'

'Yes.' Joe slipped his arm through the Captain's. 'I can't tell you what a difference it makes to me, mother and Christina settling down like this. I tell you, I was awfully worried. But I had a talk with both of them. All they needed was to get one another's point of view.'

'Do you think so?'

'Why, of course.'

Joe was more deeply in love with Christina than ever. He clung to her like a child. He lay on her breast and she stroked his hair.

During these days she said only one strange thing. One morning when they were both awake she whispered:

'Joe.'

'Yes, darling; what is it?'

'This room is in a part of the house all by itself.'

He murmured sleepily: 'What's that got to do with it?'

'Only—if you went away any time—I shouldn't like it, sleeping all by myself.'

'Silly!'

'It isn't so silly. No one would hear if anything happened.'

'What could happen?'

'Oh—nothing.'

'Besides,' he said, drawing her closer to him, 'I'm not going away. If I go you'll go too.'

'Yes. I suppose so.'

Nevertheless both Matty and Archer noticed that there was something strange now about Bessie Field. They noticed it because their lives depended for their very existence on the kind of person that Bessie was. When Bessie was happy they were happy. When she was unhappy they were gravely disturbed. They both knew that she was unhappy. One evening Matty, Christina, and Mrs. Field were in the drawing-room. Christina was reading; the other two were sewing.

Matty began to chatter:

'I think I'll go into Polchester on Friday, Bessie, if you don't mind. That nice Canon and Mrs. Collins said a week or two ago when they were staying with the Fauntleroys that if ever I went in for a day's shopping I was to take luncheon with them. "Well, now, Mrs. Collins, do you really mean it?" I said, because you know how often people say those things just to be saying something and then they are *most* surprised and not at all pleased if you take them at their word. "Oh yes," Mrs. Collins said. "The Canon and I really do mean it. There's nothing we'd like better." So very nice and kind of her, so I said at once: "Then that's settled. The very next time." So I thought Friday unless there's something you want me for. Of course I could make it early next week.' She stopped and looked across at her sister. Bessie Field was staring at Christina. She looked, her eyes unflinching, her body motionless.

'Bessie.'

There was no answer.

Matty also looked. Christina was intent on her book. 'How beautiful she is!' Matty thought. 'It must be wonderful to be so beautiful. No wonder Bessie—'

Then she was suddenly frightened. She wanted to cry out. 'Bessie, are you ill?' A coal crashed in the fire.

'Oh, Bessie, the fire!'

Still Bessie did not move. It was as though she were in a trance.

No one ever knew what Archer Field was thinking. He spent a large part of the day by himself, but when he *was* with his wife he watched her furtively, on the look-out to serve her, to amuse her, to talk to her. If anyone had watched him during these last weeks—but of course no one did: he was entirely disregarded by everyone—they would have seen his brow puckered, his eyes—under the black eyebrows—constricted.

He appeared during these days more often than before. He was present at meals, he would say, staring through his monocle: 'Like a stroll before dinner, Bessie?'

'No, thanks.'

'Oh, come on. It would do you good.'

'Archer, *don't* be so tiresome, please! *Why* should I have a stroll? It's cold and damp.'

'Perhaps you're right. Hee-dee-hee-dee, the cow jumped over the moon.'

There began to be a certain absurdity about the days. There was much rain now and they were a good deal in the house.

Bessie would appear in a doorway:

'Where's Joe? Anyone seen him? I want him for something.' Or: 'Congreve isn't in his studio. Congreve! Congreve! Where are you, Congreve?'

And then Archer would appear.

'Seen your mother, Joe?'

'No, dad. Do you want her?'

'Not exactly. It doesn't matter. Tra-la-la. . . . Tell me, pretty maiden. . . . No, it doesn't matter really.'

All the family was irritated by Archer's habit of humming tunes. Joe knew a man in Polchester, a heavy lugubrious man from Bradford, who would suddenly while talking to you hum a tune. Rotten manners! And here was his own father doing it!

Once most unexpectedly Archer popped his head in at the little untidy study where Joe sat and did the accounts.

'Joe! Hullo, Joe! . . . Seen your mother anywhere?'

'No, I haven't,' said Joe shortly, for he was busy.

'Know where she is?'

'No, I don't.'

'Well, it doesn't matter. Tee-hee, tra-la-la. . . . What do you think about your mother?'

'What do I think about her?'

'Yes. . . . Is she all right? Perfectly fit?'

'Why—yes—as far as I know—perfectly.'

'As far as you know! I'm glad to hear that. She doesn't tell *me* much.'

'Why, what do you *think* is the matter?'

'Oh, nothing. . . . Wasn't sure. . . . Wanted your opinion.'

He made Bessie restless.

'Archer, I've got the impression that you're always following me about these days. What's the matter?'

'Dear me, Bessie. That's a good joke! That is indeed. Following you about! Tee-hee. . . . High above the windy lea clouds were racing through the sky. . . .'

'Archer, I wish you wouldn't hum.'

'No, dear. Certainly not, dear. Sorry.'

She patted his dry, thin cheek.

'That's right, dear. You go and read. Or perhaps Joe would have a game of billiards. . . .'

'All right, dear.'

'Don't follow me around. It fusses me.'

'Very well, dear.'

It fussed Bessie because she herself was restless. It was as though she were expecting something to happen.

'I don't know what it is, Simpson. I can't sit quiet and read. I seem to be anxious about the boys. Which is silly because they are perfectly well.'

'Mr. Congreve seems very keen on his painting.'

'Yes. He's taken it up again.'

Simpson stared at her mistress. Then said:

'Excuse me, ma'am. Do you mind me asking you something?'

'No. Of course not.'

'It's only, ma'am, where my duty lays. If I'm busy with a bit of work that's rather a hurry, if you understand me, and young Mrs. Field asks me to do something for *her* and I refuse because I'm busy with something for yourself, ma'am, that's rather a hurry, am I stepping out of my duty?'

'No. Of course not.'

They looked at one another. Then Mrs. Field said quietly:

'Is Mrs. Joseph tiresome with the servants?'

'Well, ma'am, not to say tiresome—inconsiderate perhaps at times.'

'Inconsiderate? In what way?'

'She's been a bit spoilt at home, I dare say, and then being so pretty. . . . Men

make a fuss of her, I shouldn't wonder.'

'You must come and tell me, Simpson, if you have any complaints.'

'Yes, ma'am.' Then Simpson said: 'I don't like her.'

Mrs. Field said nothing.

'Never from the first moment I saw her. The first moment I said to myself: "You may be a good-looker," I said, "but I don't like you and what's more I never will."'

Almost in a whisper Bessie Field said: 'I don't like her either.'

'Snubs doesn't like her. Never did. You can trust a dog for telling human nature.'

'Yes. Snubs doesn't like her.'

Simpson, never taking her eye off her mistress, went on:

'She's doing no good in this house. She isn't the one Mr. Joe ought to have married.'

'No. She isn't.'

'It's all her good looks. She's bewitched him.'

'I think you're right,' Mrs. Field said.

'If she didn't look as she does he wouldn't care anything for her. Poor Mr. Joe!'

'Yes. Poor Mr. Joe!'

This conversation had been so soft and so gentle that the ticking of the white marble clock on the mantelpiece had been louder than those two voices.

Very shortly after this conversation Joe found himself attacked by Simpson. Having known her with great domestic intimacy for ten years, Joe and Congreve treated her with great freedom. Joe had always been her favourite and he could do with her what he pleased.

He had been looking for some shirts in a drawer in his bedroom when Simpson, thinking no one was there, came in. She stepped back when she saw him.

'Oh, beg pardon, Master Joe.'

He was on his knees. He looked laughing up at her. Then he sprang to his feet.

'No. Wait a minute. I want to speak to you.'

'Yes, Master Joe.'

'You funny old thing! We haven't had a word together lately, have we?'

'Not many, Master Joe.'

'But we're just the same friends as ever, aren't we?'

'I hope so, I'm sure.'

'You do sound stiff!' He went up to her, looked gaily into her face. 'Anything the matter?'

'Not as I know of, Master Joe.'

He imitated her. '"Not as I know of, Master Joe." . . . Then there *is* something. What *is* it?'

'Nothing. Nothing at all. . . . Here now, Master Joe, you must let me get about my work. There's plenty to do and no time to do it in.'

'Oh, rot! You're not so busy as all that!' His face sobered. 'As a matter of fact, Simmy, there *is* something I want to say. Look here, I don't think you're quite as polite to Christina—to my wife—as you might be.'

'And what has Mrs. Field been complaining of?'

'Oh, she hasn't been complaining of anything. Not exactly. She isn't that kind. Only she's been here some time now and she thinks you don't like her. She thinks you grudge doing things for her.'

'Oh, she does! I'm sorry for that. I'd only say, Master Joe, that if there's anything really wrong, your mother's the right person to know of it. It's her orders I obey in this house.'

He stepped back a pace and looked at her.

'Here, hold on, Simmy! This isn't like you. We've always been the best of pals. You know what I think of you. What's the matter? How's my wife offended you?'

'It's not for me to be offended. I'm only a servant.'

'Now come off that, Simmy. This is ridiculous. Now tell me. What's the matter?'

But Simpson turned to the door.

'Things aren't right in this house, Master Joe—not by a long way they aren't. And if you can't see for yourself it's not for me to offer advice.'

She had her hand on the door. She spoke suddenly with passion.

'But I'll tell you this, and you remember my words. I've served your mother for ten years. There's not her equal in the whole world. If she asked me to die for her I'd do it. If she ordered me to go on my knees on this hard floor and stay there I'd stay there. It's not pleasant for me to see her suffer and I don't regard them as make her suffer with liking. She's worth the lot of you in this house put together. That's how I feel and it wouldn't be right if I said any other. And now I must get on with my work.'

She went. After she was gone he stood looking out of the window. Well, *there* was a funny woman! Women were rum, especially virgins when they got middle-aged like Simpson. She was right, of course, about his mother. She *was* a wonderful woman. There *was* no one like her! But Christina was wonderful in *her* way too! Only she was young and beautiful, and old virgins like Simpson were jealous of young and beautiful girls like Christina. Christina had been right when she had said there were too many women in this house. Things weren't right in the place, although

Christina and his mother *had* settled down! He knew, for the first time, a momentary impulse towards escape. To get right away with Christina somewhere, to have her alone to himself! The thought of a little home to themselves came more beguilingly to him than ever before. It wasn't, in a way, fair to Christina that she should be living in someone else's house, especially under the rule of anyone as dominating as his mother. For she *was* dominating, the Old Lady, and it had seemed to him of late that she had wished to superintend his every movement. He had noticed, too, that he was now never alone with Christina save at night. Whenever they planned a walk or an expedition to the village his mother needed him. And Christina, he must admit, was behaving very sweetly about it. She was a grand girl, oh! a grand girl! And his mother. He worshipped his mother. Simpson was right. There was no one like his mother anywhere. Well, it would all settle down, he supposed. Give things time and they always settled themselves!

It was at the beginning of the second week in February that the weather changed. Mrs. Field, going one morning down into the garden, found that the garden-beds near the sea-wall were powdered with sand. There were primroses like fragments of pale wash-leather in the wall's shelter. The tide was high and had reached the shingle above the beach and under the wall. Upon this shingle the sea scraped as though it were digging for something. Mrs. Field, looking over the wall, across the deserted beach, saw that on the horizon the sea was still, faintly purple like a coloured mat, but that nearer the shore it was grey-green with little flurried white-topped waves like excited birds. The Tower on her left was dead, lit by an invisible sun. There *was* a sun and yet no sun. There *was* a wind and yet no wind. Joe's boat, painted freshly a bright blue, was drawn up on the shingle and was almost indecent in its sharpness of colour.

There came a moment then in Bessie Field's consciousness, a moment in time infinitesimal, between her ignorance of Congreve's presence and awareness of him, when she had an extraordinary experience, almost a revelation. It was as though someone said in her ear: 'Now make your choice. Are you going forward or no?' Almost as though someone said to her: 'Now, Bessie Field, you are seeing things as they are. That huddled brown snake on the shingle, ready to raise its head, is, as you perfectly well know, a wisp of seaweed. Will you still see it as seaweed or shall suddenly the snake raise its head? The grey-green water merging into the purple horizon is the sea—the flowing, advancing, retreating salt sea water. Shall it be so or will you move forward and find it a curtain which, when you tear it aside, reveals—

will you risk *what* it reveals? You lean against this sea-wall. Your breasts are pressed by the hard stone. Shall it remain to you a stone wall or will you, in one little hand, lift a stone from it that will be as light as a puff of powder? You know that for weeks now you have been hurrying as though driven by the wind. Will you continue yet further, entering this new dangerous country in which you will be the only inhabitant, lonely, restless, frightened; the country where salt water is a curtain, seaweed a snake, hard stone baking-powder? You are not there yet. Must you enter it?'

It was a moment of extraordinary revelation. For weeks she had been nervous, restless, suffering from headaches, neuralgia, angry without cause. Her recent unhappiness struck her like a sudden splash of rain in the face. She had a moment of the clearest reason. Why had she been unhappy and restless? Quite simply because she thought she was losing her sons. But she wasn't losing them if they loved her. Mothers, all the world over, surrendered their sons. It was the law of life. And the more they surrendered them the more they recovered them. Your last chance, your last chance, Bessie Field! The sea is still the sea, the seaweed lies on the sand, the foam scrapes the stones. The water draws here on the shingle; further along the beach there is sand right to the wall, and that is where the seaweed lies, brown and dark—but no snake is there, as yet.

She stared over the top of the wall. A moment of real terror seized her. What was coming towards her? What threatened her? Why was her brain hot and tangled as though threads, wrongly caught, moved trying to extricate themselves? 'I want to be as I am! I want to be as I am!' her soul whispered. 'No anger. No hatred. Not this hot brain, this throbbing pulse, this beating heart. What is this ahead of me over the sea-wall? The Tower is bending that it may see better, the sea is parting like the Red Sea, and on the beach ever so faintly the seaweed moves. It is about to raise its head. . . . Oh, let me alone! Let me be! Let me stay safely on this side of the wall!'

She turned and saw Congreve coming towards her. The moment was over. She loved her son; she would keep him always beside her; she hated Christina who was trying to take her beloved boy from her. Her heart filled with love and hatred. She moved towards Congreve. She stared for a moment at the primroses sheltering under the wall. They seemed to her to have a faint green odour.

'Hullo, mother!' He bent and kissed her. She looked at him anxiously. She could see that he was uneasy. Why was he not painting this morning?

'Not painting, darling?'

'No. I've taken a morning off. It looks like a storm coming up.'

'Yes. The weather's changing.'

'Where's everybody?'

'I don't know. Matty's writing letters. Your father's reading.'

She put her hand through his arm.

'Come with me to the house.'

He stayed.

'No—I've things to do.' He bent forward and kissed her cheek. 'Darling—what a rotter of a son I've always been!'

She smiled. She was suddenly happy with a tingling, burning happiness.

'Nonsense. No one ever had better sons.'

He looked at her, staring into her eyes.

'I've done nothing with my life. Tried to paint——'

'Oh, well, if it's made you happy.'

'That's what you care most about—that I should be happy?'

'Of course—you and Joe.'

He dropped his gaze. He kicked at the soil.

'Oh, well, Joe's happy now. He's got his beautiful bride.'

His mother said nothing.

He went on: 'She's settled down here now, hasn't she?—Christina, I mean?'

'Oh yes—she's sweet.'

'Perhaps—if I—'

He stopped.

'What? If you what?'

'Oh, nothing! I'm a useless kind of fellow. I don't think there's a soul in the world cares for me but you—oh yes, and Simpson, of course,' he added, laughing. His voice was trembling. 'I'd like to show them all—about my painting, I mean. I've got to learn more. There's an awful lot I don't know.'

'I'm sure you paint beautifully, dear,' she said. 'You know, you mustn't be cross with me even if I don't seem to understand your painting. I'm not clever at all about those things. I think you're very patient with me. You must go up to London again one day for a visit, and then perhaps you can ask one of your painting friends to stay here. I don't want to be selfish. Sometimes I think you and Joe depend on me *too* much. It's from our always being together, the three of us.'

'Then you wouldn't—' His voice was shaking.

She looked at him with concern.

'What is it, Congreve? Something is worrying you. I know it is. Has been for some time. There's nothing wrong, is there?'

He didn't answer. He looked ahead out to sea. Then, as though with a great

effort:

'No. Nothing wrong. . . .' He went on: 'Remember, though, I do love you. Whatever happens I *do* love you.'

They walked up into the garden together.

'That's all I want,' she said happily. 'That you and Joe should love me, that we should all be together. . . .' Her voice trembled now a little. 'Without you I don't know what I'd do. I think I should die.'

Then, as they turned towards his studio, she added, laughing:

'And that's enough sentimental talk for one day. We ought to be ashamed of ourselves.'

After luncheon she went up to her room, a fine wide bedroom with a writing-table and high broad windows. She took up a book, settled herself in an armchair, and almost at once was asleep. Lying there, her hands folded, her mouth a little open, she looked like a very gentle old lady, happily content and quiescent.

Someone was knocking on the door. She awoke with a start.

'Come in,' she said.

Curtis, the gardener, stood there, his ugly lowering face embarrassed.

'Why, Curtis, what is it?'

He came towards her, holding a letter in his brown soil-grimed hand.

'Excuse me, Mrs. Field. It's Mr. Congreve.'

'Congreve?'

'This letter, ma'am. He gave it me just before he went off in the car. He asked me not to give it you before he'd been gone an hour.'

She caught the letter from him.

He stood there.

'Mr. Congreve went off in the car?'

'Yes, ma'am. Driving himself. He had his baggage with him. He told me to give you that there letter.'

Her heart was beating so frantically that she saw three Curtises. In a voice that seemed to come from another part of the room she said:

'Thank you. That will be all.'

Bending forward in her chair she read the letter. Congreve wrote:

DARLING MOTHER—I've gone to London to paint. I know how badly I'm behaving leaving you like this without a word. I've been trying for weeks to tell you but I simply haven't had the courage. Even this morning I tried: I'm too much of a coward, too much afraid of seeing you unhappy. I've thought of it every way but

there's really nothing else I could do. You see, ever since Christina came I've had a new sense about my painting. It's been like a new life in me. Not that she's had anything to do with it in a way. She knows nothing about painting. I'm not in the least in love with her. I don't even find her very interesting. She'll be plain enough in a few years I dare say, but at this moment to look at her is to make you think, if you're an artist, that you can make something beautiful. I had lost hope. I didn't tell you, because I didn't want to hurt you, that I knew as long as I stayed here I'd never do anything creative. For one thing I love you so much that when I'm with you I don't feel I can do anything you don't believe in. And you never cared about my painting. Why should you? No one else did either. When I saw Christina I knew I *was* a painter and after that I couldn't rest. I must go to London and learn and work.

I've told you all this because I want you to understand and, after a little time, perhaps you will see that it's the best thing that *could* happen. Your son who was dead is alive. That isn't affectation, darling mother. *It's true.* And I want you to see that it doesn't separate us. When I've got on a bit you'll come up and stay with me, won't you? We'll have a wonderful time—theatres and all sorts! And then I'll soon come back to Scarlatt and stay for weeks! You see, if I don't I'm miserable because of you but happy because of myself. You'd rather have a son you're proud of, wouldn't you, mother?

Write to me and tell me you're not angry or unhappy. Write to me c/o Frank Ainger, 10 Hallam Street, Portland Place, W.

Your loving and devoted son,

CONGREVE.

They were all waiting for dinner in the drawing-room when Mrs. Field came in.

'Congreve's gone up to London,' she said.

There was some questioning, but it quickly died down. Conversation at dinner was general and most uncomfortable. At the end of dinner Mrs. Field, saying she was tired, went to her room.

At nine-thirty or so Matty knocked on her sister's door and then went in.

Mrs. Field was seated near her writing-desk, tearing up papers. Torn pieces of paper lay all round her on the floor.

Matty began: 'Bessie, I had to come and if you're angry with me I can't help it. But I knew you'd be so unhappy about Congreve, although perhaps he's gone to London only for a few days.'

'He's gone for always,' Bessie Field said.

'Oh, he can't have done. He'd never do a thing like that without saying a word

to any of us. As I said to Archer, "Congreve would never go," I said, "without saying good-bye. You can be sure," I said, "it's only for a night or two to see a friend or something.'"

'He left a letter for me which makes everything perfectly clear.'

'Oh dear, whatever is he thinking of?' Then she looked at her sister and what she saw there made her go to her, made her kneel on the floor amongst the torn paper, put her arms round Bessie and cry:

'Oh, darling, don't be so unhappy! Don't! Don't! There's Archer and Joe and I. We all love you. We'll never leave you and Congreve will come back and it will all be as it always has been. We all love you, we do indeed! Don't look so unhappy, Bessie darling. We can't bear it if you're unhappy. We all love you!'

Bessie Field put her hand for a moment on her sister's head.

'There, Matty, it's quite all right. There's nothing the matter. He might have said good-bye to me instead of writing a letter. That has hurt me a little, I confess. . . . There now. . . . Leave me if you don't mind. I have much to do. And would you mind, when you go, taking those primroses in that bowl downstairs? They have an odd smell, I think.'

There was a scratching at the door. Matty went to it and opened it.

'It's Snubs.'

'Oh yes. Let him in, will you? Thank you. That's all. Good-night.'

# CHAPTER IV

## THE SIN IS HERE

ON the morning after Congreve's departure Joe and Christina awoke very early.

'And this is bloody,' Joe said, staring about the dark room. 'Who would ever have thought Connie capable of it?' He turned over, took Christina's body into his arms. 'But you *did* know—and didn't tell me.'

She lay against him.

'Someone was in this room last night—about one this morning.'

'Nonsense.'

'It wasn't. I heard the movements, managed to look at the clock without stirring. It was one-ten. Someone brushed against a chair. A woman. I *think* your mother. . . . Isn't there a lock on our door?'

'I don't think there is. Matter of truth, I don't think there are locks on any of the doors except the bathroom. House sadly neglected.'

He leaned on his elbow.

'Now instead of fairy stories, tell me exactly. What *did* Congreve tell you?'

'That I'd inspired him to be a real painter and that the urge was so strong that he must go to London.'

'And what did you say?'

'I said that he mustn't go, that his mother would never get over it.'

'And he?'

'That he loved his mother but didn't care whom he hurt. . . . I'd already sworn not to tell a soul.'

'You should have told me.'

'And if I had—what would you have done?'

'Told him that he must tell mother or I would.'

'What good would that have done? You couldn't have stopped him.'

'It would have prevented him going away without saying a word to mother. That's what Simpson said he did. Left a letter with Curtis.'

He sat up and whistled, a little whistle of shrill dismay.

'Oh, Lord, I hope he said nothing in that letter about its being your influence that sent him to London.'

Christina stared into the faintly stirring darkness.

'Who *was* that last night? Joe, we've *got* to have a lock and key to this room.' She added: 'Your mother would know it was my fault even though Congreve *didn't*

mention it.'

'But it isn't your fault,' Joe said indignantly. 'None of it's your fault as far as Connie goes. And why shouldn't he go to London to paint?' Joe, who arrived at ideas slowly, now had a real question to ask. 'What's it all about, anyway? I marry, Connie goes to be a painter. Why should mother make the fuss? Thousands of sons are leaving thousands of mothers every day of the week. That's what sons are for. Why should this be different?'

Christina kissed his cheek.

'Joe, you're growing. You wouldn't have asked that question two months ago. God's answering half my prayer anyway. This situation is not quite ordinary because your mother is not quite ordinary. I've told you all about it before. She's a woman with only one egg in one basket. She's always been domineering, excitable, obsessed. Such women are dangerous. I've taken *you* away. Congreve is gone. There's nothing left for her.'

As she said the words she knew that she had for the moment lost him. It was as though Mrs. Field had moved up to them through the darkness and taken him into her arms. He was sitting up, staring before him, unaware that Christina was there. Christina could imagine that Bessie Field was sitting up in *her* bed, calling, 'Joe! Joe! Where are you? Come to me. I'm all alone.'

'By Jove!' Joe said. 'It's a damned shame. That's what it is—a damned shame. Connie went off without a word to her—just the sort of egoistic swine he is. Not a word. Poor Old Lady! My God, I'll be good to her. I'll make up to her for everything. She shan't feel lonely. We must make it up to her, Christina.'

'Yes,' Christina murmured, as though to herself. 'We must both make it up to her.'

'At any rate,' Joe added, 'that puts paid to our going off somewhere for a week or two, Christina. We can't go off now and leave the Old Lady. We can't. Of course not. Of course . . .'

He was curled up, lying down again, and asleep. He breathed the soft gentle rhythm of a child.

Christina, her hand against the cool strong curve in her husband's back, lay and gazed, without cowardice, into the world that she must now face. Her hand held to Joe's flesh for reassurance, but she must stand up for her position entirely alone. If Mrs. Field had hated her before, it was nothing to the fashion in which Mrs. Field would hate her now. And Mrs. Field would do something about it. What would she do?

Christina had said five minutes before that Joe had grown in these few months of

marriage. She had grown also. She was no longer the frightened inexperienced girl of that first railway journey to Scarlatt. One direction in which she had grown was in her understanding of Bessie Field. She understood her so well that she might have been Bessie Field herself. Did anyone try to rob her of Joe she would stop short of nothing, not even of murder. That was what women were like if the person they loved was taken from them. Yes—what now would Mrs. Field do? She would attempt to separate Joe and Christina? In that she must fail. She would drive Christina from the house? She would injure her in some way?

Christina understood enough to know that the lady would not hold her hand and wait. She was not that kind of a lady. She had had her way always: she would do anything to have her way now and at once. The desire to be rid of Christina would be an obsession just as her sons were an obsession. Human beings in general did not reckon sufficiently with the obsessions of others. Almost everyone was obsessed about something. The majority indulged its obsessions in moderation and safety. But once a week at least you read in your newspaper of some obsession that had grown too strong for its possessor. 'Things like that don't happen to us'—but they *did* happen to someone, like the perfectly respectable lady who, only a week or two ago, poisoned her husband with arsenic—like Seddon and young Bywaters and Major Armstrong, all perfectly ordinary persons.

Her hand tightened on Joe's back. She turned towards him and drew him a little closer to her. She was moving now—moving into a world that Joe would never understand but that was real nevertheless. 'Things like that don't happen to us.' What could she do to protect herself against these undefined perils?

She could go away. No. She would not leave Joe. Once she did that he might never come back to her again. Or would he? If she went, to-morrow, back to her mother and father, might he not perhaps follow her by the next train? Dear Joe! She kissed very softly the back of his head. If he did, he would be wretched, picturing always his mother, alone, and deserted by her two sons. He would begin to hate Christina for what she had done. Moreover it would be, for her, a cowardly running away—neither more nor less. Could she, by staying, after all, persuade Mrs. Field to trust her and even care for her? No. At the beginning perhaps, but not now. Not now—after what Congreve had done. Besides, Mrs. Field had detested her from the first moment of seeing her. Christina recalled that first greeting when Mrs. Field, kissing her, had cried: 'How beautiful you are—and how tall!'

Possibly Mrs. Field would do nothing? It would not be agreeable, because friends now they could not be, but there might be a truce. No. There would be no truces. Mrs. Field was not at all the kind of woman who believed in truces.

Christina drew Joe yet closer to her. She imagined herself saying to him: 'Joe, your mother will have me in some way. I don't know in what way, but you've got to protect me. We've got to be together in this.'

No, Joe would not believe a word of it. If she said anything of the kind he would, from that moment, be on the side of his mother. He would begin to dislike and distrust Christina, think her neurotic, nervous, selfish, cruel—a thousand things! No. Whatever was coming she would face alone. No one in the house, except possibly the Captain, would understand or sympathize with her. And the Captain now avoided her. It seemed that he had his own troubles; he was so gloomy and silent now, and, Christina suspected, was drinking more than was proper. She dared not risk a visit to Lavinia Peacock. She was quite alone.

Already this house, that she hated, seemed to her mysteriously active. She was certain that Simpson or Curtis or *someone* was aware of her every movement. And someone had been in this room this very night!

Facts, then—not melodrama. No return to the jolly, fanciful days of the dark-eyed flashing Aurora Floyd, the lady about whose adventures Mrs. Field loved to hear from Joe.

This was danger. And danger as real as the bed in which she was lying, as real as Joe's body pressed, warmly, strongly against her own.

'Yes,' Mrs. Field said, smiling in queenly fashion upon them all. 'Congreve left a letter for me. He was afraid to tell me, silly boy. As though I wouldn't understand! Coffee, Joe? Yes, dear, thank you, as you *are* up! Some bacon and kidney—*no* egg. You might blow that one out, Joe. Anyone more bacon? Cook will do it in a minute. . . . Thank you, dear. Yes, he wrote and said that Christina's beauty made him feel that perhaps he was a painter after all. You *must* feel flattered, Christina dear. So he's gone up to have some lessons. Dear boy—I'm only too delighted if it makes him happy. Here you are, Snubs—although you know I don't really approve. You're getting disgracefully fat.'

The Captain got up from the table. He looked anything but well. There were heavy black pouches under his eyes. He looked at Mrs. Field sardonically. He said nothing, but went to the window and stared out at the grey tumbled sky.

'And what about *you*, Captain Green?' she asked with light irony. 'What are *you* going to do this fine morning?'

'It isn't fine. Nasty weather on the way. But it doesn't matter to me. I'm off at the end of the week.'

'*Really* off?' They looked at one another.

'*Really* off. There's a brother of mine arrived from Kenya. He's at Drymouth. Wants to see me. We haven't met for twenty years.'

'It will be nice seeing him again.'

'It may or may not. If I like him, I may go back to Kenya with him.'

'Yes—why not? Kenya's lovely, I believe.'

'Everywhere's lovely. Everywhere's damnable. Everywhere's nowhere.' He went out, banging the door behind him.

'And where are you going this morning, dear?'

Christina knew, as swiftly as though she had heard the iron bolts shot home, that she was in prison. She had read, last year at home, one of those books that tell about prison life. The really awful thing to her in that book had been the way in which every step counted. In your cell, along the passage, in the workroom, with the other prisoners taking exercise in the open, every step counted, every step was watched, every step was self-conscious.

So now here every step counted. From the breakfast-table where she was finishing her marmalade to the door was a few yards only: yet under the eyes of the Old Lady the distance was infinite. Every movement, wiping her lips, rising from the table, walking to the door or the window—was now a watched event.

She put a piece of toast in her mouth and in her mouth it stayed. Ridiculous! But suppose they decided (they?—Mrs. Field, Curtis, Simpson—oh yes, and Snubs) on a gentle undemonstrative poison. A long, slow undetectable poison. There *were* such things! None of your common arsenic weed-killer, but something tasteless and slow. One day she would feel less well. She would be sick one morning—a baby coming perhaps? Quite natural, her lethargy. Less well . . . and less well. . . . Kindly nursing by Mrs. Field, Simpson in attendance. Local doctor called in. 'Nothing to worry about, Mr. Field. All quite natural in the circumstances. The first child is always a little upsetting.'

Yes, probably that was true enough. She was almost sure that she *was* to have a baby. What a grand covering for the Old Lady! A situation made to her hand.

Christina swallowed her piece of toast and felt sick. She looked at Snubs, who was gazing, like the self-satisfied patronizing Squire of old time, toward the window. Why should not Snubs be her food-taster? That would indeed be to make the punishment fit the crime! There was still a fragment of marmaladed toast on her plate. 'Here, Snubs, old boy!'

Snubs looked at it, turned his head, got up and walked—like a minute travelling sofa—to the window.

Mrs. Field smiled.

'Well, I must be going about my affairs. Snubs, I'm afraid, will take food only from myself or Simpson. And yet he's astoundingly greedy. He has no manners at all.'

Miraculously, before the day was out, Mrs. Severing had come to tea. She knew that Congreve had left for London. Why? How? No one could name authority, but everyone knew. Astonished, as always, by Christina's beauty, she sat staring at the girl. No manners. But she did not know that she was staring. The girl would be plain in no time, of course. A baby or two would do it. Nor would her hair keep that wonderful colour without artificial aid. And she was certainly, in herself, a very ordinary girl. Abrupt in her manners. Conceited, no doubt, and her husband spoilt her. Nevertheless—this Beauty! The girl simply could not make an awkward movement. Where had she learnt to carry her head like that? But it was the colour—the dim gold hair sparkling with fire, the grey-gold eyes, the rose-white of cheek and neck and hands. Sweetness of expression? Mrs. Severing must admit that although pride and temper were there—arrogance even—the smile was charming, warm, friendly, honest. And she looked at you as though she trusted you. Mrs. Severing, knowing that she was the worst gossip in the world, liked to be trusted. Gossip she called 'little bits of news for Dick.'

And to-day it wasn't really Christina she had come to see. Her tight defined little body in its neat grey and white tweeds, her air (as of a lively bird perched on the branch of a tree looking with sharp eyes about her for appetizing worms), her comforting sense that she was really out collecting tit-bits for her 'dear Dick,' her sense of health and well-being (for she was sleeping well and eating splendidly), her natural and by no means blameworthy interest in her fellow human beings: all these gave her a sort of springy verve as though at any moment she might hop to her feet and fly up to the ceiling.

'Thank you. What *lovely* buns! Bran, are they? So healthy—I'm always telling Dick that what he needs is bran, although he really does a lot of exercise for his age. But of course we never *dreamt* of Congreve going to London—and how soon do you expect him back again?'

'Oh, not for a long time,' Mrs. Field answered. 'He'll probably find a studio there!'

'No, really! Well, I *am* interested. So will Dick be.'

At this moment Matty came in. She looked once at her sister and then sat down. Mrs. Severing attacked her.

'And weren't *you* astonished at Congreve suddenly going off like that?'

'Not in the least,' Matty at once replied. 'Bessie and I were always expecting it. I remember Congreve saying to me a month or two ago: "Aunt Matty," he said, "the trouble with me is I don't know enough." Dear modest fellow that he is. He always was. I remember that tutor the boys had saying to me once that he had most remarkable talent, and I'm sure he has although I'm no judge of pictures, as he's often told me. "Aunt Matty," he said, "you like pictures with a message." That's what he's often said. "You like pictures with a message," by which he meant, you know, something anyone could understand like a dying stag or an old sea-captain looking out of the window or a wedding or a knight in armour going to the wars.' Matty laughed contentedly. 'He's perfectly right. That's the kind of picture I *do* like or a nice recognizable portrait of somebody—a relation or Walter Scott or Queen Victoria. But of course that sort of painting wasn't enough for Congreve, so he's gone to London to learn more. What, though,' she ended, '*does* puzzle me about painting is that I should have thought it much more difficult, and you'd have to learn a lot more to get a good likeness or make a sheep look *like* a sheep than to do what Congreve does—make a few lines and circles and say it's a train. But then I know nothing at all about it!'

'Won't you miss him terribly, Mrs. Field?'

'Miss him? Why, of course. But mothers have got to be used to losing their sons.'

It was then, as Mrs. Severing excitedly told her husband afterwards, that she noticed something very strange about Mrs. Field.

'At first, dear, I couldn't tell in the least what it was. She looked quite ordinary, wearing that sort of uniform she always wears, sitting up in her chair as though she had a board down her back—just like Queen Victoria. Then I noticed her hands. They were never still. You know how she always is, hands on her lap unless she's holding something—never restless. That's the last thing she is. But this afternoon her little fat fingers moved in and out of one another all the time. If they'd had any bones in them, you'd have heard them crack. Then her eyes weren't looking at anyone. They were the eyes of a blind woman. And she was deep in her own thoughts. I don't know what she was thinking of, but it certainly wasn't of us. Then I noticed that Matty was very anxious about her. Frightened, you might call it—so that really, Dick, I began to be frightened too. Do you remember Lavinia Peacock telling us what Boadicea was like in a real temper? She always prophesied that she'd have a nervous breakdown one day. In my opinion that's just what she's going to have.'

Yes, and the Captain was really going this time! It was the day before his departure. He was a little drunk. He knelt in the Tower and bade it farewell. A seabird within the roof, above the narrow window, aimed at his bare back and hit it.

There was a terrific smell of the sea, salt, spumy, acrid, fierce, as though the thick Tower with its hard stout stones held, in that small compass, the very essence of the sea's spirit—cold, green, rolling, stinking essence of the sea.

'It's no use, old fellow,' the Captain, tipsy but clear-sighted, whispered, stroking the 'DEUS VULT' with his stubby finger. 'You've done all you could for me, but what you've given me the Old Lady's taken away. It's all up, old body—all finished—all done for—but you're my ticket-of-leave, you're my cup of tea.' He staggered to his feet and was suddenly sober as a judge: a judge of all life, of all its true values. 'Don't mix your values. There are things beyond Time. Stick to them. Love and charity and all goodness. Don't be a boss. "DEUS VULT"—good old God.'

He heard the thump-thump of the waves against the stone. In his mind's eye he could see the wave rear its salty hand, splash its fingers on the grey stone, and slip, in green confusion, into the welter again.

'I'm finished. I can't live without her—or you. I'll go and say good-bye to the Old Lady.'

He found her in her room, sitting in her armchair, Snubs at her feet, a fire burning brightly, and she was staring in front of her.

He stood in the doorway, a little unsteady, looking at her.

'Can I come in?' he asked.

She was far away in her thoughts, motionless except for her fingers which twisted and untwisted on her lap.

'Can I come in?' he asked again.

She suddenly looked at him, and he had a curious conviction that she had expected to see someone else standing there.

'Tim, you're getting fat,' she said.

'I know I am.' He sank heavily into the other armchair. 'I'm a little drunk too. But I've come to bid you farewell.'

'How often you've done that before!' she said.

'Yes. But this time it's real and true. I'm off to-morrow. I have a brother in Drymouth wants to see me.'

He *was* a little drunk, of course, but nevertheless the Old Lady did keep her room unreasonably close. It smelt to his confused nostril of mixed biscuit, canary seed, penetrated with a faint smell of burning. Beads of perspiration began to form on his forehead.

‘You keep a good fire here,’ he said. ‘I don’t know how you manage to stay awake with it.’

‘Oh, I manage to stay awake,’ Bessie Field answered. ‘Especially now.’

‘What do you mean—especially now?’

‘I have important things to settle and decide.’

‘Do you mean—about Congreve?’

‘Not about Congreve only.’

He examined her and noticed a change in her. She was intensely preoccupied about something inside her own thoughts. The strange preoccupation of her mind seemed to spread out into the room itself. He had been often enough in that room, but he had never before known it so oppressive, so ’stinking with closeness’ as he phrased it to himself. He sniffed, he thought, an evil smell, a *new* evil smell that he had never smelt before. He did, in fact, sniff.

Mrs. Field said amiably:

‘You’re smelling those flowers. Three times I’ve had them put out of this room. Primroses. I never knew before their smell was so strong. Will you kindly remove them for me?’

He stumbled to his feet, picked up the bowl of primroses, placed them on the small table in the passage outside.

As he sat down again he said:

‘I’ve come to say good-bye, Bessie, to thank you for all you’ve done for me and to speak my mind a little.’

‘We shall miss you, Tim,’ she said contentedly.

‘No. Will you?’ He leaned forward, his arms on his stout knees, his head cupped in his hands, staring at her. ‘Things are sort of breaking up here, aren’t they? And when I came, over six months back, they seemed as settled as settled.’

She said nothing.

‘You know—when I came here for a night or two—I hadn’t the slightest idea, of course, that I was going to stay. You hadn’t either.’

‘No. I must confess I hadn’t,’ she admitted.

‘You just swallowed me up and enjoyed it.’

She smiled and her dimples made her like a charming pleased child.

‘What an ungrateful thing to say—instead of thanking me for my hospitality!’

‘I’ve nothing to thank you for—or myself either. There was still some hope I might do something with my life before I came here. But what with you and good liquor I’m done, finished—no more life in me.’

‘That’s right,’ she said. ‘Blame everyone but yourself.’

'Oh, I blame myself all right! If I didn't blame myself so much I might pick up and start life again—although I doubt, what with drink and women, I'd ever make much of it.' He gave her a long steady stare. 'But what I really want to know is why *you* took such trouble over me? What fun was it for you to drain me of all vitality, to make me run your messages, to chew me up and swallow me?'

Bessie Field, who now was busy with some sewing, snapped a thread with her teeth, and said:

'Really, Tim, what language!'

'Oh, well, I understand it, I suppose! All your life you've wanted to possess everyone who has come here, and even I, a bibulous womanizing sea-captain, was worth trying your hand on for want of something better to do. Congreve's departure was a bit of a blow to you, wasn't it?'

He had leaned yet further on his knees, looking at her intently. He lowered his voice as though someone were listening on the other side of the door.

'Now. Tell me. Go on. Mind you, I know all about you. I'm the only one who does. So tell me. Congreve's going hit you right between the ribs, Old Lady, didn't it? Got you right in the heart. You'll never get over it, will you? Never to your dying day!' He thumped his knee. 'Grand! Grand! You're struck a mortal blow there, Old Lady! A mortal blow! Both your sons! There's a devilish tune for you!'

He stopped, surprised at the change in her. He had been saving up, oh yes, a long time saving up for these final speeches of his: he bore her a bitter grudge. But he hadn't expected this. Her face was all puckered like a baby's, and down her soft plump cheeks two fat shining tears were gently rolling.

'Here,' he said roughly, 'I don't want to be too hard on you. When I say "lost," you haven't lost them if you behave like an ordinary human being. Go and see Congreve in London. You'll have a grand time. And let Christina and Joe go off by themselves for a week or two. They'll come back ready for anything. Come on. It isn't so tragic. Lots of mothers see their sons marry pretty girls and are glad of it.' He broke off. 'I guess it's too late,' he murmured. 'You're past that. You're done for. That's the truth. You're done for.'

The tears stayed drying on her cheeks, but it was in quite a controlled voice that at last she spoke.

'You think you know me, Tim—just the little time you've been here. You know nothing at all, nothing of what I am, nothing of what my life with my boys was until Joe brought that girl here. Our life—the three of us—it was the most beautiful thing in the world—perfect—Joe, Congreve, and I—no one but ourselves understood it—no one of us will ever have anything like it again.'

He broke in brutally with:

'Beautiful! Perfect! Hell it was! It was as beautiful and perfect as a boa-constrictor swallowing a pair of rabbits! Perfect for the boa! Why, certainly, yes! You're suffering hell now, aren't you? You're just mad with hurt pride and malice and revenge and self-pity! Oh, I'm not blaming you! I've been like that in my time. I know how it hurts. But you're only paying for the goods you've bought. You've committed the sin against the Holy Ghost, Old Lady, and I'm just drunk enough to be able to tell you about it. And what's that sin, pray? Ask the nice sea-captain. That sin, dear lady, is greed, lust, wanting to hug something so tight to yourself that there's no life left in it! It's worse than any sin in the Decalogue, Old Lady, and has done more harm through history than breaking all the other Commandments put together. "It's mine! It's mine! It's mine!" "I want it! I want it!" You grabbed those two sons of yours and nearly crushed the life out of them. And now you've lost them. You know darned well you have. And you'll be punished good and strong for it. You greedy old thing, you —— a nice lonely old age you're in for, and I'm drunk enough to tell you I'm glad of it.'

He stopped, moistened his lips. He had been delighted with the sound of his own voice, as he always was, but now there was a strange silence. He looked at her intently.

'By God!' he said in an awed whisper. 'I don't believe she's heard a word that I've been saying.'

Her eyes brooded, thought active in their depths cavernously. Her cheeks were drawn in as though she were sucking in her breath. Her little hands were clutched as though she were wringing a cloth between them.

'Tim,' she said softly, nodding her head, as though they had just agreed on something. 'She's wicked—a wicked woman. If she hadn't those looks you'd all see it. She's evil, and if there was a God, He'd punish her. As there isn't . . .'

He got to his feet, went over to her and shook her by the shoulder.

'Look here!' he said. 'Come out of it! You're dreaming.'

She looked up at him, smiling, then reached for her sewing.

'Tim—you're not nearly so clever as you think you are. Oh no, not nearly. . . . Well—we shall miss you. You must come back and pay us another visit.'

He stood over her, swaying a little on his feet.

'Look here! You're not to harm her. Do you understand? You're not to touch a hair on her head!'

Bessie Field looked up at him again very friendlily, smiling.

'She's got lovely hair, hasn't she?'

'No. But I mean it. She's as sweet a child as ever stepped—kind, generous, plucky. And don't you think you can separate Joe and her. You never will, not if you live till ninety. That's real love, that is. None of your hocus-pocus, but the real thing. *I* know!'

She began to put her sewing into her green-and-scarlet bag.

'Now go along. I must brush my hair and wash my face like any other decent old lady.'

'Don't you touch her, now,' he repeated. 'She's out of your reach and you know it.'

She shook her finger at him.

'Ah, the things I know! Wouldn't you like to guess what they are!' She got up. She walked with stately dignity over to her dressing-table. As she raised a silver-backed hairbrush she said:

'Because I let you sit in my bedroom, Captain Timothy Green, doesn't mean that you know *all* my secrets. Now go along—and let me manage my own affairs. Joe and Congreve are *my* sons, you know, and not yours.'

He saw her reflection in the mirror. The eyes that gazed at him from behind the glass were from some other world—the only world, out of so many terrible ones, that as yet he had been spared the citizenship of.

# CHAPTER V

## THE CAPTAIN SAYS GOOD-BYE

The day before the Captain's departure was a Friday. On the afternoon of that Friday Christina made an experiment.

She had reached by this time a queer mixed condition of fear, and laughter at herself for that same fear. She often compared herself with one of her favourite heroines—Catherine Morland, the heroine of *Northanger Abbey*. She told herself that nothing more terrifying would be discovered by her than a laundry list, and that her picture of Mrs. Field was as absurdly exaggerated as Catherine's vision of General Tilney.

On the outside, during these weeks, it seemed certainly so. The worst trouble of these dark cloudy days was a general dullness. Joe was hard at work again, was all day out on the property. Archer Field was scarcely visible. Matty was a darling, but, at long last, a darling bore. The Captain had lost his spirits. Mrs. Field herself kept a great deal to her room.

It was no easy thing for Christina to fill her day. No one in the neighbourhood except Lavinia Peacock seemed a possible friend, and Lavinia at present she must avoid. This lack of occupation was made worse for her by a constant sense of physical malaise. Before her marriage she had been very rarely ill and, if she were, always from a defined cause. Now she woke in the morning with a vague headache, had little appetite, and, while reading a book or writing a letter, would suddenly feel palpitations of the heart, breathlessness, even a distant approach of a fainting fit. These symptoms might be the signs of the happiest thing for her in the world, a baby, but of that she was not sure.

She intended to see a doctor in Polchester on the first opportunity. But, as is always the case, when one suffers from some vague discomfort, the general outside world seemed also to play its part. The days were heavy with dark skies that threatened but did not break into storm. Thunder rumbled in the distance. The sea drove in long sulky swells on to the indifferent shore.

About the house, too, there was in her imagination an air of suspense. A more ordinary house you could not conceive, nor an uglier. Now there had fallen upon it an almost absolute silence. Again and again Christina would raise her head and listen. She discovered in herself a stupid trick of turning, from her table or chair, and looking behind her as though she would take by surprise someone who had crept up beside her.

With all her Jane Austen mockery of the properties of melodrama and smiling confidence in the normality of everyday life, there *were* two actual facts with which she must reckon.

One was certainly of minor importance: the hostility of Simpson, the maid. Here again, seen in the distance and from the comforting safety of second-hand, was a stock figure of all the tales of violence from Mrs. Radcliffe to Wilkie Collins, and beyond. The stern unsmiling woman from the North who, for one reason or another, silently plans vengeance. But in actual concrete fact it is not pleasant to have someone who actively dislikes you daily in your company. There are few things more unpleasant. Christina had learnt by now to avoid the woman whenever possible. She never asked her for anything; she never gave her an order nor offered her any occasion for rudeness. Nevertheless Simpson's dislike of her seemed to grow with every hour of silence.

The second and more important fact was that Christina was now certain that Mrs. Field was ill or on the verge of some illness. Their relationship was, on the outside, quite normal; on the inside most abnormal. The girl felt that the older woman was now ceaselessly considering her. It was not only that every word and movement of hers was watched and confirmed—so it had been for a long time now—but that *behind* word and movement there was a relationship, silent, intangible, almost of pursuer and pursued.

Once in her schooldays there had been a mistress who had formed for her a sudden liking. Christina, without knowing why, had pushed this intimacy away from her, and at last, in a short scene that had upset her for weeks afterwards, she had spoken her mind and ended it. Before that scene there had been, for some time, a deep, uncomfortable, unspoken, developing history between them in which silences had been more eloquent than words, and minute fragments of action had been as portentous as battles.

Christina thought of that now, for here, on a much deeper and wider scale, was the same silent threatening relationship. Only here it was hatred that threatened, not affection.

Congreve's name was not mentioned, but Christina believed that the thought of him was never absent from his mother's mind for an instant, and with every thought there was accusation of Christina.

One day, after tea, Joe had cried, laughing: 'What about it, mother? What about some reading?'

Mrs. Field had been walking from the tea-table. She had turned on him, her face quivering, and cried:

'No. . . . No! How dare you!'

Mrs. Field's consciousness of Congreve made Christina conscious of him. Often from day to day when he had been living in the house she would not see him except at meal-times. Now that he was *not* living in the house she seemed to see him constantly. He had been always a quiet man in his movements; he had never been a great talker except when he was excited on one of his own subjects. She remembered his voice clearly enough as, reading to his mother, the French words fell like freshly minted coin into the large bowl of listening silence. Yes, that listening attention! And now it was *he* that was listening. With that sharp glance upwards that now she was always giving she seemed *almost* to miss him, just catching the reflection of the light on his long pale nose as he disappeared. In her present uneasy state it seemed to her that he was really there, disappearing round corners, shutting doors carefully behind him, whisking down passages, and all to avoid his mother. 'Don't let mother catch me!' he seemed always to be whispering in her ear. 'Now I see how pleasant it is to be free I don't want to be caught again!' And at the same time Christina's imagination made it appear to her that Mrs. Field was always pursuing her son, crying: 'Congreve! Congreve! Where are you?'—up and down the house, pursuer and pursued. Or was it Mrs. Field and herself who were pursuer and pursued?

One morning alone in the room with her, Archer Field had caught her by the arm and said huskily:

'Cheer her up! Take her out of herself! Cheer her up!'

Christina looked at him quizzically.

'Me? . . . Do you think *I'm* the one?'

'Why, certainly! You're young and bright and pretty, aren't you?'

How little he perceives! was Christina's thought. Poor Archer was, it was plain, greatly perturbed. His lean face was one long question-mark of uneasiness.

'I do my best, you know. It's about Congreve she's worrying. But she's never taken me seriously. That's a pity, but there it is. I'd do anything for her, you know, anything at all. Can't bear to see her unhappy. Upsets me like anything.'

'Don't you think,' Christina said, 'that if you took her away for a little holiday—a cruise or something—it would cheer her up? She hardly ever goes away.'

Archer looked startled indeed. His black bushy eyebrows seemed to jump as he fixed his eyeglass more firmly.

'A cruise! Oh, Lord, no! A cruise with me! Why, she'd die at the idea. She can't bear being alone with me for more than five minutes at a time. Why, to be left alone in the house here with only Matty and me would be to her like the worst sort of

imprisonment. No, it's the boys she cares for, and I don't blame her. She never had much use for women anyway. Forgive me, my dear——'

'Oh, that's all right,' said Christina. 'But that's why I thought it a little strange for you to suggest that *I* should cheer her up.'

'Oh yes, quite,' said Archer rather vaguely. 'I can't bear to see her unhappy, you know. And after all you're young, and dashed pretty—forgive me, my dear. . . .'

He looked at her with a puzzled intensity as though he wondered what he had been talking about.

'Well, so long—so long. "The harp that once through Tara's halls."' He pulled himself up by the door. 'I don't think she's well,' he said. 'In confidence, mind you. I don't think she's well at all. Very upsetting.'

It was on this dark afternoon of the day before the Captain's departure that she made her little experiment. The silver clock in the drawing-room had just struck three. Christina was alone there. The afternoon was so oppressive that she had thrown open one of the windows and she could hear very faint, distant rumbling of thunder above the steady drum-like throb of the tide. On the sea horizon the sky was black and a long ebony pencil-line ran under the sky across the sea's surface. For the rest the ocean was a pale phosphorescent grey and dead calm. Gulls, like grey fragments of waves, broke the thin surface of the sky, uttering wailing cries, distant and faint as though heard through glass. Nothing else moved and there was no other sound. The house was so deeply silent that it seemed to Christina to be holding its breath for the coming storm. The human world was dead. But *was* it? That was what she suddenly determined to decide. She walked softly into the hall. Saint George, staring myopically over the dead body of the Dragon, regarded her with plaster-cold indifference. She started up the stairs. She had reached the bend by the hideous little stained-glass window when she heard a door open. There was no one to be seen, but someone, she was convinced, was listening behind the door in the hall that led to the kitchen world. She took another two steps and so now was hidden from anyone in the hall. The door to the kitchen opened and the parlour-maid, one Molly, came out and stood, her mouth open, fingering her apron.

Christina turned back down the stairs.

'Well, Molly,' she said. 'What is it?'

'Oh, ma'am. . . . I beg your pardon, ma'am. I was looking for Mrs. Field.'

Christina smiled. 'I don't know where she is. In her room perhaps.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

Opening on to the first floor, to the right of the stairs, was a room known as the library. Very dreary this place was, never used by anybody, burdened with hundreds of old books—travels, sermons, eighteenth-century poets, collected by Archer's grandfather. Here, in the shabby old chair, Christina stayed and rested.

What craziness possessed her? She realized suddenly that for weeks now she had been at the edge of her endurance, beating back phantasmal fears. Let her look at things as they were. So long as Joe was with her no harm could come to her. It was the house itself, her day-after-day loneliness and the consciousness of her mother-in-law's hatred of her that gave her this maddening nervousness so that now, as she sat in the dusk, with the stuffy mustiness of the old books all about her, her heart was hammering and her mouth was dry. It was this sense that something was being planned in the dark against her. It was the necessity of her own inaction that terrified her. She could not face Mrs. Field because there was nothing to face. She could bring no accusation because there was no accusation to bring. It was only, she told herself, her own inexperience because no one before had hated . . .

She was aware that the door-handle was being turned. The light was a half-light, but she could see, clearly enough, that the handle of the door was turned twice. The door did not, however, open.

She stayed there without moving. At last she walked to the door, opened it softly and looked out. No one was there. She walked on down the passage, turned a corner towards a small staircase that came up from the kitchen quarters and waited. Someone was coming down the passage and with very quiet footsteps. She turned back into the main passage and confronted Simpson.

'I beg your pardon, ma'am,' Simpson said.

'You have been following me.'

They were so close together that Christina could see the small grey mole on the woman's right cheek.

Christina felt a tempestuous anger. She had to hold her hands rigidly to her sides.

'Of course not, ma'am.'

'But certainly you have. You turned the handle of the library door just now.'

'I did not.'

Simpson regarded her with a quiet restrained insolence.

'If it wasn't you, who could it have been?'

'I don't know, I'm sure.'

'I want to know why you have been following me.'

'I was not doing so. I have better things to do.'

Christina said quietly: 'Yes, I should have thought you would have.'

She walked past her and down into the hall.

She went into the garden and there, coming towards the house, was the Captain. She caught his arm. 'Oh,' she said, 'I'm so glad it's you!'

'Why—who did you think it was?'

'I don't know. I'm absurd, I'm nervous. Oh, Tim, I wish you weren't going! I've only got Joe left now. *Must* you go? Stay a little while. I'm sure everyone wants you to.' Her hand was trembling. He took it in his.

'Yes. I've got to go. Should have done long ago. Come down to the beach for a moment. I want to talk to you. It's allowable,' he said. 'The last time. And I'm sober as hell.'

'Is hell sober?' she said, laughing hysterically. 'Of course I'll come. Where's Joe? Why is he out all day? It isn't fair.' She was nearly crying.

'What's the matter? Has anything upset you?'

'No. No. It's nothing. Let's go down to the beach—away from this beastly house.'

They went through the garden, hand in hand, and on to the beach. They stood there, in the gathering, thickening dark, hand in hand.

'You're not cold, are you?'

'Oh no. On the contrary, it's stifling. I've been hearing thunder all the afternoon. I think that's why I'm so nervous.'

'Yes. There's a whacking storm coming.'

Even as he spoke, she felt a plop of rain, like a fragment of chill jelly, strike her forehead.

'It won't rain really yet.' He moved away, letting go of her hand. 'We can talk here. You never know who's listening up in the house.'

She drew a deep breath. 'Do you know what, Tim? They're following me about. I tested it just now and caught Simpson tracking me down. I accused her of it.'

'And what did she say?'

'Oh, she denied it of course.'

'Pity you charged her with it.'

'But why are they doing it, Tim? Why? What harm have I done?'

'Plenty. You've robbed Boadicea of her children and she's off her head over it. She thinks you're so wicked that it would be a noble act to rid the world of you.'

Christina shivered.

'It's not *my* fault!'

'No. It's hers for being so greedy.' He came a little closer to her. 'You're all right so long as Joe's here. But honestly I should persuade him to take you off for a

belated honeymoon as soon as you can. Bessie Field isn't sane just now and seeing you every day just aggravates her insanity. Honestly she'd like to do you a mischief, spoil your beauty or harm you in some way. She's done what she wanted all her life and had what she wanted. For the first time she's checked and by you. Greed—that's what's killed her—just as it has me.'

'Why,' asked Christina, 'what have you been greedy of?'

'Drink. Women. Taking what I wanted without paying for it. You've *got* to pay the price, the fair and decent price, for everything. Otherwise you corrupt and decay. Bound to happen. You blame God, chance, fate, God, fate, chance, God. But it isn't. It's yourself.'

He came still closer to her, put his arm around her and kissed her very gently. She didn't move away.

'But there. I wasn't intending to preach. This is the last time you and I will ever talk together.'

'Why, what nonsense, Tim!' she said, laughing. 'There'll be lots of times! You will come and stay with Joe and me when we have our home.'

'No,' he said, his arm tightening about her shoulders. 'It's true what I say. This is the last time.'

'But why?'

'Oh—I'm off, you know——'

'Off! Where?'

'Oh, abroad. . . . Kenya with my brother perhaps. Who knows? Anyway I won't be seeing you again, and that's why I've kissed you and have got my arm around you. I've told you I'm sober and so I am. I'm meaning every word I'm saying.'

'You *do* sound serious. And why shouldn't you have your arm round me? Joe wouldn't mind.'

'It wouldn't be a good habit all the same,' the Captain answered. 'And I'll tell you why—and this is the last time too. It wouldn't be a good habit because I loved you the first time I set eyes on you. I've told you that drunk and I'm telling you it sober. Real love with everything in it. I've *never* loved a woman before in *every* way—and now I've found her she's only a child and married to my best friend, and I'm finished, with all the buck drained out of me. But that's what does come to you when you haven't earned your keep on this earth, when you've shuffled and scamped and cheated as I have.'

'Aren't you being a bit sentimental, Tim?' Christina asked him. 'Taking a bit of pleasure in glooming over yourself? You've been here with nothing to do, you've

been idle. And you fancy you're in love with me. But it will all look quite different when you're away from me, with your brother whom you haven't seen for so long. You see, when you're on a ship again or doing a job in Kenya or somewhere, then your life here will seem to you *very* unimportant.' She sighed. 'I realize that even about myself. I know that I am imagining all sorts of things that aren't true. When Joe and I *do* get away—if we *ever* do—I shall wonder how I ever *could* have been frightened by the Old Lady. It will seem ridiculous. So with you, Tim. And when you come back and stay with Joe and me we'll all three laugh at it together.'

He kissed her again.

'You're very sweet. But you don't understand what's happened to me. Why should you? You're too young and altogether know too little about life as yet. But one day perhaps you'll have a flash of clear thinking about yourself and see that it's up to you and no one else whether your soul dies within you or doesn't. I was granted a number of those flashes, but I let them all go by. . . . But no. Here I am preaching again. What I really wanted to say to you, my darling, is that you've got the grandest luck—you and Joe love one another as people should love one another, and it's going to last. I know a lot about love or lust or whatever you like to call it. Love's as rare as the bluebird on a tree: desire's as common as blowing your nose. Nature deceives us and she's right to do it. But I know Joe as well as I've known any man and he's grand. He isn't awfully quick and he hasn't a lot of imagination, but he's a beautiful heart. Oh, a beautiful heart; he's as honest as the rain and as kind as a mother with her child and a grand man with his hands. His mother's done her best to destroy him and she might have done it if you hadn't come along. But he's safe now, safe now, with the sweetest, loveliest child in the world. Here's my blessing.' He kissed her the third time. 'And now go along in and I'll be seeing you at dinner-time maybe.'

'But of course you will. Now cheer up and think of the time you'll be staying with us. In Wiltshire perhaps.'

She kissed him on his cheek, which was cold and taut.

'Come along. We'll go in together.'

'No. You run along. I'm staying here a bit. Joe will be back by now.'

'So he will.'

Like a child all her earlier fears were forgotten and she went up through the dark garden thinking of Joe.

The Captain walked up and down the shore for a while. The rain came faster. He stood looking out at the sea.

Then he took a small revolver out of his coat pocket and shot himself through the

heart.

# CHAPTER VI

## OVER THE EDGE

They found the Captain's body on the beach late that same night. Afterwards they discovered in the pocket of his coat this letter to Joe:

Dear Joe—It seems very bad manners to put an end to my very disappointing history here when I've had so much kind hospitality. I can't do anything else, however. It's simply my final weakness. As the hour of my departure has stealthily caught up with me through these weeks I've perceived with more and more certainty that I'll never be able to catch that train. I just can't pluck up the energy to walk that distance. It isn't, mind you, that I've been so awfully happy here under your mother's hospitable roof. I haven't, most of the time, been happy at all. But my unhappiness is of very old date. I was born, I think, one of those men who believes in a heaven he's going all his life to be sceptical about. That belief and that scepticism joined like the Siamese twins! It's a conjunction that naturally enough drives you to drink and women. However, I'm not at this late date trying to put up a case for myself. There isn't in fact any case to put. I'm only another of those unfortunates into whose drink there's been thrown a very thin powder of spiritual discontent. Mind you, the pleasures of the body are good enough of themselves so long as we don't imagine there's something finer. 'I have been faithful to thee . . . in my fashion.' You won't know where that old tag comes from, Joe. Congreve would know but he's now painting unsubstantial wraiths to his own complete satisfaction in Portland Place.

I'm writing this in my room before I go down to the beach for the last whimper and exit. The sea, the Tower, these have been my happiness here. Sometimes I've thought that I might go on with them away from here and so reach some sort of achievement again. But no. Christina showed me that wasn't to be. After all if I'd been right in what I had always hoped to prove, that life never brought anything or anybody *really* off, that old Nature bungled, in the end, absolutely everything—why, then, I, who have also been bungled, might have thought it worth while to survive in an imperfect world. Not that Christina is perfect. But my love for her is—a perfect frustration! At the very first sight of her, outside Congreve's studio, I knew at last, after all these years, at the very end of things, what real love is. Christina, dear Joe, is just an ordinary child with a lovely body. When I say ordinary she is, I mean, like hundreds of other women—faithful and honest if she finds the man she belongs to, sweet-natured, subtle in no way, not over-intelligent, but with all the charm of a loving, trusting faithful child who doesn't see further than her nose. Her beauty turns

these ordinary things into extraordinary and I really do not believe that she'd be so beautiful if she were not good-hearted, generous and true. But I've met in my time many more remarkable women. That's nothing to do with loving. You love with all your heart and soul when someone captures your heart. It isn't the extraordinary people who capture you, but the simple-hearted, the honest-intentioned, the generous-minded. Well, seeing her I realized what I've all my life missed, what I never now can have, and so I'm going for good.

To put it more simply, I despise the kind of man I am too thoroughly to think it's worth his living any more.

So good-bye, dear Joe. Another thing that makes this muddle impossible for me is that I've been fonder of you than of any man I've known—and you're married to Christina.

You love one another truly. Age will not wither you nor time decay—in fact as grandparents you'll both be tiresomely perfect.

And one thing more. Don't force Christina to live with your mother too long. The child is very good about it, and you, loving your mother as you do, cannot see all round the picture. Your mother's a very remarkable woman. She managed to soften in me the last little bit of muscle I boasted of. And that is my fault not hers. But she isn't quite sane on the subject of yourself and Congreve. If women have what they want too long and too completely, there's a miserly strain comes out in them. They are noblest when they give up one thing after another all through life as they mostly have to. Your mother's had her own way always until Christina came. She's blaming Christina for the change. Remember your wife comes first always—always and always.

Funny my saying that! *My* wife would laugh if she could see it! But I've added everything up wrong all my life through.

So God bless you both. If you think of me ever remember me as a man who found his mess of pottage a poor deal.

Yours ever,

Tim.

There was the inquest and there was the funeral. Evidence was given that he had been unhappy and dissatisfied for some months and had spoken to that effect. His marriage had been a failure. He had no private means.

Christina gave evidence and told clearly and simply the story of her last conversation with him.

'I didn't know, of course, that he had anything of the sort in his mind. I see now

that many of the things that he said had another meaning.'

The Coroner read privately the Captain's letter to Joe. There was no need, he said, that it should be read publicly. It was a private letter concerning private matters. There was no doubt at all but that Captain Green had taken his own life while temporarily insane.

Afterwards Mrs. Field said: 'Joe, darling, may I read Tim's letter.'

Joe said: 'No, I'd rather not, mother. No one's going to see it.' Then he added with odd abruptness: 'Anyway, you can't. I've destroyed it.'

She looked at him, then said lightly:

'Was there anything about me in it?'

He answered her steadily: 'No, mother.'

'Anything about Christina?'

'No, mother.'

'I see.'

For Christina there was at first nothing but miserable unhappiness at the Captain's unhappiness. To do that how unhappy he must have been! She was haunted by him at first as by a friend who had loved her, whom she might have comforted but had not. She lay in bed crying while Joe, nursing her as though she were a child, consoled her. And in this she *was* a child, for it was her first impact with real tragedy. She was so young in heart and experience as well as in years that the dark sentences of death that life is for ever pronouncing had been to her until now only rumoured voices. She could think of nothing but Tim: what might she have done to comfort him?

'Nothing,' Joe assured her. 'Nothing. Nothing. It was better this way. He had messed up everything. He had reached the stage when the only thing left to him was to sentimentalize over his failure. It was better for him to go as he did.'

Then, recovering a little from this, she discovered that, behind it, was a curious speculation everywhere as to that last conversation. Even Joe, who trusted her so, was inquisitive.

'What did he say to you? Don't tell me if you don't want to talk about it.'

'Oh, I can talk about it,' she said, raising her head proudly. 'It's just as I said at the inquest. We met by chance in the garden and he said he was going in the morning and must say good-bye. I said that there was no need to be so serious about it and that we'd meet again. He said a lot of sweet things about you and how lucky we were to be married. That's all.'

'He didn't say he loved you?'

'Yes—although I don't see that that's anyone's business but yours. . . . Why,'

she said suddenly, her cheeks flushing, 'are people talking about it?'

'Of course they are. In a little place like this.'

'Are they saying he killed himself because he was in love with me?'

'Yes. They are.'

'Does your mother believe that?'

'Of course she does. She knew he was in love with you as I knew. That wasn't *your* fault, darling. *You* couldn't help it. He always said that. He said that in his letter to me as a matter of fact.'

'Did you show that letter to your mother?'

'No. I showed it to no one. I destroyed it.'

'Your mother,' she said, her voice shaking a little, 'must hate me now more than ever.'

He put his hands on her shoulders and drew her back against him.

'Look here, darling, you're a baby. You talk like an infant. Mother doesn't *hate* you. She doesn't hate anyone. Oh yes, Lavinia Peacock perhaps. It's school-girl talk all this—about hating. You're living in the twentieth century.'

She turned round to him.

'When there's no hatred? Why, it's all hatred and torture and imprisonment and cruelty.' Her voice stayed. She kissed him passionately. 'Oh, Joe, go on loving me! It's natural if I'm frightened! Nothing like this has ever happened to me before. You do love me, don't you? You do! You do!'

'Love you!' he said, holding her close to him. 'More and more and ever more.'

'Well, then. . . . Let's go away! Just for a little—just for a little while—now! Tim in that last talk on the beach said we ought to go away.'

'Soon, darling, soon. He said something of the same kind in his letter. But he never understood mother—how sweet and loving and good she is.'

'Yes. Yes,' Christina went on, 'but can't you see that she isn't well? Your marrying me and Congreve going and now this. She blames me for everything.'

'Here! Hold on, Chris, old girl. Why, you're shaking all over! You say mother is ill. Why, you're much worse. Now listen. I promise we'll go away and soon. But it can't be just yet. I can't leave mother as she is—not for a week or two. As you say she isn't well. I've noticed it myself.'

'Then promise me,' Christina said. 'Promise me that you won't leave me—not for a minute—not for a moment——'

He stepped back, looking at her, laughing.

'Why, you *are* a baby after all, Chris! One would think you were in the nursery demanding a night-light.'

'I don't care what you think—however silly I seem. Only don't leave me—don't leave me.'

He tilted her head with his hand, kissed her eyes.

'I'll not leave you—unless I have to, of course.' Then he added, laughing: 'If it comes to that, I'll leave Simpson on guard!'

And now, Bessie Field, how are you feeling about it, sitting there so straight and pretty? Very proud she's feeling and with reason, for she has two worlds now to balance in her clever little hands, and it isn't everyone that can manage that. Her hands are for ever restless as she tosses first one golden ball then the other into the air. But her eyes don't follow the balls as they rise and fall. No. Her eyes are too clever for that. They gaze mildly, observingly, into that world which now, as she knows so well, is only a mockery and a sham playing at being real. The world in which figures, so thin and opaque that they might be made for candle-shades, move solemnly about, carrying tea-cups and saying: 'Shall I draw the curtains, ma'am?' or 'His brother will see about it in the paper. I wonder he hasn't written,' or 'I saw the Fauntleroys at the funeral,' or 'Yes, the rain is coming in. Please shut the window.' Bessie Field plays her part with perfect conviction. She sits down. Matty arranges the cushions behind her head.

'Poor Tim! He was his own worst enemy.' She looks round gently and smiles. 'Congreve has written. He would have been down for the funeral if there had been time. He and Timothy never understood one another. They were too opposite types.'

Yes, she looks round and smiles even, quite tenderly, on that wicked murderess who has destroyed her sons and killed her friend. (Ah! here, for a brief moment, the two worlds intermingle.) 'Don't sit in a draught, Christina. There's such a wind blowing.' 'Don't sit in a draught, Christina!' Now she moves suddenly away from this play-acting into reality. In the real world there is a drum beating, or is it the nerve, the stupid irritating nerve in her temple? And quite close to her is standing her father. Oh, she *had* been surprised when he had so unexpectedly appeared standing beside her bed and saying, in the old jolly husky voice that she had so dearly loved: 'I've come to help you, Bessie.' Of course she had been surprised but very quickly had grown accustomed to his presence. Always now he was at her side, stout but grey in the face, not rubicund as he had once been, and sometimes you could see through him to the chairs and walls and shining red coals in the dying fire. The other persons in her real world were Simpson and Snubs. They wanted, as she did, that

justice should be done. Simpson sometimes raised her arms and, like a water-spout, would reach to the ceiling. Then from the roof would these words come dropping: 'Spoil her beauty! Spoil her beauty! Spoil her beauty!'

What fools they all were—Archer, Matty, Joe and the rest—not to perceive which was the real world and which the false! But as they did not—why, then, she, Bessie Field, must continue to take them in! And couldn't she just!

Oh, she was proud of herself and her clever acting. At meal-times she would talk about the weather and politics and Matty's toothache and the new Archdeacon in Polchester, just as though these ridiculous things were not figments of a dream. And oh! but she had to be tricky! For they watched her—yes, they all watched her just to see whether they could not catch her out.

'How are you this morning, mother?' Joe would say. He was a good boy, Joe, but cunning like the rest. She could be cunning too, and she would smile and pat his cheek and say: 'Thank you, Joe dear. I had an excellent sleep,' while her dear father, smelling, as he always did, of tobacco and Harris tweed, would whisper in her ear: 'Let them give us half a chance and we'll get her. First opportunity—we'll get her!'

Oh yes, she could be cunning. She could even, so well did she play her game, kiss the girl on the cheek and say: 'Good morning, Christina dear,' and it pleased her to feel how immediately the girl shrank back and how deeply the frightened trouble stirred in her beautiful eyes. Beautiful eyes! Beautiful eyes! 'We'll give her beautiful eyes,' said father.

Not only was she cunning; she was also proud. For to her had been given the responsibility of justice. All her life—a life wonderful and full of duties rightly done—had led to this great responsibility: that she should punish the sinner. Had the girl, she told her father—for she was able to talk with him without speaking aloud even while others were talking round her—not come to Scarlatt she might have continued her wickedness, ruining lives, separating children from their parents, driving good men to their deaths, over many years. People were blind, or had not the courage. But here abruptly would an end be put to it all. 'Spoil her beauty, Bessie! Spoil her beauty!'

She must be, in the presence of others, so sharply alert, not to betray herself, that at times she failed to hear words addressed to her, did not know that people were speaking. Then, when she did not answer, she saw in their eyes a sharp wondering surprise. Especially that poor fool, Matty, who was always looking at her as though she was about to ask her whether she were not well. There were occasions now when she had to control herself from giving Matty a good little slap on the cheek. She was in fact aware of fierce gusts of anger that would rise within her so that, if she were not careful, she would stamp on the floor and shout. Oh, but

she *was* careful, very careful indeed. Other silly impulses there were. She had sudden moments of intense pity of herself. Poor Bessie Field whose boys had been stolen from her, all alone, all alone. . . . Take care, Bessie, or you will burst into tears, cry and cry your heart out. On the other hand something or somebody would strike her as irresistibly funny, Snubs yawning, or the other dogs scratching, or the way Joe's hair stood up at the back of his head, or simply a tea-cup with the tea-leaves sticking grotesquely to the side of it. At such trifles she would have an impulse, quickly rising within her, without warning, to break into loud peals of laughter. But this too she must not do, for they were all watching to catch her out in just such a thing as this.

Years ago someone, returning from the East, had given her a Chinese doll—a doll with a head-dress of silver wire, a pink and shining face, a stiff dress of rose and gold brocade. For many a day this doll had sat on the edge of the bookcase near the window, dangling its stiff white legs and crimson shoes. Now she got up, crossed the floor and took the doll. She sat down again, nursing it in her lap. Only Matty was present.

'Why, Bessie, what do you want with that doll?'

'It's pretty, isn't it?' said Bessie.

'Why, yes. Colonel Northcote gave it to you at least ten years ago.'

'Colonel Northcote. So he did. I'm going to my room now, I think.'

'I'll come with you if you like.'

'No, thank you.'

'I'll come with you and talk a little. I've nothing to do.'

She got up. It was on such an occasion that it was all she could do not to give Matty a nice sharp slap.

'I'm quite all right, thank you.' She marched with stately dignity out of the room, nursing the doll.

In the privacy of her own room only one world existed. No one was with her save her father. She could relax from all that play-acting. She sat down, giving a little sigh of lustful pleasure. All her body was taut and strong. Her heart hammered and her temples throbbed.

On the table beside her was her work-box. She opened it, and there on their neat little tray lay a multitude of pins.

She stood the doll up, facing her, on her knees.

She said no word; was only aware that her father, the firelight shining through his

ash-grey face, stood beside her chair. She took a pin from the box and drove it into the pink waxen face. Fragments of the wax fell on to her lap. Her body began to tremble. She steadied the hand that held the doll, found another pin and drove it into the other cheek. She heard the doll cry out in agony. Then, in a frenzied hurry, she picked up more pins and more. She drove them into the eyes, the mouth, the neck. Then through the body, the arms, the legs. She pulled at the thin neck. The head fell on her lap. Sawdust scattered, dry and feathery on her hands. She lay back, exhausted with her triumph.

Two mornings later everyone in the house was wakened early by the wind. The storm had risen during the night and now the waves were thundering up the beach and crashing against the Tower while the sand blew in whirls above the garden-beds, and thick rain-bellied clouds raced across the sulky sky.

About ten o'clock Joe knocked on his mother's door.

'Come in,' she said. She was seated, reading her morning post. The room had been done, but Simpson was there arranging some things in a drawer.

'Listen, mother. I've had a letter from Tim's brother. The one back from Kenya.'

'Yes, dear.'

'He's in Polchester and wants me to tell him about Tim. He's at the Bull.'

'Yes, dear.'

'I've wired him that I'll see him this afternoon. I'll motor in and be back probably to-night.'

Mrs. Field sat up in her chair. She turned and looked at Simpson.

'Mr. Joe's going into Polchester.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'Of course,' Joe went on, 'it might happen I shan't be back till the morning. I may not see him till this evening.'

Mrs. Field said: 'Will you take Christina with you?'

'Of course not.'

She turned sideways. It seemed to Joe exactly as though she were speaking to someone who wasn't there. He had noticed, for weeks now, her inattention, and sometimes he had seen her lips moving. A great gust of wind made distant doors clap.

Coming downstairs to his own office he saw Christina, standing there and looking across the garden to the sea. When he came in she cried out:

'It's the first sea-storm I've ever seen. I never imagined such waves! They'll be

over the wall into the garden.'

'We often get one or two about now,' Joe said, going to his table and looking at some letters. Then he went to her, kissed her and put his arm around her. 'I've got to drive into Polchester. Tim's brother is there from Drymouth and wants to see me.'

She turned quickly. 'I'm coming too!'

'No, Chris darling. There's no point. I shall simply see Green for an hour and come straight back.'

'You *will* be back this evening?'

'Yes. In all probability. I *may* be kept if I don't catch him this afternoon. I've sent a wire.'

'Oh no, no!' She caught his arm. 'If you're going to stay the night I'm coming too.'

'But I shan't stay the night—at least it's very unlikely.'

'No, but there's a chance! I've *got* to come with you. Please, please, Joe—I must.'

He laughed, patting her cheek with his hand.

'Well, you're not coming, baby—see? It would only bore you. There's nothing for you to do. As a matter of fact it's only half-day in Polchester, so you couldn't even shop.'

She was half hysterical, shaking him by the shoulders.

'Joe, I've got to come, I've *got* to come! It isn't safe leaving me here. Don't you understand anything? Don't you see that it isn't safe?'

But he liked her least in her school-girl hysterical mood. Then he would wonder, for an instant of egoistic self-betrayal, whether he hadn't after all made a mistake. So he walked back to the table, picked up some letters and went to the door. 'Sorry, Chris. I'm not taking you.' Then he relented. He took her in his arms. 'Why, you're shaking all over.'

She said nothing.

He held her closer.

'Look here. . . . Really, darling, you'd be bored. It isn't going to be nice having to talk about Tim anyway. And I'm almost *sure* to be back to-night.'

At last she said:

'All right. Go along. I can see the car's there.'

He said: 'Honestly, darling, this is better. Amuse yourself. I'll be back about seven.'

After the car had driven off she came back into the hall. The wind shrieked down the staircase and tore at the windows, but the noise of the sea was like the

warning thunder of a thousand drums.

# CHAPTER VII

## THE EVENING

AT tea there were present only Matty and Christina. The storm was at its height and, from where she sat, Christina could see across the corner of the window to the sea-wall of the Tower. The waves, like flat-hooded cobras rose hissing to the top of the wall: then it was as though a gun were fired in the heart of the thick spumy spray, a lacework of white-feathered water fanned the dark air; a silence of suspense followed while echoing distant guns fired repeatedly down the stretch of sand. Christina had gone to the window and, for a brief instant, opened it. She had to have air.

Matty gave a little scream. 'Oh, my dear—you'll be soaked!'

Christina closed the window and turned round.

'How long is this likely to go on?'

'What, dear?' They had to shout to one another across the room against the muffled guns, the shriek of the wind down the chimney, the banging doors, the creaking windows. 'Come closer, dear. I can't hear what you say. Some more tea?'

'No, thank you. Will the storm go on all night?'

'I shouldn't wonder. It often does.'

'How awful! I've never seen a storm like this before.'

'No, dear. I always think they built this house too close to the sea.'

Christina said: 'Matty—don't any of the doors in this house have locks on them?'

'Well—they all *did*,' Matty said doubtfully. 'Bessie has so many things to think of. As a matter of fact,' she went on rather eagerly, 'that's always been a rather odd thing about Bessie—so punctilious and wanting everything to be just right—and yet she's allowed the house to get quite shabby in some respects. I've often wanted to say something but haven't quite liked. . . .'

Christina came close to Matty as though she were about to confide some secret, but all she said was: 'Matty. My door, *our* door, Joe's and mine—it *has* a lock but it hasn't a key. We haven't had a key since we've been here. Where do you think it is?'

'A key? Oh, I expect Bessie has it somewhere. You'd better ask her.'

'Oh no,' said Christina.

'Or,' Matty went on, 'Simpson may have it. Or she could *get* it for you. Ask *her* and then you won't have to bother Bessie, who isn't any too well.' Then, as

Christina didn't reply, she said to her: 'But what do you want a key for, dear?'

'In case Joe doesn't come back from Polchester. I shall be all alone.'

'Why,' said Matty, giggling a little in a foolish way she had, 'no one's likely to harm you, dear.'

'I haven't slept alone in this house before.'

'Why, just fancy!' Here Matty broke into real laughter. 'I've slept alone in this house for more than twenty years! Just think of that!' Her face grew grave. She sighed. 'Christina, I'm really worried about Bessie. Archer is too.'

'What do you think is the matter?'

'I don't know, I'm sure. I only wish I did. Bessie's been very strange lately. Haven't you noticed anything?'

'What sort of thing?'

'So *strangely* restless, and talking to herself. And not listening when you speak to her. Archer and I are dreadfully worried. Of course it's been terrible for her, Congreve going and then the poor Captain.'

Matty's lips quivered. Christina thought that she was going to cry. But she pulled herself together.

'Of course you read of things happening in the papers, but you never expect it in your own house! And Bessie isn't as young as she was. And I do think Congreve might have said good-bye to his mother. Loving him as she does. I remember I said to Simpson at the time, although I don't believe in being too confidential to servants, but then Simpson is scarcely like a servant, she's been with us *such* a long time, I said to Simpson: "If only he'd said good-bye to his mother," and Simpson, I remember, made the oddest reply: "He's been got at, Miss Matty," she said. "Things aren't in this house as they should be." Such a very queer——'

'Don't you hear a car?' Christina said. She jumped up and went to open the window for a moment and listen.

'I expect,' Matty said comfortably, 'Joe will stay the night in Polchester—such a stormy night.'

'Oh no, he mustn't!' Christina cried. 'He said he'd come back! He promised. . . .'

'Why, Christina!' said Matty. She came over to her and patted her arm. 'Sometimes you're just a baby. Really you are! One would never think you were married and had a husband——'

The door opened. They both turned. Bessie Field stood looking at them.

'Has Joe come back?' she asked.

'Why, no, dear,' Matty said, going towards her. 'And I don't suppose he will

now. He won't like driving in the dark in this dreadful weather.'

But Bessie Field was gone. The door had been closed as softly as it had been opened. Matty had followed her.

Christina stood there, staring at the window. Darkness was falling fast. In any case she could see but little, for a storm of rain was lashing the windows and beating the glass with a furious angry urgency. Christina had now only one thought and this obsessed her like the beating of a savage drum: it had that same insistence and agony. Joe *must* come back. He must. He had promised. He must. He must.

She turned from the window, walked about the room, trying to bring her agitation into order. She had always prided herself on her power of control, and said to herself often: 'Two years ago I'd have been in a terrible rage or a sulk or a flood of tears. Now I'm more sensible.'

Well, she must *be* sensible! She must think of her Catherine Morland and books like *Cold Comfort Farm* and good common-sense women like her mother. She could hear her mother's quiet pleasant orderly voice saying: 'Why, Chris dear! Frightened to spend a night away from your husband! I'm ashamed of you!'

All very well, but the Captain *had* shot himself, down there below the window. Simpson *had* followed her, Mrs. Field *was* ill. Odd things *did* happen! The Captain had warned her. He seemed to be with her now in the room, saying: 'Get Joe to take you away! Bessie Field. . . . Look out for Bessie Field!'

If only the house were not so silent. There was something awful about the contrasted silence of the house and the racket of the storm. If only Molly would come in and fetch the tea things. What was Archer Field doing? He would be a comfort. She noticed a bowl with primroses on the table. How funny! Mrs. Field had said days ago that she disliked their scent. And yet primroses *had* no scent—or only a very faint one. She went over and smelt them, then straightened herself, wondering. For there *was* about them an odour of decay! She felt as though she would never like them again. But everything in this house was decayed. She hated it. She had hated it from the first. It was a bad omen for Joe and herself that their married life had begun here.

She felt then a real agony of terror for herself and Joe. They were separated. Perhaps they would never be together again! Something would happen to Joe! His car would crash. He was lying now dead on the road somewhere, the rain pouring down upon his cold wet face. 'Christina, don't be an ass!' she heard herself saying aloud and then was frightened at the way in which her voice seemed overcharged in the silent listening room.

'Joe must come! He must! He must! I won't imagine things, but I can't sleep in

that room alone to-night, Mrs. Field hating me as she does and ill—out of her mind really. I *know* she's out of her mind, the way she's been looking and muttering. . . . Joe, you *must* come. You're on your way now. You're nearly here. You're turning the road through the village. . . .'

She went out through the hall-door on to the porch. She found that there was a corner where, by standing close in against the wall, she was sheltered from the storm. The wind tore at her dress but the rain was driving the other way.

The noise out here, the thunder of the sea, the crack of the waves against the Tower, the rhythmic dripping of the rain, this was all terrific, but it was an immense relief from the silence of that hateful house. She could see nothing but she knew exactly where the Tower stood, strong, confident, thinking nothing of one more among the million storms.

She knew then, in a moment of revelation, what the Tower had done for her. It had given her something of a sense of true proportion. This moment of experience, however unpleasant it might be, was a small thing in the whole long discipline of experience. You must grow old, take all life into account, be toughened by assault, see that the stones must be welded truly together by storm and water and the long slow passing of ordinary weather. So only could you be made into a true Tower worthy to be called a Tower.

Life without pain, fear, loss, indignity, sin, would be meaningless, with neither form nor colour. She thought tenderly of the Captain. 'He would laugh at my platitudes but would believe them all the same.' Now she felt better; she was stiffened, more courageous, was *not* the baby, she indignantly reflected, that Matty had called her.

All the same, Joe must come! He *must*. She would not go back into that beastly house alone.

Behind the confused sea-noises there were other sounds, and again and again they seemed to be the purr of a car, the hoot of a horn, the jarring of brakes. Once she almost ran out into the garden, crying joyfully 'Joe! Joe!': but it was not. She knew that she must hear the gates creak back on their hinges and then the car starting again.

Somewhere a clock struck six. The rain turned and, as though with a personal fury, started to drive in upon her. She went back into the house.

When dressing for dinner she turned on all the electric lights—the one over the dressing-table, the one over the bed. Things lay about the room so innocently and

simply that she was reassured. On the little table by the bed was her own New Testament, the one in blue leather, now shabby, that her mother had given her on her Confirmation. Close beside it, lying open on its face, was the novel that Joe had been reading—*Lord Jim* by Joseph Conrad. On the dressing-table were his silver brushes with the initials J. F. on their backs, the little porcelain box, with fighting-cocks painted on the lid, that contained his studs. Over the back of a chair was the salmon-coloured tie that he had been wearing with his country clothes before he changed to go to Polchester. On the little table near the window was a photograph of herself in a silver frame. Hanging above the table by the bed was a queer water-colour in green and silver that Congreve had given them for a wedding present. She had liked the colour but had not known in the least what the picture represented. It was called 'The Water-Wheel.' On the dressing-table was a photograph of Joe—head and shoulders. Dear Joe! Dear darling, darling Joe! She picked it up and kissed it and held it to her breast like any silly schoolgirl. Then she took his tie and kissed it also. She seemed to reach, standing now in front of the glass, in her white silk panniered dress, staring at herself, a deeper consciousness of her love for Joe than she had ever done before.

It was, after all, her first night away from him since their marriage. She was almost certain now that she was going to have a child. And this awareness added a new maternity to her love for him, almost as though the child that she was going to bear were Joe himself. She put out her arms as though to encircle and protect him, as though he were in reality a little child whom she must guard from ill. The figure in the mirror also put out its arms, and together these two women, little more than girls, white-dressed, anxious-eyed, drew him in and sheltered him from all the perils of the night. She was mother and friend and eager sensuous mistress, staring into the glass to find him.

She was reassured. She went to the window and listened to the rain that was now only a steady beat. The kindly light shone in the room, the familiar things lay about. There was surely nothing to fear.

She knelt down and prayed:

'Oh, God, be near me and Joe. We love one another so much and now for the first time are separated. I am going to have his child. Keep us all three from the perils of the night.'

She said the words aloud as she had been taught to do as a child. Her mother had told her that if she did not say them aloud her mind would wander.

She went down to dinner feeling equipped for the facing of all the terrors of this world and the next. But, alone with Matty in the dining-room and Simpson serving

them, all her fears returned.

'Where's Archer?' she asked.

'He insists on having something to eat with Bessie although I know she doesn't want him.'

They spoke scarcely at all. The rain drove against the windows, the setters lolled there with their eyes on the food. Snubs was not present.

It was plain that Matty was greatly distressed. Her placid face, so like a pink faded tea-cosy, was crumpled. She made her bread into little pellets. Once and again she heavily sighed. When Simpson had left the room she broke out:

'I don't know what's the matter with me to-night, I'm sure. The house is so full of noises, but then it always is when there's a storm. I said to Archer only this evening: "Archer," I said, "every door in this house wants seeing to," but poor Archer is so very worried about Bessie. Bessie is simply everything to him and always has been since the day he married her, although he tries to hide it—not wanting to be sentimental, I suppose. Oh dear—a cross word from anyone and I shall burst into tears. It does so upset Archer and me when Bessie isn't herself—and that she *isn't* herself there's no denying.'

Later on, about ten o'clock, Matty said that she would go to bed. The clock in the drawing-room was striking half-past ten when Christina went up to her room.

The strange thing was that it was no longer reassuring as it had been before dinner. It was as though someone had been here moving the furniture.

Someone *had* been here, of course; the bed was turned down, her dressing-gown and nightdress laid out on the bed, her red slippers lined with white fur, that Joe had given her, demurely arranged at the bed foot. Nothing else surely had been changed. She switched on all the lights and stood there listening with added alarm to the beating of her own heart: for it was beating, as it seemed, with a *personal* agitation as though it had a secret cause for alarm of which she herself knew nothing.

There was no cause. There *is* no cause. The rain was still driving against the now curtained windows, and a little wind, like a crying child, could be heard now here, now there. The room was warm. There was a high blazing fire. She stopped in her undressing to listen. She stared about her, opened the cupboard, even glanced behind the curtains, and then, to her own shame, bent and looked under the bed. 'That's what they do in farces. Old spinsters afraid of burglars.'

The furniture had not been moved and yet it did not look the same as before dinner. This might be because the mirror on the dressing-table had swung back so that the floor was tip-tilted. Christina straightened it; then she put on her dressing-gown and sat down to brush her hair. Her hands trembled so that she could scarcely

hold the brushes. ‘Oh, Joe!’ she thought. ‘Why didn’t you come?’ She was trembling from head to foot. She must be in bed and asleep; the morning would be there in an instant, and then Joe in his car. She would be telling him of her goosiness and laughing with him at it. She went across the floor, switched off the light by the door, then stood wondering. There were only two lights now: one over the dressing-table, the other on the table by the bed. The brilliant firelight made the room alive. Oh, why had she not insisted on a key for the door? Now it was too late. There was nothing to push against it. The chairs, the table, these were too light. But she would hear if someone came in. Still in the mood of half-shame at her cowardice she carried one of the chairs to the door. No one could turn the handle without its rasping against the chair-back. Then she turned out the light above the dressing-table, climbed into bed, switched off the light in the little twisted copper stand on the table. She heard the thin pitiful wind’s cry behind the wainscot, then instantly was asleep.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE NIGHT——FIRST-HAND ACCOUNT FROM CHRISTINA

Dearest Joe—Three months after the event I am going to attempt an exact account of it.

This is for my own sake and for yours. For my own because I want, before it is too late, to examine myself with all the honesty of which I am capable. This self-examination I have shirked day after day. This is not like me, for, ever since I can remember, I have wanted to be straight with myself, and in this very affair at Scarlatt I might have done better had I not priggishly determined on an egoistic honesty. However, honest now I have *got* to be! I have buried the beastly thing down so deep that it's turning into a kind of poisonous gas—if I'm not mixing my metaphors, which I dare say I am, because I'm not at all an accomplished writer and don't very much want to be.

For your sake, too, I am going to give as exact an account of the affair as I can, not minding how small the details are, nor how ridiculous my own thoughts, fears—even terrors—seemed at the time.

You, from the moment we drove away from Scarlatt on the day following until now, have never asked me a single question. When you came in on that morning and saw the mark on my cheek, you did, of course, ask me certain things, but I was stunned then and, as I remember, the only thing I wanted was to get rid of you and have some sleep!

No, from that moment to this, you have never asked me a single question—which is, I think, very wonderful of you. All the same the very fact that you *haven't* asked anything has spoiled a little the frankness of our relations. Not that we don't love one another more than ever, especially now that our child is coming. But this is the *only* thing between us and I am determined that there shan't be even that.

Now when I'm alone here, except for dear Lavinia—while you are at Scarlatt, —is a fine time for me to do it. I miss you most childishly and even though I am so sorry for the poor thing and know that she can never do me any kind of harm again, the wickedness that is in me hates that you should be alone with her. And yet it is right that you should be! You must do everything in the world that you can for her, and so must I. But it is hard for me even now to realize that she can control nothing any more, not even her own personal habits. When I think of that, of her state and the lonely desolation in that house, then my own real self-reproaches begin. I am the sinner! I am the criminal! If I let those reproaches get too far they seem to drain

away all my strength, all my self-respect. This was the thing that you, Joe, were most afraid of from the first. On the very morning after, almost your first words were: 'You silly little fool! You're not to blame!' But am I not? . . . That's what I've really got to find out. That's why I've got to be so completely honest in my account of this horrible, ludicrous, tragic affair.

Well, now, from the beginning. What kind of a girl was I when I married you? I'm a woman now, and yet it's so short a time, as time goes, since I sat in that train with you, an ignorant girl, wondering what they'd be like, whether they'd be fond of me, whether anything *could* separate you and me.

Very funny it is to remember now that when you asked me where I'd like my child to be born I said 'Wiltshire'—and *here* I am with the Downs just outside the window, only ten miles from Salisbury. This job is the very job that I wanted you to have, managing exactly the kind of estate that you love to manage, and Colonel Forrest exactly the man you should work for. How lucky too that you've found as good a man as Barnett to manage Scarlatt. You could never have been at ease here if Scarlatt were going to wrack and ruin.

And so you might say that everything is for the best in this best of all possible worlds. But I don't know. In any case this *isn't* the best of all possible worlds—with the tyrannies, the cruelties, the unjustified wars and massacres. Mankind is up against something devilish—something actually and *concretely* devilish. I also was up against something devilish at Scarlatt: and that something devilish *wasn't* Mrs. Field. In fact in a way we were both up against it together, side by side, which is funny when you come to think of it.

Well, now to go back again. Was I wrong in my behaviour from the beginning? I easily might have been. When I went to Scarlatt I was as simple and ignorant a girl as you could find. I knew only one thing really—that I loved *you*. And with that I knew that I'd fight for you with tooth and claw. I had something savage in me. I remember saying to you in the train, 'I could kill anyone who tried to take you away from me.' Little I knew then that it was almost to come to that!

But now I go back to our visit to the island for the real beginning of everything—that lovely beautiful day when you bathed and we slept and were too late to meet the Fauntleroys. And that brings me to a very silly business, into which, however, I've got to go because it really was the cause of all the events. I mean my own good looks. How very foolish to write down on paper that you're good-looking! I'm far from proud of it, of my good looks, I mean: I had nothing whatever to do with them, I didn't even use any fancy face-creams or tie my hair into knots or wear pretty clothes. These I would have liked, but I never had the money.

What a shock it was to me on the island that day when I realized that if I hadn't been good-looking you never would have married me—no, not though I had been wise as Solomon or as sweet and good as that girl in Chaucer's poem. Had I been a plain little thing with a crooked nose and a dirty complexion, even though you *had* married me none of the rest would have happened: Mrs. Field would not have hated me, the Captain would not have fallen in love with me, Congreve would not have been inspired to paint again. Is it conceited of me to say this? I think not, because I have nothing to do with my looks. I am pleased that I look nice, because you are proud of me, but for the rest it was a nuisance before I married, and *after* I married was a perpetual worry to me lest you should get tired of me (looks being such a very insecure basis for love). Now that my child is coming I'm safe. You will never leave me now, even though my face were to be scarred in a motor accident.

And now to go on. Once the thing was started could I have prevented, by anything I did, the later developments? I could, I suppose, had I been willing to surrender everything to her—my independence, my liberty of thought and action, my friends. This is where the Tower and Lavinia come in. I was little more than a child; I had never really been opposed by anyone before, not even very much been disliked. I have a fatal weakness of wanting to be liked by everyone around me. I hate quarrels. I love peace. And I *might* have weakened had it not been for the Tower and Lavinia.

The Tower showed me that goodness and beauty and strength are not to be won except by determined resolution and a refusal to panic and a vow of integrity. Why did the Tower show me that? Many people would say that that is romantic nonsense. But it isn't. My love for you had from the beginning something that the Tower had. The house was so ugly, so weak, so shabby. But the Tower, every time I looked at it, seemed to say: 'Never mind what happens to you. There are worse things than pain and loneliness, worse things than any physical disaster. Keep your integrity.' Lavinia said, and says, the same. She's had a rotten life but she's kept her integrity and is therefore someone of power who has made something out of life. I think that, on that evening when Mrs. Field challenged me about Lavinia and the men were all so shocked, I realized in a flash that I'd *got* to be true to the things and persons I believed in, however nasty Mrs. Field was, however offended you were. I remember that I thought of the Tower that evening, could feel its strength and coolness and indifference to what people said or thought.

After I'd settled that, how could I have done anything other than I did? I was perfectly passive. I didn't flirt with the Captain, I didn't encourage Congreve in his painting, and I *tried* to be good with Mrs. Field. *This* was my real difficulty because

I knew from the very beginning that she was fighting me. It was that moment at the Christmas dance when she came in and found the Captain kissing me and was *glad* that she had, that I knew what I was up against. It was then that I realized that she wasn't normal and was therefore dangerous. I think I foresaw on that evening that her brain might, if things went far enough, break down altogether. It was then that I began to be really afraid.

I suppose that all of us feel sometimes when we are overtired or badly bothered that our brains are like very taut red-hot wires; that one strain more and the wire will snap. It is because we know in our own selves what that is (and women especially know it) that we are afraid of its happening to other people.

I can have a pretty savage temper myself. I remember, when I was small, slapping Sister Anne's face for something she had said, and if at that moment I'd had a knife in my hand I might have stuck it into her blouse with vigour. And yet I am normally, as I've said already, a peaceable, law-abiding creature! If someone really took you from me I wouldn't, I'm sure, stop at murder.

So I can understand Mrs. Field, who was eaten up with a possessive obsession, had always had her way, and had a furious temper that she had learnt, through discipline, to control so thoroughly that her brain was affected by the effort. Yes, I understood her and I feared her all the more because of that.

Two people hated me in that house: two people and a dog. Snubs hated me because his mistress did. Simpson hated me also because her mistress did, and for another reason too. I was the sexual element in that house. I see that now very clearly, and I see that in that final struggle between herself and me which I shall describe in a moment, there was something very definitely sexual. It was almost as though Simpson were trying to rape me, not for *her* pleasure but for *my* ruin. This is a horrible thought and I would not have even known what it meant six months ago, but if I'm to go on clearly and honestly through life and be straight with you and give my child the best and wisest care, *everything* in this affair must be brought into the light.

Simpson was, and is, a very strange woman. Her life is familiar enough, and I know that when I began to be really frightened I tried to laugh myself out of it by thinking of all the novels I'd read with situations and figures like these. Simpson externally was pure Wilkie Collins—the ugly sour-faced housekeeper with a back like a ramrod, speaks in monosyllables and is plotting out a long-delayed vengeance on someone.

*Inside* Simpson isn't that at all. She *hates* men and devotes herself to some woman or other. Basically this is sexual but she doesn't know that. She is revolted

by anything to do with sex and she loathed me at once, because she saw that men would find me sexually attractive. When, in addition to that, I threatened the peace and happiness of the woman she served and worshipped, then she tipped over into a kind of insanity, in a lesser degree than Mrs. Field but insane all the same.

And it was THAT (in capitals!) that I was afraid of. Not actually the two women but the evil spirit that possessed them—and I think I can see the same things in the world to-day. I don't *hate* the Germans or Italians or Japanese, but that spirit of evil power, of greed and lust and cruelty, now walking about the earth, it's THAT that we must fight. (And it is in ourselves as well as in them. I'm writing now just like the leaders in a dirty little misprinted weekly paper called *David and Goliath* that drops into our letter-box uninvited every Thursday.)

And so—after this outburst of platitudinous rhetoric—to facts. The facts were that by this time, just before Congreve told me he was going to London, I was terrified of Mrs. Field and Simpson. Yes. Terrified. Then Congreve *ran* away to London. I was *more* terrified. Then poor Tim shot himself. After that I seemed to be right *inside* the hatred of Mrs. Field. I could feel her moving all round me, and if I put out a hand I touched the chill imprisonment of her ribs, so to speak. The awful thing was that I was now so dreadfully alone. You had been enveloped by your mother all your life and naturally couldn't escape from all that in a moment. You haven't, my darling, altogether escaped even now. I don't suppose you ever will *quite*. I was *really* alone. Timothy Green was, I think, the only person who fancied that something physical might happen to me. Lavinia knew what Mrs. Field was capable of, because she had seen her in one of her tempers, but she's confessed since that she didn't really think that anything would happen. One doesn't. There are no Mrs. Maybricks or Seddons or Edith Thompsons right inside one's house. They are always streets away. And yet one *is*, I suppose, Maybrick, Seddon, Thompson potentially half the time. At least one's no better than they.

No one but myself thought that something horrible might happen; but *I* did.

You can't imagine, unless you've experienced it, how nasty it is to feel that you are followed everywhere. I couldn't at first believe it, but after I'd laid a trap or two I knew it was true and *then* when I confronted Simpson in the passage I proved it up to the hilt. How she hated me at the minute! She would have liked to scratch my cheeks to ribbons—and yet she was as stiff, as still as a soldier on guard. Once I knew that I was followed everywhere I knew that Mrs. Field was planning something.

A funny change came over her at this time. It was as though she were leading a double life! She was acting for all that she was worth. I'm sure she was giving herself

prizes for the way that she was taking everybody in. Poor Matty and Archer were dreadfully puzzled. They went about frightened and miserable. Something was the matter with their Bessie, but they couldn't tell what! Oh dear, oh dear, how worried they were! And here I blame you a little, dear Joe, that you didn't now see that your mother was ill and needed proper attention. You seem to have noticed nothing, which really *was* very stupid of you. But again you had, I suppose, been always so wrapped up in your mother that you were too near to her to see what was happening to her. In any case I was quite alone and *wasn't* I frightened!

And so I come to the day itself and to that really awful moment when you told me that you had to go into Polchester. It seemed like the worst confirmation of all my fears. As my fright had grown in those last days, the one thing to which I had held was that I mustn't let you out of my sight, at any rate at night. I had to hold on to you without letting you see that I *was* holding on, for men of your type hate the fussing, clinging kind of wife. Up to this moment I'd managed it, but when you said quite casually that Tim's brother was in Polchester and (still more casually) that if you couldn't find him quickly you'd stay the night and be back in the morning, all my caution, my restraint, left me. I behaved like a mad woman. I clung on to you, almost screamed at you! I wanted to tell you that if it hadn't been for you I'd have run away long ago. That the danger, however fantastic it might seem to *you*, was real, horribly real. But I couldn't. I knew that you respected and admired me for my independence and a sort of woman's courage that always seems wonderful to men if they love you and rather impertinent if they don't. I saw at once that you hated my agitation and thought it weak and silly. If I went on with it you'd be angry and leave me in a temper, which would be worse for me than anything. Always there was the old difficulty that I couldn't accuse your mother because you loved her. In the back of my mind too was almost a relief that it would at last be put to the test. If I were alone that night and nothing happened, some of my fear would be allayed. There was always the thought in my mind that I had been suggesting to myself all these fears and imagining what simply didn't exist.

So I let you go. The storm had come up fiercely. Doors and windows were banging, the rain was chattering against the window, and the sea was like guns firing. I had at least the good sense to think to myself how all the heroines of fiction left in danger in a house at night were accompanied inevitably by ferocious storms! But from the moment of your departure I thought of nothing but your return. I had tea alone with Matty and she was depressed, silly and irritating. Mrs. Field looked in for a moment and left. I went up to dress for dinner, and to comfort myself counted over the friendly things in the room. I had before this stood outside for a moment, blown

by the wind, and taken some consolation from the Tower which looked so strong and confident. But *here* were the things that belonged to *you*. Your silver-backed brushes, the little porcelain box with the fighting-cocks that held your studs, a salmon-coloured tie thrown over the back of the chair, above all your dear picture. And my own shabby blue New Testament that my mother had given me at my Confirmation. And a book you had been reading—*Lord Jim*. I touched them all and kissed your photograph. Then I went down to dinner and had it alone with Matty. I had been obsessed at tea and was obsessed now, although it was much too late to do anything, with the question of locks. Why were there no locks on the doors? How could I sleep alone in comfort in that room when there was no lock to the door? 'Why,' Matty said innocently, 'who's going to harm you, my dear?'

All through dinner I tried to insist on my own absurdity. We were real life, not fiction. No one harmed young girls in the middle of the night; certainly elderly women did not.

I saw clearly enough the absurdity of it; there was in fact an element of absurdity somewhere hanging about to the very end. But, oddly enough, the absurdity didn't take away from the fear and my sense of my own danger. I've always thought that the Judge looks absurd when he puts on the black cap, but that doesn't make him less terrible. Everything has its absurdity—love-making most certainly, and death very often, and even torture. The only thing in life, I think, that has *no* absurdity is cruelty to children and animals.

I went up to bed just as half-past ten was striking. There was a big fire that lit all the room, which was friendly. I could feel the storm simply shaking the house and the rain whipping the windows. I thought again of the Tower that nothing could shake. I said my prayers and then, very childishly, put a chair against the door. I went to bed and almost at once was asleep.

I woke suddenly and knew that it was some noise that had wakened me. I looked first at the fire and I remember that I took it all in quite solemnly and slowly before I looked at the door—the banked-up fire now red-hot and glowing but throwing out over the room only a half-light, and the fire-irons made from sabres of the 1870 Franco-Prussian War, sharp, shining things with curved handles of red leather. I was, I suppose, still only half awake, for I stared quite sleepily at the fire before I turned to the door.

There was the chair thrown down, and side by side, just inside the door, staring across the room at me, were Mrs. Field and Simpson.

Joe! Joe! Joe! I cry your name out now, all these months after, as in a kind of whisper I repeated it then. My heart really seemed to do what stories describe it as

doing: it jumped into my throat and stayed there, a heavy choking lump, while its beats, now that it was in my throat, thundered in my ears. They neither spoke nor moved. Mrs. Field was dressed in a kind of black silk wrap with gold dragons stamped over it. Simpson, her hair tied into a grey bun at the back of her bony head, wore a yellow flannel dressing-gown.

They stood there, as I say, without moving, and I doubt whether they had then any idea of what they meant to do. Simpson, I have always thought, came to see that her mistress was not in trouble rather than to avenge herself on me. She hated me right enough, but her devotion to her mistress came before everything—even her hatred of me. Mrs. Field only knew that she was going to spoil my beauty—the words that she repeated again and again in the scene that followed.

So they stood there looking across at the bed. I remember that among other things I thought to myself: 'So it really *has* happened! I wasn't so wrong after all!'

I had come to my senses a little and I said in a voice that was, I hope, steady: 'Who's there?'

(By the way, Joe, when I repeat sentences and pieces of conversation I'm not certain, of course, at this length of time, of the actual words. But a number of things said I do exactly remember and shall till I die. I have always wondered that witnesses at trials can remember so precisely: 'Then I understand that at 3 P.M. on Thursday the 14th of November you said to Mrs. Freeman, "I'm just going round the corner, Mrs. Freeman"'—and so on. Well, now I know that you can often remember the *exact* words. And the more you remember the more you remember, so to speak!)

They made no answer. So I raised myself on my elbow and said: 'What's the matter? Is something wrong? Is there anything I can do?'

Your mother came forward, then, almost to the bed. She never took her eyes off me for a single moment—and what strange eyes they were! Any kind of insanity has something very touching and pitiful about it because the victim is lost. It is so terrible to be lost! You are alone, you have no clue to your position, you are frightened. All those things were in your mother's eyes, Joe! Don't be offended by anything I may say now! I know you love her, but I am going to tell the exact and absolute truth, and you must read it. For your mother's sake as well as for both of ours.

There were other things in Mrs. Field's eyes. There was an extraordinary rage. (I remember that once I quarrelled with a girl at school. We had been good friends for quite a long time so that it staggered me to see suddenly that flaming, furious, angry hatred. Besides anger there was also a kind of lip-licking pleasure, the sort of pleasure you feel at unexpected good food or a pretty frock.) But the worst thing

was that her neck was bare and it was skinny and muscled like a hen's. A pulse leaped up and down behind the drawn skin. Her neck was so marked and thin and lined for so plump and round a woman! The pulse was an active moving expression of the intense excitement that she was feeling. I had plenty of time to see all this, for we stared at one another, she so close to the bed that her plump boneless hand moved restlessly on the purple silk quilt.

At last I said: 'What is it? What have you come here for?'

She said: 'I have come to punish you because you are a wicked woman.'

One rather awful thing was that, at this point, we spoke in whispers as though we were afraid of being overheard.

'I'm not wicked,' I said. 'I've done no one any harm. In any case you've no right to come in here in the middle of the night.' (Pretty feeble!)

She turned her head ever so slightly and said: 'She *is* wicked, isn't she, father? You know all I've told you about her.'

I couldn't help following her eyes, which were staring into space a little between the window and the fire. Just here was the chair that had your salmon-coloured tie hanging over it, and I couldn't be sure, so abnormal were my senses by this time, that there wasn't a shadowy figure just obscuring the chair as thin smoke does. This will sound the completest nonsense to you, but I intend to put everything in!

'Please,' I said. 'Please leave this room. It's *my* room and Joe's.'

'Oh no, it isn't,' she said, shaking her head. 'It's my house *and* my room! You've no right here. You never had any. You have driven my son away and killed my friend, the poor Captain. You're a murderess and there's no knowing what harm you'll do if we let you go on as you're going. You've bewitched my poor son and turned him away from his mother.'

Her eyes stared into mine quite pitifully as though she were asking me to help her, and yet furiously with hatred and eager design.

At that moment, though, I was dreadfully sorry for her. I even put out my hand and touched hers.

'Go back to bed,' I said. 'We'll talk about it in the morning. If I've done harm, I'm sorry. I certainly didn't mean to. I've always wanted you to like me from the very beginning.'

Her hand suddenly closed on mine so that I gave a little cry. They had always looked soft and boneless. In reality they could grip like a vice and her nails dug into my palms. The quick pain made me furious: I pushed at her breast with my other hand so that she let go and tumbled back. At the same moment Simpson came forward.

I wasn't whispering any longer. I cried out: 'Get out of my room, both of you! That woman has no right here anyway. Clear out, both of you, or I'll make you!'

I was so furious that I forgot to be frightened and I could have sworn like a fishwife. Anyway good manners on all our parts went flying, from that moment, into the fire. Simpson said something like: 'You do harm to a single hair of her head and I'll show you . . .'

Meanwhile my brain was active. I knew that this was ludicrous and vulgar and at the same time deadly serious. Matty and Archer and the other servants slept in the other wing. Not a soul would hear us though we screamed and shouted. The thing for me to do was to slip out of bed and get to the door. Once out of the door I could run to Matty's room down a flight of stairs and along two passages and be safe. Could I surprise them both and get to the door? I made a movement and was out on my feet on the other side of the bed from them both between the bed and the wall.

Mrs. Field looked at me across the bed and then words simply poured from her, a lot of it filthy and obscene. I could see her, even as she spoke, sitting straight up in her chair like Queen Victoria giving tea to the Fauntleroys! 'You little slut . . . with your good looks that send men crazy. Oh, you know all about them. You know how to lure them on. A prostitute, that's what you are—a girl out of the streets. But we're going to spoil your beauty, aren't we, father? That's what we agreed. We'd come and spoil your beauty. Men won't kill themselves for wanting you when we've finished with you, father and I. Come and look at her, father, in her pretty blue pyjamas. We'll strip her pretty blue pyjamas off her, won't we, father?—and spoil her so that men will turn their heads away. . . .' And a lot, lot more.

Don't mind, Joe. This wasn't her real self. Her real self was lost, sad, desolate. Her round pleasant face worked into a kind of frenzy. It wasn't like her face at all. She was shaking all over.

And while she talked I was thinking of the door. How could I get there without a struggle with Simpson? The distance seemed infinite. Close at my hand was a little bedside table (the one you used, Joe: you always slept on the wall side) and on it open was *Lord Jim*. I had a mad impulse to pick the book up and throw it in Simpson's face and then dash for it.

Instead I did the silliest thing. I took two or three steps forward and instantly Simpson went to the door and stood with her back to it.

I walked towards her. Then everything happened very quickly.

'Simpson,' I said, 'Mrs. Field isn't well. She doesn't know what she's doing. Take her back to her room.'

Simpson said not a word.

‘There’ll be a terrible row in the morning when my husband returns.’

Still she said nothing. I think her silence infuriated me. Her silence and her set, hard, ugly face, her hideous dressing-gown, and some old traditional better-class nonsense that she, a servant, should dare to stop my leaving my own room.

‘Get away from that door!’

She didn’t move and she didn’t speak.

‘Get away from that door!’

Then I threw myself at her. I meant, I think, simply to push her away from the door, but what actually happened was that I grasped the rough shoulder of her flannel dressing-gown, felt it come away in my hand and instinctively caught her round the neck.

But the moment I touched her something happened to her. She had come there, as I have said, without meaning to do me any harm, although she hated me. But at my touch she changed. All her loathing for me and all the pretty women there ever had been and all the loving embraces ever exchanged between man and woman, together with her hatred for me as the cause of all her mistress’s unhappiness, rose up in her in a hot flood. My blue silk pyjamas, the softness of my skin, some scent there was about me, and perhaps, deep, deep down, her frustrated, inhibited love of her own sex, this all mounted to her brain until she too for the moment was crazy. She shook her neck free, turned and tore the pyjama jacket from my body, and with her hand like iron dragged me towards Mrs. Field and the fire.

I’m pretty strong, as strong as a girl of my age ought to be, but I was nothing to Simpson. I was hampered too because my pyjama trousers had slipped down and were hanging round my ankles. But my hands were free and I pulled at Simpson’s neck, then with one hand struck at her cheek, then tried with both my hands together to push her neck back.

We were now no more and no less than a couple of drunken desperates fighting outside a public-house. I wasn’t as yet afraid. I was even rather happy. All I wanted was to give her one in the eye and then run for my life. I kicked my feet free of the pyjamas, caught her round the waist, and for a little we swayed together as I suppose wrestlers do. No one spoke. I don’t know what at that moment Mrs. Field was doing. I am considerably confused in my memory of just at that point, but I do remember that Simpson jerked her knee up and caught me in the groin and that it hurt, and I remember her scratching my cheek with her nails.

It was then that I was aware of the fire. It had been a big one and it was now a packed glowing bank of radiant heat. I was naked and it suddenly struck my back as though it leapt at me. At that instant we swayed together and tumbled. I tried to

save myself with one knee, but Simpson had her hands round my neck and pressed me down. I fell and she lay across me, flesh hot and perspiring against flesh hot and perspiring. She pressed me down with both hands, but I had strength enough to hold her neck with mine. I was tugging her towards me. She tried to shake her head free. Her hands were on my chest. My head was free and I was able to raise it a little. Then I saw an awful ludicrous thing. Mrs. Field had roasted the end of one of the '70 fire-irons red-hot. She was holding it by its red leather handle. She was swaying a little on her short thick feet, and her mouth was wet, dripping a little as a dog's may do when he sees food. Of all ludicrous things! A red-hot poker. Harlequinades, pantomimes, children shrieking with laughter.

Simpson, turning her head, had seen it too. She muttered, quite close to my face, 'No, ma'am. Oh no, ma'am. Better not! Better not!'

*Then* I was frightened. Strength flowed from me like water. The memory flashed behind my eyes of something I had read only a week or two before, of some policeman in the East End who had gone to arrest some woman, who had seared him across the mouth with a red-hot fire-iron, and the paper had said that he would bear the mark for the rest of his life. . . . On my cheek—or, most horrible of all, my eyes. . . . I screamed, I think. I know that, with a last frenzy of energy, I tried to push Simpson away.

Mrs. Field was quite close. (Remember, Joe, she hadn't the slightest notion of what she was doing.) She fell on to her knees. I heard her whisper, 'Hold her, Simpson. Hold her, father. We'll spoil her beauty.'

The thing waved in her little hand like something alive. I think (although I can't be sure) that I smelt its heat. I know that I cried out again and again, that miserable little words for help, for pity, for mercy, to God, to Simpson, came from me. I was whimpering. We were all very close to her. I shall never know what Simpson would have done. She was, I think, too savagely, too sensuously excited at that moment to hold her mistress off. We were all very close together. I saw Mrs. Field straighten herself. I stared in my agony at her thin pulsing throat.

Then—she turned towards the fireplace. The fire-iron clattered into the grate. Quite suddenly she began to cry. She cried as though her heart were broken.

She cried: 'I can't. I can't. . . . I'm lost. It's dark. It's dark.'

At the very first sound of that cry Simpson left me as though I didn't exist. She rushed over to Mrs. Field, caught her against her bare breast, rocked her in her arms, whispering, 'There, there, my darling. There, there, my pretty. Don't cry. It's all right. No one's going to hurt you. You're quite safe. Simpson's with you. Come with me, my darling. Come and let Simpson care for you. Don't cry. Don't cry.'

She knelt, her grey hair down her back, half naked, her arms round Mrs. Field's waist, while Mrs. Field lifted her face, the tears pouring down her cheeks, and sobbed, words coming strangled from her throat.

'Congreve . . . I want Congreve. Where's Congreve?'

Simpson rose, and, putting her arm round Mrs. Field very gently, led her to the door. On the way, with her slim hand, she picked up her dressing-gown. They went out.

I walked over to my bed and lay there. Then I too began to cry. The odd thing was that it was for your mother I was crying.

I heard, for the first time since I had wakened, the rain lashing the windows.

There, Joe, is an absolutely truthful account of just what happened. I'm glad you're with her now. I hope that later when our child is born I'll be able to go too.

CHRISTINA

# CHAPTER IX

## THE JOKE

Joe Field drove through the Scarlatt gates about ten-thirty of the following morning.

He stopped his car, got out, and looked about him. His first impulse had been to enter the house quickly, find Christina and demand her forgiveness. He was guilty. He should have returned last night, but he would tell her everything. . . .

He stopped. He raised his head almost as though he were sniffing the air. He had never known the place so still.

Oh, but he had! Again and again he had noticed that sulky silence borne down upon the land by the disappointed sea. Sometimes storms were so fierce that it was impossible to doubt that there was some personal vindictiveness in the yelling wind and the pounding waves. Once more the land had stood firm and once more the sea covered its failure with the misted rain-drop pause, the silence, the shudder beneath the sky-line, the little undertone against the sand.

All this he knew, but this morning there was, most certainly, an unusual stillness. He saw that a little tree near the sea-wall had been blown down. In the summer there would be *such* a glow of flowers: hydrangeas that always seemed to flourish in the sea air, fuchsias, poppies, pinks, sweet-williams. Now there was no colour at all. Only the sky had a gleam like the sloughed skin of a snake, and, on the beach where the Captain had shot himself, great drifts of dark seaweed lay like bands of human hair.

He shivered. He was not imaginative, but why was there no one about? He stared round him to catch a glimpse of Curtis and the boy at work in the garden. There was no one to be seen.

Then he ran into the house. He saw *The Times* and the *Daily Sketch* neatly folded under 'St. George and the Dragon.' On the upper coil of the dragon's tail were some primrose-leaves blown from the bowl with half-dead primroses at the corner of the hall table. There were some letters: one for himself. He picked it up and mounted the stairs.

When he pushed back the bedroom door he cried out with relief: 'Oh, thank God!' for there was Christina, fully dressed, standing by the window. He noticed at once that there was a long scratch on her cheek.

He caught her in his arms, kissed her again and again. Then his heart lurched, tapped and paused. She was like a dummy with a forehead as cold as wax. She made no response to him at all, but when he let her go she moved away from him

and sat down on the bed.

'What's happened?' he asked. 'Are you so angry with me? . . .'

Then she smiled. 'I'm not angry, but I wasn't expecting you. When you didn't come last night——'

'I couldn't come last night.' He sat on the bed beside her. He took her hand which lay in his palm like a chilled glove. 'I couldn't because Tim's brother had gone into the country on some business. I didn't catch him at his hotel until after seven. Then we had dinner together.'

'You might have telephoned.'

'Yes, I should have done, but at first I thought I'd be back after dinner. Then Green was so interesting—so interesting about Tim—that I couldn't get away. As a matter of fact I did telephone about eleven. There was no answer.'

'Everyone had gone to bed.'

'Yes, I suppose they had. Anyway you must forgive me. And after all it wasn't so bad, was it, darling? One night away from me. There'll be times when I'll *have* to be away.'

She turned and looked at him.

'Yes. It was very bad,' she said.

Then he saw that something indeed had happened. He looked again at the scratch on her cheek.

'Chris, has anyone——?'

'Your mother came in to my room last night and wanted to kill me.'

He stared at her without speaking.

'But that isn't the point. That isn't the important thing.'

'My mother——'

'Yes. I'll tell you exactly. I was nervous. I didn't want you to go. I implored you to take me with you, didn't I?'

'Yes. Yes. Go on.'

'I knew something would happen. I've known it for months. I had dinner alone with Matty. Your mother wasn't well and stayed in her room. When I went to bed I put a chair against the door.'

He drew her closer to him, but he knew that she didn't belong to him, that she had nothing whatever to do with him.

'Then I went to sleep. I woke quite suddenly. I knew there was someone in the room.' She paused. The figure of Simpson confronted her. She would say nothing whatever about Simpson. Simpson was not important. Simpson could never frighten her, in any way at all, again.

'Your mother was standing there. She came to the side of the bed. I asked her what she wanted. She said her father had come with her and together they were going to punish me.'

He held her yet closer to him. He kissed her eyes and her dry mouth. She sighed, then drew away from him.

'No, Joe, I can tell you better if I am by myself. I asked her what wrong had I done. I said I'd never wished ill to anyone in my life. She said I was a murderess. That I had killed the Captain and destroyed her two sons. I said no, that I had wanted to love her but that she'd hated me from the beginning and I could do nothing about it. I'd tried and I'd failed. She talked to her father as though he were there, but of course he wasn't, because he's been dead for years. You don't believe in ghosts, do you?'

'No,' Joe murmured.

'Well, I don't know. It was as though there were shadows in the room. Then she said—what did she say? Where was I?'

'Darling! Darling! Come back to me. No one shall touch you ever again.'

She looked at him in surprise.

'No, of course not. No one *can* touch me ever again. Where was I? Oh yes—she said that she would burn me in the fire. It was all arranged. I was frightened, and yet it was only what I had been expecting. I had been expecting it for weeks. Then . . .'

Christina's voice wavered; she pressed her hands together. She continued:

'She tried to hold me down. We struggled. Although she's old she's very strong. . . . I thought that I was going to faint and then she could have done what she wanted . . . but I slipped out the other side of the bed and stayed there against the wall. . . . And then . . . Oh, Joe, this was terrible! This was the dreadful thing, the dreadful, dreadful thing! Quite suddenly she began to cry. She cried as though she were lost, as though everything was finished for her. . . . She went away.'

They said nothing to one another. There was a long terrible pause. Joe, who had had an easy life with everything pleasant for him, brought, in this moment, to this crisis, every fibre of character that he had. If he failed now he would lose Christina for ever. But he was a man, as yet untried, of stiff, stubborn material and he loved Christina with all the deep purpose and tenacity of unfrightened, obstinate reality. He said at last:

'My fault, and only mine. I've learnt my lesson.'

But Christina didn't hear him. She sat, leaning forward, her eyes staring at a patch of blue flowers in the carpet.

'In a way what she said was true. If you hadn't married me and brought me here everyone would have been happy. In that sense I *am* a murderess.'

He saw then what to say. He caught her arm and shook it roughly.

'You little fool! Now get this into your head, once and for all. Everything *wouldn't* have been all right even though I hadn't married you and brought you here. You're being sentimental. That's the matter with you. Things weren't all right; in fact I can see clearly now—they were all wrong. Tim Green was rotten anyway. I'm not criticizing him, poor chap. I was very fond of him. But what he said about himself was true. He'd gone weak and spineless. He hadn't even the energy to go away from here. It was partly my mother's fault too. She liked him to be weak and made him weaker. The best thing he could do was to finish it. There was no future for him anywhere. As to Congreve and myself, if you hadn't come I don't know what would have happened to us. Your coming here saved both of us. You know I love my mother, better than anyone in the world except you, but she's been letting her sense of possession grow and grow for years. Now she's broken down. It isn't your fault that she has. It's hers.' He shook her again. 'Now put that right out of your head. My mother's to blame, terribly to blame. And *I'm* to blame for leaving you.'

After a little she looked up at him, staring into his face.

'You won't mind if I go away—somewhere, anywhere—soon, at once—by myself if you like?'

'By yourself! Not if I know it. We'll go to London this afternoon.'

'Later I'll come back. If your mother can endure me—if she knows, if she understands,—I meant her no harm. I wanted to love her. . . .'

She began to cry. At first desperately and then, when he took her in his arms, helplessly, like a child.

When he had made her lie down and wrapped her up he said:

'Do you mind if I go now and see what's happening? You're quite safe. No one can touch you.'

To his surprise he saw that instantly she had fallen asleep.

As he reached his mother's bedroom Archer came out. He stopped when he saw Joe. He wore a look of extraordinary importance.

'Ah, Joe, you're back!' Then, dropping his voice, his eyes fixed on Joe's face as though he had news of great significance to communicate, he said: 'She sent for me. I was the first person she asked for when she woke up.'

'How is she?' Joe asked.

'She's had a good sleep. She'll like to see you. You mustn't stay long—a few minutes.'

Joe went in.

Doctor Harbottle, a rubicund stout fellow, who had been the Field family doctor for many a year, drew Joe into a little dressing-room.

'She's awake now. I gave her a sleeping draught at three o'clock this morning. She was in a terrible state when I arrived.'

'What exactly happened?'

'I can't quite make it out. She hasn't been well for some time now, of course. It seems that Simpson was wakened, her door being ajar, by the sound of someone crying. Her room is near your mother's, as you know. She got up and found your mother wandering about the passage, crying bitterly. Simpson tried to comfort her but she only cried the more. She said something about bad dreams. She refused to go back to her room, so then Simpson very sensibly telephoned for me. I was here in ten minutes. She was in her room but quite incoherent, saying that she was lost and the fire was too hot. We got her into bed but nothing would comfort her. I gave her a strong opiate. She woke about half an hour ago and asked for your father. When he came she seemed pleased but didn't know where she was and asked for you and Congreve. I'm afraid it's a serious mental breakdown—grave at her age. She's been heading for it a long time. Takes everything too seriously. Always has done. Physically she's as right as anything. Do her good to get up and come downstairs later.'

Joe came to the side of the bed. His mother was lying there peacefully and took his hand.

'I've seen Archer,' she said. 'And it's quite all right. He says you and Congreve can go to the cricket-match so long as you're back for supper.'

'Thank you, mother dear,' Joe said.

She nodded her head.

'I told Archer I saw no objection. Another time you must come and ask *me*. *I'm* the person to ask.'

He stayed by her bed for some time but she did not move: only lay there, smiling, and plucking with her little soft boneless hands at the counterpane.

He went downstairs and found Simpson.

'Now tell me please,' he said, 'exactly what occurred.'

She stood before him, stiffly, her hands at her sides. She never moved at all throughout their little conversation.

'There isn't much to tell, Mr. Joe. I was asleep and woke suddenly to hear someone crying. I went out into the passage and there was my mistress, sobbing to break her heart.'

'What was she doing? Walking about?'

'No, Mr. Joe. Crouched up against the wall as it were.'

'I thought you told the doctor she was walking about.'

'I told Doctor Harbottle the truth and nothing but the truth. I told him she was crouching against the wall.'

'Well?'

'I tried to get her back into her room, but she wouldn't go. She began to cry so that I thought she'd wake everybody.'

'Did she say what had upset her?'

'No, Mr. Joe. Only about a fire burning and bad dreams and such things.'

'Well?'

'At last I got her into her room. Then I woke Miss Matty—her room's the other side of the house and it was wrong to leave her, but something had to be done. Then I telephoned to Doctor Harbottle.'

She knows more, Joe thought, a lot more than this. She's lying. He looked at her so fiercely that her breast heaved and her mouth opened as though she would speak, but she said nothing.

'You're lying. Every word's a lie.'

She said nothing in her defence.

'No matter. It isn't important now. But when I return I'm afraid you'll have to find another place.'

Simpson whispered, as though from the bottom of her heart:

'Oh no, Mr. Joe . . . please. . . .'

'I'm afraid so. I'm taking my wife up to London this afternoon, but I shall be back immediately.'

She said nothing and he moved away.

Christina and he were ready to go. He went in to see his mother again.

'I'm going to get up for tea, darling,' she said, smiling. 'We'll all have tea together and Congreve shall read to us.'

He bent down and kissed her and she put her arms round his neck.

'It's all right,' he thought. 'I'll be back in two days.'

As, Christina beside him, he drove off in the car, he felt the criminal he had always felt when behaving as his mother would not wish.

The fire was blazing, the silver tea-things sparkled, Bessie Field was sitting,

Snubs at her feet, eating one of those lemon biscuits that Polchester alone in all the world can provide.

'They're a little soft,' she complained.

'They can't be,' Matty said. 'They were a fresh lot in yesterday. Try some of the gingerbread, Bessie darling. That's soft inside, just as you always like it.'

Archer was standing, looking at her with loving, eager eyes. She gave the rest of the biscuit to Snubs. Suddenly her face puckered; a tear stole down her cheek.

'I want Congreve and Joe,' she said. 'Why don't they come?'

'It's all right, darling,' Matty said. 'They told us not to wait.'

'I want Congreve.'

'I'll go and find him,' Archer suddenly said.

Matty cut a thick wedge of the gingerbread.

'There, dear! Please don't cry. Oh, please don't! Everything's all right. We all love you so.'

Bessie, crying helplessly, bit a piece of the cake.

'Why, look!' cried Matty. 'There's Archer!'

Archer stood in the doorway and on his head was the paper cap with the donkey's head that he had worn at the Christmas party.

'Oh, look at Archer!' Bessie cried.

Archer grinned.

'Hee-haw! Hee-haw! Hee-haw!' he brayed.

Bessie laughed. She laughed and laughed. The piece of cake fell to the ground. Her laughter was hysterical. Her hand knocked a plate to the floor. At the sound of the crash she stayed, her face straightening. Then it puckered.

'I'm frightened. I'm frightened!'

Archer came over to her.

'Come with me to your room. Archer will look after you.'

She smiled at him.

'Thank you, Archer.'

With infinite tenderness he raised her up, put his arm around her, and, the paper cap askew on his head, gently conducted her to the door.

In his eyes was a look of deep pride and reverence. In all his bearing a carriage of great dignity and happiness.

THE END

*Printed in Great Britain by* R. & R. CLARK, LIMITED, *Edinburgh*.

# TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Sea Tower* by Hugh Walpole]