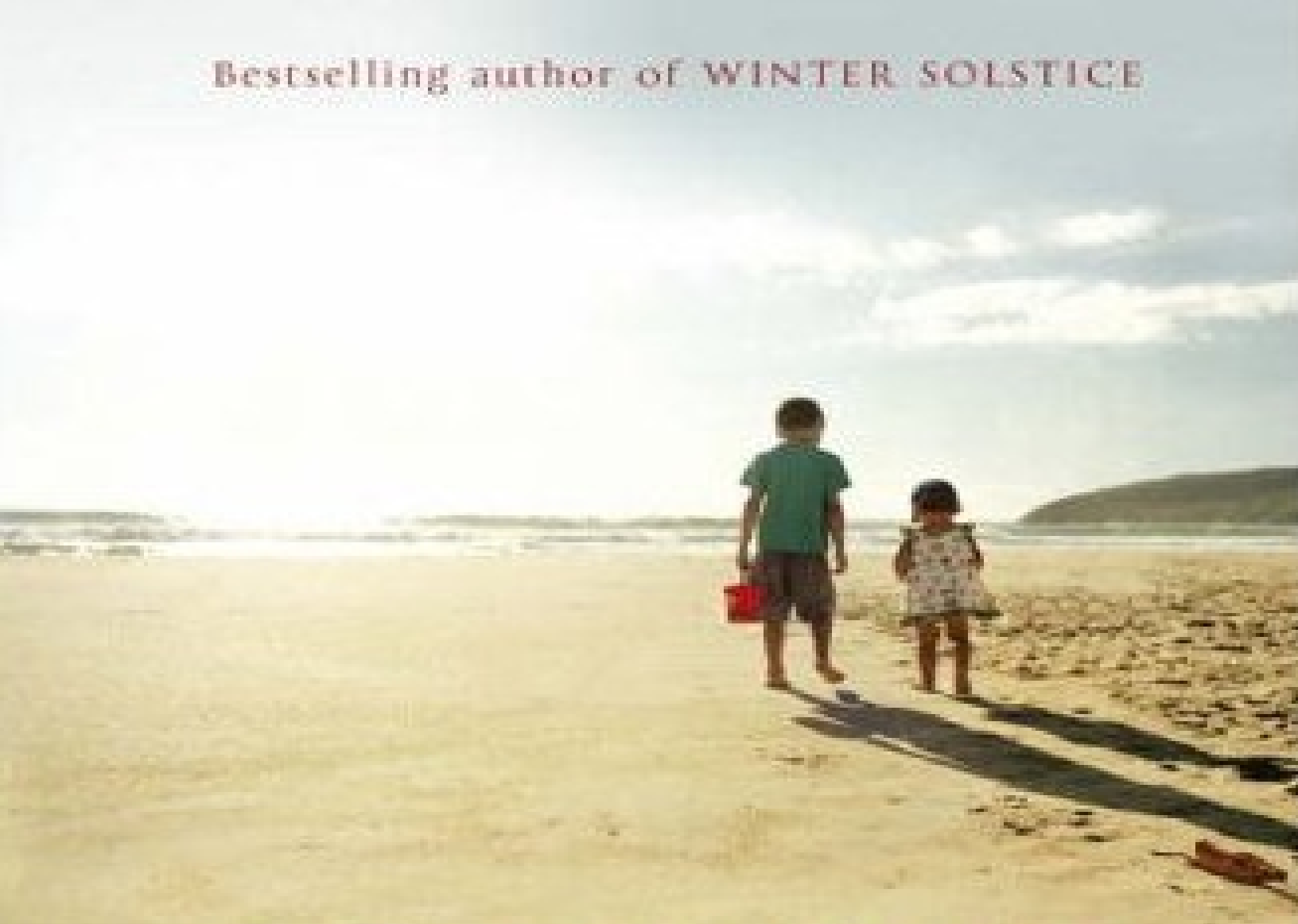


Bestselling author of WINTER SOLSTICE



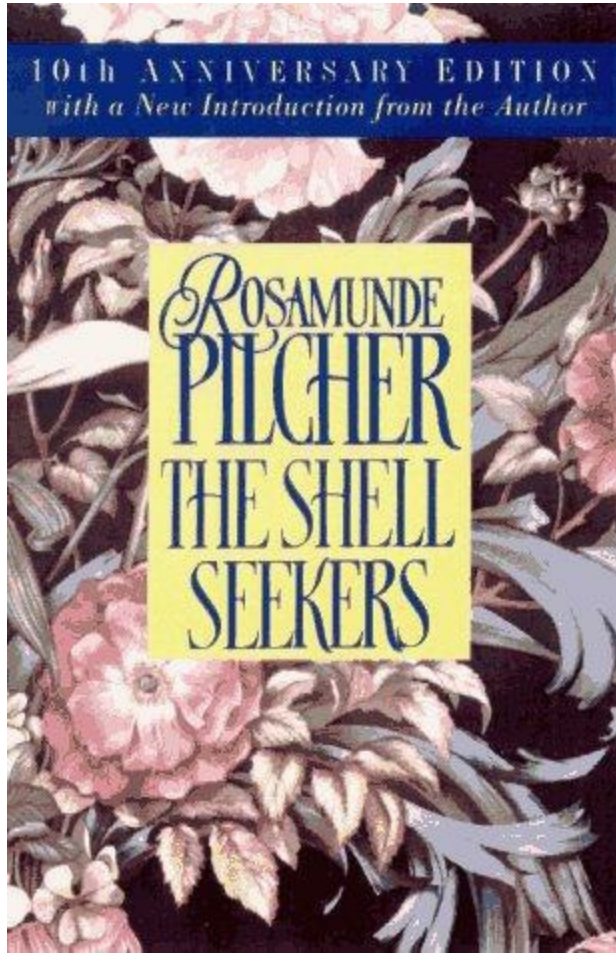
ROSAMUNDE
PILCHER

The Shell Seekers

HER CAPTIVATING NUMBER ONE BESTSELLER

10th ANNIVERSARY EDITION
with a New Introduction from the Author

ROSAMUNDE
PILCHER
THE SHELL
SEEKERS



THE SHELL
SEEKERS

ROSAMUNDE
PILCHER

This book is for my children, and their children.

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Introduction

TO THE TENTH-ANNIVERSARY EDITION

Once upon a time, in 1984 to be exact, Tom Dunne, of St. Martin's Press, was in London and made the trip north to Scotland to pay a visit to my husband and myself and my family.

By then, I had been a St. Martin's author for a number of years, and Tom had published eleven of my early books, and then *Under Gemini*, *Wild Mountain Thyme*, *The Carousel*, and a collection of short stories entitled *The Blue Bedroom*. All of these books had done quite honourably, earned their keep, and finally been remaindered, without ever causing much of a stir.

I was content. Simply grateful for what I had achieved; but my children, with touching faith in their mother, had bigger ideas.

That particular evening, there were a good many of them around. They were already old friends of Tom's and, well wined and dined, began to give him a bad time.

Why don't you make our mother famous? they demanded of him. Why don't you spread her name abroad, publish her with a huge bang and loads of hype? Why don't you make her famous, and, more importantly, rich, and isn't it about time we all hit the jackpot?

When he could get a word in edgewise, Tom, with admirable cool, explained the situation. There was nothing in the world, he assured them, that he would like to do more; but the truth of the matter was that, so far, Mother had not come up with the goods. Hadn't produced a novel that would justify huge advance publicity and global promotion. Which was salutary, but at the same time perfectly true.

It seemed time to shove my oar in. What exactly did he want?

He told me. A big fat novel for women. A good read. Something to get the teeth into. And something, above all, that tapped into my life and the

experiences of my generation.

I had never written such a book. And no novel had ever taken me more than three months to produce. Thinking about the mammoth task ahead, I quailed slightly. I was sixty, an age when most women are putting up their feet and drawing the old-age pension. I had been writing and working and bringing up my four children since the age of eighteen, and every now and then I felt as though I had scraped the bottom of my mental dustbin, was without inspiration. Perhaps it was time to retire.

But what Tom had said was a challenge. And if a person you respect thinks you can do something, then you usually can. I said. All right. I hadn't, of course, scraped the bottom of the dustbin. Ideas were floating around inside my head which had been living with me for some time. Three separate themes.

One was the lives of the upper-class Bohemian's who have always had their place in the culture of England. The Guinnesses, and the Harlechs, and the Bloomsbury group, and the lively domestic arrangements of families like the Macnamaras and the Augustus Johns. Having spent my childhood so close to St. Ives, with its colony of painters, writers and sculptors, this lifestyle was familiar to me, and infinitely attractive.

The second theme was the disastrous effect that the prospect of an inheritance, worldly goods and money, can have on a perfectly normal family. Greed and acquisitiveness can be as pervasively destructive as jealousy, and can tear parents and children, brothers and sisters, irrevocably apart.

And the last was a need to write about the days before the war, which I had never done. By then, memories had become enormously important, and a new generation was growing up who had never known those years when Britain, rich and powerful, basked in a social climate that we imagined was high noon—but was, in fact, twilight, the sun sinking as the nation faced, with some resolution, the frightening might of Hitler's Third Reich.

These ideas swam about and changed course and waited to take shape. What

finally brought them all together was the chance catching of a programme on television entitled

"Painting the Warmth of the Sun." It was about the painters of West Penwith, in Cornwall! I had known some of them, and was familiar with their abstract work. But the programme was not only about the paintings, but also the tend which had inspired them. The juxtaposition of faces, canvases, cliffs, moors, and sea all at once brought the whole concept together, and so *The Shell Seekers* was born.

Penelope Keeling. I wrote the name on a sheet of blank paper, and it looked right. She was right. She was there. Others followed. The tiresome Nancy, the cool-headed Olivia, the materialistic Noel. Lawrence Stern was a contemporary of my husband's step-grandfather, Thomas Millie Dow. And Lawrence Stern's cottage stood where Thomas Millie Dow's large house had stood, above St. Ives and the bay, and surrounded by a beautiful walled garden. Olivia's love affair with Cosmo Hamilton took place in a quinta in Ibiza where lived old friends who had settled there after the war; and the house in Oakley Street, filled with lodgers, was the home of an elderly aunt.

It all came together. It took two years to write, because of various inevitable domestic interruptions: illness, accidents, births, weddings, and deaths. In September 1986 I had to pack the manuscript and the typewriter away, and travel to the U.S. where my daughter was having a baby in Bellport, Long Island. When I wasn't looking after her and the infant and the other children, I found time to nip up lo New York City and have lunch with Tom. Then I promised him that when I got home, I would finish the novel.

Which I did. Another three weeks' solid work and it was done, THE END, I typed, and went downstairs. A farm meeting was taking place, and our accountant had come to keep control. I found him standing in the hall, put my arms around his neck, kissed him, and said, "It's finished." He bucked slightly, having never before been kissed by me, but he behaved pluckily, made the right noises, and said politely that he was looking forward to reading it.

He was one of the first to do so. I gave him the first proof copy, and he

returned it to me with a card inside. He had written. "Ros. this has to be a bestseller."

Success was a bit like climbing a flight of stairs. One step at a time. But the moment came when I knew it was within my hand. This was one evening, about three weeks after *The Shell Seekers* was published in the U.S. I was alone in the house when the telephone rang. My daughter in Bellport. Where have you been? she asked. Tom Dunne's been trying to get hold of you. You've made it! *The Shell Seekers* is on *The New York Times Bestseller List!*

Incoherent conversation ensued, the kind associated with truly exciting moments. A lot of shrieks of joy and disbelief, two people talking at the same time, and neither making much sense. Finally Pippa said, I must go, get off the line. Tom will want to talk to you. So pleased for you. Love you. Bye.

Almost immediately, another call. This time, Tom Dunne. Wonderful girl. We've made it. We've done it. There's a party on here. Champagne. I'll talk later. Good-bye.

Then, Maureen Walters, my agent from Curtis Brown. Ros, you're on the Bestseller List.

I know. Tell me about it.

I can't. No time. There's a cab waiting, and I'm going to St. Martin's Press to drink champagne.

It seemed that everybody was at the New York party except me. I poured a lonely, but celebratory, whisky and soda, and told the dogs the good news.

So that was how it all started. Now *The Shell Seekers* is ten years old and still going strong. Not only in the U.S. and the U.K. but in Scandinavia and Germany and Spain and Israel and Eastern Europe and Argentina and Japan. Translated into so many different languages, and published under so many delightfully different book jackets.

For this ten-year edition, I have been asked to write this introduction. All I

can say is that I would like to think that perhaps it will be bought as a present for some twelve- or thirteen-year-old, sated with comics and teenage mags, and ready and waiting to sink his or her teeth into an adult book that will arouse their interest and attention, keep them turning the pages, and start them off on the long and wonderful road of reading for pleasure.

I can't think of greater satisfaction for any writer.

Prologue

The taxi, an old Rover smelling of old cigarette smoke, trundled along the empty, country road at an unhurried pace. It was early afternoon at the very end of February, a magic winter day of bitter cold, frost, and pale, cloudless skies. The sun shone, sending long shadows, but there was little warmth in it, and the ploughed fields lay hard as iron. From the chimneys of scattered farmhouses and small stone cottages, smoke rose, straight as columns, up into the still air, and flocks of sheep, heavy with wool and incipient pregnancy, gathered around feeding troughs, stuffed with fresh hay.

Sitting in the back of the taxi, gazing through the dusty window, Penelope Keeling decided that she had never seen the familiar countryside look so beautiful.

The road curved steeply; ahead stood the wooden signpost marking the lane that led to Temple Pudley. The driver slowed and with a painful change of gear, turned, bumping downhill between high and blinding hedges. Moments later they were in the village, with its golden Cotswold stone houses, newsagent, butcher, The Sudeley Arms, and the church—set back from the street behind an ancient graveyard and the dark foliage of some suitably gloomy yews. There were few people about. The children were all in school, and the bitter weather kept others indoors. Only an old man, mittened and scarved, walked his ancient dog.

"Which house is it?" the taxi driver inquired over his shoulder.

She leaned forward, ridiculously excited and expectant. "Just a little way on. Through the village. The white gates on the right. They're open. There! Here we are."

He turned in through the gates and the car drew up at the back of the house.

She opened the door and got out, drawing her dark blue cape around her against the cold. She opened her bag and found her key, went to unlock the door. Behind her, the taxi driver manhandled open the boot of the car and lifted out her small suitcase. She turned to take it from him, but he held on to

it, somewhat concerned.

"Is there nobody here to meet you?"

"No. Nobody. I live alone, and everybody thinks I'm still in the hospital."
"Be all right, will you?"

She smiled into his kindly face. He was quite young, with fair bushy hair. "Of course."

He hesitated, not wishing to presume. "If you want, I'll carry the case in. Carry it upstairs, if needs be."

"Oh, that's kind of you. But I can easily manage . . ."

"No bother," he told her, and followed her into the kitchen. She opened a door, and led him up the narrow, cottage stairs. Everything smelt clinically clean. Mrs. Plackett, bless her heart, had not been wasting time during the few days of Penelope's absence. She quite liked it when Penelope went away, because then she could do things like wash the white paint of the bannisters, and boil dusters, and buif up the brass and silver.

Her bedroom door stood ajar. She went in, and the young man followed her, setting her case on the floor.

"Anything else I can do?" he asked.

"Not a thing. Now, how much do I owe you?"

He told her, looking shamefaced, as though it were an em-barrassment to him. She paid him, and told him to keep the change. He thanked her, and they went back down the stairs.

But still he hung about, seeming reluctant to leave. He probably, she told herself, had some old granny of his own, for whom he felt the same sort of responsibility.

"You'll be all right, then?"

"I promise you. And tomorrow my friend Mrs. Plackett will come. So then I won't be alone any more."

This, for some reason, reassured him. "I'll be off then."

"Goodbye. And thank you."

"No trouble."

When he was gone, she went back indoors, and closed the door. She was alone. The relief of it. Home. Her own house, her own possessions, her own kitchen. The Aga, oil-fired, simmered peacefully to itself, and all was blissfully warm. She loosened the fastening of her cape, and dropped it across the back of a chair. A pile of mail lay on the scrubbed table, and she leafed through it, but there seemed to be nothing there either vital or interesting, so she let it lie, and crossed the kitchen, opening the glass door that led into her conservatory. The thought of her precious plants, possibly dying of cold or thirst, had bothered her somewhat during the last few days, but Mrs. Plackett had taken care of them, as well as everything else. The earth in the pots was moist and loamy and the leaves were crisp and green. An early geranium wore a crown of tiny buds, and the hyacinths had grown at least three inches. Beyond the glass her garden lay winter-bound, the leafless trees black lace against the pale sky, but there were snowdrops thrusting through the mossy turf beneath the chestnut, and the first butter gold petals of the aconites.

She left the conservatory and made her way upstairs, intending to unpack, but instead allowed herself to be diverted by the sheer delight of being home again. And so meandered about, opening doors, inspecting every bedroom, to gaze from each window, to touch furniture, to straighten a curtain. Nothing was out of place. Nothing had changed. Finally downstairs again, and in the kitchen, she picked up her letters, and went through the dining room, and then into her sitting room. Here were her most precious possessions; her desk, her flowers, her pictures. The fire was laid. She struck a match, and knelt to touch it to newspaper. The flame flickered, the dry kindling flared and crackled. She piled on logs and the flames rose high in the chimney. The

house, now, was alive again, and with this pleasurable little task out of the way, there could be no further excuse for not ringing up one of her children and telling them what she had done.

But which child? She sat in her chair to consider the alternatives. It should be Nancy, of course, because she was the eldest and the one who liked to think that she was totally responsible for her mother. But Nancy would be appalled, panic-stricken, and loud with recrimination. Penelope did not think that she felt quite strong enough to cope with Nancy quite yet.

Noel, then? Perhaps, as the man of the family, Noel should be spoken to. But the notion of expecting any sort of practical help or advice from Noel was so ludicrous that she found herself smiling. "Noel, I have discharged myself from hospital and come home." To which piece of information, his reply would, in all likelihood, be, "Oh?"

And so Penelope did what she had known all along that she would do. She reached for the telephone and dialled the number of Olivia's London office.

"*Ve-nus*." The girl on the switchboard sounded as though she were singing the name of the magazine.

"Could you put me through to Olivia Keeling, please."

"Just a mo-ment."

Penelope waited.

"Miss Keeling's secretary."

Getting to speak to Olivia was a little like trying to have a chat with the President of the United States.

"Could I talk to Miss Keeling, please."

"I'm sorry, Miss Keeling is in conference."

"Does that mean she's sitting round a boardroom table, or is she in her office?"

"She is in her office . . ." The secretary sounded disconcerted, as well she might, ". . . but she has someone with her."

"Well, interrupt her please. This is her mother speaking, and it's very important."

"It . . . can't wait?"

"Not for a moment," said Penelope firmly. "And I shan't keep her long."

"Very well."

Another wait. And then, at last, Olivia.

"Mumma!"

"I'm sorry to disturb you ..."

"Mumma, is anything wrong?"

"No, nothing is wrong."

"Thank heavens for that. Are you ringing from the hospital?"

"No, I'm ringing from home."

"*Home?* When did you get *home*?"

"At about half past two this afternoon."

"But I thought they were going to keep you in for at least a week."

"That's what they intended, but I got so bored and so exhausted. I never slept a wink at nights, and there was an old lady in the bed next to mine who never

stopped talking. No, not talking. Raving, poor old soul. So I just told the doctor I couldn't stand another moment of it, and packed my bags and left."

"You discharged yourself," Olivia said, flatly, sounding resigned, but not in the least surprised.

"Exactly so. There's not a thing wrong with me. And I got a nice taxi with a dear driver and he brought me back."

"But didn't the doctor protest?"

"Loudly. But there wasn't much he could do about it."

"Oh, *Mumma*," There was laughter in Olivia's voice. "You are wicked. I was going to come down this weekend and hospital visit. You know, bring you pounds of grapes and then eat them all myself."

"You could come here," Penelope said, and then wished that she hadn't, in case she sounded wistful and lonely; in case it sounded as though she needed Olivia for company.

"Well ... if you're really all right, I might put it off for a bit. I'm actually frightfully busy this weekend. Mumma, have you spoken to Nancy yet?"

"No. I did think about it, and then I chickened out. You know how she fusses. I'll call tomorrow morning, when Mrs. Plackett's here, and I'm safely dug in and can't possibly be budged."

"How are you feeling? Truthfully, now."

"Perfectly all right. Except, as I told you, a bit short of sleep."

"You won't do too much, will you? I mean, you won't plunge out into the garden and start digging trenches or moving trees?"

"No, I won't. I promise. Anyway, everything's hard as iron. You couldn't get a spade into the earth."

"Well, thank God for small mercies. Mumma, I must go, I've got a colleague here in the office with me ..."

"I know. Your secretary told me. I'm sorry I disturbed you, but I wanted you to know what was happening."

"I'm glad you did. Keep in touch, Mumma, and cherish yourself a little."

"I will. Goodbye, my darling." "Goodbye, Mumma."

She rang off, put the telephone back on the table, and leaned back in her chair.

Now, there was nothing more to be done. She discovered that she was very tired, but it was a gentle tiredness, assuaged and comforted by her surroundings, as though her house were a kindly person, and she was being embraced by loving arms. In the warm and firelit room and the deep familiar armchair, she found herself surprised by, filled by, the sort of reasonless happiness she had not experienced for years. It is because I am alive. I am sixty-four, and I have suffered, if those idiot doctors are to be believed, a heart attack. Whatever. I have survived it, and I shall put it behind me, and not talk nor think about it, ever again. Because I am alive. I can feel, touch, see, hear, smell; look after myself; discharge myself from the hospital; find a taxi, and get myself home. There are snowdrops coming out in the garden, and spring is on the way. I shall see it. Watch the yearly miracle, and feel the sun grow wanner as the weeks slip by. And because I am alive, I shall watch it all happen and be part of that miracle.

She remembered the story of dear Maurice Chevalier. How does it feel to be seventy? they had asked him. Not too bad, he had replied. When you consider the alternative.

But for Penelope Keeling it felt a thousand times better than just not too bad. Living, now, had become not simple existence that one took for granted, but a bonus, a gift, with every day that lay ahead an experience to be savoured. Time did not last forever. I shall not waste a single moment, she promised herself. She had never felt so strong, so optimistic. As though she was young

once more, starting out, and something marvellous was just about to happen.

NANCY

She sometimes thought that for her, Nancy Chamberlain, the most straightforward or innocent occupation was doomed to become, inevitably, fraught with tedious complication.

Take this morning. A dull day in the middle of March. All she was doing ... all she planned to do ... was to catch the 9:15 from Cheltenham to London, have lunch with her sister Olivia, perhaps pop into Harrods, and then return home. There was nothing, after all, particularly heinous about this proposal. She was not about to indulge in a wild orgy of extravagance, nor meet a lover; in fact, it was a duty visit more than anything else, with responsibilities to be discussed and decisions made, and yet as soon as the plan was voiced to her household, circumstances seemed to close ranks, and she was faced with objections, or, worse, indifference, and left feeling as though she were fighting for her life.

Yesterday evening, having made the arrangement with Olivia over the phone, she had gone in search of her children. She found them in the small living room, which Nancy euphemisti-cally thought of as the library, sprawled on the sofa in front of the fire, watching television. They had a playroom and a television of their own, but the playroom had no fireplace and- was deathly cold, and the television was an old black-and-white, so it was no wonder they spent most of their time in here.

"Darlings, I have to go to London tomorrow to meet Aunt Olivia and have a talk about Granny Pen ..."

"If you're going to be in London, then who's going to take Lightning to the blacksmith to be shod?"

That was Melanie. As she spoke, Melanie chewed the end of her pigtail and kept one baleful eye glued to the manic rock singer whose image filled the screen. She was fourteen and was going through, as her mother kept telling herself, that awkward age.

Nancy had expected this question and had her answer ready.

"I'll ask Croftway to deal with that. He ought to be able to manage on his own."

Croftway was the surly gardener-handyman who lived with his wife in a flat over the stables. He hated the horses and constantly spooked them into a frenzy with his loud voice and uncouth ways, but part of his job was helping to cope with them, and this he grudgingly did, manhandling the poor lathered creatures into the horse-box, and then driving this unwieldy vehicle across country to various Pony Club events. On these occasions Nancy always referred to him as "the groom."

Rupert, who was eleven, caught the tail end of this exchange, and came up with his own objection. "I've said I'll have tea with Tommy Robson tomorrow. He's got some football mags he said I could borrow. How'm I going to get home?"

This was the first that Nancy had heard of the arrangement. Refusing to lose her cool, knowing that to suggest that he change the day would instantly bring on a high-pitched flood of argument and wails of "It's not fair," she swallowed her irritation and said, as smoothly as she could, that perhaps he could catch the bus home.

"But that means I've got to walk from the village."

"Oh well, it's only a quarter of a mile." She smiled, making the best of the situation. "Just for once it won't kill you." She hoped that he would smile back, but he only sucked his teeth and returned his attention to the television.

She waited. For what? For some interest, perhaps, in a situation that was patently important to the whole family? Even a hopeful query about what gifts she intended to bring back for them would be better than nothing. But they had already forgotten her presence; their total concentration homed in on what they watched. She found the noise of this all at once unbearable, and went out of the room, closing the door behind her. In the hall a piercing cold

enveloped her, rising from the flagged floor, seeping up the stairs to the icy voids of the landing.

It had been a bitter winter. From time to time, Nancy stoutly told herself—or any person impelled to listen—that she did not mind the cold. She was a warm-blooded creature, and it did not bother her. Besides, she enlarged, you never really felt cold in your own house. There was always so much to do.

But this evening, with the children being so disagreeable, and the prospect before her of having to go along to the kitchen and "have a word" with the morose Mrs. Croftway, she shivered and pulled her thick cardigan closely about her, as she saw the worn rug lift and shudder in the draught that poured in from beneath the ill-fitting front door.

For this was an old house that they lived in, an old Georgian vicarage in a small and picturesque Cotswold village. The Old Vicarage, Bamworth. It was a good address, and she took pleasure from giving it to people in shops. Just put it down to my account—Mrs. George Chamberlain, The Old Vicarage, Bamworth, Gloucestershire. She had it embossed, at Harrods, at the head of her expensive blue writing paper. Little things like writing paper mattered to Nancy. They made a good impression.

She and George had moved here soon after they were married. Shortly before this event, the previous incumbent of Bamworth had all at once had a rush of blood to the head and rebelled, informing his superiors that no man . . . not even an unworldly man of the Church, could be expected, on his painfully meagre stipend, to live and bring up his family in a house of such monstrous size, inconvenience, and cold. The Diocese, after some deliberation and an overnight visit from the Archdeacon, who caught a cold and very nearly died of pneumonia, finally agreed to build a new Vicarage. A brick bungalow was duly erected at the other end of the village, and the old Vicarage put on the market.

Which was bought by George and Nancy. "We snapped it up," she told her friends, as though she and George had been enormously quick off the mark and astute, and it was true that they got it for peanuts, but in time she discovered that was only because nobody else wanted it.

"There's a lot to do to it, of course, but it's the most lovely house, late Georgian, and quite a bit of land . . . paddocks and stables . . . and only half an hour to Cheltenham and George's office. Quite perfect, really."

It was perfect. For Nancy, brought up in London, the house was the final realization of all her adolescent dreams—fantasies nurtured by the novels that she devoured, of Barbara Cartland and Georgette Heyer. To live in the country and to be the wife of a country squire—these had long been the peak of her modest ambitions, after, of course, a traditional London Season, a white wedding with bridesmaids, and her photograph in the *Toiler*. She got it all except the London Season and, newly married, found herself mistress of a house in the Cotswolds, with a horse in the stable and a garden for Church fetes. With the right kind of friends, and the right sort of dogs; with George Chairman of the local Conservatives, and reading the lesson on Sunday mornings.

At first all had run smoothly. Then, there was no lack of money, and they had done up the old place, and snow-cemmed the outside, and installed central heating, and Nancy had arranged the Victorian furniture that George had inherited from his parents and happily decorated her own bedroom in a riot of chintz. But as the years went by, as inflation ballooned and the price of heating oil and wages rose, it became more and more difficult to find anyone to help in the house and garden. The financial burden of simply keeping the place going grew heavier each year and she sometimes felt that they had bitten off more than they could chew.

As if that were not enough, they were as well already into the horrifying expense of educating their children. Both Melanie and Rupert were at local private schools as day pupils. Melanie would probably stay at hers until she finished her A levels, but Rupert was down for Charlesworth, his father's public school; George had entered his name the day after Rupert was born, and taken out a small educational insurance at the same time, but the paltry sum that this would realize would now, in 1984, scarcely pay the first train fare.

Once, spending a night in London with Olivia, Nancy had confided in her sister, hoping perhaps for some constructive advice from that hard-headed

career woman. But Olivia was unsympathetic. She thought they were fools.

"Public schools are an anachronism, anyway," she had told Nancy. "Send him off to the local comprehensive, let him rub shoulders with the rest of the world. It'll do him more good in the long run than all that rarefied atmosphere and old-world tradition."

But this was unthinkable. Neither George nor Nancy had ever considered State education for their only son. In truth, from time to time Nancy had indulged in secret dreams of Rupert at Eton, trimmed with fantasies of herself at the Fourth of June in a garden-party hat; and Charlesworth, solid and reputable as it was, seemed a bit like second-best. She did not, however, admit this to Olivia.

"That's out of the question," she said shortly.

"Well then, let him try for a bursary or a scholarship. Let him do something to help himself. What's the point of bleeding yourself white on account of one small boy."

But Rupert was not academic. He had no hope of a bursary or a scholarship and both George and Nancy knew this.

"In that case," said Olivia, dismissing the subject because she was bored by it, "It seems to me that you have no alternative but to sell up the old Vicarage and move somewhere smaller. Think of the money you'd save not having to keep the old place up."

But the prospect of such an action filled Nancy with more horror even than the mention of State education for her son. Not simply because it would be tantamount to admitting defeat and giving up everything she had ever strived for, but because, as well, she had an unhappy suspicion that she and George and the children, living in some convenient little house on the outskirts of Cheltenham, bereft of the horses, the Women's Institute, the Conservative Committee, the gymkhanas and the church fetes, would become diminished, no longer of interest to their county friends and would be left to fade, like dying shadows, into a family of forgotten nonentities.

She shivered again, pulled herself together, turned from these gruesome imaginings and trod firmly down the flagged passage in the direction of the kitchen. Here the huge Aga, which never went out, rendered all comfortably warm and cosy. Nancy sometimes thought, especially at this time of the year, that it was a pity they didn't all live in the kitchen . . . and any other family but theirs would probably have succumbed to the temptation and spent the entire winter there. But they were not any other family. Nancy's mother, Penelope Keeling, had practically lived in the old kitchen in the basement of the big house in Oakley Street, cooking and serving enormous meals at the great scrubbed table; writing letters, bringing up her children, mending clothes, and even entertaining her endless guests. And Nancy, who had both resented and was slightly ashamed of her mother, had been reacting against this warm and informal way of life ever since. When I get married, she had sworn as a child, I shall have a drawing room and a dining room, just like other people do, and I shall go into the kitchen as seldom as I can.

George, fortunately, was of like mind. A few years before, after some serious discussion, they had agreed that the practicality of eating breakfast in the kitchen outweighed the slight lowering of standards. But further than that neither of them was prepared to go. Consequently, lunch and dinner were served in the huge, high-ceilinged dining room, with the table correctly laid, and formality taking the place of comfort. This gloomy apartment was heated by an electric fire that stood in the grate, and when they had dinner parties, Nancy turned this on a couple of hours before the meal was due to be served, and could never understand why her lady guests arrived swathed in shawls. Worse was that once . . . never to be forgotten . . . she had glimpsed beneath the waistcoat of a dinner-jacketed male the unmistakable traces of a thick V-necked pullover. He had not been asked again.

Mrs. Croftway stood at the sink, peeling potatoes for supper. She was a very superior sort of person (far more so than her foul-tongued husband), and, she wore, for her work, a white overall, as though that alone could render her cooking professional and palatable. Which it didn't, but at least Mrs. Croftway's evening appearance in the kitchen meant that Nancy didn't have to cook dinner herself.

She decided to plunge straight in. "Oh, Mrs. Croftway . . . slight change of plan. I have to go to London tomorrow to have lunch with my sister. It's this problem of my mother, and impossible to talk things over on the telephone."

"I thought your mother was out of hospital and home again."

"Yes, she is, but I had a word with her doctor on the phone yesterday, and he says that she really shouldn't live alone any longer. It was only a slight heart attack, and she's made a marvellous recovery, but still . . . you never know ..."

She gave these details to Mrs. Croftway not because she expected much help or even sympathy, but because illness was one of the things the woman relished discussing, and Nancy hoped it might put her in a more expansive mood.

"My mother had a heart attack, she was never the same after that. Blue in the face she went and her hands so swollen we had to cut the wedding ring off her."

"I didn't know that, Mrs. Croftway."

"She couldn't live alone any more. I had her to live with me and Croftway, she had the best front bedroom, but it crucified me, I can tell you; up and down the stairs all day long, and her with a stick banging on the floor. By the end I was a mass of nerves. Doctor said he'd never seen any woman with nerves like mine. So he put Mother in hospital and she died."

This, apparently, was the end of the depressing saga. Mrs. Croftway returned to her potatoes, and Nancy said, inadequately, "I'm sorry . . . what a strain it must have been for you. How old was your mother?"

"Eighty-six all but a week."

"Well . . ." Nancy made herself sound robust. "My moth-er's only sixty-four, so I'm sure she'll make a good recovery."

Mrs. Croftway tossed a peeled potato into the pan and turned to look at Nancy. She rarely looked straight at people, but when she did it was

unnerving because her eyes were very pale and never seemed to blink. Mrs. Croftway had her own private opinions of Nancy's mother. Mrs. Keeling she was called, and Mrs. Croftway had met her only once, during one of her infrequent visits to the old Vie-arage, but that had been enough for anybody. A great tall woman she was, dark-eyed as a gypsy, and dressed in garments that looked as though they should be given to a jumble sale. Pigheaded she'd been too, coming into the kitchen and insisting on washing the dishes, when Mrs. Croftway had her own way of doing things and did not relish interference.

"Funny her having a heart attack," she observed now. "Looked strong as a bull to me."

"Yes," said Nancy faintly. "Yes, it was a shock—to all of us," she added, her voice pious as though her mother were already dead and it was safe to speak well of her.

Mrs. Croftway made a grim mouth.

"Your mother only sixty-four?" She sounded incredulous. "Looks more, doesn't she? Thought she was well into her seventies."

"No, she's sixty-four."

"How old are you, then?"

She was outrageous. Nancy felt herself stiffen with the sheer offensiveness of Mrs. Croftway, and was aware of the blood rushing to her cheeks. She longed to have the courage to snap at the woman; to tell her to mind her own business, but then perhaps she would give in her notice and she and Croftway would depart, and what would Nancy do then with the garden and the horses and the rambling house and her hungry family to feed?

"I'm . . ." Her voice came out on a croak. She cleared her throat and tried again. "As a matter of fact, I'm forty-three."

"Is that all? Oh, I'd have put you down as fifty any day."

Nancy gave a little laugh, trying to make a joke of it, for what else was there to do? "That's not very flattering, Mrs. Croftway."

"It's your weight. That's what it is. Nothing so aging as letting your figure go. You ought to go on a diet . . . it's bad for you, being overweight. Next thing we know"—she gave a cackle of laughter—"it's you that'll be having a heart attack."

I hate you, Mrs. Croftway. I hate you.

"There's ever such a good diet in Woman's Own this week. . . . You have a grapefruit one day, and a yoghurt the next. Or maybe it's the other way around . . . I could cut it out and bring it along, if you like."

"Oh . . . how kind. Maybe. Yes." She sounded flustered, her voice shaking. Pulling herself together, Nancy squared her shoulders and, with some effort, took charge of the deteriorating situation. "But, Mrs. Croftway, what I really wanted to talk about was tomorrow. I'm catching the nine-fifteen, so I shan't have much time to tidy up before I go, so I'm afraid you'll have to do what you can . . . and would you be very kind and feed the dogs for me? . . . I'll leave their dinners ready in their bowls, and then perhaps you could take them for a little run around the garden . . . and, . . ." She went on quickly before Mrs. Croftway could start objecting to these suggestions. "Perhaps you could give Croftway a message for me, and ask him to take Lightning to the blacksmith . . . he's due to be shod and I don't want to have to put it off."

"Ooh," said Mrs. Croftway doubtfully. "I don't know if he'll be able to manage boxing that animal on his own."

"Oh, I'm sure he can, he's done it before . . . and then tomorrow evening, when I get back, perhaps we could have a bit of lamb for dinner. Or a chop or something . . . and some of Croftway's delicious Brussels sprouts . . ."

It was not until after dinner that she had the opportunity to speak to George. What with getting the children to do their homework, finding Melanie's ballet shoes, eating dinner and clearing it away, ringing the vicar's wife to tell her that Nancy would not be at the Women's Guild meeting the following eve-

ning, and generally organizing her life, there scarcely seemed time to exchange a word with her husband, who did not get home until seven in the evening, and then wanted to do nothing but sit in front of the fire with a glass of whisky and the newspaper.

But at last all was accomplished and Nancy was able to join George in the library. She closed the door firmly behind her, expecting him to look up, but he did not stir from behind *The Times*, so she crossed to the drink table that stood by the window, poured herself a whisky, and then went and sat down in the armchair and faced him across the hearthrug. She knew that very soon he would reach out a hand and turn on the television in order to watch the news.

She said, "George."

"Urn?"

"George, do listen a moment."

He finished the sentence he was reading and then reluctantly lowered the newspaper, revealing himself as a man in his middle fifties but looking a good deal older, with thinning grey hair, rimless glasses, and the dark suit and sober tie of an elderly gentleman. George was a solicitor, and perhaps imagined that this carefully contrived appearance—as though dressed for the part in some play—would inspire confidence in potential clients, but Nancy sometimes suspected that if he would only buck himself up a bit, wear a nice tweed suit and buy a pair of hornrims, then perhaps his business would perk up a bit, too. For this part of the world, since the opening of the motorway from London, had fast become enormously fashionable. New and wealthy residents moved in, farms changed hands at staggering sums; the most decrepit of cottages were snapped up and transformed, at enormous expense, into weekend hideaways. Estate agents and building societies blossomed and prospered; exclusive shops opened in the most unlikely little towns, and it was beyond Nancy's powers of comprehension why Chamberlain, Plantwell and Richards had not climbed onto this bandwagon of prosperity and reaped some of the rewards that were surely just there for the taking. But George was old-fashioned, sticking to the traditional ways and terrified of change. He was also a cautious man, and a cagey one.

Now, "What have I got to listen to?" he asked her.

"I'm going to London tomorrow to have lunch with Olivia. We've got to talk about Mother."

"What's the problem now?"

"Oh, George, you know the problem. I told you, I had a word with Mother's doctor, and he says she really mustn't live alone any longer."

"So what are you going to do about it?"

"Well . . . we'll have to find a housekeeper for her. Or a companion."

"She won't like that," George pointed out.

"And even if we find somebody . . . can Mother afford to pay her? A good woman would cost forty to fifty pounds a week. I know she got that enormous sum for the house in Oakley Street, and she's not spent a brass farthing on Podmore's Thatch except to build that ridiculous conservatory, but that money's capital, isn't it? Can she afford all this expense?"

George shifted in his chair, reaching for his whisky glass.

He said, "I've no idea."

Nancy sighed. "She's so secretive, so damned independent. She makes herself impossible to help. If only she'd take us into her confidence, give you some power of attorney, it would make life so much easier for me. After all, I am the eldest child, and it's not as though Olivia or Noel ever raise a finger to help."

George had heard all this before. "What about her daily lady . . . Mrs. What's-it?"

"Mrs. Plackett. She only comes in three mornings a week to clean and she's got a house and a family of her own to look after."

George set down his glass and sat, his face turned to the fire, his hands arranged like a little tent, fingertip to fingertip.

After a bit, he said, "I cannot quite fathom what it is you are getting in such a state about." He sounded as though he were speaking to some particularly dim-witted client, and Nancy was hurt.

"I am not in a state."

He ignored this. "Is it just the money? Or is it the possibility that you may be unable to find any woman saintly enough to agree to live with your mother?"

"Both, I suppose," Nancy admitted.

"And what do you imagine Olivia is going to contribute to the conundrum?"

"She can at least discuss it with me. After all, she's never in her life done a single thing for Mother ... or for any of us, for that matter," she added bitterly, recalling past hurts. "When Mother decided to sell Oakley Street and announced that she was going back to Cornwall to live in Porthkerris, it was I who had the most dreadful time persuading her that it would be madness to take such a step. And she still might have gone if you hadn't found her Podmore's Thatch, where at least she's within twenty miles of us and we're able to keep an eye on her. Supposing she was in Porthkerris now, miles away, with a groggy heart and none of us knowing what on earth was going on?"

"Let us try to keep to the point," begged George, at his most maddening. Nancy ignored this. The whisky had wanned her, and kindled old resentments as well.

"And as for Noel, he's practically abandoned Mother, ever since she sold Oakley Street and he had to move out. That was a blow to him. Twenty-three he was and he'd never paid a penny's worth of rent to her, ate her food and drank her gin and lived totally scot-free. It was a shock to Noel, I can tell you, when he finally had to start paying his way."

George sighed deeply. He had no higher opinion of Noei than he had of Olivia. And his mother-in-law, Penelope Keeling, had always been a total enigma to him. The constant astonishment was that any woman as normal as Nancy should have sprung from the loins of such an extraordinary family.

He finished his drink, got up from his chair, threw another log on the fire, and went to replenish his glass. From the other side of the room he said, above the small sounds of clinking glass, "Let us suppose that the worst happens. Let us suppose that your mother cannot afford a housekeeper." He returned to his chair and settled himself once more opposite his wife. "Let us suppose that you can find nobody to take on the arduous task of keeping her company. What happens then? Will you suggest that she comes to live with us?"

Nancy thought of Mrs. Croftway, perpetually in a state of umbrage. The children, noisily complaining about Granny Pen's endless strictures. She thought of Mrs. Croftway's mother, with her wedding ring cut off, lying in bed and banging on the floor with a stick. ...

She said, sounding desperate, "I don't think I could bear it."

"I don't think I could bear it either," George admitted.

"Perhaps Olivia . . ."

"Olivia?" George's voice rose in disbelief. "Olivia let any person intrude on that private life of hers? You have to be pulling my leg."

"Well, Noel's out of the question."

"It seems," said George, "that everything is out of the question." He surreptitiously pushed up his cuff and looked at his watch. He did not want to miss the news. "And I don't see that I can make any constructive suggestions until after you have had it out with Olivia."

Nancy was offended. True, she and Olivia had never been the best of friends . . . they had, after all, nothing in common . . . but she resented the words

"having it out," as though they never did anything but argue. She was about to point this out to George but he forestalled her by switching on the television and putting an end to the conversation. It was exactly nine o'clock, and he settled contentedly to his daily ration of strikes, bombs, murders, and financial disaster, topped off by the information that the next day was going to start very cold, and that during the course of the afternoon rain would slowly cover the entire country.

After a bit, Nancy, depressed beyond words, got up out of her chair. George, she suspected, did not even realize that she had moved. She went to the drink table, replenished her whisky with a lavish hand, and went out of the room, closing the door quietly behind her. She climbed the stairs and went into her bed-room and through to her bathroom. She put in the bath plug, turned the taps on, and poured in scented bath oil with the same lavishness that she had employed with the whisky bottle. Five minutes later she was indulging in the most comfortable occupation she knew, which was to lie in a hot bath and drink cold whisky at the same time.

Wallowing, enveloped in bubbles and steam, she allowed herself to dissolve into an orgy of self-pity. Being a wife and mother, she told herself, was a thankless task. One devoted oneself to husband and children, was considerate to one's staff, cared for one's animals, kept the house, bought the food, washed the clothes, and what thanks did one get? What appreciation?

None.

Tears began to well in her eyes, mingling with the general moisture of bath-water and steam. She longed for appreciation, for love, for affectionate physical contact, for someone to hug her and tell her she was marvellous, that she was doing a wonderful job.

For Nancy, there was only one person who had never let her down. Daddy had been a darling, of course, while he lasted, but it was his mother, Dolly Keeling, who had consistently shored up • Nancy's confidence and taken her side.

Dolly Keeling had never got on with her daughter-in-law, had no time for

Olivia, and was always wary of Noel, but Nancy was her pet, spoiled and adored. It was Granny Keeling who had bought her the puff-sleeved, smocked dresses when Penelope would have sent her eldest child to the party in some antique inherited garment of threadbare lawn. It was Granny Keeling who told her she was pretty and took her on treats like tea in Harrods and visits to the pantomime.

When Nancy became engaged to George, there were terrible rows. By now her father had departed, and her mother could not be made to understand why it was so important to Nancy that she should have a traditional white wedding with bridesmaids and the men in morning coats and a proper reception. Apparently it seemed to Penelope an idiotic way to waste money. Why not a simple family service with perhaps a lunch party afterwards, at the great scrubbed table in the basement kitchen at Oakley Street? Or a party in the garden? The garden was huge, masses of room for everybody, and the roses would be out. . . .

Nancy wept, slammed doors, and said that nobody understood her, nobody ever had. She finally collapsed into a sulk that might have continued forever had not darling Granny Keeling intervened. All responsibility was removed from Penelope, who was delighted to be shed of it, and everything arranged by Granny. No bride could have asked for more. Holy Trinity, a white dress with a train, bridesmaids in pink, and a reception afterwards at Twenty-Three Knightsbridge with a Master of Ceremonies in a red coat and a number of enormous, top-heavy flower arrangements. And darling Daddy, prompted by his mother, had turned up looking divine in a morning coat, to stand by Nancy and give her away, and even Penelope's appearance, hatless and majestic in layers of ancient brocade and velvet, could do nothing to mar the perfection of the day.

Oh, for Granny Keeling now. Lying in the bath, a great grown woman of forty-three, Nancy wept for Granny Keeling. To have her there, for sympathy and comfort and admiration. *Oh my darling, you are quite marvellous, you do so much for your family and your mother and they all take it quite for granted.*

She could still hear the loved voice, but it was in her own imagination, for

Dolly Keeling was dead. Last year, at the age of eighty-seven, that gallant little lady with her rouged cheeks and her painted nails and her mauve cardigan suits had passed on in her sleep. This sad event took place in the small Kensington private hotel where she had elected, along with a number of other incredibly elderly people, to spend her twilight years, and she was duly wheeled away by the undertaker with whom the Hotel Management, with some foresight, had a standing arrangement.

The next morning was as bad as Nancy had feared. The whisky had left her with a headache, it was colder than ever and pitch-dark when, at seven-thirty in the morning, she hoisted herself out of bed. She dressed, and was mortified to discover that the waistband of her best skirt would not meet and had to be fastened with a safety pin. She pulled on the lamb's-wool sweater which exactly matched the skirt, and averted her eyes from the rolls of fat that bulged over the armour of her formidable brassiere. She put on nylons, but as she usually wore thick woollen stockings, these felt dreadfully inadequate, so she decided to wear her long boots, and then could scarcely do up the zip-fastener.

Downstairs, things did not improve. One of the dogs had been sick, the Aga was lukewarm, and there were only three eggs in the larder. She put the dogs out, cleaned up the sick, and filled the Aga with its own special, enormously expensive fuel, praying meanwhile it would not go out altogether, thus providing Mrs. Croftway with good cause for complaint. She shouted for the children, telling them to hurry, boiled kettles, boiled the three eggs, made toast, set the table. Rupert and Melanie appeared, more or less correctly dressed, but quarrelling because Rupert said that Melanie had lost his geography book, and Melanie said that she'd never had it in the first place and he was a stupid liar, and Mummy, she needed twenty-five pence for Mrs. Leeper's leaving present.

Nancy had never heard of Mrs. Leeper.

George did nothing to help. He simply appeared, sometime during all this commotion, ate his boiled egg, drank a cup of tea, and went. She heard the Rover going down the drive as she frantically stacked dishes on the draining board, ready for Mrs. Croftway to deal with at her own pleasure.

"Well, if you didn't have my geography book . . ."

Outside the door, the dogs howled. She let them in, and this reminded her of their dinners, so she filled their bowls with biscuits and opened a tin of Bonzo and, in her agitation, cut her thumb on the raw edge of the lid.

"Gosh, you're clumsy," Rupert told her.

Nancy turned her back on him and ran the cold tap over her thumb until it had stopped bleeding.

"If I don't have that twenty-five pence, Miss Rawlings is going to be furious. . . ."

She ran upstairs to put on her face. There was no time for gently blending rouge or outlining her eyebrows, and the finished result was far from satisfactory, but it couldn't be helped. There wasn't time. From her wardrobe she pulled her fur coat, the fur hat that matched it. She found gloves, her Mappin and Webb lizardskin handbag. Into this she emptied the contents of her everyday bag, and then, of course, it wouldn't close. No matter. It couldn't be helped. There wasn't time.

She rushed downstairs again, calling for the children. By some miracle, they appeared, gathering up their school-bags, Melanie jamming on her unbecoming hat. Out of the back-door and around to the garage they trooped, into the car—thank God the engine started first go—and they were off.

She drove the children to their separate schools, dumping them out at the gates with scarcely time to say goodbye before she was off again, speeding for Cheltenham. It was ten minutes past nine when she parked the car in the station car-park and twelve minutes past when she bought her cheap day return. At the bookstall, she jumped the queue with what she hoped was a charming smile, and bought herself a *Daily Telegraph*, and—wild extravagance—a copy of *Harpers and Queen*. After she had paid for it, she saw that it was out of date—last month's edition, in fact—but there was no time to point this out and get her money back. Besides, it didn't really matter being out of date; glossy and shiny, it would still be a marvellous treat.

Telling herself this, she emerged onto the platform just as the London train drew in. She opened a door, any door, got in and found a seat. She was breathless, her heart fluttering. She closed her eyes. This, she told herself, must be how it feels when you have just escaped from fire.

After a bit, after a few deep breaths and a little reassuring chat to herself, she felt stronger. The train, mercifully, was very warm. She opened her eyes and loosened the fastenings of her fur. Arranging herself more comfortably, she looked out of the window at the iron-hard winter landscape that flew by, and allowed her frayed nerves to be lulled by the rhythm of the train. She enjoyed train journeys. The telephone could not ring, you could sit down, you didn't have to think.

The headache had gone. She took her compact from her handbag and inspected her face in its small mirror, dabbed some powder on her nose, worked her mouth to settle her lipstick. The new magazine lay on her lap, as full of delights as an unopened box of dark-coated, soft-centered chocolates. She began to turn the pages and saw advertisements for furs, for houses in the south of Spain, for time-sharing estates in the Scottish Highlands; for jewellery, and cosmetics that would not only make you look better but actually repair your skin; for cruise ships sailing to the sun; for ... Her desultory leafings were abruptly halted, her attention caught. A full-page spread, inserted by Boothby's, the Fine Art Dealers, announced a sale of Victorian art that was to take place in their Bond Street Galleries on Wednesday, the twenty-first of March. To illustrate this, there was reproduced a picture by Lawrence Stern, 1865-1946. The painting was entitled *The Water Carriers* (1904) and depicted a group of young women in various postures, bearing copper urns on shoulder or hip. Studying them, Nancy decided eventually, that they must be slaves, for their feet were bare and their faces unsmiling (poor things, no wonder, the urns looked dreadfully heavy) and their garments minimal, flimsy draperies of grape-blue and rust-red, with an almost unnecessary revealment of rounded breast and rosy nipple.

Neither George nor Nancy were interested in art, any more than they were interested in music or the theatre. The old Vicarage had, of course, its fair share of pictures, the sporting prints mandatory for any self-respecting

country house, and some oils depicting dead stags or faithful hounds with pheasants in their mouths, which George had inherited from his father. Once, with an hour or two to spare in London, they had gone to the Tate Gallery and dutifully shuffled through an exhibition of Constables, but Nancy's only recollection of that occasion was a lot of woolly green trees and the fact that her feet had hurt.

But even Constable was preferable to this painting. She gazed at it, finding it hard to believe that any person should want such a horror hanging on the wall, let alone pay good money for it. If she had been lumbered with such an object, it would have ended its days either in some forgotten loft or on top of a bonfire.

But it was not for any aesthetic reason that Nancy's attention had been caught by *The Water Carriers*. The reason that she gazed at it with so much interest was the fact that it was by Lawrence Stern. For he had been Penelope Reeling's father, and so, Nancy's grandfather.

The strange thing was that she was almost totally unfamiliar with his work. By the time that she was born, his fame—at its peak at the turn of the century—had dwindled and died, his output long sold, dispersed and forgotten. In her mother's house in Oakley Street there had hung only three pictures by Lawrence Stern, and two of these made up a pair of panels, unfinished, depicting a couple of allegorical nymphs scattering lilies onto slopes of daisy-dotted grass.

The third picture hung on the wall of the ground-floor hall, just below the staircase, the only space in the house that could accommodate its considerable size. An oil, and product of Stern's later years, it was called *The Shell Seekers*. It had a lot of white-capped sea, and a beach, and a sky full of blowing clouds. When Penelope moved from Oakley Street to Podmore's Thatch, these three precious possessions had moved with her, the panels to end up on the landing, and *The Shell Seekers* to dwarf the sitting room, with its low, beamed ceiling. Nancy now scarcely noticed them, so familiar were they, as much part of her mother's house as the sagging sofas and armchairs, the old-fashioned flower arrangements crammed into blue-and-white jugs, the delicious smell of cooking.

In truth, for years Nancy had not even thought of Lawrence Stern, but now, sitting in the train, in her furs and her boots, memory caught at her coat-tails and jerked her back into the past. Not that there was much to remember. She had been born at the end of 1940, in Cornwall, in the little cottage hospital in Porthkerris, and had spent the war years at Cam Cottage, beneath the shelter of Lawrence Stern's roof. But her babyhood recollections of the old man were misty—more the awareness of a presence rather than a person. Had he ever taken her on his knee, or for a walk, or read aloud to her? If he had, then she had forgotten. It seemed that no impression was made upon her childish mind until that final day, when, with the war safely over, she and her mother had left Porthkerris for all time and caught the train back to London. For some reason, this event touched Nancy's consciousness and stayed forever, clearly imprinted upon her memory.

He had come to the station to see them off. Very old, very tall, growing frail, leaning on a silver-handled stick, he had stood on the platform by the open window and kissed Penelope goodbye. His white hair had lain long on the tweed collar of his Inverness cape, and on his twisted, deformed hands he wore woollen mittens from which the useless fingers protruded, white and bloodless as bones.

At the very last moment, even as the train started to move, Penelope had snatched Nancy up into her arms, and the old man had reached out a hand and laid it against Nancy's rounded baby cheek. She remembered the cold of his hand, like marble against her skin. There was no time for more. The train gathered speed, the platform curved away, he stood, growing smaller, waving his great broad-brimmed black hat in a final farewell. And that was Nancy's first and last memory of him, for he died the following year.

Ancient history, she told herself. Nothing to get sentimental about. But extraordinary that any person, nowadays, should want to buy his work. *The Water Carriers*. She shook her head, uncomprehending, and then abandoned the conundrum and turned happily to the comforting unrealities of the Social Diary.

OLIVIA

The new photographer was called Lyle Medwin. He was a very young man with soft brown hair that looked as though it had been cut with the aid of a soup bowl, and a gentle, kind-eyed face. He had an unworldly air about him, like some dedicated novice, and Olivia found it hard to believe that he had successfully come so far along the rat race of his chosen profession without getting his throat cut.

They stood by the table at the window of her office, where he had laid out a selection of his past work for her inspection: two dozen or so large, glossy colour prints hopefully displayed for approval. Olivia had studied them minutely and decided that she liked them. In the first place, they were lucid. Fashion photographs, she always insisted, must show the clothes, the shape of them, the drape of a skirt, the texture of a sweater, and this came across with a punchy impact that would catch any eye. But as well, the pictures breathed with life, movement, enjoyment, even tenderness.

She picked one up. A man with the build of a full-back jogging through surf, blinding white track suit against a cobalt-blue sea. Tanned skin, sweat, the very smell of salty air and physical well-being.

"Where did you take this?"

"Malibu. That was an ad I did for sports clothes."

"And this?" She took up another, an evening shot of a girl in blowing flame-coloured chiffon, her face turned towards the glow of the setting sun.

"That was Point Reays ... an editorial feature for American Vogue." She laid the prints down, turned to face him, leaning against the edge of the table. This brought her down to his height, and so their eyes were level.

"What's your professional experience?"

He shrugged. "Technical college. Then a bit of free-lancing, and then I joined Toby Stryber and worked with him for a couple of years as his assistant."

"It was Toby who told me about you."

"And then, when I left Toby, I went to Los Angeles. I've been living out there for the past three years."

"And doing well."

He smiled, deprecating. "Okay, I guess."

His clothes were pure Los Angeles. White sneakers, washed-out jeans, white shirt, a faded denim jacket. In deference to the bitter London weather, he had wound a coral-coloured cashmere muffler around his slender tanned neck. His appearance, though ruffled, was nevertheless deliciously clean, like fresh laundry, dried in the sunshine, but not yet ironed. She found him extremely attractive.

"Carla's told you the brief?" Carla was Olivia's Fashion Editor. "It's for the July issue, a last feature on holiday clothes before we go into tweeds for the moors."

"Sure . . . she mentioned location shots."

"Any suggestions where?"

"We talked about Ibiza ... I have contacts out there. . . ."

"Ibiza."

He was quick to accommodate her. "But if you'd rather someplace else, it's okay by me. Morocco, maybe."

"No." She pushed herself away from the table and went back to her chair behind her desk. "We haven't used Ibiza for some time ... but I think not beach shots. Rural backgrounds would be a bit different, with goats and

sheep and hardy peasants tilling fields. You could rope some of the locals in to add a bit of authenticity. They have wonderful faces and they love having their pictures taken. . . ."

"Great . . ."

"Talk to Carla about it then. . . ."

He hesitated. "So, I've got the job?"

"Of course you've got the job. Just do it well. . . ."

"Sure. Thanks . . ." He began to gather up his prints and stack them into a pile. The buzzer on Olivia's intercom rang, and she pressed the button and spoke to her secretary.

"Yes?"

"An outside call, Miss Keeling."

She looked at her watch. It was twelve-fifteen.

"Who is it? I'm just going out for lunch."

"A Mr. Henry Spotswood."

Henry Spotswood. Who the hell was Henry Spotswood? And then the name came back to her, and she remembered the man she had met two evenings before at the Ridgeways' cocktail party. Greying hair and as tall as she was. But he had called himself Hank.

"Put him through, Jane, would you?"

As she reached for the telephone, Lyle Medwin, the folder of photographs under his arm, made his soft-footed way across the room and opened the door.

"Bye," he mouthed as he let himself out and she raised her hand and smiled, but he had already gone.

"Miss Keeling?"

"Yes."

"Olivia, Hank Spotswood here, we met at the Ridgeways'."

"Of course."

"I have a free hour or two. Any chance of lunch?"

"What, today?"

"Yeah, right now."

"Oh, I am sorry, I can't make it. My sister's coming up from the country and I'm having lunch with her. I'm already late, I should be on my way."

"Oh, that's too bad. Well, what about dinner this evening?"

His voice, remembered, filled in the details. Blue eyes. A pleasant, strong-featured, wholly American face. Dark suit, Brooks Brothers shirt with a button-down collar.

"I'd like that."

"Great. Where would you like to eat?"

For perhaps an instant she debated, and then made up her mind.

"Wouldn't you like, just for once, not to have to eat in a restaurant or an hotel?"

"What does that mean?"

"Come to my house, and I'll give you dinner."

"That would be great." He sounded surprised but by no means unenthusiastic. "But isn't that a chore for you?"

"No chore," she told him, smiling over the homely word. "Come about eight o'clock." She gave him the address and a simple direction or two in case he found himself a moronic taxi driver, and they said goodbye and she rang off.

Hank Spotswood. That was good. She smiled to herself, then looked at her watch, put Hank out of her mind, sprang to her feet, collected hat, coat, bag, and gloves, and stalked from the office to keep her luncheon date with Nancy.

Their venue was L'Escargot in Soho, where Olivia had booked a table. This was where she always came for business lunches, and she saw no reason to make any other arrangement, although she knew that Nancy would have been much more at home in Harvey Nichols, or someplace full of exhausted women resting their feet after a morning's shopping.

But L'Escargot it was, and Olivia was late, and Nancy was waiting for her, fatter than ever, in her heather wool sweater and skirt and a fur hat roughly the same colour as her faded fair curls, which made her look as though she had grown another head of hair. There she sat, a single female in a sea of business men, with her handbag on her lap and a large gin and tonic on the small table in front of her, and she appeared so ridiculously out of place that Olivia knew a pang of guilt, and as a result sounded more effusive than she felt.

"Oh, Nancy, I'm sorry, I'm terribly sorry, I got held up. Have you been waiting long?"

They did not kiss. They never kissed.

"It's all right."

"You've had a drink, anyway . . . you don't want another, do you? I booked a table for a quarter to one, and we don't want to lose it."

"Good afternoon, Miss Keeling."

"Oh, hello, Gerard. No, not a drink, thank you, we're a bit pushed for time."

"You have a table ordered?"

"Yes. A quarter to one. I'm afraid I'm a bit late."

"No matter—if you'd like to come through."

He led the way, but Olivia waited for Nancy to heave herself to her feet, gather up her bag and her magazine, and pull her sweater down over her considerable rump before she followed him. The restaurant was warm and packed and loud with masculine conversation. They were led to Olivia's usual table, in a far corner of the room, where after the customary obsequious ceremony, they were finally seated on a curved banquette, the table pushed back over their knees and the massive menus produced.

"A glass of sherry while you decide?"

"Terrier for me, please, Gerard . . . and for my sister . . ." She turned to Nancy. "You'd like some wine?"

"Yes, that would be very nice."

Olivia, ignoring the wine list, ordered a half bottle of the house white.

"Now, what do you want to eat?"

Nancy did not really know. The menu was terrifyingly large and all in French. Olivia knew that she could sit there all day, debating over it, so she made a few suggestions, and in the end Nancy agreed to consomme and then escalope of veal with mushrooms. Olivia ordered an omelette and a green salad and, with this settled and the waiter gone, "What sort of journey did you have up this morning?" she asked.

"Oh, very comfortable, really. I caught the nine-fifteen. It was a bit of a rush getting the children off to school, but I made it."

"How are the children?"

She tried to sound as though she were really interested, but Nancy knew that she was not and so did not, thankfully, expound on the subject.

"All right."

"And George?"

"He's well, I think."

"And the dogs?" Olivia persevered.

"Fine . . ." Nancy started to say and then remembered. "One of them was sick this morning."

Olivia screwed up her face. "Don't tell me. Not until we've eaten."

The wine waiter appeared, with Olivia's Perrier and Nancy's half bottle. These were deftly opened and the wine poured. The man waited. Nancy remembered that she was meant to taste it, so she took a sip, pursed her lips professionally, and pronounced it delicious. The bottle was placed on the table and the wine waiter, expressionless, withdrew.

Olivia poured her own Perrier. "Don't you ever drink wine?" Nancy asked her.

"Not during business lunches."

Nancy raised her eyebrows, appearing almost arch. "Is this a business lunch?"

"Well, isn't it? Isn't that what we're here to do? Talk business about Mumma." The baby name as usual irritated Nancy. All three of Penelope's children called her by a different name. Noel addressed her as Ma. Nancy, for some years, had called her Mother, which she considered suitable to their ages and to Nancy's own station in life. Only Olivia—so hard-hearted and

sophisticated in every other way—persisted with "Mumma." Nancy sometimes wondered if Olivia realized how ridiculous she sounded. "We'd better get on with it. I haven't got all day."

Her cool tones were the last straw. Nancy, who had travelled up from Gloucestershire for this meeting, who had wiped up dog's sick and cut her thumb on the Bonzo tin, somehow got her children to school and caught the train by the skin of her teeth, experienced a great surge of resentment.

I haven't got all day.

Why did Olivia have to be so brusque, so heartless, so un-feeling? Was there never to be an occasion when, cosily, they could talk as sisters without Olivia flaunting her busy career, as though Nancy's life, with its solid priorities of home, husband, and children, counted for nothing?

When they were small, it was Nancy who was the pretty one. Fair-haired, blue-eyed, with sweet ways, and (thanks to Granny Keeling) pretty clothes. It was Nancy who had attracted eyes, admiration, men. Olivia was brainy and ambitious, obsessed by books, exams, and academic achievement; but plain, Nancy reminded herself, so plain. Painfully tall and thin, flat-chested and bespectacled, she displayed an almost arrogant lack of interest in the opposite sex, relapsing into a disdainful silence whenever one of Nancy's boyfriends turned up, or disappearing up to her bedroom for a book.

And yet, she had her redeeming features. She would not have been her parents' daughter had she not been blessed with these. Her hair, which was very thick, was the colour and sheen of polished mahogany, and the dark eyes, inherited from their mother, glittered, like those of some bird's, with a sort of sar-donic intelligence.

So what had happened? The gangling, brilliant University student, the sister no man would dance with, had somehow, sometime, somewhere, transformed herself into this phenomenon, of Olivia at thirty-eight. This formidable career woman, this Editor of Venus.

Her appearance today was as uncompromising as ever. Ugly, even, but

almost frighteningly chic. Deep-crowned black velour hat, voluminous black coat, cream silk shirt, gold chains and gold earrings, knuckle-duster rings on her hands. Her face was pale, her mouth very red; even her enormous black-rimmed spectacles she had somehow turned into an enviable accessory.

Nancy was no fool. As she followed Olivia across the crowded restaurant to their table, she had sensed the frisson of masculine interest, seen the covert glances and the turned heads and known that they had not been turned for pretty her, but for Olivia.

Nancy had never guessed at the dark secrets of Olivia's life. Right up to that extraordinary happening, five years ago, she had honestly believed that her sister was either a virgin or totally sexless. (There was, of course, another and more sinister possibility, which occurred to Nancy after ploughing her way dutifully through a biography of Vita Sackville-West, but this, she told herself, really didn't bear thinking about.)

The classic example of an ambitious and clever woman, Olivia had apparently been absorbed by her career, which had steadily advanced until she was finally made Features Editor of *Venus*, the intelligent, up-market magazine for women, on which she had worked for seven years. Her name figured on the flagstaff page; from time to time her photograph appeared in its pages, illustrating some article, and once, answering questions in a family show, she had been on television.

And then, with everything going for her, in mid-stream of life, as it were, Olivia took that unexpected and uncharacteristic step. She went on holiday to Ibiza, met a man called Cosmo Hamilton, and never came home. At least, she did finally come back, but not until after she had spent a year out there living with him. The first her editor knew of it was a formal letter, sent from Ibiza, handing in her resignation. When the mind-boggling news filtered through, via their mother, Nancy had at first refused to believe it. She told herself that it was all too shocking; but it was, in fact, because in some obscure way, she felt that Olivia had stolen a march on her.

She could not wait to tell George, to have him dumbfounded as she had been, but his reaction took her quite unawares.

"Interesting" was all he said.

"You don't seem very surprised."

"I'm not."

She frowned. "George, it's Olivia we're talking about."

"Certainly it's Olivia." He looked at his wife's bewildered face and almost laughed. "Nancy, you surely don't imagine that Olivia has lived like a good little nun all her life? That secretive girl with her flat in London and her evasive ways. If you believed that, you're a bigger fool than I thought."

Nancy felt tears sting the back of her eyes. "But . . . but, I thought ..."

"What did you think?"

"Oh, George, she's so unattractive."

"No," George told her. "No, Nancy, she is not unattractive."

"But I thought you didn't like her."

"I don't," said George, and opened his newspaper, thus putting an end to the discussion.

It was unlike George to expound so forcefully on any subject. It was also unlike him to be so perceptive but, with hindsight and a good deal of mulling over this new turn of events, Nancy finally decided that he was probably right about Olivia. Once she had come to terms with the situation, she did not find it hard to turn it to her own advantage. Being able to boast of such a dashing relation seemed to Nancy both glamorous and sophisticated—like an old Noel Coward play—and provided one glossed over the living-in-sin bit, Olivia and Cosmo Hamilton provided quite a good conversation stopper at dinner parties. "Olivia, you know, my clever sister, it's too romantic. She's thrown everything up for love. Living in Ibiza now ... the most beautiful house." Her imagination raced ahead to other delightful, and hopefully free,

possibilities. "Perhaps next summer George and I and the children will join her for a few weeks. It depends on the Pony Club events, though, doesn't it? We mothers are slaves to the Pony Club."

But although Olivia asked their mother to go and stay and Penelope accepted with delight and spent more than a month with her and Cosmo, no such invitation ever came the way of the Chamberlains, and for this Nancy had never forgiven her sister.

The restaurant was very warm. Nancy felt, all at once, far too hot. She wished she had worn a blouse instead of a sweater, but she couldn't take the sweater off, so instead she took another cool mouthful of wine. Despite the warmth she realized that her hands were trembling.

Beside her, Olivia said, "Have you seen Mumma?"

"Oh, yes." She set down her glass. "I went to see her in hospital."

"How was she?"

"Very well, considering."

"Are they certain it was a heart attack?"

"Oh, yes. They had her in intensive care for a day or two. And then they put her in a ward and then she discharged herself and went home."

"The doctor can't have liked that very much."

"No, he was annoyed. That's why he rang me, and that's when he told me that she shouldn't live alone."

"Have you considered a second opinion?"

Nancy bridled. "Olivia, he's a very good doctor."

"A country GP."

"He would be very offended . . ."

"Rubbish. I consider there is no point in doing anything about a companion or a housekeeper until she's seen a consul-tant."

"You know she'd never see a consultant."

"Then let her be. Why should she have some dim woman foisted on her if she wants to live on her own? She's got nice Mrs. Plackett coming in three mornings a week, and I'm sure the people in the village will all rally round and keep an eye on her. After all, she's lived there for five years now, and everyone knows her."

"But suppose she has another attack, and dies, just because there's nobody to help her. Or falls down the stairs. Or has a car crash and kills somebody."

Olivia, unforgivably, laughed. "I never knew you had such a vivid imagination. And let's face it, if she's going to have a car crash, she'll have one whether there's a housekeeper there or not. I honestly don't think we should worry."

"But we have to worry."

"Why?"

"It's not just the housekeeper . . . there are other things to be considered. The garden, for instance. Two acres of it, and she's always done it all herself. Digging the vegetables and mowing the lawn. Everything. She can't be expected to go on coping with that sort of physical work."

"She isn't going to," Olivia told her, and Nancy frowned, "I had a long gas with her on the telephone the other evening—"

"You didn't tell me that."

"You've scarcely given me the chance. She sounded splendid, robust and cheerful. She told me that she thought the doctor was a fool, and that if she had another woman living with her, she'd probably murder her. The house is

too small and they'd do nothing but trip over each other, with which I wholeheartedly agreed. As for the garden, even before she had the so-called heart attack, she'd decided it was getting a bit too much for her, so she got in touch with the local garden contractors and has arranged for a man to come and work two or three days a week. I think he's starting next Monday."

All this did nothing to put Nancy in a better frame of mind. It was as though Olivia and Mother had been conspiring behind her back.

"I'm not sure I think that's a very good idea. How do we know what sort of a person they'll send? It could be anybody. Surely she could have found some nice man from the village."

"All the nice men from the village are already employed at the electronics factory at Pudley ..."

Nancy would have argued on, but was forestalled by the arrival of her soup. It came in a round brown earthenware pot and smelled delicious. She suddenly realized how hungry she was, took up her spoon, and reached for a warm brown croissant.

After a bit, she said stiffly, "You never considered discussing the matter with George and me."

"For heaven's sake, what is there to discuss? It has nothing to do with any person but Mumma. Honestly, Nancy, you and George treat her as though she were senile; she's sixty-four, in the prime of life, strong as an ox and as independent as she's ever been. Stop interfering."

Nancy was enraged. "Interfering! Perhaps if you and Noel interfered, as you term it, a little more often, it would take some of the load from my shoulders."

Olivia became icy. "Firstly, don't you ever bracket me with Noel. And secondly, if you have a load on your shoulders, you dreamt it up and put it there yourself."

"I don't know why George and I bother. We certainly get no thanks."

"What is there to thank you for?"

"A lot. If I hadn't convinced Mother it was madness, she'd have taken herself back to Cornwall and be living in some fisherman's hut by now."

"I could never understand why you thought that was such a bad idea."

"Olivia. Miles away from all of us, at the other end of the country ... it was ridiculous. I told her so. You can never go back, that's what I said. That was all she was trying to do, recapture her youth. It would have been a disaster. And besides, it was George who found Podmore's Thatch for her. And even you can't say that it isn't the most charming, perfect house in every way. And all thanks to George. Don't forget that, Olivia. All thanks to George."

"Three cheers for George."

There came at this point another interruption, while Nancy's soup bowl was removed and the escalope of veal and the omelette were served. The last of the wine was emptied into Nancy's glass, and Olivia began to help herself to salad. When the waiter had left them once more, Nancy demanded, "And what is this gardener going to cost? Contract gardeners are notoriously expensive."

"Oh, Nancy, does it matter?"

"Of course it matters. Can Mother afford it? It's very worrying. She's always been so secretive about money, and at the same time so dreadfully extravagant."

"Mother? Extravagant? She never spends a brass farthing on herself."

"But she never stops entertaining. Her food and drink bills must be astronomical. And that ridiculous conservatory she built at the cottage. George tried to dissuade her. She'd have been much better off spending the money on double glazing."

"Perhaps she didn't want double glazing."

"You refuse to be concerned, don't you?" Nancy's voice shook with indignation. "To consider the possibilities?"

"And what are the possibilities, Nancy? Enlighten me."

"She could live to be ninety."

"I hope she does."

"Her capital won't last forever."

Olivia's eyes glittered with amusement. "Are you and George afraid of being left with a destitute, dependent parent on your hands? Yet another drain on your finances after you've paid the upkeep of that barn of a house, and wheeled your children off to the most expensive schools?"

"How we choose to spend our money is none of your affair."

"And how Mumma chooses to spend hers is none of your business."

This retort silenced Nancy. Turning from Olivia, she concentrated her attention on her veal. Olivia, watching her, saw the colour rise in her sister's cheeks, the slight tremor of mouth and jowl. For God's sake, she thought, she's only forty-three, and she looks a fat, pathetic, old woman. She was filled suddenly with pity for Nancy and a certain guilt, and found herself saying, in a more kindly and encouraging tone, "I shouldn't worry too much if I were you. She got a socking price for Oakley Street, and there's a good chunk of that still to go, even after buying Podmore's Thatch. I don't suppose old Lawrence Stern realized it, but with one thing and another, he really left her quite comfortably off. Which was just as well for you and me and Noel, because, let's face it, our father was never anything, financially, but a dead loss. . . ."

Nancy, all at once, realized that she had come to the end of her rope. She was exhausted with argument, and she hated it when Olivia spoke of darling Daddy in that way. Under normal circumstances she would have sprung to the defence of that dear, dead man. But now, she hadn't the energy. The

meeting with Olivia had been a total waste of time. Nothing had been decided —about Mother, or money, or housekeepers, or anything; Olivia, as always, had talked rings around her, and now had left Nancy feeling as though she had been run over by a steamroller.

Lawrence Stern.

The delicious meal was over. Olivia glanced at her watch, and asked Nancy if she'd like coffee. Nancy asked if there was time, and Olivia said yes, she'd got another five minutes, so Nancy said she would, and Olivia ordered coffee; and Nancy, reluctantly putting out of her mind images of the delicious puddings she had spied on the sweet trolley, reached out for the Harpers and Queen she had bought for the train and which lay now on the padded velvet seat beside her.

"Have you seen this?"

She leafed through the pages until she came to the Boothby's advertisement, and handed the magazine to her sister. Olivia glanced at it and nodded. "Yes, I did see it. It's coming up for sale next Wednesday."

"Isn't it extraordinary?" Nancy took the magazine back. "To think any person should want to buy a horror like that?"

"Nancy, I can assure you, a lot of people want to buy a horror like that."

"You have to be joking."

"Certainly not." Seeing her sister's genuine bewilderment, Olivia laughed.

"Oh, Nancy, where have you and George been these last few years? There's been an enormous resurgence of interest in Victorian painting. Lawrence Stern, Alma-Tadema, John William Waterhouse . . . they're commanding enormous sums in the art dealers' sales."

Nancy studied the gloomy Water Carriers with what she hoped was a new eye. It didn't make any difference. "But why?" she persisted.

Olivia shrugged. "A new appreciation of their technique. Rarity value."

"When you say enormous sums, what do you mean, exactly? I mean, how

much will this go for?"

"I've no idea."

"A guess."

"Well . . ." Olivia turned down her mouth, considering. "Maybe . . . two hundred thousand."

"Two hundred thousand? For that?"

"Give or take the odd twenty pence."

"But why?" Nancy wailed again.

"I've told you. Rarity value. Nothing's worth anything unless somebody wants it. Lawrence Stern was never a prolific painter. If you look at the minute detail in that picture, you'll see why. It must have taken months to complete."

"But what's happened to all his work?"

"Gone. Sold. Probably sold straight off the easel, with the paint still wet. Every self-respecting private collection or public art gallery in the world will have a Lawrence Stern somewhere around the place. It's only every now and then that one of his pictures comes on the market nowadays. And don't forget, he stopped painting long before the war, when his hands became too crippled even to hold a brush. I imagine he sold everything he could and was glad to, just to keep himself and his family alive. He was never a rich man, and it was fortunate for us that he inherited a huge London house from his father, and then was able, later on, to buy the freehold of Cam Cottage. The sale of Cam Cottage went a long way towards educating the three of us, and the proceeds from Oakley Street are what Mumma's living on now."

Nancy listened to all this, but not with her fullest attention. Her concentration wavered, as her mind went off at a tangent, exploring possibilities, speculating.

She said, sounding as casual as she could, "What about Mother's pictures?"

"The Shell Seekers, you mean?"

"Yes. And the two panels on the landing."

"What about them?"

"If they were sold now, would they be worth a lot of money?"

"I imagine, yes."

Nancy swallowed. Her mouth was dry. "How much?"

"Nancy, I'm not in the business."

"Roughly."

"I suppose . . . close on five hundred thousand."

"Five-hundred-thousand." The words made scarcely any sound. Nancy leaned back in her chair seat, utterly stunned. Half a million. She could see the sum written out, with a pound sign and lots of lovely noughts. At that moment, the waiter brought their coffee, black and steaming and fragrant. Nancy cleared her throat and tried again. "Half a million."

"Roughly." Olivia, with one of her rare smiles, shunted the sugar bowl in Nancy's direction. "So you see why you and George need have no fears on Mumma's behalf."

That was the end of the conversation. They drank their coffee in silence, Olivia settled the bill, and they got up to go. Outside the restaurant, as they were travelling in different directions, they ordered two taxis and, as Olivia was pushed for time, she took the first one. They said goodbye on the pavement and Nancy watched her go. While they lunched, it had started to rain, quite heavily, but Nancy, standing in the downpour, scarcely noticed it.

Half a million.

Her own taxi drew up. She told the driver to take her to Harrods, remembered to tip the doorman, and clambered aboard. The taxi moved forward. She sat back in her seat and looked through the streaming windows at passing London, her eyes unseeing. She had achieved nothing with Olivia, but the day had not been wasted. She could feel her heart thumping with stealthy excitement.

Half a million pounds.

One of the reasons that Olivia Keeling had made such a success of her career was that she had developed the ability to clear her mind, and so beam in her considerable intelligence on one set of problems at a time. She ran her life like a submarine, divided into watertight compartments, each impregnably sealed from the others. Thus, this morning, she had put Hank Spotswood out of her mind, and so been able to give her entire attention to sorting out Nancy., On returning to the office, even as she walked through the door of that prestigious building, Nancy and all her trivial anxieties of home and family were blanked out, and Olivia was once more the Editor of Venus, with thought for nothing but the successful advancement of her paper. During the afternoon, she dictated letters, organized a session with her Advertising Manager, arranged a promotion luncheon to be held at the Dorchester, and had a long-overdue row with the Fiction Editor, informing the poor female that, if she could not find better stories than the efforts which she thought fit to submit to Olivia for approval, then Venus would cease altogether to publish fiction, and the Fiction Editor would find herself out of a job. The Fiction Editor, a single parent endeavouring to bring up two children, duly burst into tears, but Olivia was adamant; the magazine had priority over all else, and she simply handed the woman a Kleenex and gave her two weeks' grace in which to produce some magic rabbit out of her hat.

But it was all fairly draining. She realized that it was Friday and the end of the week, and was grateful for this. She worked on until six o'clock, clearing her desk, before finally gathering up her belongings, taking the lift down to the basement garage, collecting her car, and setting off for home.

The traffic was appalling, but she was used to rush-hour traffic and accepted it. Venus, with mental slam of the watertight door, ceased to exist; it was as though the afternoon had never happened, and she was back in L'Escargot again, with Nancy.

She had been brusque with Nancy, accused her of over-reacting, made little of her mother's illness, dismissed the country doctor's prognosis. This was because Nancy invariably made mountains of molehills . . . poor girl, what else did she have to do with her boring life . . . but also because Olivia, as though she were still a child, did not want to think of Penelope as anything but well. Immortal even. She did not want her to be ill. She did not want her to die.

A heart attack. That it could happen to her mother, of all people, who had never been sick in all her life. Tall, strong, vital, interested in everything, but most important, always there. Olivia remembered the basement kitchen at Oakley Street, the heart of that great rambling London house, where soup simmered, and people sat around the scrubbed table and talked for hours over brarty and coffee, while her mother did the ironing or mended sheets. When anyone mentioned the word "security," Olivia thought of that comforting place.

And now. She sighed. Perhaps the doctor was right. Perhaps Penelope should have some person living with her. The best thing would be for Olivia to go and see her, talk things over, and, if necessary, see if they could come to some sort of an arrangement. Tomorrow was Saturday. I shall go and see her tomorrow, she told herself and felt at once much better. Drive down to Podmore's Thatch in the morning and spend the day. With the decision made, she put it all out of her mind and allowed the resultant void to fill slowly with pleasurable anticipation of the evening that lay ahead.

By now, she was nearly home. But first she turned in at her local supermarket, parked the car, and did some shopping. Crusty brown bread, butter, and a pot of pate de foie gras; chicken Kiev, and the makings of a salad. Olive oil, fresh peaches, cheeses; a bottle of Scotch, a couple of bottles of wine. She bought flowers, an armful of daffodils, loaded all this loot into the boot of her car, and drove the short distance that took her to Ranfurly

Road.

Her house was one of a terrace of small red brick Edwardians, each with its bulging bay window and front garden and tiled path. From the outside it looked almost painfully ordinary, which only increased the impact of its unexpected and sophisticated interior. The cramped rooms of the ground floor had been transformed into a single spacious apartment, with the kitchen divided from the dining area only by a counter, like a little bar, and an open staircase leading to the upper floor. At the far end of the room, French windows led out into the garden, and these gave a strangely rural view, for beyond the garden fence was a church with its own half acre or so of land, where Sunday-school picnics were held in the summer-time, and a huge oak tree spread its branches.

Because of this it would have seemed natural had Olivia decorated her house in country style, with sprigged cottons and pine furniture, but the impact she had contrived was cool and modern as a penthouse flat. The basic colour was white. Olivia loved white. The colour of luxury, the colour of light. White tiled floor, white walls, white curtains. Knobbly white cotton on the deep, sinfully comfortable sofas and chairs, white lamps and shades. And the result was not cold, for this pristine canvas she had splashed with touches of primary brightness. Cushions of scarlet and Indian pink, Spanish rugs, startling abstracts framed in silver. The dining-room table was glass, the chairs black, and one wall of her dining room she had painted cobalt blue and hung with a gallery of photographs of family and friends.

It was, as well, warm, immaculate, and shingly clean. This was because Olivia's neighbour, with whom she had had a long-standing arrangement, came in each day to wash and polish. Now, she could smell the polish, mingled with the scent from a bowl of blue hyacinths, bulbs she had planted last autumn and which had finally reached their peak of scented perfection.

Unhurried, consciously unwinding, she set about her preparations for the coming evening. Drew the curtains, lit the fire (which was gas with sham logs, but as comforting and genuine as a proper fire), put a tape on the stereo, poured herself a Scotch. In the kitchen, she concocted a salad, made a dressing for this, laid the table, put the wine to cool.

It was now nearly seven-thirty, and she went upstairs. Her bedroom was at the back of the house, looking out over the garden and the oak tree, and this too was white, with a thick fitted carpet and an enormous double divan bed. She looked at the bed, and thought about Hank Spotswood, deliberated for a moment or two, and then stripped and remade it, replacing the sheets with clean ones of shining, icy, freshly ironed linen. When she had done this, and only then, she undressed and ran herself a bath.

For Olivia, the ritual of her evening bath was her one indulgence in total relaxation. Here, soaking in scented steam, she allowed her mind to drift, her thoughts to wander. It was an interlude conducive to pleasant reflections—holidays to be considered, clothes for the coming months, vague fantasies concerning her current man. But somehow this evening, she found herself back with Nancy, wondering if she was home by now in that dreadful house with her graceless family. True, she had problems, but they all seemed to be self-induced. She and George, with all their pretensions, lived far beyond their means, and yet managed to convince themselves that they had the right to so much more. It was hard not to smile at the recollection of Nancy's face, jaw sagging and eyes goggling, when Olivia had told her the probable worth of the Lawrence Stern paintings. Nancy had never been any good at hiding her thoughts, especially if you caught her unawares, and the blank astonishment had been, almost at once, replaced with an expression of calculating avarice, as Nancy doubtless envisaged school bills paid, the old Vicarage double-glazed, and security ensured for the entire Chamberlain clan.

This did not worry Olivia. She had no fears for The Shell Seekers. Lawrence Stern had given the painting to his daughter as a wedding present and it was more precious to her than all the money in the world. She would never sell it. Nancy—and for that matter Noel—would simply have to bide their time until nature took its course and Penelope turned up her toes and died. Which, Olivia devoutly hoped, would not be for years.

She mentally abandoned Nancy and let her mind move on to other, more attractive concerns. That clever young photographer, Lyle Medwin. Brilliant. A real find. And perceptive, too.

"Ibiza," he had said, and she had, involuntarily, repeated the word, and perhaps he had caught some question in her voice or expression, for he had at once made an alternative suggestion. Ibiza. Now, she realized, squeezing her sponge so that hot water trickled like balm over her nakedness, that memories had stirred and stayed, hovering around at the back of her consciousness, ever since that small and apparently insignificant exchange.

She had not thought of Ibiza for months. But, "Rural backgrounds . . ." she had suggested. "With goats and sheep and hardy peasants tilling fields." She saw the house, long and low, red-tiled, hung with bougainvillaea and trellises of vines. Heard cowbells and cocks crowing. Smelt the warm resin of pine and juniper, blown in from the sea on a warm wind. Felt again the nailing heat of the Mediterranean sun.

COSMO

On holiday with friends during the early summer of 1979, Olivia met Cosmo Hamilton at a party on a boat.

She disliked boats. She disliked the close quarters, the claustrophobia caused by too many people crowded into too small a space, the constant banging of shin and head on davit and boom. This particular boat was a thirty-foot cruiser, moored out in the harbour and reached by means of a power dinghy. Olivia went because the rest of her party were going, but she did so reluctantly, and it was just as bad as she had feared, with too many people, no place to sit, and everybody being dreadfully jolly and bluff, drinking Bloody Marys, and discussing with much noisy laughter the momentous party they had all been to the previous evening, and which Olivia and her friends had not.

She found herself standing, hand clamped around her glass, in the cockpit of the yacht, along with about fourteen other people. It was like trying to be sociable in a very crowded lift. And another awful thing about being on a boat was that there was no way you could leave. You couldn't simply walk out of the door and into the street and find a taxi and go home. You were stuck. Jammed, moreover, face to face with a chinless man, who seemed to think that you would find it fascinating to be told that one was in the Guards, and how long it took one to drive, in one's fairly fast car, from one's place in Hampshire to Windsor.

Olivia's face ached with boredom. When he turned for a moment to get his glass refilled, she instantly made her escape, stepping up out of the cockpit and making her way forward, passing en route an almost totally naked girl sunbathing on top of the cabin roof. On the foredeck, she found a corner of empty deck and there sat, her back propped against the mast. Here, the babble of voices continued to assault her ears, but at least she was alone. It was very hot. She stared despondently at the sea.

A shadow fell across her legs. She looked up, fearing the Guardee from

Windsor, and saw that it was the man with the beard. She had noticed him as soon as she stepped on board, but they had not spoken. His beard was grey, but his hair was thick and white, and he was very tall and spare and muscular, dressed in a white shirt and faded, salt-bleached jeans.

He said, "Do you need another drink?"

"I don't think so."

"Do you want to be alone?"

He had a charming voice. She did not think he looked the sort of man who would refer to himself as "one." She said, "Not necessarily."

He squatted beside her. Their eyes came level and she saw that his were the same pale, soft blue as his jeans. His face was lined and deeply tanned, and he looked as though he might be a writer.

"Can I join you then?"

She hesitated, and then smiled. "Why not?"

His name was Cosmo Hamilton. He lived on the island, had lived here for twenty-five years. No, he was not a writer. To begin with he had run a yacht charter business and then had a job as agent for a firm in London which ran package holidays, but now he was a gentleman of leisure. Olivia, despite herself, became interested.

"Don't you get bored?"

"Why should I get bored?"

"With nothing to do."

"I have a thousand things to do."

"Name two."

His eyes gleamed with amusement. "That's almost insulting."

And, indeed, he looked so fit and active that it probably was. Olivia smiled. "I didn't mean it literally."

His own smile wanned his face, like a light, and caused his eyes to crinkle up at the corners. Olivia felt as though her heart, very stealthily, was stirring and turning over.

"I have a boat," he told her, "and a house and a garden. Shelves of books, two goats, and three dozen bantams. At the last count. Bantams are notoriously prolific."

"Do you look after the bantams, or does your wife do that?"

"My wife lives in Weybridge. We're divorced."

"So you're alone."

"Not entirely. I have a daughter. She's at day school in England, so she lives with her mother during the term and then comes out here for the holidays."

"How old?"

"Thirteen. She's called Antonia."

"She must love being here for holidays."

"Yes. We have a good time. What are you called?"

"Olivia Keeling."

"Where are you staying?"

"At Los Pinos."

"Are you alone?"

"No, with friends. That's why I'm here. One of our party was given the invitation and we all tagged along."

"I saw you come on board."

She said, "I hate boats," and he began to laugh.

The next morning he turned up at the hotel in search of her. He found her alone, by the pool. It was early and her friends were presumably still in their bedrooms, but Olivia had already swum, and had ordered her breakfast to be served on the poolside terrace.

"Good morning."

She looked up, into the sun, and saw him standing there in a dazzle of light.

"Hello."

Her hair was wet and sleek from her swim and she was wrapped in a white towelling robe.

"May I join you?"

"If you want." She put out a foot and pushed a chair in his direction. "Have you had breakfast?"

"Yes." He sat down. "A couple of hours ago."

"Some coffee?"

"No, not even coffee."

"What can I do for you then?"

"I came to see if you'd like to spend the day with me."

"Does that invitation include my friends?"

"No. Just you."

He was looking straight at her, his eyes steady and quite unblinking. She felt as though she had been thrown a challenge, and for some reason this disconcerted her. Not for years had Olivia been disconcerted. To cover this unfamiliar nervousness and give herself something to do, she took up an orange from the basket of fruit on the table and began to try to peel it. She said, "What am I going to say to the others?"

"Just tell them you're going to spend the day with me."

The peel of the orange was tough and hurt her thumbnail. "What are we going to do?"

"I thought we'd take my boat out . . . take a picnic. . . . Here." He sounded impatient, leaned forward and took the orange away from her. "You'll never peel it that way." He reached into his back pocket, produced a knife and began to score the orange into four sections.

Watching his hands, she said, "I hate boats."

"I know. You told me yesterday." He returned the knife to his pocket, deftly peeled the fruit, and handed it back to Olivia. "Now," he said, as she silently took it, "what are you going to say? Yes or No?"

Olivia leaned back in her chair and smiled. She broke the orange into segments and began to eat them, one by one. In silence, Cosmo watched her. Now the heat of the morning was intensifying, and, with the delicious taste of fresh citrus on her tongue, she felt warm and content as a cat in the sun. Slowly, she finished the orange. When it was done, she licked her fingers and looked across the table at the man who waited. She said, "Yes."

Olivia discovered that day that she didn't hate boats after all. Cosmo's was not nearly as big as the one on which the party had been held, but infinitely nicer.

For one thing, there were just the two of them, and for another they didn't just bob pointlessly about at the mooring, but cast off and hauled up the sail and slipped away, past the harbour wall and out into the open sea and around the coast to a blue deserted inlet that the tourists had never taken the trouble to find. There they dropped anchor and swam, diving from the deck, and clambering aboard again by means of a maddeningly contrary rope ladder.

The sun was now high in the sky and it was so hot that he rigged an awning over the cockpit and they ate their picnic in the shade of this. Bread and tomatoes, slices of salami, fruit and cheese, and wine that was sweet and cool because he had tied lengths of twine to the necks of the bottles and lowered them into the sea.

And later, there was space to stretch out on the deck and peacefully sunbathe; and later still, when the wind had dropped, and the sun was sliding down out of the sky, and the reflected light from the water shimmered on the white-painted bulkhead of the cabin, room to make love.

The next day he turned up again, in his battered tough little drop-head, a Citroen 2 CV that looked more like a mobile dustbin than anything else, and drove her away from the coast, inland, to where he had his house. By now, not unnaturally, the rest of her party were becoming a little peeved by Olivia. The man who had been included for her delight had taxed her with this, and they had had words, whereupon he had relapsed into a fetid sulk. Which made him all the easier to leave.

It was another beautiful morning. The road led up into the mild hills, through sleepy golden villages and past small white churches, farms where goats grazed in the thin fields, and patient mules harnessed to grinding wheels trod in circles.

Here it was as it had been for centuries, untouched by commerce and tourism. The surface of the road deteriorated, modern tarmac was left behind, and the Citroen finally ground and bumped its way down a narrow, unmade track, dark and cool in the shade of a grove of umbrella pines, and came to rest beneath a massive olive tree.

Cosmo killed the engine and they got out of the car. Olivia felt the cool breeze on her face, and caught a glimpse of the distant sea. A path led on, downhill, through an orchard of almonds, and beyond this lay his house. Long and white, red-roofed, stained purple with bougainvillea blossom, it commanded an uninterrupted view of the wide valley, sloping down towards the coast. Along the front of the house was a terrace, trellised with vines, and below the terrace a small tangled garden spilled down to a little swimming pool, glinting clear and turquoise in the sunshine.

"What a place" was all she could find to say.
"Come indoors and I'll show you around."

It was a confusion of a house. Random stairways led up and down, and no two rooms seemed to be on the same level. Once it had been a farmhouse, and upstairs still were living room and kitchen, while the rooms on the ground floor, which once had been byre and stable and sty, were the bedrooms.

Inside, it was austere and cool, whitewashed throughout and furnished in the simplest of styles. A few coloured rugs on the rough wooden floors, locally made furniture, cane-seated chairs, scrubbed wooden tables. Only in the sitting room were there curtains, elsewhere the deeply embrasured windows had to make do with shutters.

But as well there were delights. Deep-cushioned sofas and chairs, draped in colourful cotton blankets; jugs of flowers; rough baskets by the open fireplace, filled with logs. In the kitchen, copper saucepans hung from a beam, and there was the smell of spices and herbs. And everywhere were evidences of the obviously cultured man who had occupied this place for twenty-five years. Hundreds of books, not just on shelves, but spilling over onto tables, window-ledges, and the cupboard beside his bed. And there were good pictures and many photographs, and racks of long-playing records neatly stacked by the record player.

At last, the tour of inspection finished, he led the way through a low door and down yet another flight of stairs, and so out again, by way of a red-tiled lobby, and onto the terrace.

She stood, with her back to the view, and gazed up at the face of the house. She said, "It's more perfect than I could have imagined."

"Go and sit down and look at the view and I'll bring you a glass of wine."

There were a table and some basket chairs set about on the flags, but Olivia did not want to sit. Instead, she went to lean against the whitewashed wall, where earthenware tubs spilled lemon-scented ivy-leaved geraniums, and an army of ants, endlessly occupied, marched to and fro in well-regulated troops. The quiet was immeasurable. Listening, she caught the tiny muted sounds that were part of this quiet. A distant cowbell. The soft cackling murmur of contented hens, hidden away somewhere in the garden but clearly audible. The stirring of the breeze.

A whole new world. They had driven only a few kilometers, but she could have been a thousand miles from the hotel, her friends, the cocktails, the crowded swimming pool, the bustling streets and shops of the town, the bright lights and the blaring discos. Farther away still were London, *Venus*, her flat, her job— fading into unreality; forgotten dreams of a life that had never been real. Like a vessel that has been empty for too long, she felt herself filled with peace. I could stay here. A small voice, a hand tugging at her sleeve. This is a place where I could stay.

She heard him behind her, descending the stone stairway, the heels of his loose sandals slapping against the treads. She turned and watched him emerge through the dark aperture of the door (he was so tall that he automatically ducked his head). He was carrying a bottle of wine and two tumblers, and the sun was high and his shadow was very black. He set down the glasses and the frosty, beaded bottle and reached into the pocket of his jeans and produced a cigar, which he lit with a match.

When this was going, she said, "I didn't know you smoked."

"Only these. Every now and again. I used to be a fifty-a-day man, but I finally kicked the habit. Today, however, seems to be a suitable occasion for self-indulgence." He had already uncorked the bottle and now poured the wine into the tumblers; he picked one up and handed it to Olivia. It was icily cold.

"What shall we drink to?" he asked her.

"Your house, whatever it's called."

"Ca'n D'alt."

"To Ca'n D'alt, then. And its owner."

They drank. He said, "I watched you from the kitchen window. You were so very still. I wondered what you were thinking."

"Just that ... up here . . . reality fades."

"Is that a good thing?"

"I think so. I'm . . ." She hesitated, searching for the right words, because all at once it became enormously important to use exactly the right words. "I'm not a domesticated creature. I'm thirty-three, the Features Editor of a magazine called *Venus*. It's taken me a long time to get there. I've worked for my living and my independence ever since I left Oxford, but I'm not telling you this because I want you to be sorry for me. I've never wanted anything else. Never wanted to be married or have children. Not that sort of permanence."

"So?"

"It's just that . . . this is the sort of place where I think I could stay. I wouldn't feel trapped or rooted here. I don't know why." She smiled at him. "I don't know why."

"Then stay," he said.

"For today? For tonight?"

"No. Just stay."

"My mother always told me never to accept an open-ended invitation. There must always be a date of arrival, she said, and a date of departure."

"She was quite right. Let's say the date of arrival is today and the date of departure you can decide for yourself."

She gazed at him, assessing motives, implications. Finally, "You're asking me to move in with you?"

"Yes."

"What about my job? It's a good job, Cosmo. Well paid and responsible. It's taken me all my life to get as far as I have."

"In that case, it's time you took a sabbatical. No man, or woman, for that matter, can work forever."

A sabbatical. A year. Twelve months could be called a sabbatical. Longer was running away.

"I have a house as well. And a car."

"Lend them to your best friend."

"And my family?"

"You can invite them out here to stay with you."

Her family, here. She imagined Nancy broiling by the swimming pool while George sat indoors, wearing a hat for fear of getting sunburnt. She imagined Noel taking himself off to prowl the topless beaches and returning for dinner with the spoils of the day, probably some blonde and nubile girl speaking no known language. She imagined her mother . . . but that was different, not ridiculous at all. This was exactly her mother's environment; this enchanting, meandering house, this tangled garden. The almond groves, the sun-baked terrace, even the bantams—especially the bantams—would fill her with delight. It occurred to Olivia that perhaps, in some obscure way, this was why she, instantly, had taken such a liking to Ca'n D'alt and felt so at ease and totally at home.

She said, "I am not the only one with a family. You too have commitments to be considered."

"Only Antonia."

"Isn't that enough? You wouldn't want to upset her."

He scratched the back of his neck and looked, for an instant, slightly embarrassed. He said, "Perhaps this isn't exactly the right moment to mention it, but there have been other ladies."

Olivia laughed at his discomfiture. "And Antonia didn't mind?"

"She understood. She's philosophical. She made friends. She's very self-contained."

A silence fell between them. He seemed to be waiting for her reply. Olivia looked down into her glass of wine. "It's a big decision, Cosmo," she said at last.

"I know. You must think about it. How would it be if we got ourselves something to eat and talked the matter over?"

Which they did, returning to the house where he said that he would make pasta, with a mushroom-and-ham sauce, and as he was obviously a much better cook than she, Olivia took herself off and back into the garden. She found her way to his vegetable patch, picked a lettuce and some tomatoes, and discovered, deep in shady leaves, a cluster of baby courgettes. These spoils she bore back to the kitchen, where she stood at the sink and made a simple salad. They ate their meal at the kitchen table, and afterwards Cosmo said it was time for a siesta, so they went to bed together and it was even better than it had been the time before.

And at four o'clock, when the heat of the day had eased a little, they went down to the pool and swam, naked, and then lay in the sun to dry.

He talked. He was fifty-five. He had been called up the day he left school,

and had been on Active Service for most of the war. He found that he enjoyed the life, and so, when the war was over and he could think of nothing else that he wanted to do, he signed on as an officer in the Regular Army. When he was thirty, his grandfather died and left him a little money. Financially independent for the first time in his life, he resigned his commission, and without ties or responsibilities of any sort, set out to see the world. He travelled as far as Ibiza, unspoiled in those days and still amazingly cheap, fell in love with the island, decided that this was where he would put down his roots, and travelled no farther.

"What about your wife?" Olivia asked.

"What about her?"

"When did she happen?"

"My father died, and I went home for his funeral. I stayed for a bit, helping my mother to sort out his affairs. I was forty-one by then, not a young man any longer. I met Jane at a party in London. She was just about your age. She ran a flower shop. I was lonely—I don't know why. Perhaps it was something to do with losing my father. I'd never felt lonely in my life before, but I did then, and for some reason, I didn't want to come back here by myself. She was very sweet, and very ready to get married, and she thought Ibiza sounded madly romantic. That was my biggest mistake. I should have brought her out here first, rather like taking your girl-friend to meet your family. But I didn't. We were married in London, and the first time she set eyes on this place it was as my wife."

"Was she happy here?"

"For a bit. But she missed London. She missed her friends and the theatre and concerts at the Albert Hall and shopping and meeting people and going away for weekends. She got bored."

"What about Antonia?"

"Antonia was born out here. A proper little Ibecenco. I thought having a baby

would calm her mother down a bit, but it only seemed to make matters worse. So we agreed, quite amicably, to part. There wasn't any acrimony, but then there wasn't anything much to be acrimonious about. She took Antonia with her and kept her until she was eight, and then, once she'd started proper school, she started coming out here, in the summer and at Easter time, to spend her holidays with me."

"Didn't you find that something of a tie?"

"No. She was no trouble at all. There's a nice couple, Tomeu and Maria, who have a little farm down the lane. Tomeu helps me in the garden and Maria comes in to clean the house and keep an eye on my daughter. They're all the best of friends. Antonia's bilingual as a result of this."

Now, it was much cooler. Olivia sat up and reached for her shirt, put her arms into the sleeves and did up the buttons. Cosmo also stirred, announcing that all this conversation had made him thirsty and he needed something to drink. Olivia said that she felt like a nice cup of tea. Cosmo told her that she didn't look like one, but he got to his feet and ambled off, disappearing up through the garden towards the house in order to put the kettle on. Olivia stayed by the pool, revelling in being alone, because she knew that in a little while he would be back. The water of the swimming pool was motionless. At the far end of this stood a statue of a boy playing a pipe, his image reflected in the water as though in a mirror.

A sea-gull flew overhead. She tipped back her head to watch its graceful passage, wings painted pink by the light of the setting sun, and she knew, in that instant, that she would stay with Cosmo. She would give herself, like some wonderful gift, a single year.

Burning your boats, Olivia discovered, was more traumatic than it sounded. There was much to do. First they made the journey back to the hotel, Los Pinos, to pack up her belongings, pay the bill, and check out. They did all this in the most clandestine fashion, terrified of being spotted, and instead of seeking out her friends and explaining the situation, Olivia took the coward's way and left an inadequate letter at the reception desk.

Then there were cables to be sent, letters to be written, tele-phone calls made

to England on crackling incoherent lines. When all was accomplished, she thought that she would feel elated and free, but instead found herself trembling with panic and sick with fatigue. She was sick. She kept this fact from Cosmo, but when later he found her prone on the sofa weeping tears of exhaustion that she could not stop, all was revealed.

He was very understanding. He put her to bed in Antonia's little room where she could be alone and quiet, and left her to sleep for three nights and two days. She only stirred to drink the hot milk he brought her, and to eat a slice of bread and butter or a piece of fruit.

On the third morning, she awoke and knew it was over. She was recovered, refreshed, filled with a wonderful sense of well-being and vitality. She stretched, got out of bed and opened the shutters to the early morning, pearly and sweet, and smelt the dew damp earth and heard the crowing cocks. She put on her robe and went upstairs to the kitchen. She boiled a kettle and made a pot of tea. With the teapot and two cups on a tray, she went through the kitchen and down the other flight of stairs to Cosmo's room.

It was still shuttered and dark, but he was awake.

As she came through the door, he said, "Well, *hello*."

"Good morning. I've brought you early-morning tea." She set down the tray beside him and went to fling wide the shutters. Slanted rays of early sun filled the room with light. Cosmo stretched out an arm for his watch.

"Half past seven. You're an early bird."

"I came to tell you that I am better." She sat on his bed. "And to say I'm sorry that I've been so feeble, and to say thank you for being so understanding and kind."

"How are you going to thank me?" He asked her.

"Well, one way had occurred to me, but perhaps it's too early in the morning."

Cosmo smiled and shunted himself sideways to make space for her. "Never too early," he said.

Afterwards, "You are very accomplished," he told her.

She lay, content in the curve of his arm. "Like you, Cosmo, I have had some experience."

"Tell me, Miss Keeling," he said, in the voice of someone doing a bad imitation of Noel Coward, "when did you first lose your virginity? I know our listeners would love to be told."

"My first year at University."

"What college?"

"Is it relevant?"

"It could be."

"Lady Margaret Hall."

He kissed her. He said, "I love you," and he didn't sound like Noel Coward any longer.

The days slipped by, cloudless, hot, long and idle,, filled with only the most aimless of occupations. Swimming, sleeping, strolling down to the garden to feed the bantams or collect the eggs, or to do a little harmless weeding. She met Tomeu and Maria, who appeared quite unruffled by her arrival and greeted her each morning with broad smiles and much handshaking. And she learned a little kitchen Spanish and watched Maria make her massive paellas. Clothes ceased to matter. She spent her days with no make-up, slopping around, barefoot, in old jeans or a bikini. Sometimes they ambled up to the village with a basket to do a little shopping, but by tacit agreement they did not go near the town or the coast.

With time to consider her life, she realized that this was the first time she had not been working, striving, hauling her way up the ladder of her chosen profession. From the earliest age, her ambition had been to be, quite simply, the best. Top of her class, top in the list of examination results. Studying for scholarships, for O levels, for A levels, revising into the small hours in order to achieve the sort of grades that would ensure her a place at University. And then Oxford, with the whole process starting all over again, a gradual buildup to the final nerve-racking peak of Finals. With First Class Honours in English and History, she could reasonably have taken a bit of time off, but her built-in driving force was too strong; she was terrified of losing momentum, of missing chances, and went straight to work. That was eleven years ago, and she had never let up.

All over. Now, there were no regrets. She was suddenly wise, realizing that this meeting with Cosmo, this dropping out, had happened just in time. Like a person with a psychosomatic illness, she had found the cure before diagnosing the complaint. She was deeply grateful. Her hair shone, her dark eyes, thick-lashed, were lustrous with contentment, and even the bones of her face seemed to lose their stressful angles and become rounded and smooth. Tall, rake-thin, tanned brown as a chestnut, she looked in the mirror and saw herself, for the first time ever, as truly beautiful.

One day, she was alone. Cosmo had gone down to the town to collect the papers and his mail and to check up on his boat. Olivia lay on the terrace and watched two small, unknown birds flirting together in the branches of an olive tree.

As she idly observed their capers, she became aware of a strange sense of vacuum. Analysing this, pinning it down, she discovered that she was bored. Not bored with Ca'n D'alt, nor with Cosmo, but bored with herself and her own emptied mind, standing bare and cheerless as an empty room. She considered this new set of circumstances at some length, and then got up out of the chair and went indoors to find something to read.

When Cosmo returned she was so deep in her book that she did not even hear him, and was quite startled when he suddenly appeared beside her. "I'm hot and thirsty," he was telling her, but then stopped short to stare. "Olivia, I didn't know you wore spectacles."

She laid down the book. "Only for reading and working and having business lunches with hard-headed men I'm trying to impress. Otherwise I wear contact lenses."

"I never guessed."

"Do you mind them? Are they going to change our relationship?"

"Not at all. They make you look enormously intelligent."

"I am enormously intelligent."

"What are you reading?"

"George Eliot. *The Mill on the Floss*."

"Don't start identifying with poor Maggie Tulliver."

"I never identify with anyone. You have a marvellous li-brary. Everything I want to read, or reread, or have never had time to read. I shall probably spend the whole of the year with my nose in a-book."

"That's all right by me, provided you emerge every now and then to satisfy my carnal lusts."

"I'll do that." He bent and kissed her, spectacles and all, and went indoors to fetch himself a can of beer.

She finished *The Mill on the Floss* and started in on *Wuther-ing Heights* and then Jane Austen. She read Sartre, *Recherche du temps perdu*, and, for the first time in her life, *War and Peace*. She read classics, biographies, novels by authors she had never even heard of. She read John Cheever and Joseph Conrad, and a battered copy of *The Treasure Seekers*, which took her straight back over the years to the house in Oakley Street where she had been a child.

And as these books were all familiar old friends to Cosmo, they were able to

spend their evenings deep in long literary discussions, usually to the background accompaniment of music; the "New World," and Elgar's "Enigma Variations," and symphonies or operas in their entirety.

To keep in touch, he had *The Times* sent out from London each week. One evening, after reading an article on the treasures of the Tate Gallery, she told him about Lawrence Stern.

"He was my grandfather, my mother's father."

Cosmo was gratifyingly impressed. "But how enormously exciting. Why did you never tell me before?"

"I don't know. I don't usually talk about him. Anyway, nowadays most people have never even heard of him. He went out of date and became forgotten."

"What a painter he was." He frowned, deep in calculations. "But he was born . . . when was it ... in the eighteen-sixties. He must have been a very old man when you came into the world."

"More than that, he was dead. He died in nineteen forty-six, in his own bed, in his own house, in Porthkerris."

"Did you used to go to Cornwall for holidays and things?"

"No. The house was always let to other people, and finally my mother sold it. She had to, because she was perpetually strapped for cash and that was another reason we never went away for holidays."

"Did you mind?"

"Nancy minded most dreadfully. And Noel would have minded too, except that he was particularly good at looking after himself. He always made friends with the right boys, and managed to wangle invitations to go sailing and skiing, and join jolly parties in villas in the south of France."

"And you?" Cosmo's voice was loving.

"I didn't mind. I didn't want to go away. We lived in a huge house in Oakley Street with an equally huge garden at the back, and I had all the museums and the libraries and the art galleries right there, just for the taking." She smiled, remembering those full and satisfying days. "Oakley Street belonged to my mother. At the end of the war Lawrence Stern made it over to her. My father was a fairly—" she sought for the right word—"lightweight sort of person. Not a man with drive or many resources. I think my grandfather must have known this, and was anxious that she should be independent and at least have a home in which to bring up her family. Besides, he was eighty then, and crippled with arthritis. He knew that he would never live there again."

"Does your mother live there still?"

"No. It became too unwieldy and expensive to run, so this year she finally decided to sell, and move out of London. She had dreams of going back to Porthkerris, but my sister Nancy talked her out of that and instead found her a cottage in a village called Temple Pudley in Gloucestershire. To give Nancy her due, it's perfectly charming, and Mother is very happy there. The only gruesome thing about it is its name. Podmore's Thatch." She screwed up her nose in distaste and Cosmo laughed. "Admit it, Cosmo, it is a bit twee."

"You could rename it. Mon Repos. Is it filled with beautiful paintings by Lawrence Stern?"

"No. Unfortunately. Only three. I wish she had more. I think, the way the market's going, they could be very valuable in a year or two."

The conversation turned to other Victorian artists, and finally to Augustus John, and Cosmo went off to find the two volumes of his biography, which she had read but wished to read again. They discussed him at length and agreed that, for all his wicked ways, they had nothing but admiration for that randy old lion, and yet both considered his sister Owen to be the better artist.

And after that they showered and put on reasonably respectable clothes and walked up to the village, to Pedro's bar, where you could sit out under the stars and have a drink. And a young man with a guitar materialized and sat on

a wooden chair and quite simply, with no ceremony, began to play the second movement of the Rodrigo *Guitar Concerto*, filling the warm darkness with that plangent and stately music, the very essence of Spain.

Antonia was due to arrive in a week's time. Already Maria had started in on spring cleaning her bedroom, hauling all the furniture out onto the terrace, whitewashing the walls, laundering curtains and blankets and covers, and beating rugs with much venom and a cane switch.

Such urgent activity brought the appearance of Antonia that much nearer and Olivia was filled with apprehension. This was not entirely selfish, although the prospect of sharing Cosmo with another woman, even if she was only thirteen and his daughter, was dismaying, to say the least of it. The true anxiety lay within herself, because she was frightened of failing Cosmo, of saying the wrong thing, or doing something tactless. According to Cosmo, Antonia was both charming and uncomplicated, but this did nothing to reassure Olivia, because she had never had anything to do with children. Noel had been born when she was almost ten, and by the time he was out of babyhood, Olivia had virtually left home and gone out into the world. There were Nancy's offspring, of course, but they were so unattractive and unbearably bad-mannered that Olivia made a point of having as little to do with them as possible. So what did one say? What did one talk about? What were they all going to do with themselves?

One late afternoon, when they had had their swim and were stretched out in long chairs by the pool, she confided in Cosmo.

"It's just that I don't want to spoil things for you both. You obviously feel very close to each other, and I can't believe she won't think I'm alienating your affections. After all, she's only thirteen. It's a difficult sort of age, and a little jealousy would be the most understandable and natural reaction." He sighed. "How can I convince you that it won't be like that?"

"Three's a bad number at the best of times. Sometimes, she's bound to want you to herself, and I may not be perceptive enough to get out of the way. Admit it, Cosmo, I do have a case."

Considering this, he did not reply at once. At last, with a sigh, he said, "There is obviously no way I can persuade you that none of what you fear is going to

happen. So let's indulge in a little sideways thinking. How would it be if, while Antonia is with us, we ask another person to come and stay? Make it a sort of house party. Would that ease your mind?"

This suggestion put an entirely different aspect to the situation. "Yes. Yes, it would. You're brilliant. Who shall we ask?"

"Anyone you like, provided it's not a young, handsome, and virile man."

"What about my mother?"

"Would she come?"

"Like a shot."

"She won't expect us to occupy separate bedrooms, will she?"

I'm too old to go corridor-creeping, I'd probably fall down the stairs."

"My mother has illusions about nobody, least of all me." She sat up, suddenly excited. "Oh, Cosmo, you'll adore her. I can't wait for you to meet her."

"In that case, we have no time to waste." He heaved himself out of his chair and reached for his jeans. "Come on, girl, move your backside. If we can get your mother lined up and Antonia organized, then they can meet up at Heathrow and come out together on the same flight. Antonia's always a bit windy about flying alone, and your mother would probably enjoy the company."

"But where are we going?" Olivia asked, buttoning her shirt.

"We'll walk up to the village and use the telephone in Pe-dro's. Have you got her number at Podmore's Thatch?"

He said the name with relish, causing it to sound more embarrassing than usual, and looked at his watch. "It's about six-thirty in England. Will she be at home? What will she be doing at six-thirty in the evening?"

"She'll be gardening. Or cooking dinner for ten people. Or pouring someone a

drink."

"Can't wait to get her here."

The flight from London via Valencia was due at nine-fifteen. Maria, who could not wait to see Antonia again, volunteered to come in and cook the dinner. Leaving her to prepare this mammoth feast, they drove to the airport. They were both, though neither would admit it, in a state of some nervous excitement and because of this arrived far too early, and so had to hang about the soulless Arrivals lounge for half an hour or more before the girl on the Tannoy announced in crackling Spanish that the plane had touched down. Then there was more delay, while passengers disembarked, went through Immigration, claimed their luggage; but finally the doors opened, and a flood of humanity surged to freedom. Tourists, pale-faced and travel-weary; families of locals with strings of children; sinister dark-spectacled gentlemen in sharp suits; a priest and a pair of nuns; . . . and then at last, just as Olivia was beginning to fear that they had missed the flight, Penelope Keeling and Antonia Hamilton.

They had found a trolley on which to pile their luggage, but had chosen one with balky wheels that kept shooting off in the wrong direction, and for some reason this had them both in giggles, and so engrossed were they in talking and laughing and trying to keep the wretched thing on a straight course, that they did not instantly catch sight of Cosmo and Olivia.

Part of Olivia's nervous apprehension sprang from the fact that she was always afraid, after a period of separation from Penelope, that her mother might have changed. Not aged, exactly, but perhaps appear tired, or diminished in some dreaded, subtle way. But the moment she caught sight of her, anxiety faded. It was all right. Penelope looked vital as ever and marvellously distinguished. Tall and straight-backed, with her thick greying hair twisted up into a knot at the back of her head and her dark eyes bright with amusement, even the struggles with the trolley did nothing to detract from her dignity. She was, inevitably, slung about with bags and baskets, and was dressed in her old blue cape, an officer's boat cloak that she had bought secondhand from an impoverished Naval widow at the end of the war and worn ever since, on all occasions from weddings to funerals.

And Antonia . . . Olivia saw a tall and slender child, looking older than her thirteen years. She had long, straight, straw-berry-blond hair, and wore jeans, a T-shirt and a red cotton jacket.

There was no time for more. Cosmo raised his arms and called his daughter's name, and they were seen. Antonia abandoned Penelope and the trolley and came running towards them, hair flying, a pair of rubber swimming flippers in one hand and a canvas satchel in the other, dodging through the throng of baggage-laden humanity to throw herself into Cosmo's arms. He caught her up and swung her round, long spindly legs flying, kissed her soundly, and set her down on her feet again.

"You've grown," he told her accusingly.

"I know, a whole inch."

She turned to Olivia. She had freckles across her nose and a full, sweet mouth, too big for her heart-shaped face, and her eyes were greeny-grey and fringed with long, thick, very fair eyelashes. Their expression was open and smiling, full of interest.

"Hello. I'm Olivia."

Antonia disentangled herself from her father's arms, tucked the rubber flippers under her arm, and held out a hand. "How do you do?"

And Olivia, looking down at the young, bright face, knew that Cosmo had been right, and all her fears unfounded. Charmed and disarmed by Antonia's mannerly grace, she shook the outstretched hand. "I'm glad you're here," she told her, and then, with that safely over, abandoned father and daughter and went to claim her own relation, still patiently guarding the luggage. Penelope, with soundless delight, flung wide her arms in one of her typical expansive gestures, and Olivia happily cast herself into them, to hug enormously, to press her face against her mother's cool firm cheek, to smell the long-familiar scent of patchouli.

"Oh, my darling pet," said Penelope, "I can't believe I'm really here."
Joined by Cosmo and Antonia, they all started talking at once.

"Cosmo, this is my mother, Penelope Keeling . . ."

"You met up all right at Heathrow?"

"No trouble at all; I carried a newspaper and wore a rose between my teeth."

"Daddy, we had a hilarious flight. Someone was sick . . ."

"Is this all your luggage?"

"How long did you have to wait at Valencia?"

". . . and the air hostess spilt a whole glass of orange juice over a nun."

Finally, Cosmo got matters under control, took charge of the trolley, and led the way out of the terminal, into the warm, dusky blue starlit darkness, filled with the smell of petrol and the sound of cicadas. Somehow, they all crammed into the Citroen, Penelope in the front and Antonia and Olivia jammed together in the back. The luggage was piled on top of the passengers and at last they were off.

"How's Maria and Tomeu?" Antonia wanted to know. "And the bantams? And Daddy, do you know something, I got top marks in French. Oh, look, there's a new disco. And a roller-skating rink. Oh, we must go roller-skating, Daddy, can we? And I really want to learn to wind-surf these holidays ... is it frightfully expensive to have lessons?"

The now familiar road climbed up and away from the town and into the countryside, where the hills were pricked with the lights of random farmhouses, and the air was heavy with the scent of pine. When they turned into the track that led down to Ca'n D'alt, Olivia saw that Maria had turned on all the outside lights and these shone out like a celebration through the branches of the almond trees. And even as Cosmo stopped the car, and they were commencing to unload themselves, Maria and Tomeu were there,

coming towards them through all this brightness; Maria stocky and sun-browned in her black dress and apron, and Tomeu shaven for the occasion and wearing a clean shirt.

"*Hola, señor,*" called Tomeu, but Maria had no thoughts for any person but her darling child.

"Antonia."

"Oh, Maria." She was out of the car and away, running down the path and into Maria's embrace.

"*Antonia. Mi nina. Favorita. Como estd usted?*"

They were home.

Penelope's bedroom, which had once been a donkey's stable, led directly off the terrace. It was so small that there was room only for the bed and a chest of drawers, and a row of wooden pegs had to do duty as a wardrobe. But Maria had given it the same ruthless treatment as Antonia's room, and it shone clean and white and smelled of soap and freshly ironed cotton, and Olivia had filled a blue-and-white jug with yellow roses and stood this, with some carefully chosen books, on the wooden bedside table. Two tiled steps led up to a second door, and she opened this and explained to her mother the whereabouts of the only bathroom.

"The plumbing's a bit erratic; it depends on the state of the well, so if the loo doesn't work the first time, you just have to go on trying."

"I think it's all quite perfect. What an enchanting place." She divested herself of her cape, hung it on a peg, and turned to stoop over the bed and open her suitcase. "And what a dear man Cosmo seems. And how well you're looking. I've never seen you look so well."

Olivia sat on the bed and watched her mother unpack.

"You're an angel to come at such short notice. It's just that I thought it might

be easier, having Antonia, if you were here as well. Not that that's the only reason I asked you. Ever since I set eyes on this place, I've been wanting to show it to you."

"You know I love doing things on the spur of the moment. I phoned Nancy and told her I was coming and she was mad with envy. And a bit cross, too, because she hadn't been invited, but I didn't take the slightest bit of notice of that. And as for Antonia, what a darling pet of a child. Not in the least shy, laughing and chatting the whole day. I do wish Nancy's children could be half as companionable and well-mannered. Heaven only knows what sin I committed to be landed with such a pair for grandchildren. . . ."

"And Noel? Have you seen Noel lately?"

"No, haven't set eyes on him for months. I rang him up the other day to make sure he was still alive. He was."

"What's he doing with himself?"

"Well, he's found himself a new flat, somewhere off the King's Road. What it's going to cost him I didn't dare to ask, but that's his problem. And he's thinking of leaving the publishing world and going into advertising—he says he's got some very good contacts. And he was just off to Cowes for the weekend. The usual."

"And you? How are things with you? How's Podmore's Thatch?"

"Dear little house," said Penelope fondly. "The con-servatory's finished at last, I can't tell you how pretty it is. I've planted a white jasmine and a vine, and bought rather a smart basket chair."

"About time you had some new garden furniture."

"And the magnolia flowered for the first time and I've had the wistaria pruned. And the Atkinsons came for a weekend, and it was so warm we v/ere able to have dinner in the garden. They were asking after you and send their dearest love." She smiled, becoming motherly, her expression one of satisfied

affection. "And when I get home, I shall be able to tell them that I have never seen you look so well. Blooming. Beautiful."

"Was it an awful bombshell for you, my staying with Cosmo and throwing up my job and generally behaving like a lunatic?"

"Perhaps. But after all, why not? You've worked all your life; sometimes, when I saw you so tired and strained, I worried for your health."

"You never said."

"Olivia, your life and what you do with it is none of my business. But that doesn't mean I have no concern for you."

"Well, you were right. I was ill. After I'd done it, cut the cords and burnt my boats, I sort of went to pieces. I slept for three days. Cosmo was angelic. And after that I was all right. I hadn't realized I was so tired. I think if I hadn't done this thing, I might well have ended up in some nut-house, having a tiny *crise de nerfs*."

"Don't even suggest such a thing."

As they spoke, Penelope moved to and fro, laying her clothes away in the chest of drawers, reaching up to hang the shabby and familiar dresses that she had brought with her. It was typical of Penelope that there should be nothing new or fashionable, bought especially for the holiday, and yet Olivia knew that her mother would imbue even these timeless garments with her own brand of distinction.

But, surprisingly, there was something new. From the bottom of the suitcase was taken a gown of emerald-green wild silk, which, held up and shaken free of its creases, revealed itself as a gold-embroidered caftan, rich and voluptuous as something from the *Arabian Nights*.

Olivia was suitably impressed. "Wherever did you get that heavenly thing?"

"Isn't it delicious? I think it's Moroccan. I bought it off Rose Pilkington. Her

mother had brought it home from some Edwardian jaunt to Marrakesh and she found it in the bottom of an old trunk."

"You'll look like an Empress in it."

"Ah, but that is not all." The caftan, fitted onto a hanger, joined the ranks of faded cottons, and Penelope reached for her capacious leather satchel and began to rummage about in its depths. "You know I wrote and told you that dear old Aunt Ethel had died? Well, she left me a little legacy. It arrived a couple of days ago, just in time for me to bring out here."

"Aunt Ethel left you something? I didn't think she had anything to leave."
"Nor I. But somehow typical of her, surprising us all right up to the very end."

And, indeed, Aunt Ethel had always been surprising.

Lawrence Stern's only and very much younger sister, she had decided, at the end of the first world war, that at thirty-three, and with the flower of British manhood cruelly depleted by the slaughter of the French battlefields, she had little option but to accept inevitable spinsterhood.-Undepressed by this, she had set about enjoying her single state as much as was humanly possible. She had lived in a tiny house in Putney, long before that area became fashionable, where, to make ends meet, she took in the odd lodger (or lover? her family was never quite sure) and gave piano lessons. Not a potentially exciting existence, but Aunt *Ethel* made it exciting, living, penurious as she was, every day to the full. When Olivia, Nancy, and Noel were children, a visit from Aunt Ethel was always keenly awaited, not because she brought them presents, but because she was such fun, and not like an ordinary grown-up at all. And going to her house was the greatest of treats, simply because you could never be sure what was going to happen next. Once, as they sat down to the lopsided cake she had baked for their tea, the bedroom ceiling had collapsed. Another time, they had lit a bonfire at the end of her tiny garden, and the fence caught fire and the fire brigade, bells clanging, had to be summoned. As well, she taught them the Can-Can and vulgar music-hall songs loaded with *double entendres* which caused Olivia to shake with guilty laughter, although Nancy had always pursed her lips and pretended not to

understand.

She had looked, Olivia remembered, like a little stick insect, with child-sized feet and dyed red hair, a smoking cigarette never far from her hand. But despite her raffish appearance and lifestyle (or perhaps because of it), her circle of friends was legion, and there was scarcely a town in the country where Aunt Ethel did not have a dear old school chum or an erstwhile beau. A good deal of her time was spent visiting these friends—who were always begging her to come and stay and give them a good laugh—but between these forays to provincial England, she homed back to London, to the art exhibitions and concerts that were breath of life to her; to her copious letter-writing, her current lodger, her piano students, and her telephone. She was always ringing up her stockbroker, who must have been a patient man, and if her meagre shares went up a point in the course of the day, she would allow herself two pink gins instead of one as the sun went over the yardarm. She called them her little drinky-poos.

In her seventies, when the pace and expense of London finally became too much even for her, Aunt Ethel moved to Bath, to be near her dearest friends, Milly and Bobby Rodway. But then Bobby Rodway passed on, to be followed shortly by Milly, and Aunt Ethel was left alone. She managed for a bit, indestructible and cheerful as ever, but age was creeping up on her, and she ended up tripping over the milk bottle and breaking her hip on her own front doorstep. After that, she went downhill like a rocket, and eventually became so frail and incapable that she was placed, by the authorities, in an old folks' home. Here, shawled, forgetful, and tremulous, she was regularly visited by Penelope, who drove down to Bath from London and, more recently, Gloucestershire, in her old Volvo. Once or twice Olivia accompanied her mother on these occasions, but they left her feeling so depressed and sad that she always tried to find some excuse not to go.

"The dear old thing," Penelope now said fondly. "Do you know, she was nearly ninety-five? Far too old ... ah, here it is."

She found at last what she was searching for, and withdrew, from the satchel, an old and worn leather jewel box. She pressed the catch, and the lid sprang open, and there, cushioned in faded velvet, lay a pair of earrings.

"Oh." The small sign of wonder was quite involuntary, but the sight of them filled Olivia with such delight. They were beautiful. Jewelled gold and enamel, fashioned in the form of a cross, with ruby and pearl pendants, and a circle of smaller pearls joining the arms of the cross to the gold stud. They were trinkets from another age, with all the intricate splendour of the Renaissance.

"These belonged to Aunt Ethel?" was all she could think of to say.

"Amazing, aren't they?"

"But where did the old girl get these?"

"I've no idea. They've been languishing in the bank for the past fifty years."

"They look antique."

"No. Victorian, I think. Probably Italian."

"Perhaps they belonged to her mother?"

"Yes, perhaps. Perhaps she won them in a card game. Or was given them by a rich and adoring lover. With Aunt Ethel, it's anybody's guess."

"Have you had them valued?"

"I haven't had time. And, although they're very pretty, I don't suppose they're worth much. Anyway, they're exactly right with my caftan. Don't you think they're made for each other?"

"Yes, I do." Olivia returned the box to her mother. "But when you get home, promise me to have them valued and get them insured."

"I suppose I should. I'm so stupid about things like that." And she dropped the box back into her bag.

The unpacking was now completed. Penelope closed the empty suitcase, stowed it under the bed, and turned to the mirror that hung on the wall. She took the tortoiseshell pins from her coil of hair and shook it loose, so that it lay, grey-streaked but thick and strong as ever, down her back. Swinging it forward over one shoulder, she took up her hairbrush. With satisfaction, Olivia watched the remembered ritual, the raised arm, the long, sweeping strokes.

"And you, my darling? What is your future?"

"I shall stay here for the year. A sabbatical."

"Does your Editor know you intend returning?"

"No."

"Will you go back to *Venus*?"

"Maybe. Maybe I'll move on."

Penelope laid down her brush, took the long tassel of hair in her hand, twisted it, folded it, and pinned it back into place. She said, "Now I must go and wash myself and then I'm ready for anything."

"Don't fall over the steps."

She took herself off in the direction of the bathroom. Olivia, waiting for her, stayed where she was, sitting on the bed, feeling herself filled with gratitude for Penelope's calm and practical acceptance of the situation. She thought about having another sort of mother, avid with curiosity and romantic images, linking Olivia with Cosmo, imagining her daughter standing at some altar in a white dress designed to look well from the back. The very idea made her laugh and shudder all at the same time.

When Penelope returned, she got to her feet.

"Now, how about something to eat?"

"I am rather hungry." She looked at her watch. "Dear heavens, it's nearly half past eleven."

"Half past eleven is nothing. You're in Spain now. Come on, let's go and see what Maria's concocted for us."

So together they went out onto the terrace. Beyond the lights, the darkness was thick and warm as blue velvet, and Olivia led the way up the stone stairs to the kitchen, where they found Cosmo and Antonia and Maria and Tomeu sitting around the candle-lit table, carousing with a bottle of wine, and all talking at once, in a castanet clatter of Spanish.

"She is splendid," Cosmo said.

They were alone together again and it was like coming home. They had made love and now lay in the darkness, Olivia cradled in the curve of his arm. They talked quietly, so as not to disturb the other sleeping occupants of the house.

"Mumma? I knew you would love her."

"I see now where you got your looks."

"She's a hundred times better-looking than I am."

"We must show her off. No one would forgive me if I let her go back to England and they'd never even met her."

"What does that mean?"

"We'll throw a party. As soon as possible. Start the social ball rolling." A party. This was a whole new idea. Since that first abortive party on the boat, Cosmo and Olivia had spent all their time alone together, talking to nobody but Tomeu and Maria and the few local men who patronized Pedro's bar.

She said, "But who will we invite?"

She felt rather than heard his laughter. His arm tightened around her shoulders. "My darling, surprise, surprise, I've friends all over the island. I have, after all, lived here for twenty-five years. Did you imagine that I was a social outcast?"

"I never thought about it," she told him truthfully. "I haven't wanted anybody but you."

"And I have wanted nobody but you. Anyway, I thought you needed a rest from people. I was frightened for you, those days when you did nothing but sleep. I decided then that it would be better to take things quietly for a bit."

"Yes." She had not realized any of this, had taken their solitude entirely for granted. Now, with hindsight, she wondered why she had not questioned their self-imposed period of retreat. "I never thought about that, either."

"Time to think about it now. How does the idea of a party appeal to you?"

She discovered that it did. "Enormously."

"Informal or terribly grand?"

"Oh, terribly grand. My mother has brought her party frock."

The next day, over breakfast, he made a list of names, both aided and impeded by his daughter.

"Oh, Daddy, you must ask Madame Sange."

"I can't, she's dead."

"Well, Antoine, then. Surely he can come."

"I thought you didn't like that randy old goat."

"I don't much, but I'd like to see him. And the Hardback boys, they're terribly nice; they might ask me wind-surfing and then we wouldn't have to pay for

lessons."

The list was finally completed, and Cosmo departed for Pe-dro's bar to spend the morning telephoning. The proposed guests who were not on the telephone were contacted by means of writ-ten invitations that were delivered by Tomeu driving, at some danger to himself and anyone else he happened to meet on the road, Cosmo's Citroen. Replies flooded back, and the final count was seventy. Olivia was impressed, but Cosmo modest. He told her that he had always been one to hide his light under a bushel.

An electrician was summoned to fix strings of coloured lights around the area of the swimming pool. Tomeu swept and tidied, set up trestle-tables, manhandled cushions and chairs. An-tonia was put to polishing glasses, washing china seldom used, sent to search on some forgotten shelf for tablecloths and napkins. Olivia and Cosmo, with a list as long as her arm, made an exhausting trip to the town and came back laden with groceries, olive oil, roasted almonds, bags of ice cubes, oranges, lemons, and crates of wine. And all the time, Maria and Penelope worked in the kitchen, where, in total accord and without a word of a common language, they boiled hams, roasted birds, concocted paellas, whipped eggs, stirred sauces, kneaded bread, and sliced tomatoes.

Finally, all was ready. The guests were due at nine, and at eight o'clock Olivia went to have a shower and change. She found Cosmo, shaved and smelling delicious, sitting on the bed trying to fit his gold links into the cuffs of his best shirt.

"Maria's put so much starch on this bloody thing, I can't get the holes open."

She sat beside him and took the shirt and the cuff-links from him. He watched her. "What are you going to wear?" he asked.

"I have two beautiful new dresses that I bought to stun the hotel guests at Los Pinos and I never wore either of them. Never had time. You came into my life, and since then I've been forced to walk around in rags."

"Which will you wear?"

"They're in the cupboard. You can choose."

He got up and opened the cupboard door and rattled around with the hangers, and finally found the dresses. One short, a brilliant pink chiffon, with layers of cloudlike skirts. The other long, sapphire-blue, waistless, flowing from a deep cuff and shoestring shoulder-straps. He chose the blue one, as she had known he would, and she kissed him and gave him back his shirt, and went to shower. When she returned from the bathroom, he had gone. She dressed slowly, with immense care, making up her face, dressing her hair, fixing earrings, spraying scent. Finally she buckled the delicate sandals and then lifted the dress up and over her head. It settled over her body cool and light as a breath of air. As she moved, it moved with her. It was like being dressed in a breeze.

A knock came at her door. She said, "Come in" and it was Antonia. "Olivia, do you think this is all right? . . ." She stopped and gazed. "Oh. You look so lovely. What a scrumptious dress."

"Thank you. Now let's look at you."

"My mother bought it for me in Weybridge, and it looked all right in the shop, but I'm not sure about it now. Maria says it's not grand enough." It was a white sailor dress with a pleated skirt and a square collar braided in navy blue. Her brown legs, white-sandalled, were bare, and she had braided two thin plaits of her red-gold hair and tied them back with a navy-blue bow.

"I think it's perfect. You look clean and crisp as ... I don't know. A brand-new paper bag?"

Antonia giggled. "Daddy says you must come. People have started to arrive."

"Is my mother there?"

"Yes, she's out on the terrace, looking fantastic. Oh, do come. . . ." She grabbed Olivia's hand and tugged her out through the door, and hand in hand, under the lights, they made their way down the terrace. Olivia saw Penelope already deep in conversation with some man and knew that she had been right, for in her silken caftan and her inherited jewels, her mother looked,

indeed, like an Empress.

After that evening, the whole pattern of their lives at Ca'n D'alt changed. After weeks of aimless solitude, it seemed that now they never had a day to themselves. Invitations flooded in, for dinner parties, picnics, barbecues, boat trips. Cars came and went, there never seemed to be fewer than a dozen people around the swim-ming pool, and many of them were youngsters of Antonia's age. Cosmo finally got around to fixing the wind-surfing lessons, and they would all drive down to the beach where these were held, and Olivia and Penelope would lie on the sand, ostensibly watching Antonia's efforts to master the maddeningly difficult sport, but actually engaged in Penelope's favourite occupation, which was people-watching. As the people they watched on this particular beach, both young and old, were almost totally naked, her comments were hilarious and the two of them spent most of the time in hopeless, goggle-eyed giggles.

Sometimes, every now and then, came the gift of a lazy day. Then they never stirred from the house and the garden, and Pe-nelope, wearing an old straw hat and looking, with her newly acquired tan and her shabby cotton dress, like a native Ibecenco, found a pair of secateurs and attacked Cosmo's straggling roses. They swam constantly, for exercise and refreshment, and when the evenings grew cooler, went for little rural strolls, through cornfields and past small houses and farmyards where naked-bottomed babies played happily in the dust along with the goats and the hens, while their mothers unpegged washing, or drew water from the well.

When it was time, at last, for Penelope to leave, none of them wanted her to go. Cosmo, goaded by Olivia and his daughter, formally invited her to stay for longer but, though touched, she refused.

"After three days, fish and guests stink, and I've been with you for a month."

"But you're not a fish nor a guest, and you don't stink a bit," Antonia assured her.

"You're very sweet, but I must get home. I've been away too long already. My garden will never forgive me."

"You'll come again, though, won't you?" Antonia insisted.

Penelope did not reply. Across the silence, Cosmo looked up and into Olivia's eyes.

"Oh, do say you'll come."

Penelope smiled and patted the child's hand. "Maybe," she told her. "One day."

They all went to the airport to see her off. Even after they had said goodbye to her, they lingered on, waiting to watch her plane take off. When it had gone, the sound of engines fading, dying into the immensity of the sky, and there was no longer any reason to stay, they turned and went back to the car and drove home in silence.

"It doesn't seem the same without her, does it?" Antonia said sadly as they made their way down the terrace.

"Nothing ever does," Olivia told her.

Podmore's Thatch, Temple Sudbury, Glos.

Aug 17th

My dear Olivia and Cosmo,

How can I thank you for being so endlessly kind and for giving me such an unforgettable holiday? No day passed when I did not feel welcome and cherished, and I have returned home with as many memories as a crowded photograph album. Ca'n D'alt is a truly magic place, your friends charming and so hospitable, and the island—even, or perhaps I should say especially, the topless beaches—quite fascinating. I miss you all so much, in particular Antonia. It is a long time since I have spent so much rewarding time with such an enchanting young person. I could go on drivelling for ever, but I think you both know how grateful I am. I am sorry I have not written before,

but there hasn't been a moment. The garden is a riot of weeds and the rosebeds are nothing but dead heads. Perhaps I should find a gardener.

Talking of gardeners, I stopped off in London for a couple of days on my way home, stayed with the Fnedmanns and went to a delicious concert at the Festival Hall. Also took the earrings to Collingwood's to be valued, as you said I must, and you won't believe it, but the man said they were worth at least £4,000. When I'd finished fainting I inquired about insuring them, but the premium quoted was so enormous, I simply took them to the bank as soon as I got home, and left them there. Poor things, they seem doomed to spend their lives in the bank. I could sell them, I suppose, but they are so pretty. Still, nice to know that they're there, and the money realizable if I suddenly decide to do something mad, like buy myself a motor tractor for cutting the grass. (This explains reference to gardeners.)

Nancy and George and the children came for lunch last Sunday, ostensibly to hear about Ibiza, but really to tell me the iniquities of the Croftways, and how they had been invited to luncheon by the Lord Lieutenant. I gave them pheasant and fresh cauliflower from the garden, and apple crumble laced with mincemeat and brandy, but Melanie and Rupert grizzled and argued, and made no effort to disguise their boredom. Nancy is useless with them, and George doesn't seem even to notice their appalling manners. I became so irritated with Nancy that, to tease, I told her about the earrings. She showed no particular interest—she never once went to see poor Aunt Ethel—until I came to the magic words, four thousand pounds, whereupon she sprang to attention, for all the world like a gun dog scenting game. Her mind has always been easy to read, and I knew that her imagination was racing ahead, perhaps to Melanie's coming-out dance, with a paragraph or two in the social page of Harpers and Queen. "Mel-anie Chamberlain, one of the prettiest debutantes this year, wore white lace and her grandmother's famous gold-and-ruby earrings." Perhaps I was mistaken.

How cruel I am, and disloyal to my daughter, but I cannot resist sharing the little joke with you.

My thanks again. So inadequate, but what other words are there for gratitude.

*With love,
Penelope.*

The months passed. Christmas came and went. Now it was February. There had been rain and some storms, and they spent much of their time indoors with a blazing fire, but all at once came a breath of spring to the air, blossom on the almond trees, and enough warmth at midday to sit for a little while out of doors.

February. By now Olivia believed that she knew everything there was to know about Cosmo. But she was wrong. One afternoon, walking up from the garden with a basket of little bantams' eggs in her hand, she heard a car approaching, and stopping beneath the olive tree. As she climbed the steps to the terrace, she saw a strange man coming towards her. Obviously a local, but dressed more formally than was the usual, in a brown suit and collar and tie. On his head was a straw hat, and he carried a folder of papers.

She smiled inquiringly and he doffed the hat. "Buenos dias."

"*Buenos dias.*"

"Senor Hamilton?"

Cosmo was indoors, writing letters.

"Yes?"

He spoke in English. "If I could see him. Tell him Carlos Barcello. I will wait."

Olivia went in search of Cosmo and found him at his desk in the living room.

"You have a visitor," she told him. "By the name of Carlos Barcello."

"Carlos? Oh, God, I forgot he was coming." He laid down his pen and got to his feet. "Better go and have a word." He left her, running down the stairs.

She heard his greeting. "*Hombre!*"

She took the eggs into the kitchen and laid them, one by one, into a yellow china bowl. Then, filled with curiosity, she went to the window and watched Cosmo and Mr. Barcello, whoever he was, making their way down to the swimming pool, deep in conversation. They stayed there for a bit and then returned to the terrace, where they spent some time inspecting the well. After that she heard them come indoors, but they appeared to get no farther than the bedroom. The lavatory was flushed. She wondered if Mr. Barcello was a plumber.

They went out onto the terrace again. There was a bit more chat, and then they said goodbye and she heard Mr. Barcello's car start up and drive away. Presently Cosmo's footsteps sounded on the stairs, and she heard him going into the living room, throw a log on the fire and, presumably, settle down once more to his letter-writing.

It was nearly five o'clock. She boiled a kettle and made a pot of tea, and carried this through to him.

"Who was that?" she asked, setting down the tray.

He was still writing, "Um?"

"Who was your visitor? Mr. Barcello."

He turned in his chair to smile at her in some amusement.

"Why do you sound so curious?"

"Well, of course I'm curious. I've never seen him before. And he's pretty smartly turned out for a plumber."

"Who said he was a plumber?"

"Isn't he?"

"Good God, no," said Cosmo. "He's my landlord."

"Your *landlord*?"

"Yes, my landlord."

She felt, all at once, shivery with cold. She folded her arms across her chest, gazing at him; willing him, in some way, to explain to her that she had misunderstood, was mistaken.

"You mean you don't own this house?"

"No."

"You've lived here for twenty-five years and you don't own it."

"I told you. No."

It seemed to Olivia almost obscene. The house, so lived-in, full of their shared memories; the tended garden, the little swimming pool; the view. It wasn't Cosmo's. Never had been. It all belonged to Carlos Barcello.

"Why did you never buy it?"

"He would never sell."

"You never thought of looking for another?"

"I didn't want another house." He got to his feet, slowly, as though the letter-writing had wearied him. He pushed the chair aside and went to take a cigar from the box on the shelf over the fireplace. With his back to her, he went on, "And anyway, once Antonia started school, I was committed to paying her fees. After that, I couldn't afford to buy anything." There was a jar of spills on the hearth and he stooped to take one and held it to the flames for a light.

I couldn't afford to buy anything. They had never talked about money. The subject was one that had never come up between them. During the months

that they had been together, Olivia had, without question, chipped in with her share of the ordinary day-to-day expenses of living. Paying for a carton of groceries at the market checkout, or a tankful of petrol. Some-times, as naturally happens, he would find himself short of ready cash, and then Olivia picked up the bill for drinks in a bar or one of their occasional evenings out. She was, after all, not penniless, and just because she was living with Cosmo did not mean that she expected to be kept by him. Questions stirred at the back of her mind, but she felt afraid to ask them, because she was afraid of what the answers might be.

She watched him in silence. The cigar lighted, he threw the spill into the flames and turned to face her, his shoulders supported by the mantelshelf.

He said, "You look very shocked."

"I am shocked, Cosmo. I find it almost impossible to believe. It goes against the grain of something I feel most strongly about. To own your own house has always seemed to me the most important of priorities. It gives you security in every sense of the word. Oakley Street belonged to my mother, and because of that, as children, we always felt safe. Nobody could take it away from us. One of the best feelings in the world was coming home, indoors, off the street, and closing the door and knowing you were home."

He made no comment on this, only asked her, "Do you own your house in London?"

"Not yet. But I shall in two years' time, when I finally pay off the building society."

"What a business woman you are."

"You don't have to be a business woman to work out that it's uneconomic to pay rent for twenty-five years and at the end of the day have nothing to show for it."

"You think I'm a fool."

"Cosmo, no. I don't think that. I suppose I can see how it all came about, but

that doesn't stop me being concerned."

"For me."

"Yes, for you. I've just realized that I've been living with you all this time, and never given a thought to what we've been living on."

"Do you want to know?"

"Not unless you want to tell me."

"The income from a few investments that my grandfather left me, and my Army Pension."

"And that's all?"

"That's the sum of it."

"And if anything should happen to you, your Army Pension will die with you."

"Naturally." He grinned at her, trying to coax a smile into her intent and frowning face. "But let's not bury me just yet. I am, after all, only fifty-five."
"But Antonia?"

"I can't leave her what I haven't got. I simply hope that by the time I drop off the hook, she'll have found herself a rich husband."

They had been arguing, but without heat. When he came out with this, however, all Olivia's instincts rose to the boil and she lost her temper. "Cosmo, don't say things like that, don't talk in that ghastly archaic Victorian way, condemning Antonia to dependence on some man for the rest of her life. She should have money of her own. Every woman should have something of her own."

"I didn't realize that money was so important to you."

"It's not important to me. It never has been. It's only important if you haven't got any. And because it buys lovely things; not fast cars or fur coats or cruises to Hawaii or any of that rubbish, but real, lovely things, like independence and freedom and dignity. And learning. And time."

"Is this why you've worked all your life? So that you could cock a snook at the arrogant male, the Victorian paterfamilias?"

"That's not fair! You make me sound like the worst sort of Women's Libber, an aggressive great lesbian with a foul placard."

He did not reply to this outburst, and she felt instantly ashamed, wishing the angry words unsaid. They had never really quarrelled before. Her quick rage died and reason took its place. She answered his question, her voice deliberately calm. "Yes. It is one of the reasons. I told you my father was a lightweight sort of man. He never influenced me in any way. But I am always determined to emulate my mother, to be strong and independent of everybody. And, as well, I have a creative need to write, and the sort of journalism which is my profession fulfils that need. So, I'm lucky. I do what I love to do, and I get paid for it. But that isn't all. There's a compulsion somewhere, a driving force that's too strong to fight. I need the conflict of a demanding job, decisions, deadlines. I need the pressures, the flow of adrenalin. It turns me on."

"And does it make you happy?"

"Oh, Cosmo. Happiness. There's not a Blue-bird, an End to the Rainbow: I suppose what it boils down to is that if I'm working, I'm never totally unhappy. And if I'm not working, I'm never totally happy. Does that make sense?"

"So you haven't been totally happy here?"

"These months with you are different, like nothing that's ever happened before. It's been like a dream, stolen out of time. And I'll never cease to be endlessly grateful to you for giving me something that no person can ever take away. A good *time*. Not a *good* time, but a good time. But you can't

dream forever. You have to wake up. Soon, I shall start getting restless and probably irritable. And you will wonder what is wrong with me and so shall I. And I shall make a small private analysis of the problem and discover that it's time I went back to London, picked up the threads, and got on with my life."

"When will that be?"

"Next month maybe. March."

"You said a year. That's only ten months."

"I know. But Antonia comes out again in April. I think I should be gone by then."

"I thought you enjoyed each other's company."

"We did. That's why I'm going. She mustn't expect me to be here; I mustn't become important to her. Besides, I have a lot of problems waiting for me, not least sorting out a job for myself."

"Will you get your old job back?"

"If I don't, I'll get a better one."

"You're very confident."

"I have to be."

He sighed deeply, and then, with a gesture of impatience, flung the half-smoked cigar into the fire. He said, "If I asked you to marry me, would you stay?"

She said hopelessly, "Oh, Cosmo."

"You see, I find it hard to contemplate a future without you."

"If I married any man," she told him, "it would be you. But I told you, that first day I came to Ca'n D'alt. I've never wanted to be married, have children. I love people. I'm fascinated by them, but I need my privacy too. To be myself. To live alone."

He said, "I love you."

She crossed the small space that lay between them and put her arms around his waist and laid her head against his shoulder. Through his sweater, his shirt, she could hear the beat of his heart.

She said, "I made tea, and we never drank it and now it will be cold."
"I know." She felt his hand touch her hair. "Will you come back to Ibiza?"
"I don't think so."

"Will you write to me? Keep in touch."

"I'll send you Christmas cards with robins on them."

He put his hands on either side of her head and turned her face up to his. The expression in his pale eyes was immeasurably sad.

"Now I know," he told her.

"Know what?"

"That I'm going to lose you forever."

NOEL

At half past four on that cold, dark, wet March Friday, while Olivia threatened her Fiction Editor with dismissal and Nancy wandered bemusedly around Harrods, their brother Noel cleared his desk in the futuristic offices of Wenborn and Wein-burg, Advertising Agents, and took himself home.

The office did not close until five-thirty, but he had worked there for five years and reckoned that the occasional early departure was no more than his due. His colleagues, used to his ways, raised not so much as an eyebrow, and if he chanced to encounter one of the senior partners on his way to the lift, he had his cover story ready: he was feeling lousy, probably getting flu, and was going home to bed.

He did not meet one of the senior partners and he was not going home to bed, but to drive to Wiltshire for the weekend, to stay with some people called Early, whom he had never met. Camilla Early was an old school friend of Amabel's, and Amabel was Noel's current woman.

"They're having a house party for the local point-to-point on Saturday," Amabel had told him. "It might be all right."

"Have they got central heating?" Noel asked cautiously. At this time of the year, he had no intention of spending so much as an hour shivering over an inadequate log fire,

"Oh, heavens yes. Actually, they're loaded. They used to fetch Camilla from school in an enormous Bentley."

It sounded hopeful. The sort of place where one might meet useful people. Going down in the lift, he put the problems of the day behind him and let his mind go nosing ahead. If Amabel was on time, they should be out of London before the Friday-evening exodus of traffic. He hoped that she would bring her car, so that they could make the journey in that. His Jag was making strange knocking sounds, and if they went in her car, there was always the

possibility that he wouldn't be expected to pay for the petrol.

Outside the office, Knightsbridge streamed with rain, and stood solid with traffic. Usually Noel made the journey back to Chelsea by bus, or even, on summer evenings, walked down Sloane Street, but now, gripped by the bitter cold, he damned expense and flagged down a taxi. Halfway down the King's Road, he stopped the driver and got out, paid him off and turned into his own street to walk the short distance to Vernon Mansions.

His car stood parked at the pavement—an E-type Jaguar, marvellously macho, but ten years old. He had bought it from a chap who had gone bankrupt, and so had got it for peanuts, but it was only after he got it home that he discovered the copious rust on the underside of its chassis, the dicey brakes, and the fact that it absorbed petrol like a thirsty man drinks beer. And now that knocking sound had started. He paused to glance at the tyres and give one of them a kick. Soft. If by some unhappy chance he was compelled to use it this evening, he must stop at a garage and put in some air.

He left the car, crossed the pavement, and let himself in through the main door of the building. Inside it smelt stale and stuffy. There was a small lift, but since he lived on the first floor, he went up the stairs. These were carpeted and so was the narrow passage that led to his own door. He unlocked this and went in and closed it behind him, and was home. Home.

It was a joke, really.

The flats had been designed as pieds-a-terre for business men finally defeated by the sheer exhaustion of commuting daily to the depths of Surrey or Sussex or Buckinghamshire. Each had a tiny hallway, with a cupboard where you were meant to keep all your City clothes. Then there were a minuscule bathroom, a kitchen the size of a galley in a small yacht, and a sitting room. Here, a pair of louvered doors folded back to reveal a sort of kennel totally taken up by a double bed. This was not only impossible to make, but, in summer-time, hideously airless, so much so that in the warm weather Noel usually ended up sleeping on the sofa.

The decor and the furniture had come with the place and were included in the hugely inflated rent. All was beige or brown and incredibly dull. The living

room window faced out over the blank brick wall of a newly erected supermarket, a narrow alley, and a row of lock-up garages. The sunlight never penetrated, and the walls, which had once been cream, had darkened to the colour of old margarine.

But it was a good address. To Noel, that mattered more than anything else. Part of his image, like the showy car, the Harvey and Hudson shirts, the Gucci shoes. All these details were intensely important, because in his youth, due to family circumstances and financial pressures, he had not been sent to a public school, but educated at a day school in London, and so had been deprived of the easy friendships and useful connections of attending Eton or Harrow or Wellington. This was a resentment that continued, even at the age of almost thirty, to rankle.

Leaving school and finding a job had posed no problem. A post was ready and waiting for him in his father's family firm, Keeling & Philips, an old-established and traditional publishing company in St. James's, and for five years he had worked there before moving on to the infinitely more interesting and lucrative business of advertising. But his social life was a different matter altogether, and here he was thrown back on his own resources. Which were, fortunately, legion. He was tall, good-looking, clever at games, and even as a boy had learned to cultivate a sincere and open manner that swiftly disarmed. He knew how to be charming to older women, to be discreetly respectful of older men, and, with the patience and cunning of a well-trained spy, infiltrated with little difficulty the upper circles of London society. For years he had been on the Dowagers' lists of suitable young men for Debutante dances, and during the Season he scarcely slept, returning from some ball in the early sunlight of a summer dawn, stripping off his tails and his starched shirt, taking a shower, and going to work. Weekends saw him at Henley, or Cowes, or Ascot. He was invited to ski in Davos, fish in Sutherland, and every now and then his handsome face appeared in the glossy pages of *Harpers and Queen*, "enjoying a joke with his hostess."

It was, in its way, an achievement. But all at once, it was not enough. He was fed up. He seemed to be getting nowhere. He wanted more.

The flat crouched around him, watching like a depressed relation, waiting for him to take some action. He drew the curtains and switched on the lamp and

things looked marginally better. He took *The Times* from his coat pocket and tossed it on the table. Pulled off his coat and flung it across a chair. He went into the kitchen and poured a strong whisky and filled the glass with ice from the fridge. He went back to the sitting room and sat down on the sofa and opened the paper.

He turned first to the stock-market prices and saw that Consolidated Cables had gone up a point. He turned next to the Racing Page. Scarlet Flower had come in fourth, which meant that he was fifty quid down the drain. He read a review of a new play, and then the sale-room news. He saw that a Millais had gone, at Christie's, for nearly eight hundred thousand pounds.

Eight hundred thousand.

The very words made him feel almost physically sick with frustration and envy. He laid down the paper and took a mouthful of whisky, and thought about the Lawrence Stern, *The Water Carriers*, which was coming up for sale at Boothby's next week. Like his sister Nancy, he had never had any opinion of his grandfather's work, but unlike Nancy, he had not missed out on this extraordinary resurgence in the art world of interest in those old Victorian painters. Over the last few years he had watched the prices in the sale rooms slowly rising until now they had reached these mammoth sums that seemed to him out of all proportion.

The top of the market, and he had nothing to sell. Lawrence Stern was his grandfather, and yet he had nothing. None of them did. At Oakley Street there had only been the three Sterns, and these his mother had taken with her to Gloucestershire, where they dwarfed the low-ceilinged rooms of Podmore's Thatch.

What were they worth? Five hundred, six hundred thousand? Perhaps, against all odds, he should make some effort at talking her into selling. If he did manage to persuade her, the profits would, of course, have to be divided. Nancy, for one, would insist on her share, but even so, there should be a good chunk for Noel. His imagination nosed cautiously ahead, filled with brilliant schemes. He would chuck his nine-to-five job with Wenborn & Weinburg, and set up on his own. Not advertising, but commodity broking, gambling on a superscale.

All that was needed was a prestigious address in the West End, a telephone, a computer, and a lot of nerve. He had plenty of that. Milking the punters, buttering up the big investors, moving into the big time. He knew an almost sexual stirring of excitement. It could happen. All that was missing was the capital to set the exercise into motion.

The Shell Seekers. Perhaps, next weekend, he would go down and visit his mother. He hadn't seen her for months, but she had lately been unwell—Nancy, in doomlike tones, had given him this news over the telephone—so this would give him a good excuse for calling in at Podmore's Thatch, and then he could ease the conversation gently around to the subject of the pictures. If she started making excuses, or bringing up such objections as Capital Gains Tax, he would mention his friend Edwin Mundy, who was an antique dealer and an expert in flogging stuff in Europe and stashing cash away in Swiss banks where it would be safe from the insatiable maw of the Inland Revenue. It was Edwin who had first alerted Noel to the enormous prices being paid in New York and London for the old allegorical works so fashionable at the turn of the century, and once even had suggested that Noel come into partnership with him. But Noel, after some thought, had demurred. Edwin, he knew, sailed dangerously close to the wind, and Noel had no intention of spending even so much as a week in Wormwood Scrubs Prison.

It was all almost insuperably difficult. He sighed deeply, finished his whisky, looked at his watch. A quarter past five. Amabel was coming to pick him up at half past. He heaved himself out of the sofa, collected his suitcase from the cupboard in the hall and swiftly packed for the weekend. He was an expert at this having had years of practice—and it took no more than five minutes. After that, he stripped off his clothes and went into the bathroom to shave and shower. The water was boiling, which was one of the good things about living in this benighted rabbit hutch, and after his shower, warm and scented, he felt better. He dressed again in clean casual clothes—cotton shirt, cashmere sweater, tweed jacket; he put his washbag on top of his suitcase, zipped it up, and bundled his dirty linen into a corner of the kitchen for his daily lady to find and, hopefully, deal with.

Sometimes she didn't. Sometimes she didn't even come. He recalled, with the deepest nostalgia, the old way of life, before his mother had decided, with

thought for no person but herself, to sell Oakley Street. For there he had enjoyed the best of everything. The independence of a latchkey and his own suite of rooms at the top of the house, along with the endless advantages of living at home. Constant hot water, open fires, food in the larder, drink in the wine cellar, a great garden for~the summer weather, the pub across the road, the river at his doorstep, his washing done, his bed made, his shirts ironed, and for all this he had not been expected to pay for so much as a roll of lavatory paper. As well, his mother was as independent as her son, and if she was not deaf to creaking stairs and the light tread of feminine feet going past her bedroom door, then she acted as though she were and never commented. He had imagined that this idyllic way of • life was permanent, that, if any changes were to be made, he would be the one to make them, and when she first told him of her intention to sell out and move to the country, he felt as though his feet had been knocked from beneath him.

"But what about me? What the hell am I going to do?"

"Noel, my darling, you are twenty-three now, and you've lived in this house for the whole of your life. Perhaps it's time you flew the nest. I'm sure you'll be able to make other arrangements."

Other arrangements. Paying rent, buying food, buying Scotch, spending money on horrible things like Vim for the bath and laundry bills. Right up to the very last moment he had clung on at Oakley Street, hoping against hope that she would change her mind, and he hadn't actually moved out until the furniture van arrived to load her possessions for transport to Gloucestershire. In the end most of his things went too, because there was no space in the ratty little flat he had found himself for the accumulated clobber of a lifetime, and these were now stacked in the small and cluttered room at Podmore's Thatch which was known, euphemistically, as Noel's.

He went there as little as possible, resentful not only of his mother's extraordinary behaviour, but also because it irked him to see her so contentedly settled in the country, and without him. He felt that she should at least have the decency to show a little nostalgia for the good old days when they had lived together, but she didn't seem to miss him in the least.

He found this hard to understand because he missed her very much.

These poignant musings were brought to a halt by the arrival of Amabel, only fifteen minutes late. The buzzer sounded and when he went to open the door she stood outside bearing her luggage, two bulging tote bags, one of which sprouted a pair of muddy green Wellingtons.

"Hi."

He said, "You're late."

"I know. Sorry." She came in and dumped the tote bags and he closed the door and gave her a kiss.

"What held you up?"

"I couldn't get a taxi, and the traffic's hell."

A taxi. His heart sank. "Didn't you bring your car?"

"It's got a puncture. And I haven't got a spare tyre, and anyway, I don't know how to change the wheel."

This was to be expected. At anything practical, she was to-tally useless, and probably one of the most disorganized women he had ever met. She was twenty, and tiny as a child, small-boned and thin to the point of emaciation. Her skin was so pale as to be almost transparent, her eyes, grape-green, were large and thickly lashed, her hair long and fine and straight, worn loose and usually falling over her face. She wore, on this cold, wet evening, clothes remarkable for their meagre inadequacy. Skinny jeans and a T-shirt, and a skimpy denim jacket. Her shoes were flimsy, and her ankles bare. All in all, she looked like an anorexic from Bermondsey, but she was in fact the Honourable Amabel Rem-ington-Luard, and her father was Lord Stockwood, with large estates in Leicestershire. Which was what had attracted Noel to Amabel in the first place, coupled with the fact that he, for some obscure reason, found her waiflike appearance enormously sexy.

So now they would have to drive to Wiltshire in the Jag. Swallowing his annoyance, he said, "Well, we'd better get mov-ing. We'll have to stop at a garage to get some air in the tyres and fill up with petrol."

"Gosh, I'm sorry."

"You know the way?"

"Where? To the garage?"

"No. To where we're going in Wiltshire."

"Yes, of course I do."

"What's the house called?"

"Charbourne. I've been there heaps of tunes."

He stood looking down at her, and then at her so-called luggage. "Are these all the clothes you've got?"

"I've brought my Wellingtons."

"Amabel, it's still winter, and we're meant to be going to a point-to-point tomorrow. Have you got a coat?"

"No, I left it in the country last weekend." She shrugged her bony shoulders. "But I can borrow something. Camilla's bound to have stacks of suitable garments."

"That's not the point. We've got to get there first, and the heater in the Jag's not always very reliable. The last thing I want is to have to nurse you through pneumonia."

"Sorry."

But she did not sound particularly sorry. Stifling his irritation, Noel turned and pulled open the sliding door of his cupboard, felt around in its overcrowded interior, and finally found what he was looking for, which was a gentleman's overcoat of incredible age; thick dark tweed, with a faded velvet collar and a lining of tattered rabbit fur.

"Here," he said. "You can borrow this."

"Gosh." She seemed inordinately delighted; not, he knew, by his concern, but by the faded grandeur of the ancient garment. She adored old clothes and spent much of her time and money scouting round the stalls of Petticoat Lane, buying droopy evening dresses from the 1930s, or beaded bags. Now she took the dignified old wreck of a coat from him and put it on. It engulfed her, but at least the hem did not drag on the floor.

"Oh, what a scrumptious coat. Where on earth did you get it?"

"It was my grandfather's, I nicked it out of my mother's cupboard when she sold her London house."

"I couldn't keep it, could I?"

"No, you couldn't. But you can wear it this weekend. The point-to-pointers will wonder what's hit them, but it'll give them something to talk about."

She hugged the coat about her and laughed, not so much at his mild joke but with the sheer animal pleasure of wearing a fur-lined coat, and she looked so much like a wicked, greedy child that he found himself filled with a sudden physical desire for her. In normal circumstances he would, then and there, have taken her straight to bed, but right now there was not time. That would have to wait until later.

The journey to Wiltshire was no worse than he had expected. The rain never ceased, and the traffic out of London was three lanes deep and snail-slow. But at last they were on the motorway and able to get up some speed, and the knocking sound in the engine obligingly did not make itself evident, and the heater, faintly, worked.

For a little they talked, and then Amabel fell silent. He thought that she had probably gone to sleep, which was what she usually did on such occasions, but then he became aware of various shiftings and gropings going on in the seat beside him, and knew that she was not asleep.

He said, "What's up?"

She said, "There's something crackling."

"Crackling?" He was filled with alarm, imagining the Jag about to burst into flame. He even slowed down slightly.

"Yes. Crackling. You know. Like a bit of paper."

"Where?"

"Inside the coat." She groped again. "There's a hole in the pocket. I think it's something inside the lining."

Much relieved, Noel accelerated back to eighty. "I thought we were in for a conflagration," he told her.

"Once I found an old half-crown down the lining of a coat of my mother's. Perhaps this is a five-pound note."

"More likely an old letter, or a bit of chocolate wrapping. We'll investigate when we get there."

An hour later they reached their destination. Amabel, somewhat to Noel's surprise, managed not to lose the way, directing him off the motorway, through various small country towns, and finally down a narrow winding road that led through darkened farmlands to the village of Charbourne. Even in the rain and the darkness this seemed picturesque, with a main street flanked by deep cobbled pavements and thatched cottages fronted by small gardens. They passed a pub and a church, drove through an avenue of oak trees, and then came to an imposing pair of gates.

"This is it."

He turned in through the gates, past a small lodge, and up a driveway leading through parkland. In the beam of his headlights he saw the house, square, white and Georgian, with the pleasing proportions and symmetry of that period. Lights shone from behind drawn curtains, and Noel circled the wide gravelled sweep and drew up at the front door.

He killed the engine and they got out of the car and collected their luggage from the boot and went up the steps to the closed front door. Amabel found a

wrought-iron bell-pull and gave it a tug but then said, "We don't have to wait," and opened the door herself.

They stepped into a stone-flagged lobby, with another glassed door that led into the hall. The lights were on, and Noel saw that this was large and panelled, with an impressive stairway rising to the upper floor. As they hesitated, a door at the far end of the hall was opened and a woman appeared, bustling forward to let them in. She was stout and white-haired, wearing a flowered pinafore over her good turquoise-blue Courtelle dress. The gardener's wife, Noel decided, come in to give a hand over the weekend.

She opened the door. "Good evening. Come along in. Mr. Keeling and Miss Remington-Luard? That's right. Mrs. Early's just gone up for her bath and Camilla and the Colonel are down at the stables, but Mrs. Early said I was to watch out for you and show you up to your rooms. This all your luggage, is it? What a dreadful night. Did you have a bad drive? The rain's something awful, isn't it?" By now they were inside. There was an open fire in the marble fireplace, and the house felt splendidly warm. The gardener's wife closed the door: "If you'd just like to follow me. Can you manage your luggage?"

They could. Amabel, still bundled in the old coat, carried her tote bag with the Wellingtons, and Noel carried the other tote bag and his own suitcase. Thus burdened, they followed the stout lady as she led them up the stairs.

"Camilla's other guests arrived at tea-time, but they're up in their rooms now, changing. And Mrs. Early asked me to tell you that dinner's at eight, but if you'd like to be down by a quarter to, there'll be drinks in the library, and you can meet everyone else then. . . ."

At the turn of the stairs an archway gave onto a passage that led towards the back of the house. There was a scarlet carpet on the floor, sporting prints adorned the walls, and Noel noticed the pleasant smell inherent in well-kept country houses, compounded of freshly ironed linen, polish, and lavender.

"Now this is your room, dear." She opened a door and stood aside for Amabel to go through. "And you, Mr. Keeling, are along here . . . and there's the bathroom in between. I think you've got everything, but if you do need

something, just let us know."

"Thank you so much."

"And I'll tell Mrs. Early you'll be down about a quarter to eight."

With a delightful smile she went, closing the door behind her. Noel, left alone, set down his suitcase and stood looking around him. His years of weekending in strange houses had sharpened his perceptions to such a degree that he was able, almost from the moment he walked through a new front door, to gauge the possibilities of the days that lay ahead and accord them his own private system of grading.

One Star was the bottom, usually a dank country cottage complete with draughts, lumpy beds, unappetizing food, and nothing but beer offered to slake a man's thirst. Fellow guests were inclined to be unengaging relations with badly behaved children. If caught in such a situation, Noel very often remembered a sudden and pressing engagement and took himself back to London first thing on the Sunday morning. Two Star applied in the main to houses in the Army belt of Surrey, with a party consisting of a lot of athletic girls and young cadets from Sandhurst. Tennis was normally the accepted entertainment, played on a mossy court and topped off by an evening visit to the local pub.

Three Star were rambling, unpretentious country estates, with lots of dogs around, and horses in the stables, smouldering log fires, lavish nursery food, and, almost always, splendid wine. Four Star was the top, the homes of the immensely rich. A butler, your unpacking done for you, and a fire in your bedroom. The *raison d'être* for Four Star weekends was usually some coming-out dance, taking place in the neighbourhood. There would be a vast chandelier-lit marquee, set up in the garden; a band, imported at hideous expense from London to play the night away, and champagne still flowing at six o'clock in the morning.

Charbourne, he had instantly decided, was Three Star, and he was well content. He had, obviously, not been given the best guest-room, but this was, nevertheless, totally adequate. Old-fashioned, comforting, with solid Victorian furniture and heavy chintz curtains, and containing everything an

overnight visitor could possibly need. He took off his coat and slung it across the bed, and went to open a second door that led into a spacious carpeted bathroom with an enormous bath encased in mahogany. There was another door on the other side of this room, and he crossed the floor and tried the handle, half expecting to find it locked; but it opened, and he was in Amabel's room. He found her, still draped in the fur-lined coat, taking random garments from her tote bag, which she dropped, like fallen leaves, on the floor at her feet.

She looked up and saw the grin on his face.

"What's that for?" she asked him.

"Our hostess is obviously a woman of good sense and broad-mindedness."

"How do you mean?" She could be very obtuse.

"I mean that under no circumstances would she ever put us in a double room, but what we choose to do with ourselves in the privacy of the night is absolutely none of her business."

"Oh well," said Amabel, "I expect she's had plenty of practice." She rummaged deep in the tote bag and pulled out a long black stringy garment.

"What's that?" he asked.

"It's what I'm going to wear tonight."

"Isn't it a bit crumpled?"

She gave it a shake. "It's jersey. It's not meant to crumple. Do you think the water's hot?"

"Bound to be."

"Oh, goody. I'm going to have a bath. Run it for me, would you?"

He returned to the bathroom, put in the plug, and turned on the taps. Then he went back to his own room and unpacked, hanging his suits in the spacious

wardrobe and laying his clean shirts in the drawers. At the bottom of his suitcase was a silver hunting flask. By now he could hear Amabel splashing about in the water, and scented steam wreathed, like smoke, through the open door. With the flask in his hand he went through to the bathroom, collected two tooth-tumblers, half filled them with whisky and then topped them up with water from the cold tap. Amabel had decided to wash her hair. She was always washing her hair, but it never looked any different. He gave her one of the tumblers, putting it on a stool by the bath where she could reach it when she'd got the soap out of her eyes. Then he went into her room, collected his grandfather's coat off the floor and took it back to the bathroom, where he settled himself on the lid of the lavatory, placed his own drink carefully on the soap tray of the wash-basin, and began to investigate.

The steam was clearing. Amabel sat up, pushed her long sodden locks away from her face and opened her eyes. She saw the drink and reached for it.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Looking for the five-pound note."

Feeling through the heavy material, he located the crackling, deep in the hem. He put his hand in the relevant pocket and found the hole, but it was too small for his hand to get through, so he tore it a bit more and tried again. Groping down between the tweed and the dry backs of rabbit skins, his fingertips encountered fluff and scraps of fur. He set his teeth, imagining a dead mouse or something unspeakably disgusting, but quashed such horrors and persevered. At last, in the very corner of the hem, his fingers encountered what they were looking for. Cautiously he withdrew and freed his hand. The coat slipped from his knee and onto the floor and he was left holding a piece of flimsy folded paper, old and browned as some precious parchment.

"What is it?" Amabel wanted to know.

"Not a five-pound note. A letter, I think."

"Gosh, how disappointing."

Delicately, so as not to tear it, he opened it out. Saw the sloping, old-

fashioned writing, the letters beautifully formed with a finely nibbed pen.

Dufton Hall.

Lincolnshire.

8th May, 1898.

Dear Stern,

I thank you for your letter from Rapallo and note that by now you will have returned to Paris. I hope to be able to travel to France next month when, D.V., I will call upon you at your studio and inspect the oil sketch for The Terrazzo Garden. When the necessary travel arrangements have been made, I shall send you a telegram informing you of the date and time of my visit.

Yours truly,

Ernest Wollaston.

He read this in silence. When he had finished, he sat for a moment deep in thought, and then raised his head and looked at Amabel.

He said, "Amazing."

"What does it say?"

"What an amazing thing to find."

"Oh, Noel, for God's sake, read it to me."

He did so. When he had finished, Amabel was none the wiser. "What's so amazing about that?"

"It's a letter to my grandfather."

"So what?"

"Have you never heard of Lawrence Stern?"

"No."

"He was a painter. A very successful Victorian painter."

"I never knew that. No wonder he had such a super coat."

Noel ignored this irrelevance. "A letter from Ernest Wollaston.

"Was he a painter, too?"

"No, you ignoramus, he was not a painter. He was a Victorian industrialist. A self-made millionaire. He was eventually elevated to the peerage and called himself Lord Dufton."

"And what about the picture . . . what's it called?"

"*The Terrazzo Garden*. It was a commission. He commissioned Lawrence Stern to paint it for him."

"Never heard of that, either."

"You should have done. It's very famous. For the last ten years it's been hanging in the Metropolitan Museum in New York."

"What does it look like?"

Noel was silent for a moment, frowning with the effort of recalling a painting that he had only seen reproduced in the pages of some esoteric periodical. "A terrace. Italy, obviously, that was why he'd been in Rapallo. A group of women, leaning on a balustrade; roses growing all over the place. Cypress trees and blue sea, and a boy playing a harp. It's very beautiful, of its kind." He looked at the letter again, and it all fell into place and he knew exactly how it had happened. "Ernest Wollaston had made a packet and moved up in society, probably built himself this impressive great house in Lincolnshire. And he would buy furniture for it, and have carpets specially woven in France, and because he had no inherited portraits or Gainsboroughs or Zoffanys to hang on his walls, he would commission the most prestigious

artist of the day to paint a picture for him. In those days, it was a little like asking some guy, to make a film. Locations, costumes, models would all have to be considered. Then, when this had been decided and researched, the artist would make a rough oil sketch for his client to see. He had months of work ahead of him, and he had to be pretty sure that at the end of the day it was going to be exactly what the man wanted and that he got paid his money for it."

"I see." She lay back in the water, with her hair floating around her, like Ophelia, and considered all this. "But I still don't see why you're looking so excited."

"It's just that ... I'd never thought about those first oil sketches. Or if I had, I'd forgotten about them."

"Are they that important?"

"I don't know. They might be."

"Clever little me, then, finding the letter crackling away in the coat."

"Yes. Clever little you."

After a bit, he folded the letter, put it in his pocket, finished his drink and stood up. He looked at his watch. "It's half past seven," he told her, "You'd better get your skates on."

"Where are you going?"

"To change."

He left her, still wallowing, and went back into his room, closing the door behind him. Then, very quietly, he opened the other door and stepped out into the passage, and made his way back to the staircase and down into the hall. On the thick carpeting his footsteps made no sound. At the bottom of the stairs he paused, hesitating. There was nobody around, although voices and pleasant domestic clatterings came from the direction of the back quarters of the house, along with fragrant smells of delicious cooking. These, however,

did not divert him, because for the moment he had no thoughts for anything except where there might be a telephone.

He found one almost at once, right there in the hall, in a glassed-in cubby-hole beneath the stairs. He went in and closed the door, lifted the receiver and dialled a London number. Almost immediately the call was answered.

"Edwin Mundy here."

"Edwin, it's Noel Keeling."

"Noel. Long time no see." His voice was husky and expensive, with faint undertones of the cockney accent that he had never succeeded in losing. "How are things with you?"

"Fine, but look, I haven't much time. I'm down in the country. I just wanted to ask you something.

"Anything, old boy."

"I'm talking about Lawrence Stern. Are you with me?"

"Yes."

"Would you know if ever any of his rough oil sketches for major paintings have come on the market?"

There was a pause. Then Edwin said cagily, "That's an interesting question. Why? Have you got any?"

"No. And I don't know if any exist. That's why I'm calling you."

"I've never heard of any coming up in any of the important salerooms. But, of course, there are small dealers all over the country."

"What would . . ." Noel cleared his throat and tried again. "At the present state of the market, what would such a thing fetch?"

"Depends on the painting. If it was one of his important works, I suppose about four or five thousand ... but don't take my word for it, old boy, that's just a rough guess. I can't say for sure until I've seen it."

"I told you. I have nothing."

"Then why the call?"

"I've just realized that such sketches might still be around, without any of us knowing about them."

"You mean, in your mother's house?"

"Well, they'd have to be somewhere."

"If you could find them," Edwin continued, at his most ur-bane, "I imagine you'll let me handle them for you."

But Noel was not going to commit himself as easily as that. "I'd have to get my hands on them first." And then, before Edwin could say any more, "I've got to go, Edwin. Dinner's in five minutes and I haven't even changed. Thanks for your help, and sorry to trouble you."

"No trouble, dear boy. Glad to be of help. An interesting possibility. Good hunting."

He rang off. Slowly, Noel replaced the receiver. Four to five thousand pounds. More than he had dared to imagine. He took a deep breath, opened the door and stepped out into the hall. There was still nobody about, and as no person had witnessed his action, there was no necessity to leave any money to pay for the call.

HANK

At the very last moment, when all was ready and waiting for her dinner-a-deux with Hank Spotswood, Olivia remembered that she had not called her mother with the suggestion that she drive to Gloucestershire the following day and spend a leisurely Saturday with her. The white telephone stood by the sofa, and she was actually sitting there, and dialling the number, when she heard a taxi come crawling down the street. She knew instinctively that it was Hank. She hesitated. Her mother, once on the telephone, liked to talk, giving and being given news, and there would be no question of simply making the arrangement and hanging up. She heard the taxi halt at her gate, stopped dialling and replaced the receiver. She would call later on. Her mother never went to bed until midnight.

She got to her feet, straightened the dented cushion, and glanced around, checking that all was perfection. It was. Low lights, drinks waiting, ice in the ice bucket, soft music, scarcely audible, on the stereo. She turned to the looking-glass over the mantel piece and touched her hair, rearranged the collar of her cream satin Chanel shirt. There were pearls in her ear-lobes and her make-up was pearly too, soft and very feminine, unlike the startling maquillage she affected during the day. Waiting, she heard the gate open and shut. Footsteps. The doorbell rang.

She went, without hurry, to let him in.

"Good evening."

He stood on the doorstep in the rain. A rugged, handsome man in his late forties, bearing, predictably, a sheaf of long-stemmed red roses.

"Hi."

"Come along in. What a horrible evening. But you found the way."

"Sure. No problem." He stepped indoors and she closed the door, and he

handed her the flowers.

"A small offering," he told her and smiled, and she had forgotten his attractive smile and his even, very white American teeth.

"Oh, they're lovely." She took them and automatically bent her head to smell them, but they had been cruelly forced in some hothouse, and so had no scent. "How very kind of you. Take off your coat and help yourself to a drink, and I'll go and put them in water right away."

She bore them off to her little kitchen, found a jug, filled it with water, and put the roses in just as they were, without taking time to arrange them in any way. They fell, as roses do, gracefully into shape. Carrying the jug, she returned to the sitting room, and put it, with some ceremony, in the place of honour on top of her walnut bureau. The red of the flowers against the white walls was bright as drops of blood.

She turned to him. "That was very thoughtful. Now, have you got a drink?"

He had. "I took a Scotch. I hope that's in order." He set down his glass. "Now what can I fix for you?"

"The same. With water and ice."

She sank down in the corner of the sofa, curled her feet up beside her, and watched him as he dealt with bottles and glasses. When he brought the drink over to her, she put up her hand to take it, and then he collected his own and let himself down in the arm chair that stood across the hearth. He raised his glass. "Cheers."

"Good health," said Olivia.

They drank. They began to talk. It was all very easy and relaxed. He admired her house, was interested in her pictures, asked about her job, wanted to know how she had become acquainted with the Ridgeways, at whose party, a couple of nights ago, they had met. And then, tactfully prompted, he began to tell her about himself. He was in the carpet business, and over in this

country for the International Textile Conference. He was staying at the Ritz. He was a New Yorker, but had moved south to work in Dalton, Georgia.

"That must be quite a change of life-style. New York to Georgia."

"Yes." He looked down, turning his glass in his hands. "But the move came at an opportune time. My wife and I had recently separated, and it made the domestic arrangements a good deal easier."

"I'm sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about. Just one of those things."

"Do you have children?"

"Yes. Two teen-agers. A boy and a girl."

"Do you get to see them?"

"Sure. They spend their summer vacation with me. The South is great for kids. They can play tennis all the year round, ride, swim. We belong to the local country club, and they met up with a lot of youngsters their own age."

"Sounds fun,"

There came a pause, during which Olivia tactfully waited, giving him the chance to produce a wallet of photographs of his children, which, blessedly, he did not. She began to like him more and more. She said, "Your glass is empty. Would you like another drink?"

They talked on. The conversation switched to more serious subjects: American politics, the economic balance between their two countries. His opinions were both liberal and practical, and though he told her that he voted Republican, he seemed deeply concerned with the problems of the Third World. After a little, she glanced at her watch and realized, with some surprise, that it was already nine o'clock.

She said, "I think perhaps it's time we ate."

He got to his feet, collected their empty glasses, and followed her into the little dining room. She switched on the low lights, and the charmingly ordered table was revealed, laid with crystal and shining silver and a centre-piece of early lilies. The lights, though soft, were bright enough for him to spy instantly her single cobalt-blue wall, covered from floor to ceiling with framed photographs, and he was at once diverted.

"Hey, look at all this. What a great idea."

"Family photographs always seem to me such a problem. I never know where to put them, so I solved the puzzle by simply papering the wall with them."

She went behind the counter of the small kitchen, collecting pile and brown bread, while he stood with his back to her and inspected the photographs with the interest and attention of a man at an art gallery.

"Who's this pretty girl here?"

"That's my sister Nancy."

"She's lovely."

"She was," Olivia agreed. "But she's let herself go, as they say. You know, put on weight and generally become very middle-aged. But she was lovely when she was a girl. That was taken just before she was married."

"Where does she live?"

"In Gloucestershire. She's got two horrible children and a boring husband and her idea of heaven is to trail round a point-to-point with two Labradors on leads, hooting greetings at all her friends." He turned to frown in a perplexed fashion and Olivia laughed. "You don't even know what I'm talking about, do you?"

"No. But I get the gist." He went back to the photographs. "And who's this

handsome lady?"

"That's my mother."

"Have you got one of your father?"

"No, my father's dead. But that's my brother Noel. The good-looking man with the blue eyes."

"He certainly is good-looking. Is he married?"

"No. He's almost thirty now and he still isn't married."

"Has he got a girl-friend?"

"Not a resident one. He never has a resident girl-friend. He spends his whole life being terrified of committing himself. You know, the sort of man who never accepts an invitation to a party in case a better one turns up." ' Hank's shoulders shook with amusement. "You're not very kindly about your family."

"I know. But what's the point hi clinging to sentimental illusions, especially when you've reached my age?"

She came out from behind the counter and laid the pate and the butter and the crusty brown bread out on the table. She found matches and lit the candles.

"And who's this?"

"Which one are you looking at?"

"This guy, with the young girl."

"Oh." She moved to stand beside him. "That's a man called Cosmo Hamilton. And the girl is his daughter Antonia."

"What a pretty kid."

"I took that five years ago. She must be eighteen now."

"Are they related to you?"

"No. He's a friend. He was a friend. A lover, actually. He has a house in Ibiza, and five years ago I took a year off work ... a sabbatical; and spent it there, living with him."

Hank raised his eyebrows. "A year. That's a long time to live with a man."

"It passed very quickly."

She felt his eyes upon her face. "Were you fond of him?"

"Yes. Fonder than I've ever been of any person."

"Why didn't you marry him ... or perhaps he already had a wife?"

"No, he didn't have a wife. But I didn't want to marry him because I didn't want to marry anybody. I still don't."

"Do you still see him?"

"No. I said goodbye to him, and that was the end of the affair."

"And the daughter, Antonia?"

"I don't know what's happened to her."

"Do you write?"

Olivia shrugged. "I send him Christmas cards. That was what we agreed. A Christmas card every year, with a robin on it."

"That doesn't sound very generous."

"No, it doesn't, does it? And it's probably impossible for you to understand. But the important thing is that Cosmo does." She smiled. "Now, if you've finished with my friends and relations, how about pouring the wine and we'll have something to eat?"

He said, "Tomorrow's Saturday. What do you usually do with your Saturdays?"

"Sometimes I go away for the weekend. Sometimes I just stay here. Unwind, relax, ask a few friends round for a drink."

"Have you got anything planned for tomorrow?"

"Why?"

"I have no meetings fixed. I thought we might take a car and go off somewhere together . . . you could show me some of this famous countryside I'm always hearing about but never have time to go and inspect."

Dinner was finished, the dishes abandoned, the dining room lights switched off. With brandy and coffee, they had returned to the fireside, only now they were both on the sofa, sitting at either end, half turned towards each other. Olivia's dark head rested on an Indian pink cushion, her legs curled beneath her. One of her patent-leather slippers had dropped off and lay on the carpet at her feet.

She said, "Tomorrow, I'd planned to go and see my mother in Gloucestershire."

"Is she expecting you?"

"No. But I was going to call her before I went to bed."

"Do you have to go?"

Olivia considered this. She had meant to go, had decided to go, and had felt better for making the decision. But now . . .

"No, I don't have to go," she told him. "But she's been unwell and I haven't seen her for too long, and I ought to."

"How much persuading would it take to make you change your mind?"

Olivia smiled. She took another mouthful of the strong dark coffee and replaced the little cup, with much care, exactly in the centre of its saucer.

"How would you persuade me?"

"I could tempt you with the promise of a four-star meal. Or a ride on the river. Or a country walk. Whatever pleases you most."

Olivia considered this lure.

"I suppose I could put her off for a week. It's not as though she were expecting me, and so she won't be disappointed."

"You'll come, then."

She made up her mind. "Yes, I'll come."

"Shall I hire a car?"

"I have a perfectly good car of my own."

"Where shall we go?"

Olivia shrugged and laid down her coffee-cup. "Wherever you want. The New Forest; up the river to Henley. We could go to Kent and look at the gardens at Sissinghurst."

"Shall we decide tomorrow?"

"If you want."

"What time shall we start?"

"Early, I think. Then we'll get out of London before the worst of the traffic."

"In that case, perhaps I should start making tracks back to my hotel."

"Yes," said Olivia. "Perhaps you should."

But neither of them moved. Down the length of the huge white sofa, their eyes met and held. It was very quiet. The stereo was silent, the tapes long finished, and outside the rain streamed against the window panes. A car went down the road, and the little carriage clock on Olivia's mantelpiece ticked away the passing moments. It was nearly one o'clock.

He moved towards her, as she had known he would, and put an arm around her shoulders and drew her towards him so that her head no longer rested on the pink cushion but lay against the warm bulk of his chest. With his other hand, he smoothed her hair from her cheek, then, placing his fingers beneath her chin to turn up her face, bent and kissed her mouth. His hand moved from her chin to her throat, and down to the curve of her tiny breasts. He said, at last, "I've been wanting to do that all evening."

"I think I've been wanting you to do it."

"If we're starting off so early in the morning, isn't it pretty silly, my going all the way to the Ritz just to get four hours sleep and then come back for you?"

"Dreadfully silly."

"May I stay?"

"Why not?"

He drew back, gazing down at her upturned face, and his eyes were filled with a curious mixture of desire and amusement.

"There is only one snag," he told her. "I have no razor nor toothbrush."

"I have both. Brand new. For emergencies."

He began to laugh. "You are an amazing woman," he told her.

"So I've been told."

Olivia awoke, as she always did, early. Seven-thirty in the morning. The curtains were drawn, but not completely, and through the gap between them the air flowed in, fresh and cold. It was just light and the sky was clear. Perhaps it was going to be a fine day.

For a little she lay, drowsy and relaxed, smiling with content, remembering last night and anticipating with pleasure the day that lay ahead. She turned her head on the pillow and gazed with deep satisfaction at the sleeping man who occupied the other side of her vast bed. One arm was tucked beneath his head, the other lay across the thick white blanket. This was deeply tanned, as was the whole of his healthy, youthful body, and softly furred with tiny golden hairs. She put out her hand and touched his forearm, as she would have touched some piece of porcelain or sculpture, just for the sheer animal pleasure of feeling its shape and curve beneath her fingertips. The light touch did not disturb him, and when she drew her hand away, he still slept.

Her drowsiness had gone, to be replaced by the usual restless energy. She was fully awake now and raring to go. Cautiously she sat up, turned back the covers, got out of the bed. She pushed her bare feet into slippers and reached for her pale pink woollen gown, pulled it on, and tied the sash around her narrow waist. She went out of the room, closing the door behind her, and down the stairs.

She drew back the curtains and saw that, indeed, it promised to be a perfect day. There had been a light frost in the night, but the pale sky was cloudless and the first low rays of wintry sun were already penetrating the deserted street. She opened the front door and took in the milk, carried this to the kitchen, and stowed the bottles away in the fridge. She cleared the dinner dishes from the previous evening and stacked them in the dishwasher, and then laid the table for breakfast. She put coffee on to perk, found bacon and eggs, a packet of cereal. She returned to the sitting room to straighten

cushions, remove glasses and coffeecups, light the fire. The roses he had brought her had started to open, the petals curling back from the tight inner buds, like hands opening in supplication. She paused to smell them, but, poor things, they still had no scent. Never mind, she told them, you're beautiful. You'll just have to be content with your good looks.

The post, with a rattle of the letter-box, fell upon the mat inside the front door. She was just about to go and collect this, and was already half-way across the room, when the telephone rang, and she made a dive for the receiver, not wishing the shrill bell to disturb the man who still slept upstairs.

"Hello."

In the mirror over the mantelpiece she was face to face with her own reflection, morning-bare, her dark hair falling across one cheek. She pushed it back, and then, because there had been no response, said, "Hello?" again.

There was a click and a buzz and then a feminine voice spoke. "Olivia?"

"Yes."

"Olivia, it's Antonia."

"Antonia?"

"Antonia Hamilton. Cosmo's Antonia."

"Antonia!" Olivia sank into the corner of the sofa, tucking up her feet, cradling the receiver to her ear. "Where are you speaking from?"

"Ibiza."

"You sound as though you're just next door."

"I know. It's a good line, thank God." Something in the young voice caught at Olivia's attention. She felt the smile on her face fade, her fingers tightened around the smooth white surface of the receiver.

"Why are you calling?"

"Olivia. I had to let you know. I'm afraid it's rather sad. My father's dead."

Dead. Cosmo dead. "Dead." She said the word, whispered it, but did not know that she was saying it.

"He died late on Thursday night. In hospital . . . the funeral was yesterday."

"But ..." Cosmo, dead. It was not believable. "But . . . how? Why?"

"I ... I can't tell you—not over the telephone."

Antonia, without Cosmo in Ibiza. "Where are you ringing from?"

"From Pedro's."

"Where are you living?"

"At Ca'n D'alt."

"Are you alone there?"

"No. Tomeu and Maria moved in to keep me company. They've been marvellous."

"But ..."

"Olivia, I have to come to London. I can't stay here, because the house doesn't belong to me and ... oh, a thousand other reasons. Anyway, I'll have to get some sort of a job. If I came . . . could I stay with you for a few days, just until I get myself settled? I wouldn't ask you such a favour, only there isn't anyone else."

Olivia hesitated, hating herself for hesitating, but only too aware that every instinct in her being was reacting violently against the thought of any person,

even Antonia, invading the precious privacy of her house and her life.

"What . . . what about your mother?"

"She's married again. She lives in the North now, near Huddersfield. And I don't want to go there . . . I'll explain that later, too."

"When do you want to come?"

"Next week. Maybe Tuesday, if I can get a flight. Olivia, it would only be for a few days, just until I get myself organized."

Her pleading voice, over the miles of telephone cable, sounded young and vulnerable, as it had when she was a child. Suddenly, Olivia remembered Antonia as she had first seen her, running across the polished floor of the Ibiza airport, to fling herself into Cosmo's arms. And she was filled with disgust at herself. This is Antonia, you selfish cow, appealing for help. This is Cosmo's Antonia and Cosmo is dead, and the fact that she's turning to you is the greatest compliment she could pay you. For once in your life, stop thinking of yourself.

As though Antonia could see her, she smiled, comforting, reassuring. She said, making her voice warm and strong, "Of course you can come. Let me know when your flight is due, and I'll meet you at Heathrow. You can tell me everything then."

"Oh, you are a saint. I won't be any trouble."

"Of course you won't." Her practical, well-trained mind moved on to other possible difficulties. "Are you all right for money?"

"Oh." Antonia sounded surprised, as though she had not even considered such details, which she probably hadn't. "Yes. I think so."

"You've got enough to pay for the air ticket?"

"Yes, I think so. Just."

"Be in touch, then, and I'll expect you."

"Thank you so much. And . . . I'm sorry to tell you about Daddy. . . ."

"I'm sorry too." It was the understatement of her life. She closed her eyes, shutting away the pain of a loss that she had not yet fully absorbed. "He was a very special person."

"Yes." Antonia was crying. She could hear, see, almost feel the tears. "Yes . . . goodbye, Olivia."

"Goodbye."

Antonia rang off.

After a little, clumsily, Olivia replaced her own receiver. She felt, all at once, immensely cold. Curled in the corner of the sofa, she wrapped her arms around herself, staring at her neat and shining sitting room where nothing had changed, nothing had moved, and yet everything was different. For Cosmo had gone. Cosmo was dead. For the rest of her life Olivia would have to live in a world in which there was no Cosmo. She thought of that warm evening outside Pedro's where they had sat and listened to the boy playing the Rodrigo concerto on his guitar, and filling the night with the music of Spain. Why that occasion in particular, when there was a whole cornucopia of memories from her months with Cosmo?

A step on the stair made her look up. She saw Hank Spots-wood coming down towards her. He wore her white towelling bathrobe, and he did not look ridiculous in this because it was a man's one anyway and fitted him easily. She was pleased that he did not look ridiculous. She could not have borne him, at that moment, to have appeared looking ridiculous. And this was crazy, too, for what did it matter how he looked, when Cosmo was dead?

She watched him, saying nothing. He said, "I heard the telephone."

"I hoped it wouldn't wake you."

She did not know that her face was ashen, her dark eyes like two holes in her face.

He said, "What's wrong?"

He had a stubble of beard and his hair was tousled. She thought of last night and was glad it was him.

"Cosmo has died. The man I told you about last night. The man in Ibiza."

"Oh, dear God."

He was down the stairs, across the floor, sitting beside her; gathering her wordlessly into his arms as though she were a hurt child in need of comfort. With her face pressed against the rough white towelling of her own bathrobe, she wished, violently, that she were able to cry. Longed for tears to come, for grief to spill over in some physical way that would ease the tight pain of misery that held her in its grip. But this did not happen. She had never been much good at crying.

"Who was that on the telephone?" he asked.

"Cosmo's daughter, Antonia. Poor child. He died on Thursday night. The funeral was yesterday. I don't know any more."

"What age a man was he?"

"I suppose . . . about sixty. But so young."

"What happened?"

"I don't know. She didn't want to talk about it over the telephone. She just said he died in hospital. She . . . she wants to come to London. She's coming next week. She's going to stay with me for a few days."

He said nothing to this, but his arms tightened about her, his hand gently

patting her shoulder, as though he soothed a highly strung animal. After a bit, she felt comforted. She had stopped feeling cold. She freed her hands and laid them against his chest and drew away from him, composed now, and herself again.

"I'm sorry," she apologized. "I'm not usually so emotional."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"There's nothing anybody can do. It's all over."

"What about today? Would you rather we called it all off?"

"I'll just disappear, get out of your way, if you'd like me to. You'd maybe like to be alone."

"No, I don't want to be alone. The last thing I want is to be alone." She marshalled her flying thoughts, set them into order, and knew that her first priority was to let her mother know that Cosmo had died. She said, "But I'm afraid Sissinghurst or Hen-ley are out. I'll have to go to Gloucestershire after all, and see my mother. I told you she'd been unwell, but I didn't tell you that she had a slight heart attack. And she was so fond of Cosmo. When I was living in Ibiza, she came and stayed with us. It was such a happy time. One of the happiest times of my life. So I have to tell her that he's died, and I want to be there when I do it." She looked at Hank. "Would you mind coming with me? I'm afraid it's a dreadfully long drive, but she'll give us lunch and we can spend a peaceful afternoon with her."

"I'd be pleased to come. And I'll drive you."

He was like a rock. She managed a smile, filled with affectionate gratitude. "I'll ring her now." She reached for the telephone receiver. "Tell her to expect us for lunch."

"Couldn't we take her out for a meal?"

Olivia dialled the number. "You don't know my mother."

He accepted this, and got to his feet. "I smell coffee perk-ing," he observed. "How would it be if I cooked the breakfast?"

They were out of the house and away by nine o'clock in the morning, Olivia in the passenger seat of her own dark green Al-phasud, and Hank at the wheel. He drove, at first, with the greatest care, anxious not to forget that he was on the wrong side of the road, but after they had stopped to fill up with petrol, he became more confident, picked up speed, and they headed down the motorway towards Oxford at a steady seventy.

They did not talk. His concentration was all for the other traffic and the great road that curved ahead of them. Olivia was content to be silent, her chin sunk deep in the fur collar of her coat, her eyes watching but not seeing the dull countryside that flew past the windows.

But after Oxford, it got better. It was a sparkling winter day, and as the low sun rose in the late winter sky, the frost on plough and grass melted, and lacy black trees threw long shadows across road and field. Farmers had started ploughing, and hosts of gulls followed the tractors and the furrows of newly turned black earth. They passed through small towns bustling with Saturday-morning busyness. Narrow streets were lined with the cars of country families, in from outlying districts to do the weekend shopping, and pavements teemed with mothers and children and perambulators, and market stalls piled with garish garments, plastic toys and balloons, flowers, and fresh fruit and vegetables. Farther on still, outside a village pub, they came upon a Meet, the cobbled yard a-clatter with horses' hooves, the air loud with the bay and whimper of hounds, the cry of hunting horns, and the raised voices of the huntsmen resplendent in their pink coats. Hank could scarcely believe his good fortune. "Will you look at that?" he kept saying, and he would have stopped the car to watch, but a young policeman firmly moved him on. He drove off, but reluctantly, glancing back over his shoulder for a last glimpse of the traditional English scene.

"It was like something out of a movie, with that oJd inn and the cobbled yard. I wish I'd had my camera."

Olivia was pleased for him. "You can't say I'm not giving you your money's worth. We could have driven all over the country and never found anything as good as that."

"This is obviously my lucky day."

Now the Cotswolds lay ahead. The roads narrowed, winding through watery meadows and over small stone bridges. Houses and farmsteads, built of honey-coloured Cotswold stone, stood golden in the sunshine, with cottage gardens that, in summer, would be a riot of colour, and orchards of plums and apple trees.

"I can understand why your mother chose to live here. I've never seen such countryside. And everything's so green."

"Funnily enough, she didn't come here for the lovely countryside. When she sold up the London house, she had every intention of going to live in Cornwall. She'd lived there as a girl, you see, and I think she yearned to go back. But my sister Nancy thought it was too far away, too far from all her children. So she found this house for her. As things have turned out, perhaps it's all been for the best, but at the time I was angry with Nancy for interfering."

"Does your mother live alone?"

"Yes. But that's another aggravation. The doctors now say she ought to have a companion, a housekeeper, but I know she'll resent this most dreadfully. She's enormously independent and not even very old. Only sixty-four. I feel it's an insult to her intelligence to start treating her as though she's already senile. As it is, she never stops. Cooks and gardens and entertains and reads everything she can lay her hands on, and listens to music, and rings people up and has long, satisfying conversations. Sometimes she takes herself off abroad to stay with old friends. France, usually. Her father was a painter, and she spent much of her girlhood in Paris." She turned her head to smile at Hank. "But why am I telling you about my mother? Before very long, you'll be able to see it all for yourself."

"Did she like Ibiza?"

"Adored it. Cosmo's place was an old Ibecenco farmhouse, inland, up in the hills. Very rural. Just my mother's cup of tea. Whenever she found herself with a spare moment, she disappeared into the garden with a pair of secateurs, just as though she were at home."

"Does she know Antonia?"

"Yes. She and Antonia were out with us at the same time. They made great friends. No age barrier. My mother's marvellous with young people. Much better than I could ever be." She was silent for a moment, and then added, in an impulsive rush of honesty, "I'm not very sure of myself even now. I mean, I want to help Cosmo's child, but I don't relish the thought of having anyone to live with me, for how ever short a time. Isn't that a shameful thing to have to admit?"

"Not shameful. Quite natural. How long will she stay?"

"I suppose until she finds herself a job and somewhere to live."

"Has she got any qualifications for a job?"

"I've no idea."

Probably not. Olivia sighed deeply. The morning's events had left her drained with emotion and physically exhausted. It was not just that she had yet to come to terms with the shock and grief of Cosmo's death, but she felt as well surrounded, besieged by other people's problems. Antonia would arrive, would come and stay, would have to be comforted, encouraged, supported, and, in all likelihood, at the end of the day, be helped to find some sort of a job. Nancy would continue to telephone Olivia and badger her with the question of a housekeeper for their mother, while Mother was going to fight, tooth and nail, any suggestion that she should have anyone to live with her. And on top of all this ...

Her thoughts abruptly stopped dead. And then carefully backtracked. Nancy. Mother. Antonia. But of course. The solution was there. The problems,

arranged together, could be made to cancel each other out, like those fraction sums one used to be given at school, with the answer one of beautiful simplicity.

She said, "I've just had the most wonderful idea." i "What's that?"

"Antonia can come and live with my mother."

If she expected instant enthusiasm from him, she did not get it. Hank considered this at some length before asking cautiously, "Will she want to?"

"Of course. I told you, she loved Mumma. When she left Ibiza, Antonia didn't want her to go. And how much better, when she's only just lost her father, to have a few weeks of quiet and recovery with somebody like my mother before she starts hiking the streets of London trying to find herself a job."

"You've got a point there."

"And on Mumma's side, it wouldn't be like having a housekeeper, it would be like having a friend to stay. I'll suggest it today. See what she thinks. But I'm certain she won't say no. I'm almost certain she won't say no."

Solving problems and making decisions invariably revitalized Olivia, and all at once she felt better. She sat up, pulled down the sun-screen, and inspected herself in the mirror set in its back. She saw her face, still deathly pale, and there were smudges, like bruises, beneath her eyes. The dark fur of her coat collar emphasized this pallor, and she hoped that her mother would not remark upon it. She put on a bit of lipstick and combed her hair, then folded back the sun-screen and turned her attention to the road ahead.

By now they had come through Burford, there were only three miles or so to go, and the way was familiar. "We turn right, here," she told Hank, and he swung the car into the narrow lane, signposted "Temple Padley," and slowed down to a cautious crawl. The road climbed, twisting up the side of a hill, and at its summit the village came into view, nestled like a child's toy in the dip of the valley, with the silver waters of the Windrush, like a ribbon, winding by. The first houses came to meet them; golden stone cottages of great antiquity

and beauty. They saw the old wood church, sheltered by yews. A man was driving a flock of sheep, and outside the pub, which was called the Sudeley Arms, cars were parked. Here, Hank drew up and turned off the engine.

Slightly surprised by this, Olivia turned to look at him. "Are you by any chance feeling in need of a drink?" she asked him politely.

He smiled and shook his head. "No. But I think you would prefer to have a little time with your Mother alone. I'll get out here and join you later, if you'll tell me how to find her house."

"It's the third one down the road. On the right, with a pair of white gates. But you don't have to do this."

"I know." He patted her hand. "But I think it would make things easier for both of you."

"You're very sweet," she told him, and meant it.

"I'd like to bring something for your mother. If I suggested to the landlord that he sell me a couple of bottles of wine, would he oblige?"

"I'm sure, particularly if you tell him they're for Mrs. Keel-ing. He'll probably flog you his most expensive claret."

He grinned, opened the door, and got out of the car. She watched him cross the cobbled yard and disappear through the entrance of the pub, cautiously ducking his tall head beneath the lintel. When he had gone, she undid her safety belt, slid behind the driving wheel, and started up the engine. It was nearly twelve o'clock.

Penelope Keeling stood in the middle of her warm and cluttered kitchen and tried to think what she had to do next, and then decided there was nothing, because all that could be was already accomplished. She had even found time to go upstairs and change out of her working clothes and into others suitable for an unexpected luncheon party. Olivia was always so elegant, and the least one could do was to tidy oneself up a bit. With this in mind, she had put on a

thick cotton brocade skirt (much loved and very old; the material had started its life as a curtain), a man's striped woollen shirt, and a sleeveless cardigan the colour of crimson peonies. Her stockings were dark and thick, her shoes heavy laceups. Gold chains were slung about her neck, and with her hair newly dressed and a bit of scent sprayed about her person, she felt quite festive and filled with pleasant anticipation. Olivia's visits were few and far between, which only made them all the more precious, and ever since the early-morning telephone call from London, she had been in a flurry of preparation.

But now all was ready. Fires lighted in the sitting room and the dining room, drinks set out, wine opened to chambre. Here, in the kitchen, the air was filled with the scent of slowly roasting sirloin, baking onions, and crisping potatoes. She had made pastry, peeled apples, sliced beans (from the deep-freeze), scraped carrots. Later, she would arrange cheeses on a board, grind the coffee, decant the thick cream she had fetched from the village dairy. Tying on an apron to protect her skirt, she washed up the few pieces of kitchen equipment that stood about, and set them in the rack on the draining board. She stowed away a saucepan or two, wiped down the table with a damp cloth, filled a jug and watered her geraniums. Then she took off her apron and hung it on its peg.

Her washing machine had stopped churning. She never did a wash unless the day was good for drying, because she had no spin dryer. She liked laundry to be hung in the open air, giving it a delicious fresh smell, and making it infinitely easier to iron. Olivia and her friend would be arriving at any moment, but she collected the big wicker basket and emptied the tangle of damp linen into this, and, with it hitched up onto her hip, she went out of the kitchen, through the conservatory, and into the garden. She crossed the lawn, went between the gap in the privet hedge and so on to the orchard. Half of this was no longer an orchard. She had created a marvellously prolific vegetable garden, but the other half stayed as it had always been, with gnarled old apple trees, and the Windrush flowing silently beyond the hawthorn hedge.

A long rope was strung between three of these trees, and here Penelope pegged out her washing. Doing this, on a bright fresh morning, was one of

her deepest delights. A thrush was singing, and at her feet, thrusting through the tufty damp grass, bulbs were already beginning to shoot. She had planted these herself, thousands of them; daffodils and crocus and scylla and snowdrops. When these faded and the summer grass grew deep and green, other wildflowers raised their heads. Cowslips and cornflowers and scarlet poppies, all grown from seed that she had scattered herself.

Sheets, shirts, pillowcases, stockings, and night-dresses flapped and danced in the thin breeze. When the basket was empty, she picked it up and made her way back to the house, but slowly, in no hurry, visiting first her vegetable garden to check that the rabbits had not been feasting on the young spring cabbage, and then back to pause by her little tree of *Viburnum Fragrans*, its twiggy stems smothered in deep pink blossom that smelled, miraculously, of summer. She would fetch her specat-eurs and clip a spring or two, to scent the sitting room. She moved on, with every intention of going back indoors, but was diverted once more. This time by the delightful prospect of her house, set back beyond the wide, green lawn. There it stood, washed in sunshine, against a backdrop of bare-branched oak trees and a sky of the most pristine blue. Long and low it lay, whitewashed and half-timbered, with its netted thatch jutting out over the upstairs windows like thick, beetling eyebrows.

Podmore's Thatch. Olivia thought it a ridiculous name, and she felt embarrassed every time she had to say it; she had even suggested that Penelope think up some other name for the old place. But Penelope knew that you couldn't change the name of a house any more than you could change the name of a person. Besides, she had found out from the vicar that William Podmore had been the village thatcher more than two hundred years ago, and the cottage was named for him. Which settled the matter then and there.

Once, it had been two cottages, but it had been converted into one by some previous owner by the simple expedient of knocking doorways in the dividing wall. This meant that the house had two entrances, two rickety stairways, and two bath-rooms. It also meant that all the rooms led into each other, which was inconvenient if you happened to crave a bit of privacy. So, downstairs were kitchen, dining room, sitting room, and then the old kitchen of the second house, which Penelope used as a garden room, and where she

kept her straw hats, her rubber boots, her canvas apron, flowerpots, trugs, and trowels. Over this was a cramped apartment filled with all Noel's belongings, and then, in a row, three larger bedrooms. The one over the kitchen was her own.

As well, dark and fusty beneath the thatch, a loft ran the length of the roof, and this was filled with everything that Penelope could not bear to throw away when she finally departed from Oakley Street, and for which there was no space anywhere else. For five years she had promised herself that this winter, she would clear and sort it all out, but each time she climbed the wobbly steps and had a look around, she became disheartened by the enormity of the task and feebly put it off for a little longer.

The garden, when she came here, was a wilderness, but that had been part of the fun. She was a manic gardener and spent every spare moment of her days out of doors, clearing weeds, digging beds, harrowing great loads of manure, cutting out dead wood, planting, taking cuttings, raising seeds. Now, after five years, she was able to stand there and gloat over the fruits of her labour. And did so, forgetting Olivia, forgetting the time. She often did this. Time had lost its importance. That was one of the good things about getting old: you weren't perpetually in a hurry. All her life, Penelope had looked after other people, but now she had no one to think about but herself. There was time to stop and look, and, looking, to remember. Visions widened, like views seen from the slopes of a painfully climbed mountain, and having come so far, it seemed ridiculous not to pause and enjoy them.

Of course, age brought its other horrors. Loneliness and sickness. People were always talking about the loneliness of old age, but at sixty-four, which admittedly was not very old, Penelope relished her solitude. She had never lived alone before, and at first had found it strange, but gradually had learned to accept it as a blessing and to indulge herself in all sorts of reprehensible ways, like getting up when she felt like it, scratching herself if she itched, sitting up until two in the morning to listen to a concert. And food was another thing. All her life she had cooked for her family and friends and she was an excellent cook, but she discovered, as time went by, an underlying penchant for the most disgusting snacks. Baked beans eaten cold, with a teaspoon, out of the tin. Bottled salad cream spread over her lettuce, and a

certain sort of pickle which she would have been ashamed to set on her table in the old days of Oakley Street.

Even sickness brought its own compensations. Ever since that small hiccup of a month ago, which the stupid doctors insisted on calling a heart attack, she had become, for the first time in her life, aware of her own mortality. This was not frightening, for she had never been afraid of death, but it had honed her perceptions, and reminded her sharply of what the Church calls the sins of omission. She was not a religious woman, and she did not brood on her sins, which had probably, from the Church's point of view, been legion, but she did start counting up the things that she had never done. Along with fairly impractical fantasies like trekking the mountains of Bhutan, or crossing the Syrian desert to visit the ruins of Palmyra, which she accepted now that she would never do, was the yearning desire, almost a compulsion, to go back to Porthkerris.

Forty years was too long. That long ago, at the end of the war, she had got into the train with Nancy, said goodbye to her father, and left for London. The following year the old man had died, and she had left Nancy in the care of her mother-in-law to travel to Cornwall for his funeral. After the funeral, she and Doris had spent a couple of days clearing Cam Cottage of his possessions, and then she had had to return to London and the pressing responsibilities of being a wife and mother. Since then she had never been back. She had meant to. I'll take the children for holidays, she had told herself. Take them to play on the beaches where I played, to climb the moors and look for wild-flowers. But it had never happened. Why had she not gone? What had happened to the years, speeding away as they had, like swiftly flowing water pouring under a bridge? Opportunities had come and gone, but she had never grasped them, mostly because there was no time, or no money to pay for the train fares; she was too busy running the big house, coping with the lodgers, bringing up the children, coping with Ambrose.

For years she had kept Cam Cottage, refusing to sell the house, refusing to admit to herself that she would never go back. For years, through an agent, it had been let to a variety of tenants, and all this time she'd told herself that one day, sometime, she would return. She would take the children and show them the square white house on the hill with its secret high-hedged garden and the

view of the bay and the lighthouse.

This went on until finally, at a time when she found herself at her lowest ebb, she heard from the agent that an elderly couple had been to see the house, and wished to buy it for their retirement. They were, as well as elderly, enormously wealthy. Penelope, struggling to keep her head above water, with three children to educate and a feckless husband to support, found herself with no alternative but to accept their massive offer, and Cam Cottage, finally, was sold.

After that, she didn't think any more about going back to Cornwall. When she sold Oakley Street, she made a few noises about going to live there, fancying herself in a granite cottage with a palm tree in the garden, but Nancy had overridden this suggestion, and perhaps, after all, it was just as well. Besides, to give Nancy her due, as soon as Penelope had set eyes on Podmore's Thatch, she knew that she didn't want to live any-where else.

But still ... it would be nice, just once, before she finally turned up her toes and died ... to go back to Porthkerris again. She could stay with Doris. Perhaps Olivia would come with her.

Olivia turned the Alphasud in through the open gates, drove across the scrunching gravel, past the sagging wooden shed which did duty as garage and tool-store, and drew up at the back of Podmore's Thatch. The half-glassed front door led into a tiled porch. Here hung coats and mackintoshes; a selection of hats decorated the pointed antlers of a moth-eaten stag's head, and a blue-and-white china umbrella-stand sprouted parasols, walking-sticks, and an old golf-club or two. From the porch, she stepped straight into the kitchen, which simmered with warmth and smelt, mouth-wateringly, of roasting beef.

"Mumma?"

There was no reply. Olivia crossed the kitchen and went out into the conservatory, and at once spied Penelope at the far end of the lawn, standing as though in a trance, with an empty wash-ing basket balanced on one hip and the fresh breeze blowing her hair into disorder.

She opened the garden door and stepped out into the chill, bright sunshine.

"Hello!"

Penelope started slightly, saw her daughter, and came at once across the grass to greet her.

"Darling."

Olivia had not seen her since she had been ill, and now searched intently for some sign of change, fearful of finding it. But apart from the fact that her mother seemed a little thinner, she appeared to be in her normal good health, with colour in her cheeks and the usual youthful, long-legged spring in her step. She wished that she did not have to wipe the happiness from her mother's face by telling her that Cosmo was dead. It occurred to her then that people went on living until somebody told you they were dead. Perhaps it was a pity that anybody ever told anybody anything.

"Olivia, how lovely to see you."

"What are you doing, standing there with an empty washing basket?"

"Just that. Standing and staring. What a heavenly day. Did you have a good drive?" She glanced over Olivia's shoulder. "Where's your friend?"

"He stopped off at the pub to buy you a present."

"He didn't need to do that."

She stepped past Olivia and went inside, giving her shoes a cursory wipe on the mat. Olivia followed, and closed the door behind them. The conservatory was stone-floored, furnished with basket chairs and stools and a lot of faded cretonne cushions. It was as well very warm, leafy with greenery and pot plants, and heavy with the scent of freesias, which grew in abundance and were Penelope's favourite flower.

"He was being tactful." She dropped her bag on the stripped-pine table. "I've got something to tell you."

Penelope set the washing basket down beside Olivia's bag and turned to face her daughter. Slowly, her smile faded; her beautiful dark eyes turned wary, but when she said, "Olivia, you are as white as a ghost," her voice was firm and strong as always.

Olivia took courage from this. She said, "I know. I only heard this morning. It's sad news, I'm afraid. Cosmo's dead."

"Cosmo. Cosmo Hamilton? Dead?"

"Antonia called me from Ibiza."

"Cosmo," she said again, her face filled with the utmost of grief and distress. "I can scarcely believe it . . . that dear man." She did not weep, as Olivia had known she would not. She never cried. In all her life Olivia had never seen her mother cry. But the colour had drained from her cheeks, and instinctively, as though to still a racing heart, she laid a hand on her breast. "That dear, dear man. Oh, my darling, I am so sorry. You were so much to each other. Are you all right?"

"Are you all right? I've been dreading telling you."

"Just shocked. So sudden." Her hand went out to grope for a chair, found one. Slowly, she lowered herself into it. Olivia was alarmed. "Mumma?"

"So silly. I feel a little odd."

"How about a brandy?"

Penelope smiled faintly, closed her eyes. "What a brilliant idea."

"I'll get it."

"It's in the—"

"I know where it is." She dropped her bag on the table, pushed forward a stool. "Put your feet up ... just stay there ... I won't be a moment."

The brandy bottle lived in the sideboard in the dining room. She found it and carried it into the kitchen, took glasses from the cupboard, poured two large, medicinal tots. Her hand was shaking, and the bottle knocked against the glass. She spilt a little on the table-top, but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered except Mumma and her dicey heart. Don't let her have another attack. Oh, dear God, don't let her have another attack. She picked up the two glasses and carried them back to the conservatory.

"Here."

She put the drink into her mother's hand. In silence, they sipped. The neat brandy warmed and comforted. After a couple of mouthfuls, Penelope managed a faint smile.

"Do you imagine it's one of the frailties of old age when you need a drink as badly as that?"

"Not at all. I needed one too."

"My poor darling." She drank a little more. The colour was returning to her cheeks. "Now," she said. "Tell me all over again."

Olivia did so. But there wasn't very much to tell. When she fell silent, "You loved him, didn't you," Penelope said, and she was not asking a question, but stating a fact.

"Yes, I did. In that year, he became part of me. He changed me, as no other person ever has."

"You should have married him."

"That's what he wanted. But I couldn't, Mumma. I couldn't."

"I wish you had."

"Don't wish that. I'm better as I am."

Penelope nodded. Understanding. Accepting. "But Antonia? What about her? That poor child. Was she there when it happened?"

"Yes."

"What will become of her? Will she stay in Ibiza?"

"No. She can't. The house never belonged to Cosmo. She has nowhere to live. And her mother has remarried and lives in the North. And I don't suppose there's much money."

"But what will she do?"

"She's coming back to England. Next week. To London. She's going to stay with me for a day or two. She says she'll have to get a job."

"But she's so young. What age is she now?"

"Eighteen. Not a child any longer."

"She was such a dear child."

"Would you like to see her again?"

"More than anything."

"Would you . . ." Olivia took another mouthful of the brandy. It burned in her throat, warmed her stomach, filled her with strength and courage. "Would you have her here to stay with you? To live with you for a couple of months?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"For a number of reasons. Because I think Antonia will need time to get herself pulled together and decide what she's going to do with her life. And because I have Nancy on the back of my neck telling me that the doctors say you shouldn't live alone after your heart attack."

It was said with no prevarication, the way she had always said things to her mother, honestly, with no devious beatings about the bush. It was one of the characteristics that had rendered their relationship so satisfactory, and one of the reasons why, even in the most strained of circumstances, they never quarrelled.

"The doctors are talking rubbish," Penelope told her robustly. The brandy had wanned her, too.

"I think they are, but Nancy doesn't, and until you do have someone here with you, then she's never going to be off the telephone. So you see, if you agreed to having Antonia to stay, you'd be doing me a good turn too. And you'd like it. Wouldn't you? That month in Ibiza, you never stopped giggling together. She'd be company for you, and you'd be able to help her through a bad time."

But still Penelope was doubtful.

"Won't it be dreadfully dull for her? I don't lead a very exciting life, and at eighteen she may have turned into a sophisticated young lady."

"She didn't sound sophisticated. She sounded just the way she used to. And if she craves bright lights and discos and chaps, we can always introduce her to Noel."

Heaven forbid. But Penelope did not say this.

"When would she come?"

"She plans to arrive in London on Tuesday. I could bring her down next weekend."

Anxiously she watched her mother, willing her to agree to the plan. Penelope,

however, had fallen silent and appeared to be thinking of something quite different, for an expression of amusement came over her face, and her eyes were suddenly filled with laughter.

"What's the joke?"

"I suddenly remembered that beach where Antonia learned to windsurf. And all those bodies lying around, brown as kippered herrings, and elderly ladies with their sagging, leathery breasts. What a sight! Do you remember how we laughed?"

"I'll never forget."

"What a happy time that was."

"Yes. The best. Can she come?"

"Come? If she wants to, of course she can come. For as long as she likes. It will be good for me. It will make me young again."

So, by the time Hank arrived, the crisis was over, Olivia's suggestion agreed upon, and grief and shock and sadness—for the moment—put aside. Life went on, and stimulated and comforted both by the brandy and her mother's company, Olivia felt once more able to cope. When the doorbell rang, she sprang to her feet and went through the kitchen to let Hank in. He brought with him a brown paper carrier bag, which, on being introduced to Penelope, he duly handed over. She set it on the table, and being one of those people to whom it is really worthwhile giving presents, instantly opened it. The two bottles were unwrapped from their tissue paper, and her delight was gratifying.

"Chateau Latour, Gran Cru! You kind man. Don't tell me you persuaded Mr. Hodgkins at the Sudeley Arms to part with these?"

"Like Olivia told me, as soon as he knew who they were for, he couldn't wait to produce them."

"I never knew he kept such a thing in his cellar. Wonders will never cease. Thank you very much indeed. We'd drink them for lunch; only I've already opened some wine. . . ."

"You keep them for a celebration," he told her.

"I'll do that." She put them on the dresser, and Hank took off his coat. Olivia hung it with the other ratty ones in the porch, and then they all trooped through to the living room.

This was not large, and it was a constant wonder to Olivia how many of Penelope's most precious and personal possessions she had managed to cram into it. Favourite old sofas and chairs, loose-covered in mattress ticking, draped in bright Indian bedcovers, and scattered with tapestry cushions. Her bureau, open as always, was stuffed with old bills and letters. Her sewing table, her lamps, her priceless rugs, laid on top of the hair-cord carpet. Books and pictures were everywhere, patterned china ewers filled with dried flowers. Photographs, ornaments, small items of silver covered every horizontal surface, and as well, strewn about were magazines, newspapers, seed catalogues, and a bundle of unfinished knitting. All the enthusiasms of her busy life were encompassed within its four walls, but, as always happened when a person first saw it, Hank's attention was immediately caught by the picture that hung over the immense open fireplace.

It measured perhaps five feet by three and dominated the room. The Shell Seekers. Olivia knew that she would never tire of the painting, even if she lived with it for most of her life. Its impact hit you like a gust of cold, salty air. The windy sky, racing with clouds; the sea, scudding with white-caps, breaking waves hissing up onto the shore. The subtle pinks and greys of the sand; shallow pools left by the ebbing tide and shimmering with translucent reflected sunlight. And the figures of the three children, grouped to the side of the picture; two girls with straw hats and dresses bundled up, and a boy. All brown-limbed, barefoot, and intent on the contents of a small scarlet bucket.

"Hey." He seemed, for once, lost for words. "What a great picture."

"Isn't it." Penelope beamed at him, with her usual proud delight. "My most precious possession."

"For God's sake . . ." He searched for the signature. "Who's it by?"

"My father. Lawrence Stern."

"Your father was Lawrence Stern? Olivia, you never told me that."

"I left it for my mother to tell you. She's far more knowledgeable than I am."

"I thought he was . . . you know ... a pre-Raphaelite."

Penelope nodded. "Yes, he was."

"This is more like the work of an Impressionist."

"I know. It's interesting, isn't it?"

"When was it done?"

"About nineteen twenty-seven. He had a studio on the North Beach at Porthkerris, and he painted that from his studio window. It's called The Shell Seekers, and I am the little girl on the left."

"But why is his style so different?"

Penelope shrugged. "A number of reasons. Any painter has to move, to change. Otherwise he wouldn't be worth his salt. Also, by then, he had started to get arthritis in his hands, and he wasn't physically able to do that very fine, detailed, meticulous work any longer."

"What age was he then?"

"In nineteen twenty-seven? I suppose about sixty-two. He was a very old father. He didn't marry until he was fifty-five."

"Have you any other of his paintings?" He glanced around him, at walls crammed with pictures as though for an exhibition.

But, "Not in here," Penelope told him. "Most of these were done by his colleagues. There is a pair of unfinished panels, but they're up on the landing. They were the very last work he did, and by then his arthritis was so bad he could scarcely hold the brush. Which was why he never finished them."

"Arthritis? How cruel."

"Yes. It was very sad. But he was enormously good about it, very philosophical. He used to say, "I've had a good run for my money," and left it at that. But it must have been dreadfully frustrating for him. Long after he had stopped painting, he still kept his studio, and when he was depressed or had what he called a Black Dog on his shoulder, he used to take himself off and go back to the studio and just sit there in the window, looking at the beach and the sea."

"Do you remember him?" Hank asked Olivia.

She shook her head. "No. I was born after he died. But my sister Nancy was born in his house in Porthkerris."

"Do you still have the house down there?"

"No," Penelope told him sadly. "Finally, it had to be sold."

"Do you ever go back?"

"I haven't been for forty years. But, oddly enough, just this morning, I was thinking that I really must go and see it all again." She looked at Olivia. "Why don't you come with me? Just for a week. We could stay with Doris."

"Oh . . ." Taken unawares, Olivia hesitated. "I ... I don't know . . ."

"We could go any time . . ." Penelope bit her lip. ". . . but how silly of me. Of course you can't make sudden snap deci-sions."

"Oh, Mumma, I'm sorry, but it is a bit difficult. I'm not due for a break until the summer, and I'm meant to be going to Greece with some friends. They've got a villa and a yacht." This was not strictly true, as the tentative plan had not yet been finalized, but holidays were so precious, and Olivia longed for the sun. As soon as the words were out, however, she was filled with guilt, because she saw the momentary disappointment cloud Penelope's face, to be instantly replaced with an understanding smile.

"Of course. I should have thought. It was just an idea. And I don't have to have company."

"It's a long drive on your own."

"I can perfectly easily go by train."

"Take Lalla Friedmann. She'd love a trip to Cornwall."

"Lalla. I never thought of her. Well, we'll see. . . ." And abandoning the topic, Penelope turned to Hank. "Now, here we are chattering away, and this poor man hasn't even got a drink. What would you like?"

Lunch was slow, leisurely, and delicious. As they consumed the delicate pink sirloin, which Hank had kindly carved, the crisp and nutty vegetables, the horse-radish sauce, the Yorkshire pudding, and rich brown gravy, Penelope bombarded him with questions. About America; about his home and his wife and his children. Not, Olivia knew, as she went around the table pouring wine, because she felt she had to be polite and make conversation, but because she was genuinely interested. People were her passion, particularly if they were strangers from a foreign shore, and even more specially if they happened to be both personable and charming.

"You live in Dalton, Georgia? I can't imagine Dalton, Georgia. Do you live in an apartment, or do you have a house with a garden?"

"I have a house, and I have a garden, too, but we call it a yard."

"I suppose, in such a climate, you can grow practically ev-erything."

"I'm afraid I don't know that much about it. I employ a landscaper to keep the place neat. I have to admit that I don't even cut my own grass."

"That's good sense. Nothing to be ashamed of."

"And you, Mrs. Keeling?"

"Mumma's never had any help," Olivia told him. "All you see beyond the window is entirely her own creation."

Hank was incredulous. "I can't believe it. For one thing, there's so much of it."

Penelope laughed. "You mustn't look so horrified. To me it's not a tedious task, but a tremendous pleasure. However, one can't go on indefinitely, so, on Monday morning, rattle of drums, fanfare of trumpets, I am starting to employ a gardener."

Olivia's jaw dropped. "You are? You really are?"

"I told you I was going to look around for someone."

"Yes, but I scarcely believed you would."

"There's a very good firm in Pudley. Called Autogarden, which doesn't seem to me to be a very imaginative name, but that's beside the point. And they're going to send a young man out three days a week. That should get the worst of the digging done, and if he's amenable I'll get him to do other things for me as well, like sawing logs and humping coal. Anyway, we'll see how it goes. If they send a lazy lout or it costs too much, I can quite easily cancel the arrangement. Now, Hank, have another helping of beef."

The mammoth luncheon took up most of the afternoon. When finally they rose from the table, it was nearly four o'clock. Olivia offered to do the dishes, but her mother refused to let her, and instead they all put on coats and went

out into the garden for a bit of fresh air. They wandered around, inspecting things, and Hank helped Penelope to tie up a straying branch of clematis, and Olivia found a cluster of aconites beneath one of the apple trees and picked herself a tiny bunch to take back to London.

When it was time to say goodbye, Hank kissed Penelope.

"I can't thank you enough. It's been great."

"You must come back."

"Maybe. One day."

"When do you return to America?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"What a short visit. How sad. But I have so enjoyed meeting you."

"Me too."

He went to the car and stood holding the door open for Olivia to get in.

"Goodbye, Mumma."

"Oh, my darling." They embraced. "And I'm sorry about Cosmo. But you mustn't be sad. Just be grateful that you had that time with him. No looking back over your shoulder. No regrets."

Olivia put on a brave smile. "No. No regrets."

"And unless I hear to the contrary, I'll expect you next weekend. With Antonia."

"I'll be in touch."

"Goodbye, my darling."

They had gone. She had gone. Olivia, in her beautiful chest-nut-brown coat, with the mink collar turned up around her ears, and the little bunch of aconites clutched in her hand. Like a child. Penelope was filled with sadness for her. Your children never stopped being children. Even when they were thirty-eight and successful career women. You could bear anything for yourself, but seeing your children hurt was unendurable. Her heart went with Olivia, heading back to London; but her body, tired now and weary from the day's activities, took her slowly back indoors.

The next morning the tiredness, the lassitude were still with her. She awoke feeling depressed and could not think why, and then remembered Cosmo. It was raining, and for once she expected no guests for Sunday lunch, and so she stayed in bed until half past ten, when she got up and dressed and walked down to the village to collect her Sunday newspapers. The church bells were tolling, and a handful of people made their way beneath the lych-gate for Morning Service. Not for the first time Penelope wished that she were truly religious. She believed, of course, and went to church at Christmas and Easter, because without something to believe in, life would be intolerable. But now, seeing the little procession of villagers filing up the gravel path between the ancient leaning gravestones, she thought it would be good to join them with the certainty of finding comfort. But she did not. It had never worked before and it was unlikely to work now. It was not God's fault; just something to do with her own attitude of mind.

Home again, she lit the fire and read *The Observer*, and then assembled herself a small meal of cold roast beef, an apple, and a glass of wine. She ate this at the kitchen table and then went back into the sitting room and took a little nap. Awakening, she saw that the rain had stopped, so she pulled herself off the sofa, put on her boots and her old jacket, and went out into the garden. She had pruned her roses in the autumn and fed them well with compost, but there was still some dead wood around, and she plunged into the thicket of thorns and set to work.

As always when thus employed, she lost all sense of time, and her mind was full of nothing but her roses when, straightening to ease her aching back, she was startled to see two figures coming across the grass towards her; for she

had not heard a car arrive and was not expecting visitors. A girl and a man. A tall and exceptionally handsome young man, with dark hair and blue eyes, his hands in his pockets. Ambrose. Her heart missed a beat, and she told herself not to be a fool, because it wasn't Ambrose, coming at her out of the past, but her son Noel, who resembled his dead father so exactly that his unexpected appearances often gave her this uncanny turn.

Noel. With, naturally enough, a girl.

She pulled herself together, put a smile on her face, dropped her secateurs into her pocket, drew off her gloves, and edged herself out of the rose-bed.

"Hello, Ma." Reaching her side, still with his hands in his pockets, he leaned forward to give her a peck on the cheek.

"What a surprise. Where have you sprung from?"

"We've been staying in Wiltshire. Thought we'd come by to see how you're doing." Wiltshire? Drop by from Wiltshire? They had come miles out of their way. "This is Amabel."

"How do you do."

"Hello," said Amabel, making no move to shake hands. She was tiny as a child, with seaweedy hair and round, pale green eyes like two gooseberries. She wore an enormous ankle-length tweed coat that seemed familiar, and which, after a second look, Penelope recognized as an old one of Lawrence Stern's, which had mysteriously disappeared -during the move from Oakley Street.

She turned back to Noel.

"Staying in Wiltshire? Who have you been staying with?"

"Some people called Early, friends of Amabel's. But we left after lunch, and I thought that as I hadn't seen you since you were in hospital, I'd drop by and find out how you're getting on." He beamed upon her with his most delightful

smile. "I must say, you're looking fantastic. I thought I'd find you all pale and ailing with your feet up on the sofa."

Mention of the hospital irritated Penelope.

"Just a stupid scare. There's not a thing wrong with me. As usual, Nancy's blown a mountain out of a molehill, and I hate being fussed over." And then she felt remorseful, for really it was very kind of him to come all this way just to see her. "You're sweet to be so concerned, and I'm splendidly well. And it's lovely to see you both. What tune is it? Heavens, nearly half past four. Would you like a cup of tea? Let's go in and have one. You take Amabel in, Noel. There's a good fire in the sitting room. I'll join you in a moment, when I've dealt with my boots."

He did this, ambling away from her across the grass towards the conservatory door. She watched them go and then went in-doors herself by way of the garden room, where she changed into her shoes and hung up her coat, and then went upstairs, through the empty bedrooms, to her own room, where she washed her hands and tidied her hair. Down the other stairs, and in the kitchen, she put on the kettle and laid a tray. She found some fruitcake in a tin. Noel loved fruitcake, and the girl, Amabel, looked as though she could do with a bit of feeding up. Penelope wondered if she was anorexic. It would not be surprising. Noel found himself the most extraordinary girl-friends.

She made the tea and carried the tray through to the sitting room where Amabel, who had taken off Lawrence's coat, crouched like a thin cat in the corner of the sofa, while Noel piled logs on the dying ashes in the grate. Penelope set down the tray, and Amabel said, "What a smashing house."

Penelope tried to warm to her. "Yes. It's friendly, isn't it?"

The gooseberry eyes were turned on The Shell Seekers.

"That's a smashing picture."

"Everybody remarks on it."

"Is it Cornwall?"

"Yes, Porthkerris."

"I thought so. I went there once for a holiday, but it rained all the time."

"Oh dear." She could think of nothing else to say and filled in the ensuing pause with the business of pouring the tea. When this was done, cups handed round, and the fruitcake cut, she started the conversation up again.

"Now. Tell me about your weekend. Was it fun?"

Yes, they told her, it had been fun. A house party often, and a point-to-point on the Saturday, and then dinner at some other person's house, and then a dance, and they hadn't got to bed until four o'clock.

It sounded, to Penelope, inexpressibly awful, but she said, "How nice."

That seemed to exhaust their news, so she started in on her own, and told them about Olivia's visit with her American friend. Amabel stifled a yawn, and Noel, perched on a low stool by the fire, with his teacup on the floor by his side and his long legs folded like jack-knives, listened politely but, Penelope felt, without too much attention. She debated telling him about Cosmo, and then decided against it. She thought about telling him that Antonia was going to come and stay at Podmore's Thatch, but decided against that, too. He had never known Cosmo, and was not much interested in the affairs of his family. He was, in truth, not much interested in anything but himself, for he resembled his father not only in looks but in character as well.

She was about to ask him about his work and how it was going, and had opened her mouth to do this, when he forestalled her by saying, "Ma, talking of Cornwall . . ." (had they been?) ". . . did you know that one of your father's pictures is coming under the hammer at Boothby's this week? The Water Carriers. Rumour has it that it'll go for something like two hundred thousand. Be interesting to see if it does."

"Yes, I did know. Olivia mentioned it during lunch yesterday."

"You should make a trip to London. Be in at the kill. Ought to be amusing."

"Are you going to go?"

"If I can get away from the office."

"It's extraordinary how fashionable those old works have become. And the prices people pay. Poor Papa would turn in his grave if he knew what they were going for."

"Boothby's must have made a fortune out of them. Did you see their advertisement in The Sunday Times?"

"I haven't read The Times yet."

It lay, folded, on the seat of her armchair. Noel reached for it, opened it, and finding what he looked for, turned back the pages, and handed it across. She saw, in the bottom corner, one of the regular advertisements inserted by Boothby's, the Fine Art Dealers.

"Minor Work or Major Discovery?"

Her eyes moved to the small print. Apparently two small oil paintings had come on the market, in appearance and subject matter very similar. One had fetched three hundred and forty pounds, the other over sixteen thousand.

Aware of Noel's eyes upon her, she read on.

Boothby's sales have done much to inspire the recent reappraisal of this neglected Victorian period. Our ex-perience and advice are at the disposal of potential clients. If you have a work of this period which you would like appraised, why not telephone our expert, Mr. Roy Brookner, who will be pleased to travel and offer advice, entirely free of charge.

There was the address and the telephone number and that

was all. ~~

Penelope folded the paper and laid it down. Noel waited. She raised her head and looked at him.

"Why did you want me to read this?"

"Just thought you'd be interested."

"In having my pictures appraised?"

"Not all of them. Just the Lawrence Sterns."

"For insurance purposes?" asked Penelope evenly.

"If you like. I don't know how much you've got them in-sured for now. But don't forget, the market's at its peak just now. A Millais fetched eight hundred thousand the other day."

"I don't own a Millais."

"You . . . wouldn't consider selling?"

"*Selling?* My father's pictures?"

"Not *The Shell Seekers*, of course. But maybe the panels?"

"They're unfinished. They're probably worth nothing."

"That's what you think. That's why you should have them valued. Now. When you know what they're worth, you might even change your mind. After all, hanging up there on the landing, nobody sees them, and you probably never even look at them. You'd never miss them."

"How could you possibly know whether I would miss them or not?"

He shrugged. "Just taking a guess. It's not as though they're very good, and

the subject matter is nauseous."

"If that is how you feel about them, what a very good thing it is that you no longer have to live with them." She turned from him. "Amabel, my dear, I wonder if you would like another cup of tea."

Noel knew that when his mother became frosty and dignified, she was on the verge of losing her temper, and to continue to press his point would do more harm than good and simply reinforce her stubbornness. At least he had brought the subject up, and sown the seeds of his idea. Left alone, she might well come around to his way of thinking. And so, with his most delightful smile, and one of his disconcerting about-turns, he conceded defeat.

"All right. You win. I won't talk about it any more." He set down his cup, turned back his cuff, and looked at his watch.

"Are you pressed for time?" his mother asked him.

"We oughtn't to stay too long. We've got a long drive back to London and the traffic'll be gruesome. Ma, do you know if my squash racket's up in my room? I've got a game fixed up, and it doesn't seem to be anywhere in the flat."

Much relieved at the change of subject, "I don't know," Penelope said. His small room here at Podmore's Thatch was stacked with his boxes and trunks and various pieces of sporting equipment, but as she went into it as little as possible, for he rarely spent a night in the place, she had no idea what lay amongst the muddle. "Why don't you go and look?"

"I'll do that." He unfolded his long legs and stood up, said, "Shan't be a moment," and took himself off. They heard his footsteps go up the stairs. Amabel sat there, stifling another yawn, and looking like a disconsolate mermaid.

"Have you known Noel for long?" Penelope asked, despising herself for sounding both stilted and formal.

"About three months."

"Do you live in London?"

"My parents live in Leicestershire, but I've got a flat in London."

"Do you have a job?"

"Only when I have to."

"Would you like another cup of tea?"

"No, but I'd love another slice of cake."

Penelope gave her one. Amabel ate it. Penelope wondered if she would notice if Penelope picked up a newspaper and read it. She thought how charming the young could be, and how grossly uncharming, for Amabel, it seemed, had never been taught to eat with her mouth shut.

In the end, defeated, she stopped trying, picked up the tea-things, and carried them out to the kitchen, leaving Amabel looking as though she were about to fall asleep. By the time she had washed up the cups and saucers, Noel had not reappeared. Presumably he was still hunting for the elusive squash racket. Thinking that she would help him, she went up the kitchen stairs and along, through the bedrooms, to his end of the house. The door to his room stood open, but he was not inside. Puzzled, she hesitated, and then heard cautious footsteps creaking above her. The loft? What was he doing in the loft?

She looked up. The old wooden ladder led to the square aperture in the ceiling.

"Noel?"

A moment later he appeared, first long legs and then the rest of him, easing himself out of the loft and down the ladder.

"What on earth are you doing up there?"

He reached her side. There was fluff on his jacket and a bit of cobweb in his hair.

"Couldn't find the squash racket," he told her. "Thought it might be in the loft."

"Of course it's not in the loft. There's nothing in the loft but a lot of old rubbish from Oakley Street."

He laughed, dusting himself down. "You can say that again."

"You can't have looked properly." She went into the cramped little bedroom, shifted some coats and a pair of cricket pads, and instantly found the squash racket hidden beneath them. "It's here, you idiot. You were always hopeless at finding things."

"Oh, hell. Sorry. Thanks anyway." He took it from her. She watched him, but there was nothing devious in his expression.

She said, "Amabel is wearing my father's coat. When did you lay your hands on that?"

Even this did not throw him. "I nicked it during the big move. You never wore it, and it's so splendidly grand."

"You should have asked me."

"I know. Do you want it back?"

"Of course I don't. You keep it." She thought of Amabel, draped in its shabby luxury. Amabel and, doubtless, countless other girls. "I am sure you will put it to better use than I ever could."

They found Amabel fast asleep. Noel woke her, and she struggled to her feet, yawning and bug-eyed, and he helped her into the coat, and kissed his mother goodbye, and drove Amabel away. When they had gone, she went back

indoors. She closed the door and stood in the kitchen, filled with unease. What had he hoped to find in the loft? He had known perfectly well that the squash racket was not there, so what had he been looking for?

She went back to the sitting room, put a log on the fire. The Sunday Times lay where she had dropped it on the floor. She stooped and picked it up and read once more the Boothby's advertisement. Then she went to her desk, found scissors, carefully clipped it out, and stowed it away in one of the small drawers of her bureau.

In the middle of the night, she awoke with a dreadful start. A wind had risen; it was very dark, and it was raining again. Her windows rattled and raindrops dashed against the glass. "I went to Cornwall, but it rained all the time," Amabel had said. Porthkerns. She remembered the rain, driven in from the Atlantic on clouts of wind. She remembered her bedroom at Cam Cottage, lying in the darkness as she lay now, with the sound of waves breaking on the beach far below and the curtains stirring at the open windows and the beams of the lighthouse swinging their way across the white-painted walls. She remembered the garden, scented with escallonia, and the lane that led up onto the moor, and the view from the top, the spread of the bay, the brilliant blue of the sea. The sea was one of the reasons she wanted so much to go back. Gloucestershire was beautiful, but it had no sea, and she had a hunger for the sea. The past is another country, but the journey could be made. There was nothing to stop her going. Alone or in company, it didn't matter. Before it was too late, she would take the road west to that rugged claw of England where, once, she had lived, and loved and been young.

LAWRENCE

She was nineteen. Between news bulletins, anxiously listened to, the radio played tunes like "Deep Purple" and "These Foolish Things," and music from the last Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers film. All summer the town had been packed with holiday-makers. Shops sprouted buckets and spades and beachballs, smelling rubbery in the hot sun, and smart ladies on holiday staying at the Castle Hotel shocked the locals by walking the streets in beach pyjamas, and sunbathing in daring two-piece bathing costumes. Most of the holiday-makers had gone now, but on the sands there were still a few about, and the tents and bathing boxes had not yet been dismantled and put away. Penelope, walking at the edge of the sea, saw the children, cared for by uniformed nannies who sat in deck-chairs and knitted, the while keeping an eye on small charges who dug sand-castles, or ran shrieking into the shallow waves.

It was a warm and sunny Sunday morning, too good to be indoors. She had asked Sophie to come with her, but Sophie had chosen to stay in the kitchen to cook the lunch, and Penelope left her slicing vegetables for a chicken cassoulet. And Papa, after breakfast, had put on his old wide-brimmed hat and taken himself off to his studio. From there, Penelope would collect him. Together they would walk back up the hill, to Cam Cottage and the traditional midday meal that awaited them.

"Don't let him go into the pub, my darling. Not today. Bring him straight home."

She had promised. By the time they sat down to Sophie's cassoulet, it would all be over. By then they would know.

She had come to the end of the beach—to the rocks, and the diving board. She climbed the flight of concrete steps and came out in a narrow cobbled lane, winding downhill between the irregular, whitewashed houses. There were a lot of cats about, scavenging for fish scraps in the gutters, and seagulls soared overhead, or settled on roof-tops and chimneys to survey the

world with cold yellow eyes and scream defiance at nothing in particular.

At the bottom of the hill stood the church. The bells were ringing for Morning Service, and a great many more people than usual were congregating to tread heavily up the gravel pathway and disappear into the darkness beyond the great oaken doors. Dark-suited, piously hatted, with serious faces and a solemn gait, they came from all over the town. There weren't many smiles, and nobody said good morning.

It was five to eleven. In the harbour the tide was at half ebb, and fishing boats, tied up to the wall, leaned, propped on wooden stanchions. It was all strangely deserted. Only a group of children playing with an old pilchard box, and, on the other side of the harbour, a man working on his boat. The sound of hammer-blows rang across the deserted sands.

The church clock began to strike the hour, and the gulls, perched on the tower-top, rose in a cloud of white wings, their voices raised in a clamour of fury at being disturbed by the reverberant bell. She went on, walking slowly, her hands in the pockets of her cardigan; sudden small gusts of breeze blowing her long dark hair in strands across her cheeks. All at once, she became aware of her solitude. No other person was about, and as she turned from the harbour and began to climb a steep street, she heard, through open windows, the final chimes of Big Ben. She heard the voice begin to speak. Imagined families indoors, gathered around their radios, staying close, getting comfort from one another.

Now, she was truly in Downalong, in the old part of the town, making her way through the baffling maze of cobbled lanes and unexpected squares towards the open shores of the North Beach. She could hear the sound of breakers crashing on the shore, and felt the wind. It plucked at the skirt of her cotton dress and blew her hair into disorder. She turned the corner and saw the beach. She saw Mrs. Thomas's little shop, open for an hour for the sale of newspapers. The racks outside its door were stacked with these, headlines tall and grave as tombstones. She had a few coppers in her pocket, and her stomach, knocking with apprehension, felt empty, so she went inside and bought herself, for twopence, a bar of Cadbury's peppermint chocolate.

"Out for a walk, are you, my love?" Mrs. Thomas asked her.

"Yes. I'm going to fetch Papa. He's at the studio."

"Best place to be on such a morning. Out of doors."

"Yes."

"Balloon's gone up, then." She handed the bar of chocolate across the counter. "We're at war with those dratted Germans Mr. Chamberlain says." Mrs. Thomas was sixty. She had already lived through one devastating war, as had Penelope's father and millions of other innocent people all over Europe. Mrs. Thomas's husband had been killed in 1916, and her son Stephen had already been called up as a private soldier in the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry. "Had to happen, I suppose. Couldn't go on doing nothing. Not with those poor Poles dying like flies."

"No." Penelope took her chocolate.

"Love to your father then, my dear. Keeping well, is he?"

"Yes, he's well."

"Goodbye, then."

"Goodbye."

Out in the street again, she felt cold. The wind was stronger now and her thin dress and cardigan felt inadequate. She unwrapped the chocolate and began to eat it. War. She looked up at the sky, half expecting hordes of bombers to appear then and there, like the formations she had seen on the newsreels, wave after wave of them, devastating Poland. But there were only clouds, blown before the wind.

War. It was a strange word. Like Dead. The more you said it, the more you thought about it, the more incomprehensible it became. Munching chocolate, she went on, down the narrow cobbled lane that led to Lawrence Stern's studio, to find him and tell him that it was time for lunch, and that he wasn't

to drop in at the pub for a beer, and that the war, finally, had started.

His studio was an old net loft, high-ceilinged and draughty, with a great north window facing out over the beach and the sea. Long ago, he had put in a large pot-bellied stove, with a pipe chimney that rose to the roof-top, but even when this was roaring, the place was never warm.

It was not warm now.

Lawrence Stern had not worked for more than ten years, but the tools of his trade were all about, as though, at any moment, he might take them up and start to paint again. The easels and canvases, the half-used tubes of colour, the palettes encrusted with dried paint. The model's chair stood on the draped dais, and a rickety table held the plaster cast of a man's head and a pile of back numbers of *The Studio*. The smell was deeply nostalgic, of oil paint and turpentine mingled up with the salty wind that poured in through the open window.

She saw the wooden summer surf-boards, stacked in a corner, and a striped bathing towel, tossed, forgotten, across a chair. She wondered if there would be another summer; if they would ever be used again.

The door, caught by the draught, slammed shut behind her. He turned his head. He sat sideways on the window-seat, long legs crossed, an elbow propped on the sill. He had been watching the sea-birds, the clouds, the turquoise-and-azure sea, the endlessly breaking rollers.

"Papa."

He was seventy-four. Tall and distinguished, with a deeply lined, deeply tanned face and a pair of brilliant, unfaded blue eyes. His clothes were both dashing and youthful. Faded sail-red canvas trousers, an old green corduroy jacket, and, in lieu of a necktie, a spotted handkerchief knotted at his throat. Only his hair betrayed his age, snow-white and worn unfashionably long. His hair and his hands, twisted and crippled by the arthritis which, so tragically, had put an end to his career.

"Papa."

His gaze was sombre, as though he did not recognize her, as though she were a stranger, a messenger bearing dreaded news, which, in fact, she was. Then, abruptly, he smiled, and raised an arm in a familiar gesture of loving welcome.

"My darling."

She went to his side. Beneath her feet the uneven wooden floor scrunched with blown sand, as though someone had spilled a bag of sugar. He drew her close.

"What are you eating?"

"Chocolate peppermint."

"You'll ruin your appetite."

"You always say that." She drew away from him. "Do you want a piece?"

He shook his head. "No."

She put the remains of the bar in her cardigan pocket. She said, "The war's started."

He nodded.

"Mrs. Thomas told me."

"I know. I knew."

"Sophie's making a cassoulet. She said I wasn't to let you go to The Sliding Tackle for a drink. She said I was to bring you straight home."

"In that case, we'd better go."

But he did not move. She closed the windows and latched them shut. When this was done the sound of the breakers was not nearly so loud. His hat was lying on the floor. She picked it up and gave it to him, and he put it on and got to his feet. She took his arm and they started out on the long walk home.

Cam Cottage stood high on the hill above the town, a small, square white house set in a garden surrounded by high walls. Going in through the gate in the wall and shutting it behind you was like going into a secret place where nothing could reach you—not even the wind. Now, at the end of the summer, the grass was still very green, and Sophie's borders ablaze with Michaelmas daisies and snapdragons and dahlias. Up the face of the house climbed pink ivy-leaved geraniums and a clematis which each May produced a riot of pale lilac-coloured flowers. There were, as well, a vegetable plot, hidden away behind an escallonia hedge, and, at the back of the house, a small field, with a puddle of a pond, where Sophie kept her hens and ducks.

She was in the garden, watching for them, while she picked an armful of dahlias. When she heard the gate shut, she straightened up and came to meet them, looking like a little boy in her trousers and espadrilles and her blue-and-white-striped pullover. Her dark hair was cut very short, accentuating the slender tanned neck and the neat shape of her head. Her eyes were dark, large, and lustrous. Everyone said they were her best feature until she smiled, and after that they weren't too sure.

She was Lawrence's wife and Penelope's mother. She was French. Her father, Philippe Charlroux, and Lawrence had been contemporaries, sharing a Paris studio in the old carefree days before the 1914 war, and Lawrence had first known Sophie as a very small child, playing in the gardens of the Tuileries and sometimes accompanying her father and his friends to the cafes where they gathered to drink and harmlessly roister with the pretty girls of the city. They had all been very close, not imagining that this pleasant existence need ever cease, but the war had come, tearing not only them and their families apart, but their countries, the whole of Europe, their world.

They lost each other. By 1918 Lawrence was over fifty. Too old to be a soldier, he had spent the four terrible years driving an ambulance in France. Finally he had been wounded in the leg and invalided home. But he was

alive. Others were not so lucky. Philippe, he knew, was dead. But he did not know what had become of his wife and child. When it was all over, he returned to Paris to look for them, but it was hopeless. And Paris was sad, cold, and hungry. Every other person, it seemed, wore the black of mourning, and the streets of the city, which had never failed to fill him with delight, seemed to have lost their spell. He returned to London, to the old family house in Oakley Street. By now his parents were dead and the house was his, but far too large and rambling for a single man. He solved this by occupying only the basement and the ground floor, and letting the upper rooms to any soul who needed a home and was able to pay him some rent. In the big garden at the back of his house was his studio. He opened it up, cleared out some of the accumulated rubbish, and, putting memories of war resolutely behind him, he picked up his brushes, and with them, the threads of his life.

He found it hard going. One day, as he struggled with a devilishly difficult composition, one of his lodgers came to tell him that he had a visitor. Lawrence was furious, for not only was he in a rage of frustration but he hated to be disturbed in his work. With an expression of disgust he flung down his brushes, wiped his hands on a bit of rag, and went to see who it could be, marching into his kitchen through the garden door. A young girl stood there, by the stove, with her hands outstretched to its warmth as though she were bone-cold. He did not recognize her.

"What do you want?"

She was intensely thin, with dark hair bundled into a homely knot at the back of her hair, and wearing an old threadbare coat, beneath which the hem of her skirt hung uneven. Her shoes were broken and she resembled nothing so much as a little waif, a down-and-out.

She said, "Lawrence."

Something in her voice tugged at his memory. He went to her side, took her chin in his hand, and turned her face towards the window and the light.

"Sophie."

He could scarcely believe it, but, "Yes, it's me," she said.

She had come to England to find him. She was alone. He had been her father's best friend. "If anything happens to me," Phi-lippe had told her, "find Lawrence Stern and go to him. He'll help you." And now Philippe was dead, and her mother was dead, too, swept away in the influenza epidemic that had raged through Europe in the aftermath of war.

"I came to Paris to look for you," Lawrence told her. "Where were you?"

"In Lyons, living with my mother's sister."

"Why didn't you stay with her?"

"Because I wanted to find you."

She stayed. She had arrived, he had to admit, at a fortuitous time, when he was between mistresses, for he was a sensuous and very attractive man, and ever since his first student days in Paris, a series of beautiful women had passed into and through and out of his life like a well-ordered bread queue. But Sophie was differ-ent. A child. As well, she kept house with the efficiency of any well-brought-up French girl, cooking and shopping and mending and washing curtains and scrubbing floors. He had never been so well cared for. For her part, she soon lost her waiflike appearance, and although she never put on an ounce of weight, a colour bloomed in her cheeks, her hair took on a chestnut shine, and soon he was using her as his model. She brought him luck. He was painting well, and selling too. He gave her some money to buy herself something to wear, and she came back preening and proud in the cheap little dress. She was beautiful, and it was then that he stopped thinking of her as a child. She was a woman, and it was as a woman that she came to him one night, and climbed composedly into the bed beside him. She had a charming body and he did not turn her away, for he was, perhaps for the first time in his life, in love. She became his mistress. Within weeks, she was pregnant. In high delight, Lawrence married her.

It was during her pregnancy that they first travelled to Cornwall. They ended up in Porthkerris, which had already been dis-covered by painters from all

over the country, and where many of Lawrence's contemporaries had settled. The first thing they did was to rent the net loft that was to become his studio, and here, for two long winter months, they lived, camping in fearful discomfort and total happiness. Then Carn Cottage came on the market, and Lawrence, with a good commission under his belt, put in an offer and bought the place. Penelope was born at Carn Cottage and they spent every summer there, but when the gales of the autumn equinox began to blow, they either closed Carn Cottage, or rented it to winter tenants, and returned to London, to the basement of the warm, friendly, crowded old house in Oakley Street. These journeys were always made by car, for by now Lawrence was the proud possessor of a massive 4½-litre Bentley tourer, with a canvas hood that folded down and huge Lucas headlamps. It had a running board, which was good for picnics, and great leather straps to buckle down the bonnet. Some years, in the spring, they would gather up Lawrence's sister Ethel, along with a number of bags and boxes, and take the ferry to France, and then drive down to the mimosa trees and red rocks and blue seas of the Mediterranean to stay with Charles and Chantal Rainier, old friends from the pre-war days in Paris, who owned a faded, shuttered villa with a garden full of cicadas and lizards. On these occasions, they spoke only French, including Aunt Ethel, who always became immensely Gallic the moment they hit Calais, sporting a Basque beret, worn at a rakish angle, and smoking innumerable Gauloise cigarettes. Everywhere the grown-ups went, Penelope went too, the child of a mother young as a sister, and a father old enough to be her grandparent.

She thought they were perfect. Sometimes, invited to other children's homes, sitting through prim and formal meals with grim nannies making sure of your table manners, or being forced to play team games by some beefy father, she wondered how they could endure their restricted, disciplined lives, and could not wait to get home.

Now, Sophie did not say anything about the new war that had started. She simply came to kiss her husband, put her arm around her daughter, and showed them the flowers she had picked. Dahlias. A great explosion of them, in orange and purple and scarlet and yellow.

"I think," she told them, "they make me think of the Russian Ballet." She had

never lost her charming accent. "But they have no scent." She smiled. "No matter. I thought you might be late. I'm glad you're not. Let's go and open a bottle of wine, and then have something to eat."

Two days later, on the Tuesday, their war started in earnest. The frontdoor bell rang, and Penelope, going to answer it, found Miss Pawson on the doorstep. Miss Pawson was one of those very masculine ladies who turned up in Porthkerris from time to time. The misfits of the thirties, Lawrence called them, who, un-desirous of the normal joys of husband, home, and children, earned their livings in a number of ways, usually associated with animals, and taught riding, or ran kennels, or photographed other people's dogs. Miss Pawson bred King Charles spaniels and was a well-known sight, exercising these creatures on the beach, or being dragged through the town by them on their multiple leash.

Miss Pawson lived with Miss Preedy, a demure lady who taught dancing. Not folk-dancing, nor ballet, but some strange new conception of the art, based on Greek friezes, deep breathing, and eurhythmies. Every now and again, she held a Display in the Town Hall, and once Sophie had bought tickets, and they had all dutifully gone. It was an eye-opener. Miss Preedy and five of her students (some very young, others old enough to know bet-ter) walked onto the stage barefoot, and wearing orange knee-length tunics and headbands, low on their foreheads. They arranged themselves in a semicircle, and Miss Preedy stepped forward. Speaking in a high, clear voice to reach those at the back of the hall, she told them that perhaps a little explanation was necessary, and went on to give them this. It seemed that her method was not dancing in the accepted sense of the word, but a series of exercises and movements that were in themselves an extension of the body's natural functions.

Lawrence muttered, "Dear God," and Penelope had to dig him in the ribs with her elbow to keep him quiet.

Miss Preedy burred on for a bit and then stepped back into her place and the fun began. She clapped her hands, gave the order "One," and she and her students all lay down on their backs as though stunned or dead. The mesmerized audience had to crane its neck in order to see them. Then, "Two," and they all very slowly raised their legs in the air, toes pointing to the ceiling. The orange tunics fell away, revealing six pairs of voluminous

matching bloomers, caught at the knee with elastic. Lawrence began to cough, sprang to his feet and disappeared, like a dose of salts, up the aisle and out through the doors at the back. He did not return, and Sophie and Penelope were left to sit through the next two hours, convulsed with suppressed laughter, their seats shaking, their hands clamped to their mouths.

When she was sixteen, Penelope had read *The Well of Loneliness*. After that she looked at Miss Pawson and Miss Preedy with new eyes, but still remained innocently baffled by their relationship.

And now here was Miss Pawson at the door, in her stout shoes, her trousers, her zip-up jacket, her collar and tie, and a beret on her cropped grey head, pulled down sideways at a cocky angle. She carried a clipboard with papers, and her gas mask was slung over one shoulder. She was obviously dressed for battle and, given a rifle and a belt of bullets, would have been an asset to any self-respecting band of guerrillas.

"Good morning, Miss Pawson."

"Is your mother in, dear? I've come to see about billeting evacuees."

Sophie appeared and they led Miss Pawson into the sitting room. As this was so obviously an official occasion, the three of them sat at the table in the middle of the room, and Miss Pawson unscrewed her fountain pen.

"Now." No beating about the bush; it was urgent as a Conference of War. "How many rooms have you got?"

Sophie looked a little surprised. Miss Pawson and Miss Preedy had been several times to Cam Cottage, and knew perfectly well how many rooms there were. But she was so enjoying herself that it would have been churlish to spoil the fun, and Sophie told her, "Four. This room and the dining room, and Lawrence's study and the kitchen."

Miss Pawson wrote "four" in the relevant box of her form.

"And upstairs?"

"Our bedroom, and Penelope's bedroom, and the guest-room and the

bathroom."

"Guest-room?"

"I don't want anybody living in the guest-room, because Lawrence's sister Ethel is quite elderly and alone in London, and if the bombs start, then she may want to come and live with us."

"I see. Now, lavatories."

"Oh yes," Sophie assured her, "we've got a lavatory. In the bathroom."

"Only one lavatory?"

"There's an outside one, in the yard at the back of the kitchen, but we use it as a log-store."

Miss Pawson wrote, "One lavatory, one privy."

"Now, how about the attics?"

"Attics?"

"How many bods could you sleep up there?"

Sophie was horrified. "I wouldn't put anybody in the attics. They're dark and full of spiders." And then added, doubtfully, "I suppose in the old days, the maids did use to sleep there. Poor things."

This was enough for Miss Pawson.

"In that case, I'll put you down for three in the attic. Can't be too choosy these days, you know. Mustn't forget there's a war on."

"Have we got to have evacuees?"

"Oh yes, everybody has to. All got to do our bit."

"Who will they be?"

"Probably East Enders from London. I'll try to get you a mother and a couple of kids. Well ..." She gathered her papers up and got to her feet. "I must be on my way. I've got a dozen or more visits to make."

She took herself off, still grim and tight-lipped. When she said goodbye, Penelope half expected her to salute—but she didn't, just strode away down the garden. Sophie closed the door and turned to face her daughter, torn between laughter and dismay. Three people living in the attic. They went upstairs to inspect this gloomy loft, and it was even worse than they remembered. Dark, dirty, and dusty, full of cobwebs and smelling of mice and sweaty shoes. Sophie screwed up her nose and tried to open one of the dormer windows, but it was stuck fast. Old wall paper, in a hideous pattern, peeled from the ceiling. Penelope reached up and took the dangling corner and tore it loose. It fell to the floor in coils, bringing with it a cloud of plaster dust.

She said, "If we painted it all white, it mightn't be so bad." She went to the other window, rubbed a bit of glass clean, and looked out. "And there's the most marvellous view. . . ."

"Evacuees won't want to look at the view."

"How do you know? Oh, come on, Sophie, don't be so de-spondent. If they come, they've got to have a bedroom. It's this or nothing."

It was her first bit of War Work. She stripped the wallpaper and whitewashed walls and ceiling, washed the windows, painted the woodwork, and scrubbed the floor. Sophie, meanwhile, took herself off to an auction sale where she bought a carpet, three divan beds, a mahogany wardrobe and chest of drawers, four pairs of curtains, an etching entitled Off Valparaiso and a statuette of a girl with a beach-ball. For all this she paid eight pounds, fourteen shillings, and ninepence. The furniture was delivered and humped up the stairs by a kindly man in a cloth-cap and a long white apron. Sophie gave him a tankard of beer and half a crown and he went away happy, and then she and Penelope made up the beds and hung the curtains, and after that

there was nothing to do but wait—hoping against hope that they would not come—for the evacuees.

They came. A young mother and two small boys. Doris Potter, Ronald and Clark. Doris was a blonde, with a Ginger Rogers hair-style and a tight black skirt. Her husband was called Bert, and had already been called up and was in France with the Expeditionary Force. Her sons, aged seven and six, were called Ronald and Clark after Ronald Colman and Clark Gable. They were undersized and skinny and pale, with knobbly knees and rough dry hair that stuck up on end like bristles of a brush. They had all come, in a train, from Hackney. They had never been farther than Southend before, and the children wore luggage labels tied to their skimpy jackets, in case they got lost on the journey.

The peaceful pattern of life at Cam Cottage was shattered by the arrival of the Potters. Within two days, Ronald and Clark had broken a window, wet their beds, picked all the flowers in Sophie's border, eaten unripe apples and been sick, and set fire to the tool shed, which burned to the ground.

Lawrence was philosophical about this last, merely re-marking that it was a pity they hadn't been inside it.

At the same time, they proved pathetically timid. They didn't like the country, and the sea was too big, and they were frightened of cows and hens and ducks and wood-lice. They were frightened, too, of sleeping in the attic bedroom, but this was only because they took turns scaring each other to death with ghost stories.

Mealtimes became a nightmare, not because there was any lull in conversation, but because Ronald and Clark had never been taught the simplest of manners. They ate with their mouths open, drank with their mouths full, grabbed for the butter dish and knocked over the water jug, quarrelled and hit each other, and flatly refused to eat Sophie's wholesome vegetables and puddings.

As well, there was the constant noise. The simplest action was accompanied by shrieks of joy, fury, indignation, and insult. Doris was no better. She never

addressed her children in anything but a yell.

"What do you think you're doing, you dirty little tyke? You do that again, and I'll belt you one over the ear'ole. Look at your 'ands and your knees. They're filthy. When did you last wash them? Dirty little scrubber."

Penelope, reeling from the din, realized two things.- One was that Doris, in her rough, slap-happy way, was a good mother, and fond of her stringy little boys. The other was that she yelled at them because she had been yelling at them all their lives, up and down the length of the Hackney street where they had been born and bred, just as, in all probability, Doris' mother had yelled at her. She simply didn't realize there was any other way of doing things. And so, not surprisingly, when Doris called for Ronald and Clark, they never answered her. Whereupon, instead of going to search for them, she simply raised her voice another octave and shrieked again.

At last Lawrence could bear it no longer, and told Sophie that unless the Potters quietened down a bit, he would be forced to pack a bag, leave home, and go and live in his studio. He meant it, too, and Sophie, enraged at being put in such a position, stormed into the kitchen and had it out with Doris.

"Why do you scream at zem all ze time?" When she was upset, her accent became more pronounced than usual, but now she was so angry that she sounded like a Marseilles fishwife. "Your cheildren are only just around ze corner. You don't have to scream. Man Dieu, this is a little house, and you are driving us all mad"

Doris was taken aback, but had the good sense not to be offended. She was an easygoing girl, and astute as well. She knew that, with the Sterns, she and the two boys had found a good billet. She'd heard a few nasty tales from other evacuated families, and she didn't want to be moved in with some toffee-nosed old cow who'd treat her like a servant and expect her to live in the kitchen.

"Sorry," she said, in her careless fashion. She grinned. "I s'pose it's just my way."

"And your cheildren . . ." Sophie was simmering down, but still decided to strike while the iron was hot. ". . . must learn ze table manners. If you cannot teach them, then I will. And they must learn to do as zey are told. They will, if you speak quietly. They aren't deaf, but you will make them so if you scream."

Doris shrugged. "Okay," she agreed good-naturedly. "We'll 'ave a try. And now, 'ow about those potatoes for dinner? Want me to peel them for you?" After that, things got better. The noise lessened, the chil-dren, badgered by Sophie and Penelope in turn, learned to say please and thank you, eat with their mouths shut, and ask for the salt and pepper. Some of this even rubbed off on Doris, who became quite dainty, crooking her little finger, and dabbing at the corner of her mouth with her napkin. Penelope took the boys to the beach and taught them to make a sandcastle, and they be-came so intrepid, they actually paddled. Then school started, and they were out of the house most of the day. Doris, who had thought that all soup came out of a can, began to learn a little rudimentary cooking, and helped with the housework. Things settled down. They would never be the same, but at least now they were bearable.

The rooms on the second floor of the house in Oakley Street were occupied by Peter and Elizabeth Clifford. Other tenants came and went, but they had lived there for fifteen years, during which they had become the Sterns' closest friends. Peter was now seventy. A Doctor of Psychoanalysis, he had studied in Vienna under Freud, and ended a prestigious career as Professor in one of the big London teaching hospitals. Retired, however, he did not cease to work, but returned each year to Vienna to lecture at the University.

They had no children, and on these occasions, he had been invariably accompanied by his wife. Elizabeth, a few years younger than Peter, was, in her own way just as brilliant. Before her marriage, she had travelled widely, studied in Germany and France, and produced a series of thoughtful, semi-political novels, articles, and essays, gems of precise and scholarly construction that had earned her a much-respected international reputation.

It was the Cliffords who first made Lawrence and Sophie aware of the sinister things going on in Germany. To them they talked long into the night,

sitting over coffee and brandy, curtains drawn, their troubled voices conveying their anxiety and apprehension. But only to them. As far as the outside world was concerned, they remained intensely discreet, and kept their views to themselves. This was because many of their friends in Austria and Germany were Jewish, and their official visits to Vienna provided good cover for their own personal undercover operations.

Under the eye of the authorities, and at great personal risk to themselves, they made contacts, obtained passports, saw to travel arrangements, and lent money. Their enterprise and fortitude resulted in a number of Jewish families' getting out of the country, escaping across the guarded borders to reach the safety of England, or to travel on and settle in the United States. All arrived penniless, having been forced to abandon property, possessions, and wealth, but all, at least, were free. This dangerous work continued right up to the start of 1938, when it was made clear by the new regime that their presence was no longer welcome. Somebody had talked. They were suspect and blacklisted.

In January, at the beginning of the New Year, 1940, Lawrence and Sophie and Penelope held a family conference. With Cam Cottage now bulging, and Doris and her children established, presumably, for the duration of the war, it was agreed that there could be no question of them returning to Oakley Street. But Sophie did not want to simply abandon her London home. She had not seen it for six months, and she needed to check on the tenants, make black-out curtains for the basement, list inventories, find some person willing to dig the garden. She wanted to collect their winter clothes, for the weather had turned bitterly cold and Cam Cottage had no central heating; and she wanted to see the Cliffords.

Lawrence thought this a splendid idea. Apart from anything else, he was worried about *The Shell Seekers*. When the bombing started, as it undoubtedly would, he feared for the picture.

Sophie told him that she would take care of *The Shell Seekers*, arranging for it to be crated and duly transported to the relative safety of Porthkerris. She rang Elizabeth Clifford to tell her that they were coming. Three days later they all walked down to the station, and Penelope and Sophie got on the train.

Lawrence did not. He had chosen to stay behind, to keep an eye on the little household, and to be left in the tender care of Doris, who seemed quite happy to take on this responsibility. It was the first time he and Sophie had been separated since their marriage, and Sophie was in tears as the train drew out, as though fearful that she would never see him again.

The journey seemed to take forever. The train was icy cold, there was no restaurant car, and at Plymouth they were joined by a draft of sailors, who piled in until the carriages were packed tight, and the corridors filled with kitbags and smoking seamen and card games. Penelope found herself jammed into her corner seat by a young boy, stiff and uncomfortable in his brand-new uniform, and when the train started up again, he promptly fell asleep with his head on her shoulder. Darkness fell early, and after that you couldn't even read by the meagre, dimmed lights.

To make everything worse, they were held up at Reading and finally drew into Paddington three hours late.

London, blacked out, was a mystery city. They managed, by great good chance, to find a taxi, which they shared with a couple of strangers heading in the same direction. The taxi chuntered down the dark, semi-deserted streets, and the rain poured down and it was still piercingly cold. Penelope's heart sank. Home-coming had never been like this.

But Elizabeth, warned, was ready for them, and listening for the arrival of the taxi. As they paid this off, and felt their way down the ink-dark-area steps to their own basement front door, it was flung open and they were hustled inside before any illegal gleam of light could penetrate the black-out.

"Oh, my poor things, I thought you were never coming. You're so dreadfully late."

It was a great reunion, with hugs and kisses, and explanations, and descriptions of the dreadful journey, and finally much laughter, because it was such a relief to be at last out of the cold and the darkness and the train, and home.

The big, familiar room stretched the depth of the house. The street end was

the kitchen-dining room, the garden end the sitting room. Now, it was bright with light, for Elizabeth had tacked blankets at the windows in lieu of black-out curtains, and she had lighted the stove; a pot of chicken soup simmered, and the kettle sang. Sophie and Penelope took off their coats and warmed their hands, and Elizabeth made a pot of tea and a stack of hot cinnamon toast. Before long, they were sitting at the table, just as they always had, eating the impromptu snack (Penelope was starving) and all talking at once, exchanging months' worth of news. Depression lifted and the tedious train journey became a thing of the past and was forgotten.

"And how is my darling Lawrence?"

"Marvellously well, but worried about his Shell Seekers, in case the house gets bombed and the picture destroyed. That's one of the reasons we're here, to have it crated up and take it back to Cornwall with us." Sophie laughed. "He doesn't seem to be bothered about the rest of his possessions."

"And who is taking care of him?" She was told about Doris. "Evacuees! Oh, my poor things. What an invasion for you." She chattered on, telling them all that had happened in the last few weeks. "I have a confession to make. The young man in the attic was called up, and moved out, and I have allowed another young couple to take his place. They are refugees from Munich. They have been in this country for a year, but had to leave their lodgings in St. John's Wood, and could find nowhere else to live. They were desperate, so I suggested they come here. You must forgive my high-handedness, but their plight was desperate, and I know they will be good tenants."

"But of course. I am so glad. How sensible of you." Sophie smiled lovingly. Elizabeth would never falter in her brave work. "What are they called?"

"Friedmann. Willi and Lalla. I want you to meet them. They are coming down for coffee tonight, so why don't you bring Penelope up after supper and join us? When you've settled your-selves in. Peter longs to see you both. And it will be good to talk. It will be like the old days."

As she spoke, she radiated enthusiasm, her most endearing and infectious characteristic. She never changed. Her handsome, wrinkled face was as

bright-eyed and intensely intelligent as ever; her thick, wiry grey hair bundled up into a knot at the back of her head, where it teetered uncertainly, skewered by a few black hairpins. Her clothes were unfashionable and yet dateless, her swollen-knuckled hands adorned with many rings.

"Of course we will come," Sophie told her.

"About nine o'clock? What a treat."

They went, and found the Friedmanns there before them, sitting around the glowing gas stove in the Cliffords' old-fashioned parlour. They were very young, and very mannerly, springing to their feet in order to be introduced. But, Penelope thought, they were old, too. They had about them a sort of poverty-stricken dignity that was beyond age, and when they smiled and said hello, their smiles did not reach their eyes.

At first all was well. A little small talk took place. They learned that Willi Friedmann, in Munich, had studied for the law, but now earned a living doing translations for a London publisher. Lalla taught music, giving piano lessons. Lalla, in her strange, pale way, was beautiful, and sat composedly, but Willi's hands were nervous; he chain-smoked, and seemed to find it hard to be still.

He had been in England for a year, but, covertly observing him, Penelope thought that he had the appearance of a man who had only just made it. She was filled with compassion for him, trying to imagine his life, coping as he must with the daunting prospect of making a future for himself in an alien country, bereft of his friends and colleagues, and having to earn some sort of a living in an undemanding and unfulfilling way. As well, it was likely that he was constantly devilled by the almost unbearable anxiety for a family still living in Germany. She imagined a father, a mother, brothers and sisters whose fate, even now, might well have been sealed by a midnight summons. A ring at the bell, a knocking at the door tearing the night apart, confirming the most horrible of fears.

Presently, Elizabeth went out to her little kitchen and fetched in a tray with cups and hot coffee and a dish of biscuits. Peter brought out a bottle of Cordon Bleu cognac and tiny coloured glasses. These were dispensed. Sophie turned to Willi with her charming smile and said, "I am so pleased you have

come to live here. I hope you will be very happy. I am only sorry that we shan't be here too, but we must go back to Cornwall and look after everybody there. And we will not let the basement. If we want to come to London and see you all, it is better that we have our own rooms to stay in. But if the bombing starts, you must all be sure to use them as an air-raid shelter."

It was a sensible and timely suggestion. So far, there had been no more than the odd air-raid warning, to be followed, almost at once, by the all-clear. But everybody was ready. London sandbagged to the hilt, the parks dug with trenches and air-raid shelters, water tanks erected, and filled with emergency supplies. Barrage balloons floated overhead, and all across the city the anti-aircraft guns crouched, camouflaged with netting, and manned by troops who waited, minute by minute, hour by hour, week by week, for the attacks to start.

A sensible and timely suggestion, but it had a shocking effect on Willi Friedmann.

He said, "Yes." He abruptly tossed his brandy down and did not demur when Peter, without saying anything, refilled his glass. Willi began to talk. He was grateful to Sophie. He was grateful to Elizabeth for all her kindness. Without Elizabeth he would be homeless. Without people like Elizabeth and Peter, he and Lalla would probably be dead. Or worse . . .

Peter said, "Oh, come now, Willi," but Willi had started and did not seem to know how to stop. He had finished his second brandy and was far enough gone to reach for the bottle and help himself to a third. Lalla sat without moving, staring at her husband with round dark eyes that were filled with horror, but she did not try to halt him.

He talked. The flow of words became a torrent, pouring over the heads of the five mesmerized people who sat and listened to him. Penelope looked at Peter, but Peter, watchful and grave, had eyes only for the poor demented young man. Perhaps Peter knew that he needed to talk. That, sometime, it all had to spill out, and why not now, when he and his wife were warm and safe in the thickly curtained room, and with friends.

It went on and on and he told them more—things that he had seen, things that

he had heard, things that had happened to his friends. After a bit Penelope did not want to listen, and longed to cover her ears with her hands and close her eyes and blot the blackened images away. But she listened just the same, and slowly was consumed by a horror and repugnance that had nothing to do with watching newsreels or listening to radio bulletins or reading the paper. Suddenly, it became personal, and terror breathed down the back of her own neck. Man's inhumanity to man, unleashed, was an obscenity, and that obscenity was each person's own private responsibility. This, then, was the meaning of the word WAR. It wasn't just having to carry your gas mask, and do the black-out, and giggle at Miss Pawson, and paint the attic for the evacuees; but a nightmare infinitely more terrible, from which there could be no grateful awakening. It had to be endured, and this could only be done, not by running away, or putting your head under the blankets, but by picking up a sword and going to meet it.

She didn't have a sword, but the next morning, early, she walked out of the house, having told Sophie that she was going shopping. When she returned, just before lunch, and patently empty handed, Sophie was puzzled.

"But I thought you were going shopping."

Penelope pulled out a chair and sat in it and faced her mother over the kitchen table and told her that she had walked until she found a recruiting office, had gone inside, and signed on, for the duration of the war, with the Women's Royal Naval Service.

ANTONIA

The dawn came stealthily, reluctantly. Finally, she had slept again, but awoke to a darkness growing opaque, and knew that morning was on its way. It was very quiet. Cold air flowed through the open window, and, framed by the casement, the chestnut tree raised bare branches to the grey and starless sky.

Cornwall, as it had been, still filled her mind, like a brilliant dream, but even as she lay there, the dream folded its wings and slipped away, back into the past, where, perhaps, it belonged. Ronald and Clark were little boys no longer, but grown men, gone out into the world. Their mother was not Doris Potter, but Doris Penberth, nearly seventy now, and still living in the little white house deep in the old cobbled streets of Porthkerris. Lawrence and Sophie were long gone, and the Cliffords too; and Cam Cottage was gone, and finally Oakley Street as well, which left her here, in Gloucestershire, in her own bed, in her own house, Podmore's Thatch. She was—and this was one of the occasions when the fact took her by surprise, as though the years had encapsulated themselves and played a cruel trick upon her—not nineteen, but sixty-four. Not even middle-aged, but elderly. An elderly woman with a stupid little heart flutter that had landed her in hospital. An elderly woman with three grown-up children, and a whole new cast of characters, with their attendant problems, who now inhabited her life. Nancy, Olivia, and Noel. And, of course, Antonia Hamilton, who was arriving to stay . . . when was she arriving? At the end of next week? No, at the end of this week. For this was Monday. Monday morning. Mrs. Plackett came on Monday mornings, cycling from Pudley, steady as a rock on her sit-up-and-beg bicycle. And the gardener. The new gardener was starting work today, at half past eight.

This, as nothing else could do, stirred Penelope to action. She turned on her bedside light and looked at her watch. Half past seven. It was important to be up, dressed, and about before the gardener arrived, otherwise he would imagine that he had come to labour for a lazy old woman. A lazy master makes a lazy servant. Who had come out with that archaic proverb? Her mother-in-law, of course. Dolly Keeling. Who else? She could hear her saying it, while she ran her fingers along the edge of the mantelpiece to check

for dust, or stripped the sheets off her bed, in order to be sure that the long-suffering daily made it properly. Poor Dolly. She, too, had gone, keeping up appearances until the very last moment, but leaving no sense of loss behind her. Which was sad.

Half past seven. No time to waste on memories of Dolly Keeling, whom she had never liked. Penelope got out of bed.

An hour later, she had bathed and dressed, unlocked all the doors, and eaten her breakfast. Strong coffee, a boiled egg, toast and honey. Sitting over her second cup of coffee, she listened for the sound of an approaching car. She had not before had dealings with the Horticultural Contractors, but she knew that they sent their men out to work in smart little green vans with AUTO-GARDEN written in white capitals on their sides. She had seen them buzzing about, and very smart and efficient they looked, too. She felt a little apprehensive. She had never employed a gardener in her life, and hoped that he would be neither surly nor opinionated. She must tell him very firmly, right away, to prune nothing, to cut nothing back without her permission. She would start him off on something simple and down to earth. The hawthorn hedge at the bottom of the orchard. He could trim that down. She supposed that he was capable of using her little chain-saw. Was there enough petrol for the motor in the garage? Should she go and look, while there was still time to go and get some more?

There was not time, for at that moment these anxious speculations were abruptly interrupted by the unexpected sound of footsteps on gravel, approaching the house. Penelope set down her coffee-cup and got to her feet, peering across the room and out of the window. She saw him, in the quiet, chill morning light, coming towards her. A tall young man in a khaki oilskin jacket and jeans tucked into black rubber boots. He was bareheaded, brown-haired. As she watched him, he stopped for an instant, looking about him, uncertain, perhaps, of his surroundings. She saw the set of his shoulders, the lift of his chin, the angle of his jaw. Yesterday, seeing her son Noel approach across the lawn, Penelope's heart had missed a beat, and now the same scary thing happened. She laid a hand on the table, closed her eyes. She breathed deeply. Her galloping heart settled down. She opened her eyes again. The doorbell rang.

She went through the porch to open the door. He stood there. Tall. Taller than herself. He said, "Good morning."

"Good morning."

"Mrs. Keeling?"

"Yes."

"I'm from Autogarden."

He did not smile. His eyes were unblinking, blue as chips of glass, his face thin and brown, rough with the early-morning cold, the skin drawn tight across high cheek-bones. A red woollen scarf was knotted at his throat, but his hands were bare.

She looked beyond him, over his shoulder. "I was listening for a car."

"I came on my bike. Left it at the gate. I wasn't sure if this was the house."

"I thought Autogarden always sent their men to work in those green vans."

"No. I bicycled." Penelope frowned. He put a hand into his pocket. "I've a letter from my boss." He took it out, unfolded it. She saw the letter-heading, the authentication of his identity. She was instantly embarrassed. "I never thought for a moment you weren't genuine. I just imagined ..."

"This is Podmore's Thatch?" He put the letter back in his pocket.

"Yes, of course it is. You'd . . . you'd better come in."

"No. I won't disturb you. If you could just show me what you want me to do ... show me where you keep the garden tools. Coming on the bike, I wasn't able to bring any with me."

"Oh, never mind, I have everything." She knew she sounded flustered, but

that was because she was flustered. "If . . . you'll just wait a moment. I'll get a coat. . . ."

"That's all right."

She went and found her coat, and her boots, and took the garage key from its hook. Outside again, she saw that he had collected his bike from the gate, and was leaning it up against the wall of the house.

"It won't be in the way there, will it?"

"No, of course not."

She led the way across the gravel, unlocked the garage doors. He helped her open them and she turned on the light, and there was the usual confusion; her old Volvo, the three children's bicycles which she hadn't the heart to throw away, a mouldering pram, the motor mowers, a selection of rakes and hoes and spades and forks.

She edged her way through this collection, making for a decrepit chest of drawers, relic of Oakley Street, where she kept hammers and screwdrivers, rusty tins of nails, and odds and ends of garden twine. On top of this was the chain-saw.

"Can you use one of these?"

"Sure."

"Well, we'd better see if there's some petrol." There was, mercifully. Not much, but enough.

"What I'd really like you to do is trim up my hawthorn hedge."

"Fine." He shouldered the chain-saw, and took up the petrol can in his other hand. "Just point me in the right direction."

But she took him there, to be sure that he made no mistake, leading him

around the house, across the frosty lawn, through the gap in the privet hedge, and across the orchard. The thicket of hawthorn, a tangle of thorny boughs, reared up before them. Beyond it, quietly, coldly, flowed the little river Windrush.

"You've got a lovely place here," he observed.

"Yes. Yes, it is lovely. Now I want you to cut it down to this height. No lower."

"Do you want to keep any of the trimmings for firewood?"

Penelope had not thought of this. "Is it worth keeping?"

"Burns beautifully."

"All right. Keep the bits you think will be of use. And make a bonfire of the rest."

"Right." He set down the saw and the petrol can. "That's it, then."

His tone was dismissive, but she refused to be dismissed. "Are you here for the day?"

"Till four-thirty, if that's all right by you. Summer-time, I start at eight and finish at four."

"What about your lunch break?"

"I take an hour. Twelve to one."

"Well . . ." She was talking to the back of his head. "If you want anything, I shall be in the house."

He was squatting on his haunches, unscrewing the cap of the chainsaw with a long-fingered, capable hand. He made no reply to her remark, simply nodded. She was made to feel intrusive, in the way. She turned and made her way

back up the garden, a little annoyed, and yet amused at herself for being so outfaced. In the kitchen her coffee-cup, half empty, waited on the table. She took a mouthful, but it had gone cold, so she threw it down the sink.

By the time Mrs. Plackett arrived, the chain-saw had been whining for half an hour, and from the bottom of the orchard, bonfire smoke spiralled into the still morning air, filling the garden with the delicious scent of burning wood.

"He's come, then," said Mrs. Plackett as she appeared through the door, for all the world like a ship in full sail. She wore, as it was wintry, her fur pixie hood, and carried her plastic bag containing working shoes and pinafore. She knew all about Penelope's decision to employ a gardener, just as she knew almost everything that went on in her employer's life. They were very good friends and kept nothing from each other. When Mrs. Plackett's daughter Linda was "caught" by the boy who worked in the Pudley garage, Mrs. Keeling was the first person Mrs. Plackett told. And Mrs. Keeling had been a tower of strength, fiercely opposed to the notion that Linda should marry the feckless fellow, and knitting the baby a lovely white matinee coat. And in the end she had been right, because soon after the baby was born, Linda met Charlie Wheelwright, as nice a chap as Mrs. Plackett had ever known, and he had married Linda and taken the little bastard on as well, and now there was another baby on the way. Things had a way of working out for the best. There was no denying that. But still, Mrs. Plackett remained grateful to Mrs. Keeling for her kind and practical counsel at a time of real stress.

"The gardener, you mean? Yes, he's come."

"Saw the bonfire smoke as I cycled through the village." She took off her fur pixie hood, unbuttoned her coat. "But where's the van?"

"He came on his bike."

"What's his name?"

"I didn't ask."

"What's he like?"

"He's young, and well-spoken and very good-looking."

"Hope they haven't sent you one of those fly-by-nights."

"He doesn't look like a fly-by-night."

"Oh, well." Mrs. Plackett tied on her pinafore. "We'll just have to see." She rubbed her swollen red hands together. "Bitter morning, it is. Not so much cold as damp."

"Have a cup of tea," suggested Penelope, as she always did.

"Well, I wouldn't mind," said Mrs. Plackett, as she always did.

The morning was on its way.

Mrs. Plackett, having chased the Hoover round the house, polished the brass stair rods, scrubbed the kitchen floor, dealt with a pile of ironing, and used at least half a tin of furniture polish, took herself off at a quarter to twelve, in order to be home again, in Pudley, in time to give her husband his dinner. She left behind her a house shining cleanly and smelling sweetly. Penelope glanced at the clock, and set about preparing lunch for two. A pot of home-made vegetable soup was put to heat. From the larder she fetched half a cold chicken, a crusty loaf of brown bread. There were some stewed apples in a dish, a jug of cream.

She laid the kitchen table with a checked cotton cloth. If it had been sunny, she would have laid the table in the conservatory, but the clouds hung dark and low and the day had never come to anything. She put a tumbler and a can of beer by his place. After-wards, perhaps he would like a cup of tea. The fragrant broth began to simmer. Soon, he would come. She waited.

At ten past twelve, when he had still not appeared, she went in search of him. She found a neatly cut hedge, a smouldering bonfire, and a stack of little logs, but no sign of the gardener. She would have called him, but as she did not know his name, this was impossible. She went back to the house, beginning

to wonder if, after a single morning's work, he had decided to chuck his hand in and go home, never to return. But, at the back of the house, she found his bicycle, so knew that he was still around. She walked across the gravel to the garage, and there came upon him, just inside the door, sitting on an upturned bucket, eating a dull-looking sandwich made of white bread, and apparently engrossed in what could only be The Times crossword.

Discovering him at last in such cramped, cold, and uncomfortable surroundings filled her with indignation.

"What on earth are you doing?"

He sprang to his feet, startled out of his skin by her unexpected appearance and the tone of her voice, dropping his paper and knocking over the bucket, which made a hideous clatter. His mouth was still full of sandwich, which he had to chew and swallow before he could say anything. He turned red and was obviously enormously embarrassed.

"I'm . . . having my lunch."

"Having your lunch?"

"Twelve to one. You said it would be all right."

"But not out here. Not sitting on a bucket in the garage. You must come into the house, and have it with me. I thought you understood that."

"Have it with you?"

"What else? Don't your other employers give you your midday meal?"

"No."

"I've never heard of anything so dreadful. How can you possibly do a day's work on a sandwich?"

"I manage."

"Well, you don't manage with me. Throw that horrible bit of bread away, and come indoors."

He looked nonplussed, but did as he was told, not throwing the sandwich away, to be sure, but wrapping it up in a bit of paper and stowing it in the bag of his bicycle. Then he picked up the newspaper and stowed that away as well, retrieved the bucket and set it in its accustomed corner. With all this done, she led him indoors. He shed his jacket, revealing a much-mended navy-blue guernsey sweater. Then he washed his hands, and dried them, and took his place at the table. She set before him a big bowl of steaming soup, told him to cut bread and help himself to butter. She took a smaller bowl for herself and settled down be-side him.

He said, "This is really very kind of you."

"Not kind at all. Simply the way I've always done things. No. That's not right. Because I've never had a gardener before. But when my parents had any person to work for them out of doors, they always joined us for the midday meal. I think I never realized things were done differently. I'm sorry. Perhaps the little mix-up was all my fault. I should have made myself more clear."

"I didn't realize."

"No, of course you didn't. Now, tell me about yourself. What's your name?"

"Danus Muirfield."

"What a perfect name."

"I thought it was quite ordinary."

"Perfect for a gardener, I mean. Some people have names that are exactly right for their professions. I mean, what could Charles de Gaulle have been but the saviour of France? And poor Alger Hiss. Born with a name like that, he simply had to be a spy."

He said, "When I was a boy, we had a rector in our church and he was called Mr. Paternoster."

"There you are ... that just proves my point. Where were you a boy? Where were you brought up?"

"Edinburgh."

"Edinburgh. You're Scottish."

"Yes, I suppose I am."

"What does your father do?"

"He's a lawyer. A Writer to the Signet."

"What a lovely title. So romantic. Didn't you want to be a lawyer too?"

"For a bit I thought I might, but then . . ." He shrugged. "I changed my mind. Went to Horticultural College instead."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-four."

She was surprised. He looked older. "Do you like working for Autogarden?"

"It's all right. It makes for variety."

"How long have you worked for them?"

"About six months."

"Are you married?"

"No."

"Where do you live?"

"In a cottage on Sawcombe's farm. Just outside Pudley."

"Oh, I know the Sawcombes. Is it a nice house?"

"It's all right."

"Who looks after you?"

"I look after myself."

She thought of the horrible white-bread sandwich. Imagined the cheerless cottage, with an unmade bed and washing hung around the stove to dry. She wondered if he ever made himself a proper meal.

"Were you at school in Edinburgh?" she asked him, suddenly intrigued by this young man, wanting to know what had happened to him, the circumstances and motivation that had brought him to such a humble life.

"Yes."

"Did you go straight to Horticultural College from school?"

"No. I went out to America for a couple of years. I worked on a cattle ranch in Arkansas."

"I've never been to America."

"It's a great place."

"Did you never think of staying there ... for good, I mean?"

"I thought of it, but I didn't." . "Were you in Arkansas all the time?"

"No. I travelled around. I saw a lot of the country. I spent six months in the Virgin Islands."

"What an experience!"

He had finished his soup. She asked him if he would like more, and he said that he would, so she filled his bowl again. As he picked up his spoon, he said, "You said you'd never had a gardener before. Have you looked after this place all by yourself?"

"Yes," she told him with some pride. "It was a wilderness when I came here."

"You're obviously very knowledgeable."

"I don't know about that."

"Have you always lived here?"

"No. I've lived most of my life in London. But I had a big garden there, too, and before that, when I was a girl, I lived in Cornwall, and there was a garden there. I'm lucky. I've always had gardens. I can't imagine being without one."

"Do you have a family?"

"Yes. Three children. All grown up. One married. I've two grandchildren as well."

He said, "My sister has two children. She's married to a farmer in Perthshire."

"Do you go back to Scotland?"

"Yes. Two, three times a year."

"It must be very beautiful."

"Yes," he said. "It is."

After the soup, he ate most of the chicken, and all the stewed apple. He would not drink the beer, but accepted gratefully her offer of a cup of tea.

When he had drunk the tea, he glanced at the clock and got to his feet. It was five minutes to one.

He said, "I've finished the hedge. I'll bring the logs up to the house, if you'll show me where to store them. And perhaps you'd like to tell me what you want done next. And, as well, how many days a week you need me to come."

"I suggested three days to Autogarden, but if you work at this speed, I may only take two."

"That's all right. It's up to you."

"How do I pay you?"

"You pay Autogarden, and they pay me."

"I hope they pay you well."

"It's all right."

He reached for his jacket and put it on. She said, "Why didn't they give you a van to come to work in?"

"I don't drive."

"But all young people drive nowadays. You could easily learn."

"I didn't say I couldn't drive," said Danus Muirfield. "I said I didn't."

When she had shown him where to put the logs and had set him to work again, double-trenching her vegetable plot, Penelope returned to her kitchen to wash up the lunch dishes. "I didn't say I couldn't drive. I said I didn't." He had not accepted the can of beer. She wondered if he had been caught for drunk driving and had had his licence taken away from him. Perhaps he had killed some person, had taken the pledge, and sworn that alcohol, no more, should cross his lips. The very idea of such horror filled her with chill. And yet, a tragedy of such massive proportions was not beyond the bounds of

possibility. And it would explain a lot about him . . . the tenseness in his face, the unsmiling mouth, the bright, unblinking eyes. There was something there, veneered by wariness. Some mystery. But she liked him. Oh yes, she liked him very much.

At nine o'clock the next evening, which was a Tuesday, Noel Keeling turned his Jaguar into Ranfurly Road, and drove down the dark, rainy street to stop outside his sister Olivia's house. He was not expected, and had prepared himself to find her out, which she usually was. She was the most social woman he knew. But, surprisingly, the lights burnt behind the drawn curtains of her sitting room window, so he got out of the car, locked it, and went up the little path to ring the bell. A moment later, it was opened, and Olivia stood there, wearing a flame-red woollen housecoat, no make-up, and her spectacles. Obviously not dressed for company. He said, "Hello."

"Noel." She sounded astonished, as well she might, for he was not in the habit of dropping in on her, despite the fact that he lived only a couple of miles away. "What are you doing?"

"Just calling. Are you busy?"

"Yes, I am. Trying to do some reading for a meeting tomorrow morning. But that doesn't matter. Come on in."

"I've been having a drink with some friends in Putney." He smoothed down his hair, followed her into her sitting room. As usual, it was marvellously warm, firelit, filled with flowers . . . he envied her. He had always envied her. Not just her success, but the competence with which she seemed to handle every facet of her busy life. On the low table by the fire was her brief-case, sheaves of papers, pages of proof, but she stooped to bundle these into some sort of order and remove them to her desk. He went to the fireside, ostensibly to warm his hands at the flames, but actu-ally to cast his eye over the invitations that she had propped on the mantelpiece, and generally check on her social engagements. He saw that she had been asked to a wedding to which he had not, and also a private view at a new gallery in Walton Street.

She said, "Have you had anything to eat?"

He turned to face her. "A few canapes." He pronounced it the way it was spelt, which was one of the few old family jokes that they still shared.

"Do you want something?"

"What are you offering?"

"There's the remains of a bit of quiche I had for supper. You can eat that up if you want. And biscuits and cheese."

"That'd be great."

"I'll get it then. Help yourself to a drink."

He accepted this kind offer, pouring himself a stiff whisky and soda, while she disappeared through to her little kitchen beyond the dining room, turning on lights as she went. There, in a companionable fashion, he joined her, pulling a tall stool to the little counter that separated the two rooms, for all the world like a man in a pub chatting up the barmaid.

He said, "I went and saw Ma on Sunday."

"Did you? I saw her on Saturday."

"She told me you'd been. With a fancy American in tow. How do you think she's looking?"

"Marvellous, considering."

"Do you think it really was a heart attack?"

"Well, a warning anyway." She looked at him, her mouth wry. "Nancy's already got her buried ten feet under the daisies." Noel laughed, shook his head. Nancy was one of the few things he and Olivia had always agreed about. "Of course, she does too much. She's always done too much. But at least she's agreed to getting some help in the garden. That's a beginning."

"I tried to get her to say she'd come up to London tomorrow."

"For what reason?"

"Go to Boothby's. Watch the Lawrence Stern come under the hammer. See what it fetches."

"Oh yes, *The Water Carriers*. I'd forgotten it was tomorrow. Did she say she would?"

"No."

"Well, why should she? It's not as though she was going to make any money out of it."

"No." Noel looked down into his glass. "But she would if she sold her own."

"If you mean *The Shell Seekers*, think again. She'd die before letting that picture go."

"How about the panels?"

Olivia's expression was deeply suspicious. "Did you talk to Mumma about this?"

"Why not? They're dreadful pictures, admit it. They simply moulder away at the top of the stairs. She'd never even notice their going."

"They're unfinished."

"I wish everybody would stop telling me they're unfinished. My bet is that they have a rarity value that is beyond price."

After a little, she said, "Supposing she did agree to sell them." Olivia took out a tray, set plates and a fork and knife upon it, a dish of butter, a wooden platter of cheese. "Are you going to suggest what she does with the resultant

loot, or are you going to leave that to her discretion?"

"The money you give away while you're alive is worth twice what you leave when you die."

"Which means that you want to get your greedy little paws on it."

"Not just me. All three of us. Oh, don't look so po-faced, Olivia, it's nothing to be ashamed of. These days everybody's short of capital, and don't tell me Nancy isn't mad to get her hand on a bit of extra cash. She's always drooling on about how expensive everything is."

"You and Nancy, maybe. But you can count me out."

Noel turned his glass. "You wouldn't say no, though?"

"I don't want anything from Mumma. She's given us enough. I just want her to be there, well, and secure, with no money worries, and able to enjoy herself."

"She's comfortably off. We all know that."

"Do we? What about the future? She may live to be a very old lady."

"All the more reason to sell those dismal nymphs. Invest the capital for her twilight years."

"I don't want to discuss it."

"So you don't think it's a good idea?"

Olivia did not reply to this, simply picked up the tray and bore it back to the fireside. Following her, he decided that no woman could look so straight-backed and formidable as Olivia when you were trying to do something of which she did not approve.

She set down the tray with something of a thump on the low table. Then she

straightened, facing him across the room. She said, "No."

"Why not?"

"I think that you should leave Mumma alone."

"All right." With easy grace he gave in, knowing that, in the long term, this was the best way to get what he wanted. He settled himself in one of her deep armchairs, perched forward so that he could deal with his impromptu meal. Olivia moved to stand with her shoulders against the mantelpiece, her hands deep, in the pockets of her gown. He felt her eyes upon him as he picked up the fork, sliced into the quiche. "We'll forget about selling the panels. Talk about something else."

"Like what?"

"Like, have you ever seen, or heard Ma mention, or even suspected the existence of, any rough oil sketches that Lawrence Stern would have done for all his major works?"

He had spent the day debating as to whether or not he should take Olivia into his confidence about his discovery of the old letter and its subsequent possibilities. In the end, he had decided to take the risk. Olivia was an important ally to win. Only she, of all three of them, had any influence on their mother. As he asked the question, he kept his eyes on her face, saw her expression stiffen into wariness, alert with suspicion. This was to be expected.

After a bit, she said, "No." This, too, was to be expected, but he knew that she was telling the truth, because she always did. "Never."

"You see, there must have been some."

"What started you on this wild-goose chase?"

He told her about finding the letter.

"The Terrazzo Garden? That's in the Metropolitan in New York."

"Exactly so. And if a rough oil sketch was done for *The Terrazzo Garden*, then why not for *The Water Carriers* and *The Fisherman's Courtship* and all the other old classics that are now incarcerated in boring museums in every self-respecting capital in the world."

Olivia thought about this. Then she said, "They were probably destroyed."

"Oh, rubbish. The old boy never destroyed anything. You know that as well as I do. No house was ever so full of the junk of ages as Oakley Street. Unless it's Podmore's Thatch. You know, that loft of Ma's is a positive fire risk. If any insurance man saw what's been crammed up there, under the thatch, he'd have a fit."

"Have you been up there lately?"

"Went on Sunday, to search for my squash racket."

"Was that all you were searching for?"

"Well, I did have a look around."

"For a folio of rough oil sketches."

"Something like that."

"But you didn't find them."

"Of course not. You couldn't find an elephant in all that clutter."

"Did Mumma know what you were looking for?"

"No."

"You are a despicable creep, Noel. Why do you always have to do everything the backhanded way?"

"Because she's no more idea what's in that loft than she knew what was up in the attics of Oakley Street."

"What is up there?"

"Everything. Old boxes; chests of clothes and bundles of letters. Dressmaker's dummies, toy perambulators, footstools, bags of tapestry wool, weighing machines, boxes of wooden blocks, piles of magazines tied together with string, knitting patterns, old picture frames . . . you name it, it's there. And like I said, it's all a hideous fire risk. The thatch does nothing to help. One spark on a windy day and the whole house would go up like a furnace. One simply hopes Ma will have time to fling herself from some window before she's incinerated. I say, this is a deli-cious quiche. Did you make it?"

"I never make anything. I buy it all from the supermarket." She pushed herself away from the mantelpiece and crossed the room to the table behind him. He heard her pour a drink, and allowed himself a smile, because he knew that he had aroused her anxieties, and so caught her attention, and, hopefully, her sympathy. She came back to the fireside and sat on the sofa facing him, with the glass cradled in her hands.

"Noel, do you really think it's dangerous?"

"Yes. Honestly. Truthfully. I do."

"What do you think we should do?"

"Clear the whole place out."

"Mumma would never agree to that."

"All right, then, sort it out. But half of the junk up there is only fit for a bonfire, like the bundles of magazines and the knitting patterns and tapestry wool. ..."

"Why the tapestry wool?"

"It's alive with moth."

She said nothing to this. He had finished the quiche and now started in on the cheese, a particularly delicious wedge of Brie.

"Noel. You're not just blowing this all up just so that you've got a good excuse to go snooping? If you do find those rough sketches or anything else of value, remember that everything in that house belongs to Mumma."

He met her eye, assuming an expression of blameless innocence. "You surely don't think I'd steal them."

"I wouldn't put it past you."

He chose to ignore this. "If we found those rough sketches, have you any idea what they're worth? At least five thousand each."

"Why do you talk about them as if you know they're there?"

"I don't know they're there! I just suspect that they might be. But more important is that the loft is a potential fire risk and I think something should be done about it."

"Do you think we should get the whole house reassessed for insurance while we're about it?"

"George Chamberlain looked after all that when he bought the place for Ma. Perhaps you should have a word with him. And I'm not doing anything this weekend. I'll go down on Friday evening and tackle the Herculean task. I'll give Ma a ring, tell her I'm coming."

"Will you ask her about the sketches?"

"Do you think I should?"

Olivia did not answer at once. And then she said, "No, don't." He looked at

her in some surprise. "I think it might fuss her, and I don't want her fussed. If they turn up, we can tell her, and if they aren't there, it makes no difference anyway. But, Noel, you're not to say another word to her about selling her pictures. They really are nothing to do with you."

He put his hand to his heart. "Scout's honour." He smiled. "You've come around to my way of thinking."

"You're a devious villain, and I shall never come round to your way of thinking."

He accepted this with equanimity, finished his supper in silence, and then got to his feet and went to replenish his glass.

From behind him, she said, "Are you really going? To Podmore's Thatch, I mean."

"No reason not to." He returned to his chair. "Why?"

"You could do something for me."

"I could?"

"Do you know who I mean by Cosmo Hamilton?"

"Cosmo Hamilton? But of course. Lover boy from sunny Spain. Don't say he's come into your life again?"

"No, he hasn't come into my life. He's gone out of it. He's dead."

For once, Noel was truly startled and shocked. "Dead." Olivia's face was calm, but very pale and still, and he regretted his facetiousness. "Oh, I am sorry. But what happened?"

"I don't know. He died in hospital."

"When did you hear?"

"On Friday."

"But he was a young man."

"He was sixty."

"What a bloody thing to happen."

"Yes. I know. But the thing is, he has this young daughter, Antonia. She's arriving tomorrow at Heathrow from Ibiza, and she's going to stay here for a few days, and then go down to Podmore's Thatch and keep Mumma company for a bit."

"Does Ma know?"

"Of course. We fixed it on Saturday."

"She never said anything to me."

"I don't suppose she did."

"How old is this girl . . . Antonia?"

"Eighteen. I'd intended taking her myself and staying the weekend, but I've got tied up with a man. . . ."

Noel, himself again, raised an eyebrow. "Business or pleasure?"

"Purely business. A French designer, queer as a coot, stay-ing at the Ritz, and I really want to spend some time with him."

"So?"

"So if you are going to Gloucestershire on Friday night, you'd do me a favour if you'd drive her down with you."

"Is she pretty?"

"Does your answer depend on it?"

"No, but I'd like to be told."

"At thirteen, she was charming."

"Not fat and spotty."

"Not in the least. When Mumma came out to stay with us in Ibiza, Antonia was there at the same time. They became tremendous friends. And since Mumma was ill, Nancy drones on about the fact that she shouldn't live alone. But if Antonia's with her, she won't be alone. I thought it was rather a good idea."

"You've got it all worked out, haven't you?"

Olivia ignored this gibe. "Will you take her?"

"Sure, I don't mind."

"When will you pick her up?"

Friday evening ... he considered. . . . "Six o'clock."

"I'll make a point of being back from the office. And, Noel. . . ." Suddenly she smiled. She had not smiled all evening, but she smiled now, and for an instant there was a fondness between them, a companionship. They might have been any affectionate brother and sister who had just spent a pleasant hour together. ". . . I'm grateful."

The next morning, from the office, Olivia rang Penelope. "Mumma."

"Olivia."

"Mumma, look, I've had to change my plans. I can't come down this weekend

after all, I've got to do some business with a poncy Frenchman, and Saturday and Sunday are the only days he seems to be able to give me. I'm terribly sorry."

"But what about Antonia?"

"Noel's bringing her down. He hasn't phoned you yet?"

"Not a word."

"He will. He's coming down on Friday, and staying for a couple of days. We had a long family conference last night and decided you simply must have that loft of yours cleared out before the whole place goes up in smoke; I hadn't realized it was such a squirrel hoard. You are a naughty old thing."

"A family conference?" Penelope sounded surprised, as indeed she was. "You and Noel?"

"Yes, he dropped in yesterday evening and I gave him supper. He told me he'd been up to the loft to look for something, and that there's so much junk up there, it's a real fire risk. So we agreed that he should come down and clear it out. Don't worry, we're not really being overbearing, just concerned, and he's promised he won't throw anything away or burn it without your consent. I think it's rather kind of him. And he actually volunteered to do the job, so don't go all stuffy and say we're treating you like an idiot."

"I'm not being stuffy at all, and I think it's rather kind of Noel, too. I've been meaning to tidy it up myself, every winter for the past five years, but it's such a task, it was never difficult to find an excuse not to do it. Do you think Noel can manage on his own?"

"Antonia'll be there. She'd probably rather enjoy it. But don't you go humping anything."

Penelope was struck by a bright idea. "I could ask Danus to come for the day. Another pair of strong arms wouldn't come amiss, and he could be in charge of the bonfire."

"Who's Danus?"

"My new gardener."

"I forgot about him. What's he like?"

"A dear man. Has Antonia arrived yet?"

"No. I meet her off the plane this evening."

"Send her my love and say I can't wait to see her."

"I'll do that. And she and Noel will be with you on Friday evening, in time for dinner. I'm just sorry I'm not going to be there too."

"I shall miss you. But another time."

" 'Bye then, Mumma."

"Goodbye, my darling."

In the evening, Noel rang.

"Ma."

"Noel."

"How are you?"

"I'm splendid. I hear you're coming down for the weekend."

"Olivia's spoken to you?"

"This morning."

"She says I've got to come and empty the loft. She says she's having

nightmares about you going up in smoke."

"I know, she told me. I think it's a good idea, and very kind of you."

"Well, that's a turn-up for the books; we thought you'd be livid."

"Then you thought wrong," Penelope retorted, a little weary of this new image of herself as a pigheaded, uncooperative old lady. "And I shall get Danus in for the day to help you. He's my new gardener, and I'm sure he won't mind. And he's terribly good at lighting bonfires."

Noel hesitated and then said, "Great."

"And you're bringing Antonia with you. I'll expect you then, on Friday evening. And don't drive too fast."

She was about to put the receiver down and cut him off, but he sensed this, and yelled "Ma," and she put it to her ear again.

"I thought we'd finished."

"I wanted to tell you about the sale. I went along to Booth-by's this afternoon. How much do you think *The Water Carriers* went for?"

"I've no idea."

"Two hundred and forty-five thousand, eight hundred pounds."

"Dear heaven. Who bought it?"

"An American art gallery. Denver, Colorado, I think."

She shook her head in wonder, as though he could see her.

"What a sum of money."

"Makes you sick, doesn't it?"

"It certainly," she told him, "makes you think."

Thursday. By the time Penelope had got herself out of bed and downstairs, the gardener was already at work. She had given him a key to the garage, so that he could gain access to the garden tools, and from her bedroom window he could be observed toiling in the vegetable garden. She did not disturb him, because, during that first day, she had been made to realize that he was not only hard-working, but a private sort of person, and would not relish her constantly appearing to give him the time of day, check on his activities, and generally make a nuisance of herself. If he needed anything, then he would come and ask her. If not, then he would simply get on with his task.

But still, at a quarter to twelve, with the sketchy housework accomplished, and a batch of bread proving on the Aga, she untied her apron and went down the garden to have a word, and remind him that she was expecting him, indoors, for lunch. It was warmer today, and there was quite a lot of blue sky. Not much heat in the sun, but still, she would lay the table in the conservatory, and they would eat their meal out there.

"Good morning."

He looked up and saw her, and straightened his back, leaning on the spade. The still morning air was filled with robust and heartening smells: freshly turned earth and the rotted compost mixed with a quantity of horse manure, which he had barrowed from her carefully nurtured heap.

"Good morning, Mrs. Keeling."

He had shed his jacket and sweater and worked in his shirtsleeves. His forearms were brown and knotted with lean muscle. As she watched him, he put up a hand and wiped a smear of mud from his chin with his wrist. The gesture caused a piercing sensation of *deja vu*, but now she was prepared for this, and it did not cause her heart to hiccup, but simply filled her with pleasure.

"You look warm," she told him.

He nodded. "It's warm work."

"Lunch will be ready at twelve."

"Thank you. I'll be in."

He went back to his digging. A robin was hovering around, as much, Penelope guessed, for company as for worms. Robins were delightfully gregarious.- She turned and left him to his labours, and made her way back to the house, picking a bunch of early polyanthus on the way. The flowers were velvety and richly scented, and brought to mind the pale primroses of Cornwall, studding the sheltered hedgerows at a time when the rest of the country was in the grip of winter.

I must go soon, she told herself. Spring in Cornwall is such a magical time. I must go soon, otherwise it will be too late.

She said, "Danus, what do you do on weekends?"

Today she was giving him cold ham and baked potatoes and cauliflower cheese. For pudding, there were jam tarts and a baked egg custard. Not a snack, but a proper meal, and she sat and ate it with him, and wondered if, at this rate, she would become enormously stout.

"Nothing much."

"I mean, do you work for anybody at weekends?"

"I sometimes give a Saturday morning to the Pudley Bank Manager. He'd rather play golf than garden and his wife complains about the weeds."

Penelope smiled. "Poor man. What about Sunday?"

"My Sundays are free."

"Would you come here for the day ... as a job, I mean. I'll pay you, I won't

pay Autogarden, and that's quite fair, because it isn't gardening I want you to do."

He looked a little surprised, as well he might.

"What is it you want me to do?"

She told him about Noel and the attic. "There is such a lot of rubbish up there, I know, and it'll all have to be humped downstairs and sorted out. He can't possibly do it all by himself. I thought if you could be here to give him a hand, it really would be a help."

"Of course I'll come. But as a favour. You don't need to pay me."

"But—"

"No," he said firmly. "I don't want to be paid. What time shall I be here?"

"About nine in the morning."

"Fine."

"Quite a little party for lunch. I have a young girl coming to stay for a few weeks. Noel's bringing her with him tomorrow evening. She's called Antonia."

"That'll be nice for you," said Danus.

"Yes."

"A bit of company."

Nancy was not a great one for reading newspapers. If she had to go to the village to shop, which she did most mornings, because there was a singular lack of communication between herself and Mrs. Croftway, and they always seemed to be running out of butter or instant coffee, or gravy browning, then she usually dropped in at the newsagents and bought herself a Daily Mail or a

copy of *Woman's Own* to peruse over the sandwich and chocolate biscuit that comprised her lunch, but *The Times* did not enter the house until the evening, brought home by George in his brief-case.

Thursday was Mrs. Croftway's day off, which meant that Nancy was in the kitchen when George returned from work. They were having fish cakes for dinner, which Mrs. Croftway had already concocted, but Croftway had brought in a basket of his horrible, overgrown, bitter Brussels sprouts, and Nancy stood at the sink, preparing these, hating the task and fairly sure that the children would refuse to eat them, as the sound of the car came up the drive. After a moment or two the back door opened and shut and her husband joined her, looking worn and unsubstantial in his sober clothes. She hoped that he had not had a tiresome day. When he had a tiresome day, he was inclined to take it out on her.

She looked up, and smiled firmly. George so seldom looked cheerful that it was important not to be depressed by his gloom, and to keep up the illusion—even if only she was taken in by it—of an affectionate and companionable relationship.

"Hello, darling. Had a good day?"

"All right."

He dumped his brief-case on the table, and from it withdrew *The Times*.
"Have a look at this."

Nancy was amazed by such forthcomingness. Most evenings he simply grunted and took himself off to the library for a quiet hour or so before dinner. Something riveting must have happened. She hoped it was not an atomic bomb. She abandoned the sprouts, dried her hands, and went to stand beside him. He spread the paper out on the table, turned to the Arts Page, and pointed, with a long pale forefinger, to a specific column.

She peered hopelessly at the blur of print. She said, "I haven't got my glasses."

He sighed, resigned to her incompetence. "The Sale Room news, Nancy. Your grandfather's picture was sold yesterday at Boothby's."

"Was it yesterday?" She had not forgotten about *The Water Carriers*. On the contrary, the conversation she had had with Olivia over lunch at L'Escargot had occupied her thoughts ever since, but so obsessed had she been with the probable value of the paintings that still hung at Podmore's Thatch, that she had lost track of the days. She had never been very good at remembering dates.

"Do you know what it fetched?" Nancy, open-mouthed, shook her head. "Two hundred and forty-five thousand, eight hundred pounds."

He spoke the magic words in measured tones, so that there was no possible chance of her mishearing him. Nancy felt quite faint. She laid her hand on the kitchen table in order to steady herself and continued to goggle at him.

"Bought by some American. Sickening the way anything of value always has to go out of the country."

She found her voice at last. "And it was a terrible picture," she told him.

George smiled chillily, and without a touch of humour. "Fortunately, for Boothby's and for the previous owner, not everybody is of your opinion." But Nancy scarcely registered this dig. She said, "So Olivia wasn't far wrong."

"What does that mean?"

"We talked about it, that day we had lunch at L'Escargot. She guessed it would bring in something like that." She looked at George. "And she guessed that *The Shell Seekers*, and the other two pictures Mother still has, are probably worth half a million. Perhaps she was right about that as well."

George said, "No doubt. Our Olivia is scarcely ever wrong about anything. The sort of circles she moves in, she can keep that long nose of hers very close to the ground."

Nancy reached for a chair and took the weight off her legs. She said, "George, do you suppose Mother realizes what they're worth?"

"I shouldn't suppose so." He pursed his lips. "I'd better have a word. We should get the insurance premiums bumped up. Any person could walk into that house and simply lift them off the walls. As far as I can see, she's never locked a door in her life."

Nancy began to feel excited. She had not previously told George of her conversation with Olivia because George did not like her sister, and was patently disinterested in anything that she might have to say. But now that George had brought the subject up himself, it made everything much simpler.

She said, striking while the iron was hot, "Perhaps we should go and see Mother. Talk things over."

"The insurance, you mean?"

"If the premiums go up too much, she may . . ." Nancy's voice went rough. She cleared her throat. ". . . she may decide that it's simpler to sell them. Olivia said the market's at its peak just now for these old Victorian works . . ." (that sounded marvellously sophisticated and knowledgeable, and Nancy felt quite proud of herself) ". . . and it would be a pity to miss the opportunity."

For once George seemed to be considering her point of view. He pursed his lips, read the paragraph once more, and then neatly, precisely, folded up the paper.

He said, "It's up to you."

"Oh, George. Half a million. I can hardly imagine so much money."

"There'd be taxes, of course, to pay."

"But even so! We must go. Anyway, I haven't been to see her for far too long.

It's time I checked up on how things are going with her. And then I can bring up the subject. Tactfully." George looked doubtful. They both knew that tact was not Nancy's strongest point. "I'll go right away and give her a ring."

"Mother." "Nancy." "How are you?" "Very well. And you?"

"Not doing too much?"

"Are you referring to me or you?"

"You, of course. Has the gardener started work?"

"Yes, he came on Monday, and again today."

"I hope he's satisfactory."

"Well, he satisfies me."

"And have you thought any more about having someone to live with you? I put an advertisement in our local paper, but I haven't had any replies, I'm afraid. Not so much as a phone call."

"Oh, you don't need to worry about that any more. Antonia's coming tomorrow evening, she's going to stay with me for a bit."

"Antonia? Who's Antonia?"

"Antonia Hamilton. Oh dear, I suppose we've all forgotten to tell you. I thought Olivia might have given you the news."

"No," Nancy told her frostily. "Nobody's told me any-thing."

"Well, that nice friend of Olivia's, the one she lived with when she was in Ibiza, it was so dreadfully sad; he died. And so his daughter's going to come here for a bit just to pull herself together and give herself time to decide what she's going to do next."

Nancy was enraged. "Well, I must say, I do think somebody might have let me know. I wouldn't have taken the trouble to put the advertisement in, if I'd known."

"I'm so sorry, darling, but somehow with one thing and another, I've been so busy and I forgot. But anyway, it means that you don't need to worry about me any longer."

"But Mother, what sort of a girl is she?"

"I think, probably, very sweet."

"How old?"

"Only eighteen. She'll be splendid company for me."

"When is she arriving?"

"I told you. Tomorrow evening. Noel's bringing her down from London. He's going to spend the weekend and clear out the attic. He and Olivia have decided that it's a fire risk." There was a pause in the conversation, and then she went on, "Why don't you all come over and join us for lunch on Sunday. Bring the children. And then you can see Noel and meet Antonia." And bring up the subject of the pictures.

"Oh . . ." Nancy hesitated. ". . . I think that would be all right. Just wait a moment, till I have a word with George. . . ."

She left the receiver dangling and went in search of her husband. She did not have to search far. She found him, as she knew she would, deep in his armchair, concealed by *The Times*.

"George." He lowered the paper. "She's asked us all for lunch on Sunday." She hissed this in a whisper, as though her mother could overhear, although the telephone was far out of earshot.

"I can't go," said George instantly. "I have a Diocesan luncheon and meeting

I have to attend."

"In that case, I'll take the children."

"I thought the children were spending the day with the Wainwrights. . . ."

"So they are. I'd forgotten. Well, I'd better just go by myself."

"It seems," said George, "that you had."

Nancy returned to the telephone.

"Mother?"

"Yes, I'm still here."

"George and the children seem to be otherwise engaged on Sunday, but I'd love to come over if it's all right by you."

"On your own." (Did Mother sound a little relieved? Nancy put the notion from her head.) "What a treat. Come about twelve and we can have a chat. I'll see you then."

Nancy replaced the receiver and went to tell George of the arrangement. She also told him, at some length, of the thoughtlessness and high-handedness of Olivia, who had found, with no difficulty at all, a companion for their mother, and had not even bothered to let Nancy know of the arrangement.

". . . and she's only eighteen. Probably some little flibberti-gibbet who'll lie in bed all day and expect to be waited on. Making more work for Mother. You would think, wouldn't you, George, that Olivia might have let me know. At least talked it over. After all, I have taken on the responsibility of keeping an eye on Mother, and yet none of them ever even considers me. It does seem incredibly thoughtless . . . George?"

But George had switched off; stopped listening. Nancy sighed and left him, returning to the kitchen to work off her resentments on what remained of the Brussels sprouts.

Noel and Antonia did not arrive from London until nearly a quarter past nine in the evening, by which time Penelope had them both dead in a twisted mass of metal (the Jaguar) by the side of the motorway. It was a night of black rain, and she kept going to the kitchen window to peer hopefully through it in the general direction of the gate, and was just beginning to contemplate ringing the Police, when she heard the sound of the car engine racing down the road from the village, slowing up, changing gear, and turning—thank you, God—through the gates to draw up at the back door.

She took a second to compose herself. Nothing put Noel in a worse mood than to be fussed over, and after all, if they had not left London until six or after, it had been stupid to allow herself to get into such a state. She shed her anxieties, put a calm and smiling expression on her face, and went to turn on the outside light and open the door.

She saw the long, racy, slightly battered shape of Noel's car. He was already climbing out of it, and going to open the other door. Out of this emerged Antonia, lugging some sort of haversack behind her. She heard Noel say, "You'd better run for cover," and Antonia did just that, with her head down against the rain, scuttling for the shelter of the porch and straight into Penelope's waiting arms.

She dropped the haversack on the doormat and they hugged, holding each other very tight, Penelope filled with relief and affection, and Antonia simply thankful to be here at last, safe and in the arms of just about the only person whom, at the moment, she wanted to be with.

"Antonia." They drew apart, but Penelope still held her arm, drawing her through the inner door, away from the dark, cold, wet night, and into the warmth of the kitchen. "Oh, I thought you were never going to get here."

"So did I."

She looked the same, much as she had looked at thirteen. Taller, of course, but just as slender . . . she had a beautiful long-legged figure . . . and her face had grown to her mouth, but otherwise nothing much seemed to have

changed. Still the freckles on her nose, the slanting, greenish eyes, the long, thick, fair eyelashes. Still the red-gold hair, shoulder-length, heavy and straight. Still, even, the same sort of clothes; blue jeans, and a white sweat-shirt with a man's thick V-necked sweater pulled over it.

"It is so lovely to have you here. Did you have a good drive down? Was it dreadfully rainy?"

"Pretty bad."

Antonia turned as Noel came through the door to join them, bearing, not only Antonia's suitcase and his own bag, but the abandoned haversack as well.

"Oh, Noel." He set down the cases. "What a perfectly dreadful night."

"Let's hope we don't have rain the entire weekend, other-wise we won't get a thing done." He sniffed. "Something smells good."

"Shepherd's pie."

"I'm ravenous."

"No wonder. I'll take Antonia up and show her her room, and then we'll have dinner. Give yourself a drink. I'm sure you need one. We'll be down in a moment. Come along, Antonia. . . ."

She picked up the haversack and Antonia carried her bag, and Penelope led the way upstairs, across a tiny landing, through the first bedroom and into the second.

"What a marvellous house," said Antonia from behind her.

"It's not for privacy. All the rooms lead into each other."

"Like Ca'n D'alt."

"It used to be two cottages. There are still two staircases and two doors. Now

here we are." She set down the haversack and glanced around the carefully prepared room, checking that she had forgotten nothing. It looked very nice. The white, closely fitted carpet was new, but all else dated back to Oakley Street. The twin beds, with their polished, wheel-back heads; the rose-flowered curtains that did not match the bedspreads. The little mahogany dressing-table, and the balloon-backed chairs. She had filled a lustre jug with polyanthus and turned down one of the beds to reveal crisp white linen and pink blankets. "This cupboard is the wardrobe, and through the other door is the bathroom. Noel's room is just beyond and you'll have to share the bathroom with him, but if he's using it, you can come to the other end of the house and use mine. Now . . ." With all explained, she turned to Antonia. "What would you like to do? Have a bath? There's plenty of time."

"No. I'll just wash my hands if I may. And then I'll come down."

There were shadows like smudges beneath her eyes. Penelope said, "You must be tired."

"I am, rather. I think it's a sort of jet lag. I haven't quite caught up with myself yet."

"Never mind, you're here now. You don't have to go anywhere else, not until you want to. Come down when you're ready and Noel will give you a drink."

She returned to the kitchen, where she found Noel, with a large, dark whisky and soda, sitting at the table and reading the paper. She closed the door behind her, and he looked up. "Everything okay?"

"Poor child, she looks drained."

"Yes. She didn't talk much on the way down. I thought she was sleeping, but she wasn't."

"She hasn't changed in the very least. I think she was the most attractive child I ever knew."

"You mustn't put ideas into my head."

She gave him a cautionary glance. "You behave yourself this weekend, Noel."

He looked the picture of innocence. "Now what could you mean by that?"

"You know perfectly well what I mean."

He grinned, still good-humoured, unabashed. "By the time I've finished harrowing all that rubbish out of your attic, I'll be too shagged to do anything except pass out in my own little bunk."

"I certainly hope so."

"Oh, come off it, Ma, you must realize she's not at all my type . . . white eyelashes have no appeal. Makes me think of rabbits. I'm starving. When are we going to eat?"

"When Antonia comes down." She went to open the oven door and check on the shepherd's pie to make certain that it was neither overcooked nor inedible. Which it wasn't. She closed the door. Noel said, "What did you think about Wednesday's sale? *The Water Carriers*."

"I told you. Quite unbelievable."

"Have you decided what you're going to do?"

"Have I got to do anything?"

"You're being obtuse. It went for almost a quarter of a mil-lion! You own three Lawrence Sterns, and the financial responsibility, if nothing else, completely alters the situation. Do what I suggested the last time I was here. Get them professionally val-ued. If you still don't want to sell them, then for God's sake have them reinsured. Any cunning joker could walk into the house one day when you're out in the rose-beds and simply walk off with them. Don't be too stupid about it all."

Across the table, she eyed him, torn between a sort of motherly gratitude for his concern and a nasty suspicion that her son —so like his father—was up to something. He met her eyes with a clear and open blue gaze, but she remained undecided.

She said at last, "All right, I'll think about it. But I shall never sell my darling Shell Seekers, and I shall continue to get the utmost satisfaction and comfort from looking at it. It's all I've got left of the old days, and being a child, and Cornwall and Porthkerris."

He looked slightly alarmed. "Hey. Just listen to those sob-bing violins. It's not like you to start getting maudlin."

"I'm not being maudlin. It's just that, lately, I've developed this yearning to be there again. It's something to do with the sea. I want to look at the sea again. And why not? There's nothing to stop me going. Just for a few days."

"Are you sure that's wise? Isn't it better to remember it as it was? Everything changes, and never for the better."

"The sea doesn't change," Penelope told him stubbornly.

"You'd know nobody."

"I know Doris. I could stay with her."

"Doris?"

"She was our evacuee at the beginning of the war. Lived with us at Cam Cottage. She never went back to Hackney. She just stayed at Porthkerris. And we still correspond and she's always asking me to go and visit her. . . ." She hesitated, and then, "Would you come with me?" she asked her son.

"Come with you?" He was so taken aback by her suggestion that he made no attempt to conceal his astonishment.

"It would be company." That sounded pathetic, as though she were lonely.

She tried another tack. "And it might be fun for us both. I don't regret many things in my life, but I do regret never taking you all to Porthkerris when you were children. But I don't know; things just never worked out that way."

A faint embarrassment lay between them. Noel decided to turn it all into a joke. "I'm a bit long in the tooth for sand-castles on the beach."

His mother was not particularly amused. "There are other diversions."

"Such as what?"

"I could show you Cam Cottage, where we used to live. Your grandfather's studio. The Art Gallery that he helped to start. You seem so interested, all of a sudden, in his pictures, I should have thought you would be interested in seeing where it all began."

She did this sometimes; delivered a glancing blow, right beneath the belt. Noel took a mouthful of whisky, composing himself. "When would you go?"

"Oh. Soon. Before the spring is over. Before summer conies."

He knew relief at having a watertight excuse. "I couldn't get away then."

"Not even for a long weekend?"

"Ma. We're up to the eyes in the office, and I'm not due for leave until July at the earliest."

"Oh well, in that case it's impossible." To his relief she abandoned the subject. "Noel, would you be kind and open a bottle of wine?"

He got to his feet. He felt a bit guilty. "I'm sorry. I would have come with you."

"I know," she told him. "I know."

By the time Antonia reappeared it was a quarter to ten. Noel poured the wine,

and they all sat down to eat the shepherd's pie, and the fresh fruit salad, and biscuits and cheese. Then Noel made coffee for himself, and, announcing that he was going up to the loft to give it a preliminary once-over before starting work the next day, took himself off upstairs, bearing his coffee with him. When he had gone, Antonia, as well, rose to her feet, and began to stack the plates and glasses, but Penelope stopped her.

"There's no need. I'll put it all in the dishwasher. It's nearly eleven, and you must long for your bed. Perhaps you'd like a bath now?"

"Yes, I would. I don't know why, but I feel frightfully dirty. I think it's something to do with being in London."

"I always feel that way, too. Take lots of hot water and have a good soak."

"That was a lovely dinner. Thank you."

"Oh, my dear . . ." Penelope was touched, and all at once found herself at a loss for words. And yet there was so much to be said. "Perhaps, when you're in bed, I'll come up and say good night to you."

"Oh, will you?"

"Of course."

When she had gone, Penelope slowly cleared the table, stacked the dishwasher, put out the milk bottles, laid the breakfast. Upstairs, in this house where sounds echoed through open doors and wooden ceilings, she heard Antonia run the bath; heard, high above, Noel's muffled footsteps as he edged his way around the cluttered loft. Poor man, he had taken on himself a gargantuan task. She hoped that he would not lose heart half-way through and that she would not be left with an even bigger muddle than before. The bath-water, gurgling, ran away down the waste-pipe. She hung up the tea-towel, turned off the lights, and went upstairs.

She found Antonia in bed, awake, and turning the pages of a magazine Penelope had left on the bedside table. Her bare arms were brown and

slender, and her silky hair spread itself out over the white linen pillowslip.

She closed the door behind her.

"Did you have a good bath?"

"Blissful." Antonia smiled. "I put in some of those delicious bath salts I found. I hope that was all right."

"That was what you were meant to do." She sat on the edge of the bed. "It's done you good. You don't look so weary."

"No. It's woken me up. I feel all alert and chatty. I couldn't possibly go to sleep."

From overhead, beyond the beamed ceiling, came the sound of something being dragged across a floor.

Penelope said, "Perhaps that's just as well, with the din that Noel's creating."

At that moment, there was a thud, as though some heavy article had been inadvertently dropped, and then Noel's voice. "Oh, bloody hell."

Penelope began to laugh, and Antonia laughed too, and then quite suddenly was not laughing any longer, for her eyes were filling with tears.

"Oh, my dear child."

"So silly . . ." She sniffed and groped for a handkerchief and blew her nose. "It's just that it's so wonderful to be here, with you, and be able to laugh about silly things again. Do you remember how we used to laugh? When you were staying with us, funny things happened all the time. It was never quite the same after you left."

She was all right. She was not going to weep. The tears had receded, scarcely shed, and Penelope said gently, "Do you want to talk?"

"Yes, I think I do."

"Do you want to tell me about Cosmo?"

"Yes."

"I was so sorry. When Olivia told me ... I was so shocked ... so sorry."

"He died of cancer."

"I didn't know."

"Lung cancer."

"But he didn't smoke."

"He used to. Before you knew him. Before Olivia knew him. Fifty a day or more. He kicked the habit, but it killed him just the same."

"You were with him?"

"Yes. I've been living with him for the past two years. Ever since my mother remarried."

"Did that upset you?"

"No. I was very happy for her. I don't much like the man ' she chose, but that's beside the point. She does. And she's left Weybridge and gone to live in the North, because that's where he comes from."

"What does he do?"

"He has some sort of woollen business . . . worsteds, weav-ing, that sort of thing."

"Have you been there?"

"Yes, I went the first Christmas they were married. But it was dreadful. He has two of the most ghastly sons, and I couldn't wait to get out of the house before one of them actually raped me. Well, maybe that's a bit of an exaggeration, but that's the reason I couldn't have gone to my mother after Daddy died. I just couldn't. And the only person I could think of who would help me was Olivia."

"Yes, I see; but tell me more about Cosmo."

"Well, he was all right. I mean, there didn't seem to be anything wrong with him. And then, about six months ago, he started this horrible coughing. It used to keep him awake at nights, and I'd lie and listen and try to tell myself that it was nothing very serious. But finally I persuaded him to go and see his doctor, and he went into the local hospital for an X-ray and a check-up. He never, actually, came out. They opened him and removed half of one of his lungs and then closed him up again, and said that he'd soon be able to come home, but then he had a post-operative collapse, and that was it. He died in hospital. He never recovered consciousness."

"And you were alone?"

"Yes. I was alone, but Maria and Tomeu were always around, and I never imagined such a thing was going to happen, so I wasn't actually all that worried or frightened. And it all happened so quickly. One day, it seemed, we were together, at Ca'n D'alt, just the way we'd always been, and the next day he was dead. Of course it wasn't the next day. It just seemed that way."

"What did you do?"

"Well ... it sounds dreadful, but we had to have a funeral. You see, in Ibiza only the shortest time can elapse between death and the burial. It has to happen the very next day. You wouldn't think that, in a day, on an island where practically nobody has a telephone, the news would get around, but it did. Like bush telegraph. He had so many friends. Not just people like us, but all the local people as well, men he'd drunk with in Pedro's bar, and the fishermen down in the harbour, and the farmers who lived around us. They were all there."

"Where was he buried?"

"In the graveyard of the little church in the village."

"But . . . it's a Catholic church."

"Of course. But that was all right. Daddy wasn't a churchgoer, but as a child he'd been baptized and received into the Catholic Church. As well, he'd always been very friendly with the village priest. Such a kind man . . . enormously comforting. He conducted the service for us, not in the church, but by the graveside, in the sunlight. By the time we left, you couldn't see the grave for flowers. It looked so beautiful. And then everybody came back to Ca'n D'alt, and Maria had made some things to eat, and they all had some wine, and then they all went away again. And that was what happened."

"I see. It all sounds very sad, but quite perfect. Tell me, have you told Olivia all this?"

"Bits of it. She didn't really want to hear too much."

"That's in character. When Olivia is deeply touched or distressed, she hides her feelings away, almost as though she were pretending to herself that nothing had happened."

"Yes. I know. I realized that. And it didn't matter."

"What did you do when you were with her in London?"

"Not much. I went to Marks and Spencers and got myself some warm clothes. And I went and saw Daddy's solicitor. That was a pretty depressing interview."

Penelope's heart sank for the girl. "Did he leave you nothing?"

"Virtually nothing. He had nothing to leave, poor darling."

"What about the house in Ibiza?"

"That never belonged to us. It belongs to a man called Car-los Barcello. And I wouldn't want to stay there. Even if I did, I couldn't pay the rent."

"His boat. What happened to that?"

"He sold that soon after Olivia left. He never bought another."

"But the other things. His books, and furniture and pictures?"

"Tomeu has arranged with a friend to store them for me until such time as I need them, or can bear to go back and get them."

"It's hard to believe, Antonia, I know, but that time will come."

Antonia put her arms behind her head and gazed at the ceiling. She said, "I'm all right now. I'm sad, but I'm not sad that he didn't go on living. He would have been ill and frail, and he wouldn't have lasted for more than another twelve months. The doctor told me that. So it was better that he went the way he did. My only real sadness are the years that were wasted after Olivia went. He never had another woman. He loved Olivia very much. I think, probably, she was the love of his life."

It was quiet now. The thumpings and footsteps from the loft had ceased, and Penelope guessed that Noel had decided to chuck his hand in and had taken himself back downstairs.

After a little, she said, choosing her words with some care, "Olivia loved him too, as much as she has ever been able to give her heart to any man."

"He wanted to marry her. But she wouldn't."

"Do you blame her for that?"

"No. I admire her. It was honest, and very strong."

"She's a special person."

"I know."

"She just has never wanted to marry. She has this horror of dependence, and committal, and putting down roots."

"She has her career."

"Yes. Her career. That matters to her more than anything else in the world."

Antonia considered this. She said, "It's funny. You could understand it better if she'd had a miserable childhood, or suffered some dreadful trauma. But with you for a mother, I can't imagine anything like that ever happening to her. Is she so different from your other children?"

"Totally." Penelope smiled. "Nancy is the very opposite. All she ever dreamed about was being a married woman with a house of her own. A little bit The Lady Of The Manor, perhaps, but what of it? She does no harm. She's happy. At least, I imagine she's happy. She's got exactly what she always wanted."

"How about you?" Antonia asked. "Did you want to be married?"

"Me? Heavens, it's so long ago, I can scarcely remember. I don't think I thought very much about it. I was only nineteen and it was wartime. In wartime, one didn't think very far into the future. Just lived from day to day."

"What happened to your husband?"

"Ambrose? Oh, he died, some years after Nancy was married."

"Were you lonely?"

"I was alone. But that's not the same as being lonely."

"I never knew anyone who died before. Not before Cosmo."

"The first experience of losing someone close to you is always the most shattering. But time passes, and you come to terms with it."

"I suppose so. He used to say, 'all life is a compromise'."

"That was wise. For some, it has to be. For you, I should like to think that there was something better in store."

Antonia smiled. The magazine had long since fallen to the floor, and her eyes had lost their feverish brightness. She was, like a child, becoming drowsy.

"You're tired," Penelope told her.

"Yes. I'll sleep now."

"Don't wake too early." She got up off the bed, and went to draw back the curtains. The rain had ceased, and out of the darkness came the hoot of an owl. "Goodnight." She went to the door, opened it, turned off the light.

"Penelope."

"What is it?"

"It's just so lovely to be here. With you."

"Sleep well." She closed the door.

The house was silent. Downstairs, all the lights were out. Noel had obviously decided to call it a day, and gone to bed. There was nothing more to be done.

In her room, she pottered about, taking her time, cleaning her teeth, brushing her hair, putting night-cream on her face. In her night-dress she went to draw back the heavy curtains. Through the open window a breeze stirred, cold and damp, but smelling earthily sweet, as though her garden, with spring nearly upon them, was stirring, woken from the long winter sleep. The owl hooted

again, and it was so quiet that she could hear the soft whisper of the Windrush flowing on its way beyond the orchard.

She turned from the window and climbed into bed and turned off the light. Her body felt heavy and tired, grateful for the comfort of cool sheets and soft pillows, but her mind stayed wide awake, because Antonia's innocent curiosity had stirred up the past in a disconcerting and not wholly welcome fashion, and Penelope had answered her questions with some caution, neither lying nor telling the whole truth. The truth was too confused to tell, devious and long ago. Too long ago to start unravelling the strands of motivation and reason and the sequence of events. She had not talked of Ambrose, nor mentioned his name, nor thought about him, for longer than she could remember. But now, she lay open-eyed, gazing into the gloomy darkness that was not truly dark, and knew that she had no option but to go back. And it was an extraordinary experience; like watching an old film, or discovering a dog-eared photograph album, turning the pages, and being amazed to find that the sepia snapshots had not faded at all, but had stayed evocative, clear, and sharp-edged as ever.

AMBROSE

The Wren Officer squared her papers and unscrewed her fountain pen.

"Now then, Stern, what we have to decide is which Category to put you in."

Penelope sat on the other side of the desk and looked at her. The Wren Officer had two blue stripes on her sleeve and a neat crop of hair. Her collar and tie were so stiff and tight that they looked as though they might choke her; her watch was a man's, and beside her, on the desk-top, lay her leather cigarette case and a hefty gold lighter. Penelope recognized another Miss Pawson and felt quite kindly towards her.

"Have you any qualifications?"

"No. I don't think so."

"Shorthand? Typing?"

"No."

"University degree?"

"No."

"You must call me 'Ma'am.'"

"Ma'am."

The Wren Officer cleared her throat, finding herself disconcerted by the guileless expression and dreamy brown eyes of the new Wren Rating. She wore uniform, but somehow it didn't look right on her; she was too tall, and her legs were too long, and her hair was a disaster, soft and dark and bundled up into a loose coil that looked neither neat nor secure.

"You went to school, I presume?" She half expected to be told that Wren Stern had been educated at home, by a genteel governess. She looked that sort of girl. Taught a little French and water-colour painting and not much else. But Wren Stern said, "Yes."

"Boarding school?"

"No. Day schools. Miss Pritchett's when we were living in London, and the local Grammar School when we were living in Porthkerris. That's in Cornwall," she added kindly.

The Wren Officer found herself longing for a cigarette.

"This is the first time you've been away from home?"

"Yes."

"You must call me 'Ma'am.' "

"Ma'am."

The Wren Officer sighed. Wren Stern was going to be one of those problems. Cultured, half-educated, and totally useless. "Can you cook?" she asked without much hope.

"Not very well."

There was no alternative. "In that case, I'm afraid we'll have to make you a Steward."

Wren Stern smiled agreeably, seeming pleased that they had at last come to some decision.

"All right."

The Wren Officer made a few notes on the form, and then screwed the top back on her pen. Penelope waited for the next thing to happen. "I think that's

it." Penelope got to her feet, but the Wren Officer was not finished. "Stern. Your hair. You must do something about it."

"What?" asked Penelope.

"It mustn't touch your collar, you know. Naval regulations. Why don't you get the hairdresser to cut it off?"

"I don't want it cut off."

"Well . . . make some sort of effort. Try to get the hang of a neat little bun."

"Oh. Yes. All right."

"Off you go then."

She went. "Goodbye." The door half closed behind her and then opened again. "Ma'am."

She was drafted to the Royal Naval Gunnery School, HMS Excellent, at Whale Island. She was a Steward, but, perhaps because she "spoke proper," was made an Officer's Steward, which meant that she worked in the Wardroom: laying up tables, serving drinks, telling people they were wanted on the telephone, polishing silver and waiting at meals. As well, before darkness fell, she had to go around all the cabins and do the black-out, knocking on doors, and, if there was someone inside, saying "Permission to darken ship, sir." She was, in fact, a glorified parlourmaid, and was paid a parlourmaid's wages, thirty shillings a fortnight. Every two weeks, she had to attend pay parade, lining up until it was time to salute the sour-faced Pay Commander—who looked as though he hated women and probably did—say her name, and be handed the meagre buff envelope.

Asking permission to darken ship was just part of a whole new language she had had to learn, and she had spent a week at a training depot doing this. A bedroom was a cabin; the floor, the deck; when she went to work, she was going on board; a Make and Mend was a half day; and if you had a row with your friend it was called Parting Brass Rags, but as she didn't have a friend to

have a row with, the occasion to use this seamanlike expression never arose.

Whale Island really was an island, and you had to cross a bridge to get there, which was quite exciting and made it seem like going on board a ship even if you weren't. A very long time ago it had started life as a mudbank in the middle of Portsmouth Harbour, but by now was a large and important Naval Training Establishment, with a parade ground and a drill-shed and a church, and jetties, and huge batteries where the men did their training.

Administrative offices and accommodation were housed in a lot of neat red brick blocks and buildings. The lower deck quarters were square and plain, like council houses, but the Wardroom was quite grand, a country manor with the football field as its estate.

The noise was incessant. Bugles blew and pipes sounded and daily orders came crackling out over the Tannoy system. Men in training went everywhere at the double, their boots going thump-thump-thump on the tarmac. On the Parade Ground, Chief Petty Officers screamed themselves into apoplexy at squads of terrified young seamen doing their best to master the complexities of Close Order Drill. Each morning, the ceremony of Captain's Divisions and Colours took place, with the Royal Marine Band blasting out "Braganza" and "Hearts of Oak." If you were caught out of doors while the White Ensign climbed the flagpole, you had to face the quarterdeck and stand to attention, saluting, until it was all over.

The Wrens Quarters, where Penelope was sent to live, were in a requisitioned hotel at the north end of the town. Here, she shared a cabin with five other girls, all sleeping in double-decker bunks. One of the girls had dreadful BO, but as she never washed, this was hardly surprising. The Quarters were two miles from Whale Island, and as no naval transport was provided and there were no buses, Penelope put through a telephone call to Sophie to ask Sophie to send her old school bicycle. Sophie promised to do this. She would put it on a train, and Penelope would duly collect it from Portsmouth Station.

"And how are you, my darling?"

"All right." It was horrible to hear Sophie's voice and not be with her. "How are you? How's Papa?"

"Miss Pawson has taught him to use a stirrup-pump."

"And Doris, and the boys?"

"Ronald has got into the football team. And we think that Clark has measles. And I have snowdrops in the garden."

"Already?" She wanted to see them. She wanted to be there. It was horrible to think of them all at Carn Cottage and not to be with them. To think of her own darling private bedroom, with the curtains stirring in the sea breeze and the beams of the light-house crossing the walls.

"Are you happy, my darling?"

But before Penelope could answer, pip-pip-pip went the telephone and they were cut off. She put the receiver back on the hook and was glad that they had been cut off before she had time to answer, because she wasn't happy. She was lonely and homesick and bored. She didn't fit in to this strange new world and feared she never would. She should have become a nurse, or a land-girl, or gone to make munitions—anything, rather than take that dramatic, impulsive decision which had landed her in this dismal, apparently permanent plight.

The next day was a Thursday. It was February now, still cold, but the sun had shone all day, and at five o'clock Penelope, off duty at last, left the island, saluted the Officer of the Watch, and made her way across the narrow bridge. The tide was high, and Portsdown Hill, in the dying light, looked tantalizingly rural. When her bicycle arrived, she would perhaps be able to go for solitary rides, and find a bit of grass to sit on. As it was, the empty hours of evening stretched ahead, and she wondered if she had enough money to take herself to the cinema.

A car was coming down the bridge behind her. She went on walking. It slowed down and stopped alongside, a racy little M.G. with the hood folded down.

"Where are you headed for?"

For a moment, she could hardly believe he was talking to her. It was the first time any man had, except to say he wanted peas and carrots, or to order a pink gin. But there wasn't any-body else around, so he had to be. Penelope recognized him. The tall, dark, blue-eyed Sub Lieutenant whose name was Keeling. She knew that he was on his Gunnery Course, because in the Wardroom he wore the gaiters, white flannels and white muffler that were regulation dress for Officers under instruction. But now he was in everyday uniform and looked cheerful and carefree, a man setting out to enjoy himself.

She said, "The Wrennery."

He leaned over and opened the door. "Hop in, then, and I'll give you a lift."

"Are you going that way?"

"No. But I can do."

She got in beside him and slammed the door shut. The little car shot forward, and she had to hold onto her hat.

"I've seen you around, haven't I? You work in the Ward-room."

"That's right."

"Enjoying it?"

"Not much."

"Why did you take the job, then?"

"I couldn't do anything else."

"Is this your first posting?"

"Yes. I only joined up a month ago."

"How do you like the Navy?"

He seemed so keen and enthusiastic that she didn't like to tell him that she hated it. "It's all right. I'm getting used to it."

"Bit like boarding school?"

"I didn't go to boarding school, so I wouldn't know."

"What's your name?"

"Penelope Stern."

"I'm Ambrose Keeling."

There wasn't time for very much more. In five minutes they were there, turning through the gates of the Wrens' Quarters, and stopping with a scrunch of gravel at the doors, which caused the Regulating Petty Officer to glance out of her window with a disapproving frown.

He switched off the engine, and Penelope said, "Thank you very much," and reached out to open the door.

"What are you doing for the rest of the evening?"

"Nothing, really."

"Neither am I. Let's go and have a drink at the Junior Officers Club."

"What . . . now?"

"Yes. Now." His blue eyes danced with amusement. "Is that such a disastrous suggestion?"

"No . . . not a bit. It's just that . . ." Ratings in uniform were not allowed into Officers' clubs. ". . . I'll have to go and change into plain clothes." That was

another thing she had learned at the Training Depot—to call civilian clothes "plain clothes." She felt quite proud of herself for remembering all these rules and regulations.

"That's all right. I'll wait for you."

She left him there, in his little car, reaching for a cigarette to while away the time. She went indoors and bolted up the stairs, two at a time, not wanting to waste a moment, terrified that if she took too long, he would lose patience and drive away and never speak to her again.

In her cabin, she tore off her uniform and slung it across her bunk; washed her face and hands, took the pins from her hair and shook it loose. Brushing it, she revelled in the comforting, familiar weight about her shoulders. It was like being free again, her-self again, and she felt her confidence returning. She opened the communal wardrobe and pulled out the dress that Sophie had given her for Christmas, and the ratty old musquash jacket that Aunt Ethel had wanted to give to a jumble sale, but which Penelope had rescued and kept for herself. She found a pair of stockings that was not laddered and her best shoes. She didn't need a handbag, because she hadn't any money and she never wore make-up. She ran downstairs again, signed in the Regulating Book, and went out through the door.

It was nearly dark now, but he was still there, sitting in his little car, and still smoking the same cigarette.

"I'm sorry I've been so long." Breathlessly, she got back in beside him.

"Long?" He laughed, stubbed out his cigarette, and tossed it away. "I've never known a woman so speedy. I was quite prepared to wait half an hour at least."

The fact that he had prepared himself to wait so long for her was both surprising and gratifying. She smiled at him. She had forgotten to put on any scent and hoped that he would not notice the moth-ball smell of Aunt Ethel's coat.

"It's the first time I've been out of uniform since I joined up."

He started the engine.

"How does it feel?" he asked.

"Heavenly."

They went to the Junior Officers Club in Southsea, and he led her upstairs and they sat at the bar, and he asked her what she wanted to drink. She wasn't quite sure what to ask for, so he ordered two gin and oranges, and she didn't tell him that she had never drunk gin in her life.

And when the drinks came, they talked, and it was all very easy, and she told him that she lived in Porthkerris and that her father had gone there because he was an artist, but now he didn't paint any longer; she told him that her mother was French.

"That explains it," he said.

"Explains what?"

"I don't know, exactly. Something about you. I noticed you at once. Dark eyes. Dark hair. You look different to all the other Wrens."

"I'm about ten feet taller."

"It's not that, though I like tall women. A sort of . . ." He shrugged, becoming quite Gallic himself. ". . . *je ne sais quoi*." Have you lived in France?"

"No. I've stayed there. One winter we took an apartment in Paris."

"Do you speak French?"

"Of course."

"Have you got brothers and sisters?"

"No."

"Me neither." He told her about himself. He was twenty-one. His father, who had run the family business, which was something to do with publishing, had died when Ambrose was ten. When he left public school, he could have gone into the same publishing firm, but he did not want to spend his life in an office . . . besides, a war was obviously looming . . . and so he joined the Royal Navy. His widowed mother lived in a flat in Knights-bridge, in Wilbraham Place, but at the outbreak of war she had abandoned this and gone to stay in a country hotel in a remote corner of Devon.

"She's better there, out of London. She's not very strong, and if the bombing does start, she'd be more of a hindrance than a help."

"How long have you been at Whale Island?"

"A month. Hopefully, I've only got another two weeks. Depends on the exams. Gunnery's my last course. I've already got Navigation, Torpedoes, and Signals tucked under my belt, thank God."

"Where will you go then?"

"Divisional School for a final week, and then to sea."

They finished their drinks, and he ordered a second round. Then they went into the dining room and had dinner. After dinner, they drove round Southsea for a bit, and then, because she had to report back to Quarters at half past ten, he took her home.

She said, "Thank you so much," but the formal words didn't begin to express the gratitude she felt, not just for the evening they had spent together, but because he had come along just when she needed him most, and now she had a friend and wouldn't have to feel lonely any longer.

He said, "You free on Saturday?"

"Yes."

"I've got tickets for a concert. Would you like to come?"

"Oh . . ." She could feel the smile, unstoppable, spreading across her face.
"I'd love it."

"I'll pick you up then. About seven. Oh, and Penelope . . . get a Late Pass."

The concert was in Southsea. Anne Zeigler and Webster Booth singing songs like "*Only a Rose*" and "*If You Were the Only Girl in the World*."

*What e'er befall
I'll still Recall
That sunlit mountain side.*

Ambrose held her hand. That night, when he took her back, he parked the car a little way from Quarters, down a quiet lane, and took her in his arms, moth-bally coat and all, and kissed her. It was the first time any man had kissed her, and it took getting used to, but after a bit she got the hang of it and did not find it unpleasant in the very least. Indeed, his closeness, his clean-cut masculinity, the fresh smell of his skin aroused within her a physical response that came as a totally new experience. A stirring, deep inside. A pain that was not a pain.

"Darling Penelope, you are the most delicious creature."

But, over his shoulder, she caught sight of the clock on the dashboard, and saw that it was twenty-five past ten. Reluctantly, she drew back, disentangling herself from his embrace, automatically putting up a hand to tidy her disordered hair.

She said, "I have to go. I mustn't be late."

He sighed, reluctantly letting her go. "Bloody clock. Bloody time."

"I'm sorry."

"Not your fault. We'll just have to make other plans."

"What sort of plans?"

"I've got a short weekend coming up. How about you? Could you get one?"

"This weekend?"

"Yes."

"I could try."

"We could drive up to town. Take in a show. Stay the night."

"Oh, what a wonderful idea. I haven't had any leave yet. I'm sure I could fix it."

"The only thing is . . ." He looked worried. "My mother's let her flat to some boring Army pongo, so we can't go there. I suppose I could go to my club, but . . ."

It was lovely to be able to solve his problems. "We'll go to my house."

"Your house?"

Penelope began to laugh. "Not my house in Porthkerris, stupid. My house in London."

"You've got a house in London?"

"Yes. In Oakley Street. It's so easy. I've got a key and everything."

It was too easy. "Is it your own house?"

She was still laughing. "Not my very own. It's Papa's."

"But won't they mind? Your parents, I mean."

"Mind? Why on earth should they mind?"

He thought of telling her why and then decided against it. A French mother and a father who was an artist. Bohemians. He had never known a Bohemian, but he began to realize that he had met one now.

"No reason," he assured her hastily. He could scarcely believe his luck.

"But you looked so surprised."

"Perhaps I was," he admitted, and then smiled, at his most charming. "But perhaps I must stop being surprised by you. Perhaps I should just accept the fact that nothing you could do would surprise me."

"Is that a good thing?"

"It can't be bad."

He took her back to Quarters then, and they kissed good night and she left him and went in, and so bemused and incapable was she that she forgot to sign the book and had to be called back by the Wren on Regulating Duty, who was in a filthy temper because the young Leading Seaman whom she fancied had taken another girl to the cinema.

She got the pass and Ambrose laid his plans. A friend . . . a Lieutenant in the RNVR with enviable connections with the world of theatre . . . managed to get hold of two tickets for *The Dancing Years* at the Drury Lane Theatre. He wangled a bit of petrol and borrowed a fiver from another gullible chum. Midday on the following Saturday saw him driving in through the gates of the Wrennery, to draw up before the doorway in a flourish of flying gravel. A Wren happened to be passing, so he told her to be a love and find Wren Stern and tell her that Sub Lieutenant Keeling was ready and waiting. Her eyes goggled a bit at the racy little car and the handsome young officer, but Ambrose was used to being goggled at and dismissed her patent envy and admiration as no more than his due.

"Nothing you could do would surprise me," he had told Penelope glibly, but nevertheless, when she finally appeared, it was hard not to be a little astonished, for she wore uniform, carried her old fur jacket and a leather satchel slung over a shoulder, and that was all.

"Where's your luggage?" he asked, as she got into the car, bundling the fur down into the space between her feet.

"Here." She held up the handbag.

"That's your luggage? But we're going away for the week-end. We're going to the theatre. You don't intend wearing that flaming uniform the whole time, do you?"

"No, of course I don't. But I'm going home. There are clothes there. I'll find something to wear."

Ambrose thought of his mother, who liked to buy an outfit for every occasion, and then spent two hours getting herself into it.

"What about a toothbrush?"

"My toothbrush and my hairbrush are in my bag. That's all I need. Now, are we going to London, or aren't we?"

It was a fine bright day; a day for escaping, for being on holiday, for going off for the weekend with a person you were really fond of. Ambrose took the road that led over Portsdown Hill, and at the top Penelope looked back at Portsmouth and cheerfully said goodbye to it. They went through Purbrook and across the Downs to Petersfield, and at Petersfield they decided that they were hungry, so stopped and went into a pub. Ambrose ordered beer, and a kind woman made them Spam sandwiches, which she served daintily garnished with a sprig of bright yellow cauliflower out of a piccalilli jar. They went on, through Haslemere and Farnham and Guildford, and they came into London by way of Hammersmith and down the King's Road and turned into Oakley Street, blissfully familiar, with the Albert Bridge at the end of it, and the gulls, and the salty, muddy smell of the river, and the sound

of tugs hooting.

"It's here."

He parked the M.G. and turned off the engine, and sat re-garding, with some awe, the tall face of the dignified old terrace house.

"Is this it?"

"Yes. I know the railings need painting, but we haven't had time. And of course it's miles too big, but we don't live in it all. Come on, I'll show you."

She gathered up her bag and her coat, and she helped him put up the hood in case it should rain. With this accomplished, he collected his grip, and stood there, filled with pleasant anticipation, waiting for Penelope to go up the impressive pillared steps to the great front door, take out a key and let him in, and felt slightly let down when, instead, she led the way down the pavement, opened the wrought-iron gate, and ran down the area steps to the basement. He followed, closing the gate behind them, and saw that it was not a depressing area, but rather a cheerful one, with whitewashed walls and a scarlet dustbin, and a number of earthenware tubs which, in summer, no doubt, would burgeon with geraniums and honeysuckle and pelargoniums.

The door, like the dustbin, was scarlet. He waited while she unlocked this and then, cautiously, followed her indoors, to find himself in a light and airy kitchen unlike any he had ever seen before. Not that he had seen many. His mother never went into her kitchen except to tell Lily, the cook-general, how many people were coming to lunch the next day. Because she had to spend no time in her kitchen, and certainly never worked there, its décor was of no importance to her, and Ambrose remembered it as an uninviting, inconvenient place of much gloom, painted bottle-green and smelling of the sodden wooden draining board. When she wasn't carrying coal, preparing meals, dusting furniture, or waiting at table, Lily occupied a bedroom off this kitchen, which was furnished with an iron bedstead and a yellow varnished chest of drawers. She had to hang her clothes on a hook at the back of the door, and when she wanted to have a bath she had to have it in the middle of the afternoon when nobody else needed the bathroom, and before she

changed into her best uniform of black dress and muslin apron. At the outbreak of war, Lily had shaken the life out of Mrs. Keeling by giving in her notice and going off to make munitions. Mrs. Keeling could find no one to take her place, and Lily's defection was one of the reasons she had chucked in the sponge and retired to sit the war out in darkest Devon.

But this kitchen. He put down his grip and gazed about him. Saw the long, scrubbed table, the motley variety of chairs, the pine dresser laden with painted pottery plates and jugs and bowls. Copper saucepans, beautifully arranged by size, hung from a beam over the stove, along with bunches of herbs and dried garden flowers. There were a basket chair, a shining white refrigerator, and a deep white china sink beneath the window, so that any person impelled to do the washing-up could amuse himself at the same time by watching people's feet go by on the pavement. The floor was flagged and scattered with rush-mats, and the smell was of garlic and herbs, like a French country *epicene*.

He could hardly believe his eyes. "Is this your *kitchen*?" "It's our everything room. We live down here." He realized then that the basement took up the entire depth of the house, for at the far end, French windows gave out onto the green of a garden. It was divided, however, into two separate apartments by means of a wide curved archway, hung with heavy curtains in a design that Ambrose did not recognize as the work of William Morris. "Of course," Penelope went on, dumping her coat and her bag on the kitchen table, "when the house was built, all this space was simply a warren of pantries and store-rooms, but Papa's father opened them all up and made what he called a garden room. But we use it as a sitting room. Come and see." He set down his grip, took off his hat, and followed her.

Passing beneath the archway, he saw the open fireplace, set with bright Italian tiles, the upright piano, the old-fashioned gramophone. Large, well-worn sofas and chairs stood about, loose-covered in a variety of faded cretonnes, draped in silken shawls, scattered with handsome tapestry cushions. The walls were whitewashed, a backcloth for books, ornaments, photographs . . . the memorabilia, he guessed, of years. The space left over by these was filled by pictures, so vibrant with sundrenched colour that Ambrose could almost feel the heat beating back from those flag-stoned terraces, those

simmering, black-shadowed gardens.

"Are those pictures by your father?"

"No. We've only got three of his paintings, and those are all in Cornwall. He has arthritis in his hands, you see. Hasn't worked for years. These ones were all done by his great friend, Charles Rainier. They worked together in Paris, before the last war, and they've been friends ever since. The Rainiers live in the most heavenly house, right down in the South of France. We used to go and stay with them, quite often ... we used to drive there, in the car . . . look . . ." She took a photograph from the shelf and held it out for him to see. "Here we all are, en route. ..."

He saw the usual little family group, carefully posed, Penelope with pigtails and a skimpy cot-ton dress. And her parents, he supposed, and some female relation. But what really caught his attention was the car.

"That's an old four-and-a-half-litre Bentley!" And he could not keep the awe from his voice.

"I know. Papa adores it. Just like Mr. Toad in *The Wind in the Willows*. When he drives it, he takes off his black hat and puts on a leather motoring helmet, and he refuses to put up the hood, and if it rains we all get drenched."

"Do you still have it?"

"Heavens, yes. He'd never get rid of it."

She went to replace the photograph, and Ambrose's eyes, instinctively, were drawn back to Charles Rainier's seductive pictures. He could not think of anything more glamorous than driving, in carefree, pre-war, days, to the south of France in a 4 1/2-litre Bentley, headed for a world of nailing sunshine, resin-scented pines, al fresco meals, and swimming in the Mediterranean. He thought of wine, drunk beneath a trellis of vines. Of long, lazy siestas, with shutters closed for coolness, and love in the afternoon and grape-sweet kisses.

"Ambrose."

Jarred from his day-dream, he looked at her. In innocence, she smiled, pulled off her uniform hat, threw it down on a chair, and, still lost in and bemused by his own fantasy, he imagined her taking everything else off as well—then he could make love to her, right here and now, on one of those large and inviting sofas.

He took a step towards her, but it was already too late, for she had turned from him and gone to struggle with the latch of the French windows. The spell was broken. Cold air flooded into the room, and he sighed, dutifully following her on into the frosty London day, in order to be shown the garden.

"You must come and look . . . it's huge, because ages ago, the people who lived next door sold Papa's father their bit of garden. I'm sorry for the people who live there now, they've only got a horrid little yard. And the wall at the bottom of the garden is very old, Tudor, I think; I suppose this must once have been a Royal orchard or a pleasure garden or something."

It was indeed an extremely large garden, with grass and borders and flower-beds and a sagging pergola.

"What's the shed?" he asked.

"It's not a shed. It's my father's London studio. But I can't show it to you because I haven't got the key. Anyway, it's just full of canvases and paint, garden furniture and camp-beds. He's a terrible hoarder. We all are. We none of us throw anything away. Every time we come to London, Papa says he's going to clear out the studio, but he never does. It's a sort of nostalgia, I suppose. Or sheer laziness." She shivered. "Cold, isn't it? Let's go back in, and I'll show you the rest."

Wordlessly, he followed her, his expression of polite interest giving no hint of his racing mind, which was working busily as an adding machine, calculating assets. For, despite the well-worn shabbiness and unconventional arrangement of this old London house, he found himself deeply impressed by its size and grandeur, and decided that it was infinitely preferable to his

mother's perfectly appointed flat.

As well, he was mulling over the other scraps of information which Penelope had dropped, so lightly, as though they were of no importance, about her family and their marvellously romantic and Bohemian lifestyle. His own, by comparison, seemed inordinately dull and stereotyped. Brought up in London, yearly holidays at Torquay or Frinton, school, and then the Navy. Which, up to now, had simply been an extension of school, with a bit of drill thrown in. He hadn't even been to sea yet, and wouldn't be sent until he'd finished his courses.

But Penelope was cosmopolitan. She had lived in Paris; her family owned not only this London house, but one in Cornwall. He considered the place in Cornwall. He had lately read Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, and imagined just such a house as Manderley; something vaguely Elizabethan, perhaps, with a driveway a mile long, lined with hydrangeas. And her father was a famous artist, and her mother was French, and she appeared to think nothing of driving to the south of France, to stay with friends, in a 4i/2-litre Bentley. The 4i/2-litre Bentley filled him with envy as nothing else could do. He had always longed for just such a car, a status symbol that would turn heads proclaiming wealth and masculinity, with just a touch of eccentricity thrown in for added flavour.

Now, reflecting on all this, and anxious to find out more, he went behind her, indoors, across the basement, and up a dark and narrow stairway. Through another door, and they were in the main hall of the house, spacious and elegant, with a beautiful fanlight over the front door, and a wide, shallow-stepped stair-way curving to the next floor. Stunned by such unexpected grandeur, he gazed about him.

"I'm afraid it's very shabby," she admitted, sounding apologetic. Ambrose did not think it was shabby in the least. "And that horrible great faded patch on the wallpaper is where *The Shell Seekers* used to hang. It's Papa's favourite picture, and he didn't want it bombed, so Sophie and I had it crated and carted away to Cornwall. The house doesn't seem quite the same without it."

Ambrose moved towards the stair, anxious to ascend and see more, but "This

is as far as we go," Penelope told him. She opened a door. "This is my parents' bedroom. It used to be the dining room, I think, and it looks over the garden. It's lovely in the mornings, because it gets all the sun. And this is my room, facing out over the street. And the bathroom. And this is where my mother keeps her Hoover. And that's it."

The tour of inspection was over. Ambrose returned to the foot of the staircase, and stood there, looking upwards.

"Who lives in the rest of the house?"

"Lots of people. The Hardcastles, and then the Cliffords, and then the Friedmanns in the attics."

"Lodgers," said Ambrose. The word stuck in his throat, because it was a word that his mother had always uttered with the greatest disdain.

"Yes, I suppose they are. It's lovely. It's like having friends around all the time. And that reminds me, because I must go and tell Elizabeth Clifford we're here. I tried to ring her, but the number was engaged, and then I forgot to try again."

"Are you going to tell her I'm here too?"

"Of course. Coming with me? She's a darling, you'll love her."

"No. I think not."

"In that case, why don't you go back to the kitchen and put a kettle on the stove and we can have a cup of tea or something. I'll see if I can borrow a bit of cake or something off Elizabeth, and then after tea we'll have to go out and buy ourselves eggs and bread and stuff; otherwise we shan't have anything to eat for breakfast."

She sounded like a little girl playing Wendy Houses.

"All right."

"Shan't be a moment."

She left him, running up the staircase on her long legs, and Ambrose stood there in the hall and watched her go. He chewed his lip. Usually so sure of himself, he was filled by unfamiliar uncertainty, and the uneasy suspicion that, by coming here, to Penelope's house, he had somehow lost control of the situation. This was disturbing, because it had never happened before, and he had a horrid premonition that her extraordinary mixture of naivety and sophistication could well have the same effect on him as a tremendously strong dry martini, leaving him both legless and incapable.

The big stove in the kitchen was unlit, but there was an' electric kettle, so he filled that and switched it on. The darkness of the February afternoon had closed in, and the big shadowy room felt cold, but the fireplace in the sitting room was laid with sticks and paper, so he lit it with his lighter and watched the sticks catch, and then added some coal from a copper bucket and a log or two. By the time Penelope came running down the stairs it was burning well and the kettle sang.

"Oh, clever man, you've lit the fire. That always makes everything much more cheerful. There wasn't any cake, but I borrowed a bit of bread and some margarine. Something's missing, though." She stood frowning, trying to puzzle this out, and then realized what it was. "The clock. Of course, it hasn't been wound. Wind the clock, Ambrose. It's got such a comforting tick-lock."

The clock was an old-fashioned one, high on the wall. He pulled up a chair and stood on it, opened the glass, set the hands, and wound the big key. While he was thus occupied, Penelope opened cupboards, took out cups and saucers, found a teapot.

"Did you see your friend?" With the clock going, he climbed down from the chair.

"No, she wasn't in, but I went on up and found Lalla Fried-mann. I'm quite glad I saw her, because I was a bit worried about them. They're refugees, you see, a young Jewish couple from Munich, and they've had the most ghastly time. The last time I saw Willi, I thought perhaps he was going to have a

breakdown." She thought of telling Ambrose that it was because of Willi that she had joined the Wrens, and then decided against it. She wasn't sure that he would understand. "Anyway, she says he's much better, and he's got a new job and she's going to have a baby. She's such a nice person. She teaches music, so she must be frightfully clever. Do you mind having your tea without milk?"

After tea, they walked up to the King's Road, found a gro-cer's and did a little shopping, and then they returned to Oakley Street. It was nearly dark, so they pulled all the black-out curtains, and she made up the beds with clean sheets while he sat and watched her.

"You can sleep in my room, and I'll sleep in my parents' bed. Would you like to have a bath before you change? There's always heaps of hot water. Or would you like a drink?"

Ambrose said yes on both counts, so they went back downstairs and she opened a cupboard and brought out a bottle of Gordon's and a bottle of Dewar's and a bottle of something strange and unlabelled that smelt of almonds.

"Who does all this belong to?" he asked.

"Papa."

"Won't he mind if I drink it?"

She gazed at him in astonishment. "But that's what it's there for. To give to friends."

This was new ground once more. His mother doled out sherry in tiny glasses, but if he wanted gin, he had to produce it for himself. He did not, however, make any remark, but simply poured himself a hefty Scotch and, carrying this in one hand and his grip in the other, made his way upstairs, to the bedroom allocated to him. It felt strange, taking off his clothes in such alien, feminine surroundings, and as he undressed he prowled a bit, like a cat making itself at home: looking at pictures, sitting on the bed, inspecting the titles of the books

on the bookshelf. He expected Georgette Heyer and Ethel M. Dell, but found instead Virginia Woolf and Rebecca West. Not only a Bohemian but an intellectual as well. This made him feel sophisticated. Wearing his Noel Coward dressing gown and carrying his bath towel, his wash-bag, and the whisky, he made his way down the hall. In the cramped bathroom he shaved, and then ran a bath and soaked for a bit. The bath was far too short for his long legs, but the water was boiling. Back in the bedroom, he dressed again, embellishing his uniform with a starched shirt, a black satin tie from Gieves, and his best black half-wellington boots, polished up with a handkerchief. He brushed his hair, turning his head this way and that in order to admire his profile, and then, content, picked up the empty tumbler and went down the stairs.

Penelope had disappeared, presumably to hunt through her mother's wardrobe for something to wear. He hoped that she would not shame him. By firelight, the sitting room looked satisfactorily romantic. He poured himself another Scotch and looked through the piles of gramophone records. Most of them were classics, but he found Cole Porter sandwiched between Beethoven and Mahler. He put the record on the old gramophone, wound up the handle.

*You're the top,
You're the Coliseum,
You're the top,
You're the Louvre Museum.*

He began to dance, eyes half closed, holding an imaginary girl in his arms. Perhaps after the theatre and a spot of supper, they would go on to a nightclub. The Embassy or the Bag of Nails. If he ran out of money, they'd probably take a cheque. With a bit of luck, it wouldn't bounce.

"Ambrose."

He hadn't heard her coming. Slightly embarrassed at being caught out in his little pantomime, he turned. She came across the room towards him, shy of her appearance, anxious for his approval, waiting for him to make some comment. But Ambrose found himself, for once, without words, for, in the soft light of lamp and fire, she was very beautiful. The dress she had finally

unearthed had perhaps been fashionable five years ago. It was made of creamy chiffon, splashed with crimson and scarlet flowers, and the flowing skirt fitted over her slender hips and then flared out into folds. The bodice had little buttons down the front, and there was a sort of cape, in layers, which moved as she moved, fluttering like butterfly wings. Her hair she had swept up, revealing the long and perfect line of neck and shoulder, and as well a remarkable pair of dangling silver-and-coral earrings. She had put on some coral lipstick and smelt delicious.

He said, "You smell delicious."

"Chanel Number Five. I found some in the bottom of a bottle. I thought it might have gone a bit stale. . . ."

"Not stale."

"No ... do I look all right? I tried on about six dresses, but I thought this was the best. It's dreadfully old and a bit short, because I'm taller than Sophie, but . . ."

Ambrose set down his drink and reached out his hand. "Come here."

She came, and placed her hand in his. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her, very gently and tenderly, because he did not want to do anything that might disarrange her elegant hair or her modest make-up. Her lipstick tasted sweet. He drew away from her, smiling down into her warm, dark eyes.

"I almost wish," he told her, "that we didn't have to go out."

"We'll come back," she told him, and his heart leaped in anticipation.

The Dancing Years was very romantic and sad and quite unreal. There were a lot of dirndls and lederhosen, and pretty songs, and the characters all fell in love with each other, and then bravely renounced each other and said goodbye, and every other tune was a waltz. When it was over, they went out into the pitch-black streets, drove up Piccadilly, and went to Quaglino's for dinner. A band was playing and couples danced on the stamp sized floor, all

the men in uniform and a good many of the girls as well.

Bourn.

Why does my heart go bourn,

Me and my heart go boum-boumpety-boum,

All the time.

Between courses, Ambrose and Penelope danced too, but it wasn't really dancing because there was space only to stand in one spot and shift from foot to foot. But that was all right, because they had their arms around each other and their cheeks touched and every now and then Ambrose would kiss her ear or murmur something outrageous.

It was nearly two o'clock before they returned to Oakley Street. Holding hands, stifling laughter, they made their way in the inky darkness through the wrought-iron gate and down the steep stone steps.

"Who bothers about bombs?" Ambrose said. "We can just as easily kill ourselves stumbling around in the black-out."

Penelope detached herself from him, found the key and the lock and finally got the door open. He walked past her into the warm, velvety blackness. He heard her close the door behind them, and then, when it was safe to do so, she turned on the light.

It was very quiet. Above them, the other occupants of the house slumbered in silence. Only the ticking of the clock disturbed the stillness, or the passing of a car in the street outside. The fire that he had lighted was nearly out, but Penelope went through to the far end of the room to stir the embers and turn on a lamp. Beyond the archway the living room was suffused with light, like a stage set after the curtain has just gone up. Act One, Scene One. All that was needed were the actors.

He did not immediately join her. He felt pleasantly tipsy, but had reached the

point when he knew that he wanted another drink. He went to the whisky bottle and poured himself a tot, filling the tumbler with soda from the siphon. Then he turned off the kitchen light and went through to the flickering flamelight and the huge cushioned sofa and the girl he had desired all evening.

She knelt on the hearthrug, close to the warmth of the fire.

She had taken off her shoes. As he appeared, she turned her head and smiled. It was late, and she might have been tired, but her dark eyes were bright, her face glowing.

She said, "Why is a fire such a companionable thing? Like having another person in the room."

"I'm glad it's not. Another person, I mean."

She was relaxed, peaceful. "It was a good evening. It was fun."

"It's not over yet."

He sat, lowering himself onto a low, wide-lapped chair. He set down his drink. He said, "Your hair is all wrong."

"Why wrong?"

"Too tidy for love."

She laughed, and then put up her hands, and began slowly to unpin the elegant knot. He watched her in silence, the classic feminine gesture of raised arms, the flimsy cape of her dress falling against her long neck like a little scarf. The last pin was removed, and she shook her head and the long dark mass of hair, like a tassel of silk, fell down over her shoulders.

She said, "Now I'm me again."

From the-kitchen, the old clock struck two gentle resounding notes.

She said, "Two o'clock in the morning."

"A good time. The right time."

She laughed again, as though nothing he could say could give her anything but delight. So close to the blazing fire, it was immensely warm. He set down his glass and pulled off his jacket, unknotted the tie and stripped it loose, unbuttoned the restricting collar of his starched shirt. Then he stood up, and stooping, pulled her to her feet. Kissing her, burying his face in the clean, scented profusion of her hair, his hands felt, beneath the flimsy silk of her dress, the slenderness of her young body, her rib-cage, the steady beat of her heart. He picked her up in his arms—and for a girl so tall, she was amazingly weightless—took a couple of strides and set her down on the sofa, and she was still laughing, lying there with that magical hair spread all over the threadbare cushions. Now, his own heart thumped like a drum, and every nerve in his body jangled with need of her. At times, during his short relationship with her, he had found himself wondering whether or not she was a virgin, but he no longer wondered, for it had ceased to matter. Sitting beside her, he began, very gently, to undo the tiny buttons down the front of her dress. She lay there, complaisant, not trying to stop him, and when he began to kiss her again, her mouth, her neck, her round and creamy breasts, her response was both sweet and accepting.

"You're so beautiful." After he said this, he realized, somewhat to his own surprise, that he had spoken instinctively, from his heart. "You're beautiful too," Penelope told him, and put her strong young arms around his neck, and drew him down. Her mouth was open and ready for him, and he knew then that all of her was simply waiting for him.

The firelight flamed, warming them, lighting their love. Memories stirred, deep in his subconscious, of a night nursery, drawn curtains—long-lost images of babyhood. Nothing to harm, nothing to disturb. Security. And as well, this flying sense of elation. But, too, somewhere at the very edge of this exultation, a small voice of common sense.

"Darling."

"Yes." A whisper. "Yes."

"Are you all right?"

"All right? Oh, yes, all right."

"I love you."

"Oh." No more than a breath. "Love."

In the middle of April, somewhat to her surprise, for she was hopelessly impractical about such matters, Penelope was informed by the authorities that she was due for a week's leave. She accordingly presented herself, with a queue of other Wrens, at the office of the Regulating Petty Officer and, when her turn came, requested a rail pass to Porthkerris.

The Petty Officer was a cheerful lady from Northern Ireland. She had a freckled face and frizzy red hair, and looked quite interested when Penelope told her where she wanted to go.

"That's in Cornwall, isn't it, Stern?"

"Yes."

"Is that where you live?"

"Yes."

"Lucky girl." She handed over the pass, and Penelope thanked her and went out of the room clutching her ticket to freedom.

The train journey was endless. Portsmouth to Bath. Bath to Bristol. Bristol to Exeter. At Exeter she had to wait an hour and then get onto the slow, stopping train that would take her on to Cornwall. She did not mind. She sat, in the dirty train, in a corner seat and stared through the soot-smearred window. Dawl-ish, and her first glimpse of the sea; only the English Channel,

but still, better than nothing. Plymouth, and the Saltash Bridge, and what looked like half of the British Navy at mooring in the Sound. And then Cornwall, and all the small halts with their saintly and romantic names. After Redruth, she let down the window by its leather strap and hung out, not wanting to miss the first glimpse of the Atlantic, the dunes and the distant breaking rollers. Then the train trundled over the Hayle Viaduct, and she saw the estuary, filled with the flood tide. She pulled her suitcase off the luggage rack and went to stand in the corridor as they rounded the last curve and drew into the junction.

It was by now half past eight in the evening. She opened the heavy door and stepped thankfully down, lugging her case behind her, and with her uniform hat stuffed into the pocket of her jacket. The air felt warm and sweet and fresh, and the low sun cast long beams down the platform and out of its dazzle walked Papa and Sophie, come to meet her.

It was unbelievably wonderful to be home. The first thing she did was to race upstairs, tear off her uniform, and put on some proper clothes—an old cotton skirt, an Aertex shirt left over from school, a darned cardigan. Nothing had changed; the room was just the way she had left it, only tidier and shingly clean. When, bare-legged, she ran downstairs again, it was to go from room to room, a thorough inspection, just to make sure that there, as well, everything was exactly the same. Which it was.

To all intents and purposes. Charles Rainier's portrait of Sophie, which had once held pride of place over the sitting room mantelpiece, had been moved to a less important position and its place taken by *The Shell Seekers*, which had, after a number of inevitable delays, arrived from London. It was too large for the room, and the light was insufficient to do justice to its depth of colour, but still, it looked very handsome.

And the Potters had changed for the better. Doris had lost her pudgy curves and become quite slender, and she was letting her dyed hair grow out, so that now, half peroxide and half mousy brown, it resembled nothing so much as the coat of a piebald pony. And Ronald and Clark had grown, and were losing their spindliness and city-bred pallor. Their hair had grown as well, and their cockney voices had a distinct overtone of pure Cornish. And the ducks and hens had doubled in number, and one old hen had gone all broody and had, when nobody was looking, hatched out a brood of chicks in a

broken wheelbarrow hidden deep in a thicket of brambles.

All Penelope wanted was to catch up on everything that had happened since the day—which now seemed immeasurably distant—when she had climbed on the train and set off for Ports-mouth. Lawrence and Sophie did not let her down. Colonel Trub-shot was running the ARP (Air-Raid Precautions) and being a nuisance to everybody. The Sands Hotel had been requisitioned and was full of soldiers. Old Mrs. Treganton—the town's dowager, and a terrifying lady with dangling earrings—had tied an apron around her waist and was in charge of the Services Canteen. There was barbed wire on the beach and they were building concrete pillboxes, spiked with sinister guns, all along the coast. Miss Preedy had given up her dancing class and was now teaching physical training in a girls' school that had been evacuated from Kent, and Miss Pawson, in the black-out, had tripped over her stirrup-pump and bucket and broken her leg.

When at last they ran out of things to tell her, they hoped, naturally enough, to hear their daughter's tidings; every detail of her new—and, to them, unimaginable—life. But she didn't want to tell them. She didn't want to talk about it. She didn't want to think about Whale Island and Portsmouth. She didn't even want to think about Ambrose. Sooner or later, of course, she would have to. But not now. Not this evening. She had a week. It could wait.

From the top of the hill, the land lay exposed, drowsing in the sunlight of a warm spring afternoon. The great bay to the north glittered blue, dazzled with sun pennies. Trevoise Head was hazy, a sure sign of continuing good weather. To the south curved the other bay, with the Mount and its Castle, and in between lay farmland, winding high-hedged lanes, emerald fields where cattle grazed amongst the outcrops of granite. The wind was light, scented with thyme, and the only sounds the occasional bark of a dog, or the pleasant chuntering of a distant tractor.

They had walked, she and Sophie, the five miles from Cam Cottage. They took the narrow lanes that led up onto the moor, where the grassy hedges were studded with wild primroses, and ragged robin and celandine burst from the ditches in a profusion of pink and yellow. Finally they had climbed the stile and made their way up the turfy path, winding through thickets of

bramble and bracken, which led to the summit of the hill; to the earns of lichened rock, piled tall as cliffs, where once, thousands of years, ago, the small men who inhabited this ancient land had stood to watch the square-sailed ships of the Phoenicians sail into the bay, to drop anchor and trade their eastern treasures for the precious tin.

Now, weary from the long hike, they rested, Sophie supine on a patch of turf, with an arm across her eyes against the glare of the sun. Penelope sat beside her, elbows resting on her knees, her chin in her hand.

Far up in the sky a plane, a tiny silver toy, flew over. They both looked up and watched it go. Sophie said, "I don't like planes. They remind me of the war."

"Do you ever forget it?"

"Sometimes, I let myself. I pretend it hasn't happened. It's easy to pretend on a day like this."

Penelope put out her hand and tugged at a tuft of grass.

"Nothing much has happened yet, has it?"

"No."

"Do you suppose it will?"

"Of course."

"Do you worry about it?"

"I worry for your father. He worries. He has been through it all before."

"So have you. . . ."

"Not as he did. Never as he did."

Penelope threw away the grass and reached out to pull at another tuft.

"Sophie."

"Yes."

"I'm going to have a baby."

The sound of the aircraft engine died, absorbed into the summery immensity of the sky. Sophie stirred, slowly sat up. Penelope turned her head and met her mother's eyes, and saw on that youthful, sunburned face an expression that could only be described as one of the deepest relief.

"Is. this what you have not been telling us?"

"You knew?"

"Of course we knew. So reticent, so silent. Something had to be wrong. Why did you not tell us before?"

"Nothing to do with being ashamed or apprehensive. I just wanted it to be the right time. I wanted to have time to talk about it."

"I have been so worried. I felt you were unhappy and regretted what you had done, or that you were in some sort of trouble."

Penelope wanted to laugh. "Aren't I?"

"But of course you aren't in trouble!"

"You know, you never fail to amaze me."

Sophie ignored this. She became practical. "You are certain you are having a child?"

"Certain."

"Have you seen a doctor?"

"I don't need to. Anyway, the only doctor I could go to in Portsmouth was the Naval Surgeon, and I didn't want to go to him."

"When is the baby due?"

"In November."

"And who is the father?"

"He's a Sub Lieutenant. At Whale Island. Doing his Gunnery Course. He's called Ambrose Keeling."

"Where is he now?"

"Still there. He failed his exams, and he had to stay on and do the whole course again. It's called a re-scrub."

"What age is he?"

"Twenty-one."

"Does he know you're pregnant?"

"No. I wanted to tell you and Papa before anyone else."

"Are you going to tell him?"

"Of course. When I get back."

"What will he say?"

"I've no idea."

"It doesn't sound as though you know him very well."

"I know him well enough." Far below, in the valley a man with a dog at his

heels came through a farmyard, opened a gate and began to climb the hill to where his milk cows grazed. Penelope lay back on her elbows and watched him go. He wore a red shirt and the dog ran circles around him. "You see, you were right about my being unhappy. At the beginning, when I was sent to Whale Island, I don't suppose I've ever been so miserable in my life. I was such a fish out of water. And I was homesick and I was lonely. That day I joined up, I thought I was picking up a sword and going out to fight, along with everybody else, and I found myself doing nothing but handing round vegetables, drawing black-out curtains, and living with a lot of females with whom I had nothing in common. And there was nothing I could do about it. No escape. Then I met Ambrose, and after that everything started to get better."

"I didn't realize that it was as bad as that."

"I didn't tell you. What good would it have done?"

"If you have a baby, you will have to leave the Wrens?"

"Yes, I'll be discharged. Probably dishonourably."

"Will you mind?"

"Mind? I can't wait to get out."

"Penelope . . . you didn't get pregnant on purpose."

"Heavens no. Even I couldn't be as desperate as that. No. It just happened. One of those things."

"You know . . . you surely know . . . that you can take precautions."

"Of course, but I thought the man always did that."

"Oh, my darling, I had no idea you were so naive. What a rotten mother I have been."

"I've never thought of you as a mother. I've always thought of you as a sister."

"Well, I've been a rotten sister." She sighed. "What are we going to do now?"

"Go back and tell Papa, I suppose. And then go back to Portsmouth and tell Ambrose."

"Will you marry him?"

"If he asks me."

Sophie thought about this. Then she said, "I know you must feel very strongly about this young man, otherwise you would not be carrying his child. I know you well enough to know that. But you mustn't marry him just because of the baby."

"You married Papa when I was on the way."

"But I loved him. I loved him always. I couldn't imagine an existence without him. Whether he had married me or not, I would never have left him."

"If I do marry Ambrose, will you come to my wedding?"

"Nothing would keep us away."

"I'd want you to be there. And then, afterwards . . . when he finishes at Whale Island, he'll be sent to sea. Can I come home and live with you and Papa? Have the baby at Cam Cottage?"

"What a question to ask! What else would you do?"

"I suppose I could become a professional fallen woman, but I'd much rather not."

"You'd be useless at it, anyway."

Penelope was filled with grateful love. "I knew you'd be like this. How awful it would be to have a mother like other people's mothers."

"Perhaps if I was, I should be a better person. But I am not good. I am selfish. I think about nobody but myself. This terrible war has started and things are going to get very bad before it is all over. Sons will be killed, and daughters too, and fathers and brothers, and all I can feel is thankful because you are coming home. I've missed you so much. But now we can be together again. How ever bad things get, at least we'll be together."

Ambrose, with a stiff drink in his hand, telephoned his mother.

"Coombe Hotel." The voice was feminine and intensely genteel.

"Is Mrs. Keeling there?"

"If you just wait a moment, I'll go and look for her. I believe she's in the lounge."

"Thank you."

"Who shall I say is calling?"

"Her son. Sub Lieutenant Keeling."

"Thank you."

He waited.

"Hello?"

"Mummy."

"Darling boy. How lovely to hear you. Where are you call-ing from?"

"Whaley. Mummy. Look. I've got something to tell you."

"Good news, I hope."

"Yes. Splendid news." He cleared his throat. "I'm engaged to be married."

Total silence.

"Mummy?"

"Yes, I'm still here."

"You all right?"

"Yes. Yes, of course. Did you say you were going to be married?"

"Yes. The first Saturday in May. At the Chelsea Registry Office. Can you come?"

It sounded as though he were inviting her to a little party.

"But . . . when? . . . who? ... Oh dear, you have flustered me."

"Don't get flustered. She's called Penelope Stern. You'll like her," he added without much hope.

"But . . . when did all this happen?"

"It's just happened. That's why I'm ringing. To let you know at once."

"But . . . who is she?"

"She's a Wren." He tried to think of something to tell his mother that would reassure her. "Her father's an artist. In Cornwall." Silence again. "They've got a house in Oakley Street." He thought of mentioning the 4i/2-litre Bentley, but his mother had never been much of a one for cars.

"Darling. I'm sorry to sound so unenthusiastic, but you are very young . . . your career ..."

"There's a war on, Mummy. . . ."

"I do know. I of all people should know that."

"You'll come to our wedding?"

"Yes. Yes, of course . . . I'll come up to town for the week-end. I'll stay at The Basil Street."

"That's great. You can meet her then."

"Oh, Ambrose . . ."

She sounded quite tearful.

"Sorry about taking you unawares. But don't worry." Pip-pip-pip went the phone. "You'll love her," he repeated, and hastily rang off before she had time to implore him to put more money in the box.

Left with the buzzing receiver in her hand, Dolly Keeling slowly replaced it on the hook.

From behind her little desk under the stairs, where she had been pretending to add an account, but was in fact listening in to every word, Mrs. Musspratt looked up and smiled inquiringly, her head cocked to one side like a beady-eyed bird.

"Good news, I hope, Mrs. Keeling."

Dolly pulled herself together, gave a little toss of her head, assumed an expression of cheerful enthusiasm.

"So exciting. My son is to be married."

"Oh, splendid. How romantic. These brave young people. When?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"When is the happy event to take place?"

"In two weeks. The first Saturday in May. In London."

"And who is the lucky girl?"

She was becoming a little too inquisitive. Forgetting herself, Dolly put the woman in her place. "I haven't yet had the pleasure of meeting her," she said with dignity. "Thank you for coming to find me, Mrs. Musspratt." And with that she left the woman to her sums and returned to the resident's lounge.

The Coombe Hotel had years before been a private house, and the lounge had once been its drawing room. It had a high white marble mantelpiece enclosing a tiny grate, and a number of bulging sofas and armchairs upholstered in white linen smothered with pink roses. A few water-colours, hung too high, were dotted about the walls, and there was a bow-window looking out onto the garden. The garden had gone to seed since the outbreak of war. Mr. Musspratt did what he could with the grass cutter, but the gardener had gone to war and the borders were full of weeds.

There were eight permanent residents living in the hotel, but four of them had closed ranks and set themselves up as the élite, the hard core of the little community. Dolly was one of them. The others were Colonel and Mrs. Fawcett Smythe and Lady Beamish. They played bridge together in the evenings, and had laid claim to the best chairs, around the fire, in the lounge, and the best tables, by the window, in the dining room. The others had to make do with chilly corners where the light was scarcely sufficient to read, and the tables in the way of the pantry door. But they were so sad and downtrodden anyway that nobody thought to pity them. Colonel and Mrs. Fawcett Smythe had moved to Devon from Kent. They were both in their seventies. The Colonel had spent most of his life in the Army, and so was very good at telling everybody what that feller Hitler was going to do next, and putting his own interpretation on snippets of news that appeared in the daily papers relating to secret weapons and the movement of warships. He was a small, nut-brown man with a bristling moustache, but he made up for

his lack of inches by a barking, parade-ground manner and a military bearing. His wife was fluffy-haired and quite colourless. She knitted a lot, said "Yes dear," and agreed with everything her husband said, which was just as well for everybody, because Colonel Fawcett Smythe, contradicted, went red in the face and looked as though he were about to have a seizure.

Lady Beamish was even better. Of all of them, she was the only one unafraid of bombs or tanks or anything that the Nazis might unleash upon her. She was over eighty, tall and stout, with grey hair screwed into a knot at the back of her head and a pair of relentlessly cold grey eyes. She was as well very lame (the result, she had told an impressed audience, of a hunting accident) and had to walk with a hefty stick. When she was not actually on the move, she propped this article by the side of her chair, where it invariably got in the way of passers-by, either tripping them up or painfully clouting them across the shins. She had come reluctantly to the Coombe Hotel to sit out the war, but her home in Hampshire had been requisitioned by the Army, and her hard-pressed family had finally bullied and persuaded her to retire to Devon. "Put out to grass," she grumbled constantly, "like some old war-horse."

Lady Beamish's husband had been a senior official in the Indian Civil Service, and she had lived much of her life in that great subcontinent, the jewel in the crown of the British Empire, which she always referred to as "Inja." She must, Dolly often thought, have been a tower of strength to her spouse, queening it at garden parties, and, in times of trouble, coming up trumps. It was not hard to imagine her, armed only with sola topi and silken sunshade, quelling a riotous mob of natives with those steely eyes, or, should the rioters decline to be quelled, rallying the ladies and making them tear up their petticoats for bandages.

They were waiting for Dolly where she had left them, gathered around the tiny fire. Mrs. Fawcett Smythe with her knitting, Lady Beamish slapping Patience cards onto her portable table, the Colonel standing with his back to the flames, wanning his bottom, and bending and stretching his rheumatic knees like a stage policeman.

"Well." Dolly sat down in her chair.

"What was all that about?" Lady Beamish asked, putting a black knave on a red queen.

"That was Ambrose. He's going to be married."

This announcement caught the Colonel unawares, with his legs bent. It seemed to take some concentration to get them straight again.

"Well, I'll be jiggered," he said.

"Oh, how exciting," quavered Mrs. Fawcett Smythe.

"Who's the girl?" asked Lady Beamish.

"She's . . . she's an artist's daughter."

Lady Beamish turned down the corners of her mouth.

"An artist's daughter?" Her voice was deep with disap-proval.

"I'm sure he's very famous," said Mrs. Fawcett Smythe consolingly.

"What's she called?"

"Er . . . Penelope Stern."

"Penelope Stein?" The Colonel's hearing was not always very reliable.

"Oh, heavens, no." They were all very sorry for the poor Jews, of course, but it was unimaginable that one's son should marry one. "Stern."

"I've never heard of an artist called Stern," said the Colonel, as though Dolly were pulling a fast one on him.

"And they have a house in Oakley Street. And Ambrose says I will love her."

"When are they getting married?"

"The beginning of May."

"Are you going?"

"Of course I must be there. I shall have to ring The Basil Street, book a room. Perhaps I should go a little earlier, go round the shops, find something to wear."

"Is it going to be a very large affair?" asked Mrs. Fawcett Smythe.

"No. The Chelsea Registry Office."

"Oh dear."

Dolly felt moved to assert herself, take up cudgels on behalf of her son. She could not abide the thought of any of them becoming sorry for her. "Well, wartime, you know, and with Ambrose going to sea at any moment . . . perhaps it's the most practical . . . though, I must say, I had always had dreams of a really pretty wedding in a church with an arch of swords. But there it is." She shrugged bravely. "C'est la guerre."

Lady Beamish went on with her Patience. "Where'd he meet her?"

"He didn't say. But she's a Wren."

"Well, that's something anyway," Lady Beamish remarked. She sent Dolly a sharp, meaningful glance as she said this, which Dolly was careful not to intercept. Lady Beamish knew that Dolly was only forty-four. Dolly had told her at some length of her own frailties; the horrid headaches (she called them migraines) that were apt to strike her low at the most opportune moments; and there was her back trouble, which could be brought on by any simple domestic task such as bed-making or a session at the ironing board. Working stirrup-pumps or driving ambulances was simply out of the question. But still Lady Beamish remained unsympathetic, and from time to time made unkind remarks about Bomb-Dodgers and people who Didn't Pull Their Weight. Now, "If Ambrose has chosen her, she'll be a darling," she told them all

firmly. "And," she added, "I've always wanted a daughter."

It wasn't true. Upstairs in her bedroom, alone and unobserved, she could be herself, let all pretences drop. Awash with self-pity and loneliness, pierced by the jealousy of spurned love, she turned for comfort to her treasure box, her wardrobe, stuffed with feminine, expensive clothes. Inspected this little outfit, and then that. The soft chifcons and fine wools slid past beneath her hands. She took down a filmy dress and went to the long mirror, holding it up in front of her. One of her favourites. She had always felt so pretty in it. So pretty^ In the looking-glass, she met her own eyes! They filled with tears. Ambrose. Loving a woman other than herself. Marrying her. She dropped the dress on the padded stool, and threw herself upon the bed and wept.

Summer had come. London was sweet with blossom and lilac. Sunlight lay, a warm benediction, on pavement and roof-top, reflected from the silvery curves of high-floating barrage balloons. It was May; a Friday; noon. Dolly Keeling, ensconced in The Basil Street Hotel, sat on the sofa by the open window of the upstairs lounge and waited for the arrival of her son and his fiancée.

When he came, running up the stairs two at a time, carrying his hat, looking marvellously handsome in his uniform, she was filled with delight, not simply at the sight of him, but, as well, because he appeared to be on his own. Perhaps he had come to tell her that he had decided to call the whole thing off, and that he wasn't going to be married after all. Eagerly, she got to her feet and went to greet him.

"Hello, Mummy . . ." He stooped to kiss her. His height was one of her pleasures, because it made her feel vulnerable and helpless.

"My darling . . . where's Penelope? I thought you were coming together."

"We did. Drove up from Pompey this morning. But she wanted to get out of uniform, so I dropped her at Oakley Street and came on here. She won't be long."

The tiny hope died, almost at birth, but still, she could have Ambrose to herself for a little time more. And it was easier to talk, just the two of them.

"Well, we'll just have to wait for her. Come along and sit down and you can tell me everything that's going to happen." She caught the eye of the waiter, ordered a sherry for herself and a pink gin for Ambrose. "Oakley Street. Are her parents there?"

"No. That's the bad news. Her father's got bronchitis. She only heard last night. They're not going to be able to make the wedding."

"But surely her mother could come?"

"She says she has to stay in Cornwall and look after the old boy. And he is really old. Seventy-five. I suppose they don't want to take any risks."

"But it does seem a shame . . . only little me at the wedding."

"Penelope's got an aunt who lives in Putney. And some friends called Clifford. They're going to come. That's enough."

Their drinks arrived, and were put down on Dolly's account. They raised their glasses. Ambrose said, "I looks towards you," and Dolly smiled complacently, certain that the other occupants of the hotel lounge were watching them, their eyes caught by the handsome young Naval Officer and the pretty woman who looked far too young to be his mother.

"And your own plans?"

He told her. He had finally passed his Gunnery exams, had a week coming up at Divisional School, and would then be sent to sea.

"But your honeymoon?"

"No honeymoon. Married tomorrow, a night at Oakley Street, and then back on Sunday to Portsmouth.

"And Penelope?"

"I'm putting her on the train for Porthkerris on Sunday morning."

"Porthkerris? Is she not coming back to Portsmouth with you?"

"No. Actually." Biting his thumb-nail, he gazed from the window as though something riveting were about to happen in the street below. Which it wasn't. "She's got a bit of leave."

"Oh dear. What a little time you'll have together."

"Can't be helped."

"No, I suppose not."

She turned to set down her sherry glass and saw the girl reach the top of the stairs, standing there, hesitating, looking around her, looking for somebody. A very tall girl, with long dark hair caught back from her forehead—a schoolgirl's hair, plain and undressed. Her face, with its creamy complexion and deep-set dark eyes, was remarkable for its sheer unadornment; the gleam of unpowdered skin, the pale mouth, the dark brows, natural and unplucked and strongly shaped. She wore, on that hot day, clothes more suitable for a country holiday than a formal luncheon in a London hotel. A dark-red cotton dress with white spots and a white belt around its slender waist. White sandals on her feet, and . . . Dolly had to take a second look, just to be sure . . . yes, bare legs. Who on earth could she be? And why was she looking this way? And coming towards them? And smiling . . . ?

Oh, dear God.

Ambrose was getting to his feet. "Mummy," he was saying, "this is Penelope."

"Hello," said Penelope.

Dolly just managed not to gape. She could feel her jaw dropping, but jerked it back into place and transformed the grimace into a brilliant smile. Bare legs. No gloves. No handbag. No hat. Bare legs. She hoped that the head waiter

would allow them into the restaurant.

"My dear."

They shook hands. Ambrose busied himself drawing up another chair, and signalling the waiter. Penelope sat in the full light of the window and faced Dolly with a gaze disconcerting in its unblinking directness. She is eyeing me, Dolly told herself, and knew the stirrings of resentment. She had no right to eye her future mother-in-law, and start up this tiresome fluttering of her heart. Dolly had expected youth, shyness, diffidence, even. Certainly not this.

"So nice to meet you . . . and you had a good drive up from Portsmouth. Yes, Ambrose has been telling me. . . ."

"Penelope, what do you want to drink?"

"An orange or something. With ice, if there is any."

"Not a sherry? Nor a glass of wine?" Dolly tried tempting her, smiling still to cover her discomfiture.

"No. I'm hot and thirsty. Just orange."

"Well, I've ordered a bottle of wine for luncheon. We can have our little toast then."

"Thank you."

"I'm sorry about your parents' not being able to be there tomorrow."

"Yes. I know. But Papa caught flu, and then he didn't go to bed and he started wheezing. The doctor's put him to bed for a week."

"Is there nobody else who could look after him?"

"Except Sophie, you mean?"

"Sophie?"

"My mother. I call her Sophie."

"Oh, I see. Yes. Is there nobody else who could take care of your father?"

"Only Doris, our evacuee. And she's got her own two boys to keep an eye on. Besides, Papa's a rotten patient; Doris wouldn't stand a chance with him."

Dolly made a little gesture with her hands.

"I suppose, like the rest of us, you're servantless now."

"We always have been," Penelope told her. "Oh, thank you, Ambrose, that's perfect." She took the glass from his hand, drank half of it in what looked like a single mouthful, and then set it down on the table.

"You always have been? Have you never had any help in the house?"

"No. Not servants. People staying who lent a hand, but never servants."

"But who does the cooking?"

"Sophie. She loves it. She's French. She's a marvellous cook."

"And the housework?"

Penelope looked slightly nonplussed, as though she had never considered housework. "I don't know. It seems to get done. Sooner or later."

"Well." Dolly allowed herself a little laugh, worldly and mondaine. "It all sounds very charming. And Bohemian. And very soon, I hope, I shall have the pleasure of meeting your parents. Now, let's talk about tomorrow. What are you going to wear for your wedding?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"I haven't thought about it. Something, I suppose."

"But you must go shopping!"

"Oh, heavens no, I won't go shopping. There are masses of things at Oakley Street. I'll find something."

"You'll find something. . . ."

Penelope laughed. "I'm afraid I'm not a clothes person. We none of us are. And we none of us ever throw anything away. Sophie's got some pretty things stashed away at Oakley Street. This afternoon Elizabeth Clifford and I are going to have a good old rootle-round." She looked at Ambrose. "Don't look so worried, Ambrose, I won't let you down."

He smiled bleakly. Dolly told herself that she felt heart-sorry for the poor boy. Not a loving glance, not a tender touch, not a quick kiss had passed between him and this extraordinary girl he had found and decided to marry. Were they in love? Could they possibly be in love and continue to behave in such a careless fashion? Why was he marrying her if he was not besotted by her? Why was he marrying . . . ?

Her thoughts, probing, came upon a possibility so appalling that they did a swift about turn and scuttled for home.

And then, timidly, emerged again.

"On Sunday you're going home, Ambrose tells me."

"Yes."

"On leave."

Ambrose was staring at Penelope, trying to catch her eye. Dolly was aware of this, but Penelope, apparently, was not. She simply sat there, continuing to

look calm and unruffled.

"Yes. For a month."

"Will you stay at Whale Island?"

Ambrose started waving his hand about, and finally, as though he could think of nothing else to do with it, clamped it over his mouth.

"No, I'm being discharged."

Ambrose let out a great noisy sigh.

"For good?"

"Yes."

"Is that usual?" She felt proud of herself, still smiling, but icy-voiced.

Penelope, too, smiled. "No," she told Dolly.

Ambrose, perhaps deciding that the situation could get no worse, now sprang to his feet. "Let's go and get something to eat. I'm starving."

Composedly, slowly, Dolly collected herself, her handbag, her white gloves. Standing, she looked down at Ambrose's future wife, with her dark eyes and her tassel of hair, and her careless grace. She said, "I am not sure whether they will allow Penelope into the restaurant. She doesn't seem to be wearing any stockings."

"Oh, for God's sake . . . they won't even notice." He sounded angry and impatient, but Dolly smiled to herself, because she knew that his anger was directed, not at herself, but Penelope, because she had let the cat out of the bag.

She is pregnant, she told herself, leading the way across the lounge towards the dining room. She has trapped him, caught him. He does not love her. She

is forcing him to marry her.

After luncheon, Dolly excused herself. She was going upstairs for a little lie-down. A silly headache, she explained to Penelope, with just a hint of accusation in her voice. I have to be so careful. The slightest excitement . . . Penelope looked a little taken aback, because the luncheon had scarcely been exciting, but said that she quite understood; that she would see Dolly at the Registry Office tomorrow; that it had been a delicious lunch, and thank you very much. Dolly got into the archaic lift and rose upwards like a caged bird.

They watched her go. When he guessed that she was out of earshot, Ambrose turned on Penelope.

"Why the hell did you have to tell her?"

"What? That I'm pregnant? I didn't tell her. She guessed."

"She didn't have to guess."

"She'll know sooner or later. Why not now?"

"Because . . . well, that sort of thing upsets her."

"Is that why she's got a headache?"

"Yes, of course it is. . . ." They made their way downstairs. "It's started everything off on the wrong foot."

"Then I'm sorry. But I honestly can't see that it makes any difference. Why should it matter to her? We're getting married. And what business is it of anybody but ours?"

He could come up with no reply to this. If she could be so obtuse, then there was no explaining. In silence they emerged into the warm sunshine and walked down the street to where he had parked his car. She laid a hand on his arm. She was smiling. "Oh, Ambrose, you're not really bothered? She'll get over it. Water under the bridge, Papa always says. Nine-day wonder. And

then it'll be forgotten. Besides, once the baby arrives, she'll be delighted. Every woman looks forward to her first grandchild and dotes on it."

But Ambrose was not so sure. They drove at some speed down Pavilion Road, down the King's Road, turning into Oakley Street. When he drew up outside the house, "Are you coming in?" she asked him. "Come and meet Elizabeth. You'll love her."

But he declined. He had other things to do. He would see her tomorrow. "All right." Penelope was tranquil and did not argue. She gave him a kiss, got out of the car, and slammed the door shut. "I shall now go and dig myself up a wedding dress."

He grinned reluctantly. Watched her run up the steps and let herself in through the front door. She waved, and was gone.

He put the car into gear, did a U-turn and sped back the way they had come. He crossed Knightsbridge and drove through the gates into the park. It was very warm, but cool beneath the trees, and he parked the car and walked a little way, and found a seat and sat upon it. The trees rustled in the breeze and the park was full of pleasant summer sounds . . . children's voices and bird-song, with the continuous rumble of London traffic as background music.

He felt morose and gloomy. It was all very well, Penelope saying that it didn't matter, and that his mother would get used to the idea of a shotgun marriage—for indeed, what else was it?—but he knew perfectly well that she would never forget and probably never forgive. It was just very unfortunate that the Sterns were not going to be at the wedding tomorrow. They, with their liberal views and Bohemian attitudes, might possibly have been able to swing the balance, and even if Dolly refused to come round to their way of thinking, at least she might be made to realize that there was another point of view.

For, according to Penelope, they were not a bit bothered about the forthcoming baby; quite the opposite—they were thrilled, and had made it clear, through their daughter, that Ambrose was in no way expected to make an honest woman of her.

Being told that he was a prospective father had knocked the ground from beneath his feet as nothing else could possibly do. He was shaken, appalled, and furiously angry—with himself for letting himself be caught in the classic, dreaded trap, and with Penelope for having taken him in. "Are you all right?" he had asked her, and "Oh, yes, all right," she had replied, and, in the heat of the moment, and with one thing and another, there simply hadn't been time to double-check.

And yet, she had been very sweet. "We don't need to get married, Ambrose," she had assured him. "Please don't think you have to." And she had looked so calm and untroubled about the whole sorry affair that he had found himself doing a swift about-face and considering the possibilities on the other side of the coin.

Perhaps he was not, after all, in such a fix. Things could be very much worse. She was, in her strange way, beautiful. And well-bred. Not any common little girl, picked up in some Ports-mouth pub, but the daughter of well-to-do, if unconventional, parents. Parents, moreover, of property. That enviable house in Oakley Street was not to be sneezed at, and a place in Cornwall was definitely an added bonus. He saw himself sailing in the Helford Passage. And there was always, at the end of the road, the possibility of inheriting a 4½-litre Bentley.

No. He had done the right thing. Once his mother had got over the little hiccup of discovering that Penelope was pregnant, then things should be all right. Besides, there was a war on. It was going to blow up at any moment and it would last for a long time, and they wouldn't be able to see much of each other, or even live together, until it was over. Ambrose had no doubt that he would survive. His imagination was not vivid, and he was not troubled by nightmares of engine-room explosions, or being drowned, or freezing to death in the winter seas of the Atlantic. And by the time it was finished, he would probably feel more like settling down and taking on the role of family man than he did at the moment.

He shifted in his chair, which was hard-backed and hideously uncomfortable. He noticed, for the first time, the lovers who lay only a few yards away, entwined on the bruised grass. Which gave him a splendid idea.

He got off" the chair and walked back to his car, drove out of the Park, around Marble Arch and into the quiet streets of Bayswater. He was whistling under his breath.

I get no kick from champagne, Mere alcohol doesn't thrill me at all, So tell me, why should it be true . . .

Outside a tall, self-respecting house, he parked by the pavement's edge and made his way down basement steps to a flower-filled area. He rang the bell of the yellow front door. He was taking a chance, of course, but at four o'clock in the afternoon, she was usually around, taking a nap, or pottering in her tiny kitchen, or otherwise unoccupied. The chance paid off. She came to the door with her blonde hair tousled and a lacy negligee held modestly across her rounded, lavish breasts. Angie. Who had, when Ambrose was seventeen, gently relieved him of his virginity, and to whom he had fled, in times of trouble, ever since.

"Oh." Her face lit up, filled with delight. "Ambrose!"

No man could have had a better welcome.

"Hello, Angie."

"It's ages since I've seen you. Thought you must be bobbing about in the ocean by now." She held out a plump and motherly arm. "Don't stand there on the doorstep. Come along in."

Which he did.

As Penelope opened the front door of Oakley Street, Elizabeth Clifford leaned over the bannister and called her name. Penelope went upstairs.

"How did it go?"

"Not very well." Penelope grinned. "She's the worst. All hatted and gloved and furious because I wasn't wearing stock-ings. She said we wouldn't be allowed into the restaurant because I wasn't, but of course we were."

"Does she realize you're having a child?"

"Yes. I didn't actually tell her, but the dawning of knowledge suddenly broke. You could tell. Much better, really. Ambrose was furious, but she might just as well know."

"I suppose so," said Elizabeth, but had it in her heart to feel sorry for the poor woman. Young people, even Penelope, could be dreadfully unperceptive and unfeeling. "Do you want a cup of tea, or something?"

"Later, I'd love one. Look, I've got to find something to wear tomorrow. Do help me."

"I've been nosing around in an old trunk. . . ." Elizabeth led the way into her bedroom, where a variety of crushed and shredded garments were piled upon the enormous double bed she shared with Peter. "Isn't this one rather nice? I bought it to go to Hurlingham ... I think it was nineteen-twenty-one. When Peter was in his cricket-playing period." She took a dress from the top of the pile; creamy linen, very fine; long-waisted, shapeless, hem-stitched. "It looks a bit grubby, but I could wash and iron it and have it ready for tomorrow. And look, there are even shoes to match—don't you adore the diamante buckles? . . . and cream silk stockings."

Penelope took the dress and went to the mirror, holding it up in front of her, gazing with half-closed eyes, turning her head this way and that to gauge the effect.

"It's a lovely colour, Elizabeth. All wheatey. Could I really borrow it?"

"Of course."

"What about a hat? I suppose I ought to wear a hat. Or put my hair up, or something."

"And we'll have to find a petticoat. It's so fine it's transparent, and your legs will show."

"Can't have my legs showing. Dolly Keeling would have a fit. . . ."

They began to laugh. Laughing, tearing off the red cotton dress, pulling the pale linen over her head, Penelope began to feel quite light-hearted. Dolly Keeling was a pain in the neck, but she was marrying Ambrose, not his mother, so what did it matter what that lady thought of her?

The sun shone. The sky was blue. Dolly Keeling, having break-fasted in bed, rose at eleven. Her headache, though it had not actually disappeared, had subsided. She bathed, dressed her hair, and put on her face. This took a long time, for it was important that she should look both youthful and impeccable, and hopefully put everyone else, including the bride, into the shade. With the final eyelash tweaked into place, she stood up, shed her filmy gown and donned her finery. A lilac silk dress, with a loose, floating coat of the same material. A fine straw halo hat, worn off the face, and bound with lilac grosgrain ribbon. Her totter-heeled, peep-toe shoes, her long white gloves, her white kid hand-bag. The ultimate reflection in the mirror reassured and bolstered her morale. Ambrose would be proud of her. She took a final couple of aspirin, doused herself in Houbigant, and went downstairs to the lounge.

Ambrose was waiting for her, looking devastating in his best uniform, and smelling as though he had just come straight from an expensive barber, which he had. There was an empty glass on the table at his side, and when she kissed him she smelt the brandy on his breath, and her heart went out to her dear boy, because he was, after all, only twenty-one, and bound to be nervous.

They went downstairs and took a taxi to the King's Road. Driving along, Dolly held Ambrose's hand, tightly, in her own little white-gloved fingers. They did not talk. It was no good talking. She had been a good mother to him ... no woman could have done more. And as for Penelope . . . well, some things were better left unsaid.

The cab drew up outside the imposing edifice of the Chelsea Town Hall. They stepped out onto the warm, breezy pavement, and Ambrose paid the

driver. While he was doing this, Dolly rearranged herself, smoothed her skirts, touched her hat to make certain that it was safely anchored, and then glanced about her. A few yards away, another person waited. It was a bizarre little figure, even tinier than herself, and with the thinnest black silk legs that Dolly had ever seen. Their eyes met. Dolly, flustered, hastily looked away, but it was too late, for already the other woman had moved forward, her face alight with eager anticipation, to pounce upon Dolly, grasping her wrist with a grip like a vice, and proclaiming, "You have to be the Keelings. I knew it. Knew it in my bones the moment I set eyes on you."

Dolly gaped, convinced that she was being attacked by a lunatic, and Ambrose, turning from the cab as it drove away, was as taken aback as his mother.

"I'm sorry, I—"

"I'm Ethel Stern. Lawrence Stern's sister." She was but-toned into a child-size scarlet jacket with much frogging and embellishment, and wore on her head a vast, billowing black velvet tam-o'-shanter. "Aunt Ethel to you, young man." She released Dolly's arm and thrust her hand in Ambrose's direction. When he did not instantly take it, a dreadful uncertainty crossed Aunt Ethel's wrinkled features.

"Don't say I've got the wrong family?"

"No. No, of course not." He had reddened slightly, embar-rassed by the encounter and her outlandish appearance. "How do you do? I am Ambrose, and this is my mother, Dolly Keeling."

"Thought I couldn't be mistaken. I've been waiting for hours," she went on chattily. Her hair was dyed dark red, and her hectic make-up haphazard, as though she had applied it with her eyes shut. Her blackened eyebrows did not quite match, and the dark lipstick was already beginning to seep up into the wrinkles of skin around her mouth. "I'm usually late for everything, so I made a big effort today, and of course was far too early." All at once her expression altered to one of deepest tragedy. She was like a little clown; an organ-grinder's monkey. "My dear, isn't it absolutely bloody about poor Lawrence?"

Poor devil, he'll be so disappointed."

"Yes," said Dolly faintly. "We were so looking forward to meeting him."

"Always enjoys a trip to London. Any old excuse will do. . . ." At this point, she let out a screech, causing Dolly to jump out of her skin, and began waving her arms in the air. Dolly saw the taxi come trundling up from the other direction, and from this emerged Penelope and presumably the Cliffords. They were all laughing, and Penelope looked totally relaxed and not in the least nervous.

"Hello! Here we all are. What perfect timing. Aunt Ethel. Gorgeous to see you . . . Ambrose, hello." She gave him a quick peck. "You've never met the Cliffords, have you? Professor and Mrs. Clifford. Peter and Elizabeth. And this is Ambrose's mother. . . ." Everybody looked pleasant and shook hands and said "How do you do." Dolly smiled and nodded and was charming, the while her eyes busy, darting from one face to another, missing nothing, making their usual instant assessment.

Penelope looked as though she were wearing fancy dress, and yet, maddeningly, beautiful too—stunning and distinctive. She was so tall and slender, and the long, loose creamy dress, an heirloom, Dolly guessed, only served to accentuate this enviable elegance. Her hair she had knotted up into a loose coil at the nape of her neck, and she wore an enormous straw hat of acid green, wreathed with daisies.

Mrs. Clifford, on the other hand, resembled a retired governess, probably very clever and brainy, but dowdily attired. The Professor was slightly smarter (but then it was always easier for a man to be well dressed) in a dark grey flannel chalk-striped suit and a blue shirt. He was tall and thin, hollow-cheeked, ascetic. Quite attractive in a scholarly way. Dolly was not the only one who thought him attractive. From the corner of her eye she had spied Aunt Ethel greet him with an embrace, hanging from his neck and kicking up her little old legs behind her like the soubrette in a musical comedy. She wondered if perhaps Aunt Ethel was slightly mad, and hoped this did not run in the family.

Finally, they were all organized by Ambrose, who told them that if they did not get going soon, then he and Penelope would miss their slot. Aunt Ethel settled her hat, and they trooped indoors for the ceremony. Which took no time at all, and was over before Dolly had found a moment to dab at her eyes with her lace-trimmed handkerchief. Then they all trooped out again and moved on to the Ritz, where Peter Clifford, acting on instructions from Cornwall, had booked a table for lunch.

There is nothing like delicious food and a quantity of champagne, all dispensed by an urbane host, for improving any situation. Everybody, even Dolly, began to relax, despite the fact that Aunt Ethel chain-smoked throughout the meal and told countless questionable anecdotes, screaming with laughter long before the punch line was even reached. The Professor was charming and attentive, and told Dolly that he liked her hat, and Mrs. Clifford seemed really interested in life at The Coombe Hotel and wanted to hear all about the people who lived there. Dolly told her, dropping the name of Lady Beamish more than once. And Penelope took off her acid-green hat and hung it on her chair, and darling Ambrose got to his feet and made a dear speech, referring to Penelope as his wife, whereupon everybody gave a little cheer. All in all it was a good party, and by the time it was over, Dolly felt that she had made friends for life.

But the best of everything has to come to an end, and at last, reluctantly, it was time to gather their belongings, push back their little gilt chairs, get to their feet and head for their various destinations—Dolly to The Basil Street, the Cliffords to an early evening concert at the Albert Hall. Aunt Ethel went on to Putney, and the young couple to Oakley Street.

It was while they stood, mildly tipsy, in the foyer, waiting for the taxis that would finally disperse them, that the event occurred which doomed forever Penelope's relationship with her mother-in-law. For Dolly, woozy with champagne, and feeling sentimental and magnanimous, took Penelope's hands in her own and, gazing up at her, said, "My dear, now that you are Ambrose's wife, I should like you to call me Marjorie."

Penelope blinked in some astonishment. It seemed a funny thing to call your mother-in-law Marjorie, when you knew perfectly well that her name was Dolly. However, if that was what she wanted . . .

"Thank you. Of course I will." She stooped and kissed the soft and scented cheek offered so graciously.

And for a year, she did call her Marjorie. Writing to thank for a birthday present, "Dear Marjorie . . ." she began the letter. Phoning The Coombe Hotel to give news of Ambrose, "Oh, Marjorie, it's Penelope speaking," she was to say.

It was not until many months had passed, by which time it was too late to rectify the situation, that she realized that Dolly had really said, in the foyer of the Ritz, "My dear, I should like you to call me Madre."

On the Sunday morning, Ambrose drove Penelope to Paddington to put her on the Riviera for Cornwall. The train, as usual, was stuffed to the gunwales with troops, seamen, and soldiers, kitbags and gas masks and tin hats. It had been impossible to book a seat, but Ambrose found an empty corner that he piled with her luggage, so that no other person could claim it.

They returned to the platform to say goodbye. It was hard to find the words, because all at once everything was alien and new; they were husband and wife, and neither knew what was expected of them. Ambrose lit a cigarette and stood smoking it, gazing up and down the platform, glancing at his watch. Penelope longed for the guard to blow his whistle, for the train to start to move, for it all to be over.

She said, with some violence, "I hate goodbyes."

"You'll have to get used to them."

"I don't know when I'll see you again. In a month, when I come back to Portsmouth for my discharge, will you be gone?"

"Most likely."

"Where will they send you?"

"It's anybody's guess. The Atlantic. The Med."

"The Med would be nice. Anyway, sunny."

"Yes."

Another pause.

"I wish Papa and Sophie could have been there yesterday. I so wish you could have met them."

"When I get some decent leave, I'll maybe get down to Cornwall for a few days."

"Oh, do."

"I hope everything goes all right. The baby, I mean."

She blushed a little. "I'm sure it will be all right."

He looked at his watch again. She said, in some desperation, "I'll write to you. You must—"

But at that moment the guard's whistle pierced the air. At once the usual small panic ensued. Doors were banged, voices raised, a man came sprinting, catching the train at the last possible second. Ambrose dropped his cigarette, ground it out with his heel, stooped and kissed his wife, bundled her aboard, and slammed the door behind her. She let down the window and hung out. The train began to move.

"Will you write and let me know your new address, Ambrose?"

An extraordinary thought occurred to him. "I don't know your address."

She began to laugh. He was running now, keeping alongside. "It's Cam Cottage," she shouted, above the din of clanking wheels. "Cam Cottage, Porthkerris."

Now the train was going too fast for him, and he slowed to a halt, stood there, waving her away. The train took the curve of the platform and, belching steam, rolled out of sight. She was gone. He turned and began the long walk back up the deserted platform.

Cam Cottage. The Elizabethan manor that he had dreamt up for himself, the sailboat on the Helford River—faded and dissolved, gone for ever. Cam Cottage. It sounded disappointingly ordinary, and he could not help feeling that he had, in some way, been cheated.

But still. She had gone. And his mother had returned to Devon and it was all safely over. Now, all he had to do was drive himself to Portsmouth and report for duty. In a funny way, he realized, as he ambled in the direction of the car-park, he was looking forward to getting back to routine, and Service life and his shipmates. Men, on the whole, were easier to live with than women.

A few days later, on the tenth of May, the Germans invaded France, and the war started in earnest.

SOPHIE

It was the beginning of November before they saw each other again. After the long months of separation, there came a telephone call out of the blue. Ambrose, from Liverpool. He had a few days leave, was catching the first available train and coming to Cam Cottage for the weekend. He came, stayed, and departed again. Due to a number of adverse circumstances, the visit was an unqualified disaster. One was the fact that it rained, a steady downpour, for the entire three days. Another was that Aunt Ethel, never the most tactful nor conventional of guests, was also there at the time. The other reasons were too numerous, and too disheartening, to be either analysed or counted.

When it was over, and he had returned to his destroyer, Penelope decided that it had all been too depressing even to think about, and so, with the single-mindedness of youth, coupled with incipient pregnancy, firmly put the unhappy episode out of her mind. There were other, more important things, to bother about.

The baby arrived, bang on cue, at the end of November. She was not born, as her mother had been, in Carn Cottage, but at the little cottage hospital in Porthkerris. She made her appearance so swiftly that the doctor did not arrive until it was all over, and Penelope and Sister Rogers were left to cope on their own. Which they did, efficiently and neatly. Once Penelope had been set, more or less, in order, Sister Rogers, as was the custom, bore the baby away, to wash it and tidy it up generally and dress it in the tiny vest and gown and the Shetland shawl which Sophie—it went without saying—had unearthed from some drawer, smelling strongly of mothballs.

Penelope had always held her own private theories about babies. She had never had anything to do with them; had never even held one, but she believed implicitly that once you actually saw your own child for the first time, you would recognize it instantly. Why, of course, you would say, moving aside the swaddling shawl with a gentle forefinger and gazing down at the new little face, why, of course. It's you.

But this did not happen. When Sister Rogers finally re-turned, bearing the infant with as much pride as if she had just given birth herself, and laid her tenderly into Penelope's waiting arms, Penelope stared at the child with sinking disbelief. Fat, fair, with cornflower blue, rather closely set eyes, huge chubby cheeks, and the general aspect of a cabbage rose, she resembled no person that Penelope had ever known. Certainly neither of her parents; nor Dolly Keeling; and as for the Sterns, she might not have had a drop of their blood coursing through her hour-old veins.

"Isn't she a beauty?" cooed Nurse Rogers, leaning over the bed to gloat.

"Yes," Penelope admitted faintly. If there had been any other mothers in the hospital, she would have insisted that there had been a mix-up and she had been presented with another woman's baby, but as she was the only maternity case in the place, this was hardly likely.

"Look at those blue eyes! Like a little flower, she is. I'll leave you with her for a moment, while I go and ring your mother."

But Penelope did not want to be left with the baby. She couldn't think of anything to say to it. "No, take her, Sister, please. I might drop her or do something awful."

Sister, tactfully, did not question this. Some young mothers were funny, and heaven knew, she'd seen a few. "Right then," She scooped the woolly bundle back into her arms. "Who's a little love, then?" she asked it. "Who's Sister's little pet?" And, with her apron crackling, she went out of the room.

Penelope, thankful to be rid of the pair of them, lay back upon the pillows. Lay, gazing at the ceiling. She had a baby. She was a mother. She was the mother of Ambrose Keeling's child.

She discovered, to her dismay, that it was no longer possible to ignore and put out of her mind all that had happened during that dreadful weekend, which had been doomed before it even started, because Ambrose's projected visit had been the cause of the only real row she had ever had with her

mother. Penelope and Aunt Ethel had gone off for the afternoon together, to have tea with some decrepit old acquaintance of Aunt Ethel's, who lived in Penzance. Returning to Cam Cottage, a delighted Sophie informed Penelope that she had a lovely surprise waiting for her upstairs. Dutifully she had followed her mother up to her room, and there saw, instead of her own much-loved bed, a new and monstrous double bed, which took up all the space. They had never quarrelled before, but in a gust of uncharacteristic rage, Penelope lost her temper and told Sophie that she had no right, it was her bedroom, and it was her bed. And it wasn't a lovely surprise at all, it was a hateful surprise. She didn't want a double bed, it was hideous, she wouldn't sleep in it.

And Sophie's quick Gallic temperament flared to match her own. No man who had been bravely fighting a war could be expected to make love to his wife in a single bed. What did Penelope expect? She was a married woman now, a little girl no longer. This was no longer her bedroom, it was their bedroom. How could she be so childish? And Penelope had burst into furious tears and shouted that she was pregnant, and she didn't want to be made love to, and by the end of it they were both screaming at each other like a couple of fish-wives.

There had never been such a fight before. It upset everybody. Papa was furious with the pair of them, and others in the house crept around on tiptoe as though an explosion had taken place. Eventually, of course, they made it up, apologised and kissed, and the matter was not mentioned again. But it did not augur well for Ambrose's visit. Indeed, looking back, it did much to contribute to the resultant disaster.

She was Ambrose's wife.

Her lips trembled. She felt the lump, swelling in her throat. Tears gathered, welled into her eyes, fell, unchecked, sliding down her cheeks, soaking the pillow-case. Once started, it was impossible to stop. It was as though all the unshed tears of years had decided to come at once. She was still crying when her mother arrived, bursting joyously through the door. Sophie was dressed in the rust-red canvas trousers and fisherman's guernsey which she had been wearing when Sister Rogers telephoned, and as well, bore in her arms a huge

bunch of Michaelmas daisies, hastily gathered from her border as she made her way through the garden.

"Oh, my darling, you clever girl, and in no time at all . . ." She dropped the flowers onto a chair and came to embrace her child. "Sister Rogers says . . ." She stopped. The joy faded from her face and was replaced by an expression of acute concern. "Penelope." She sat on the edge of the bed and reached for Penelope's hand. "My darling, what is it? Why do you cry? Was it so difficult, so bad?"

Incoherent with weeping, Penelope shook her head. Her nose was running, her face blotched and swollen.

"Here," Ever practical, Sophie produced a clean handkerchief scented and fresh. "Blow your nose, mop up your tears."

Penelope took the handkerchief and did as she was told. Already, she felt marginally better. Just having Sophie there, sitting beside her, improved the situation. When she had blown, and mopped, and sniffed for a bit, she felt strong enough to pull herself into a sitting position, and Sophie pummelled the»pillows and turned them over, so that the wet, tear-soaked sides were on the bottom.

"Now. Tell me what is it? There is nothing wrong with the baby?"

"No. No, it isn't the baby."

"Then what?"

"Oh, Sophie, it's Ambrose. I don't love Ambrose. I should never have married him."

It was out. It was said. The relief of having actually admitted it, out loud, was enormous. She met her mother's eyes, and saw them grave, but Sophie, as always, was neither surprised nor shocked. She simply sat, silent, for an instant, and then said his name, "Ambrose" as though it were the answer to some unsolved conundrum.

"Yes. I know now. It's all been the most ghastly mistake."

"When did you know?"

"That weekend. Even as he got off the train and came walking up the platform towards me, I was filled with misgiving. It was like seeing a stranger coming and one that I didn't particularly want to see. I didn't think it was going to be like that. I felt a bit shy about seeing him again after all these months, but I never imagined it would be like that. Driving back to Cam Cottage with him beside me, and the rain bucketing down, I tried to pretend that it was nothing—just an awkwardness between us. But as soon as he walked into Cam Cottage I knew that it was hopeless. He was wrong. Everything was wrong. The house rejected him and he didn't fit. And after that, it just went on getting steadily worse."

Sophie said, "I hope that had nothing to do with Papa and me."

"Oh, nothing, nothing," Penelope hastened to assure her. "You were angels to him, both of you. It was me that was so vile to him. But I couldn't help it. I was bored by him. It felt like having the most impossible stranger to stay. You know, how people say, so-and-so will be in your neighbourhood, so nice, I know you will be kind to him. And you are kind, and you ask them for the weekend and it's all a nightmare of suffocating boredom. And I know it rained all the time, but that shouldn't have mattered. It was him. He was so uninteresting, so useless. Do you know, he couldn't even clean his own shoes? He'd never cleaned his own shoes. And he was rude to Doris and Ernie and he thought the boys no better than a pair of urchins. He's a snob. He couldn't understand why we all sat down to meals together. He couldn't think why Doris and Clark and Ronald weren't all banished to live in the kitchen. I think that was what upset me more than anything else. I never realised that he—that anybody for that matter—could think such things; could say them; could be so hateful."

"In fairness, my darling, I don't think you can blame him for his views. That is the way he has been brought up. It is perhaps we who are out of line. We have always conducted our domestic lives quite differently from other

people."

But Penelope was not to be comforted. "It wasn't just him. Like I told you, it was me as well. I was horrible to him. I didn't know I could be so horrible. I didn't want him there. I didn't want him to touch me. I wouldn't let him make love to me."

"In the condition you were in at the time, that is hardly surprising."

"He didn't think it was surprising. He was just angry and resentful." She gazed at Sophie in some despair. "It's all my fault. You said that I shouldn't marry him unless I truly loved him and I didn't listen to you. But I do know that if I had been able to bring him to Cam Cottage, to meet you both, before we even got engaged, then I would never, in a thousand years, have married him."

Sophie sighed. "Yes. It is unfortunate that there was no time for that. And as well, it was unfortunate that Papa and I were not able to be at your wedding. Even at that last moment, it might have been possible to change your mind and back away. But it's no good looking back. It's too late."

"You didn't like him, did you, Sophie? You and Papa? Did you think I must have gone out of my mind?"

"No, we didn't think that."

"What am I to do?"

"My darling, at the moment, there is nothing that you can do. Except, I think, grow up a little. You're not a child any longer. You have responsibilities now, a child of your own. We are in the middle of this dreadful war, and your husband is at sea with the Atlantic Convoys. There is nothing for it, but to accept the situation and carry on. Besides," she smiled, remembering, "he came to see us at a bad time. All that rain, and Aunt Ethel there as well, smoking her cigarettes, and nipping back her gin, and coming out with her usual outrageous and hideously outspoken remarks. And as for you, no pregnant woman is ever quite herself. Perhaps, next time you see Ambrose,

things will be different. You might feel differently."

"But, Sophie, I've made such a fool of myself."

"No. You were just very young and caught up in circum-stances that were totally beyond you. Now, please, for my sake, cheer up. Smile and ring the bell, and Sister Rogers will bring my first grandchild into the room for me to see. And we will forget that this conversation ever took place."

"Will you tell Papa?"

"No. It would trouble him. I don't like him worried."

"But you never have secrets from him."

"This one I shall keep."

It was not only Penelope who found herself nonplussed by the baby's appearance. Lawrence, coming, the next day, to view her for the first time, was equally puzzled.

"My darling, who does she look like?"

"I've no idea."

"She is very sweet, but she doesn't appear to have anything to do with either you or her father. Perhaps she is like Ambrose's mother?"

"Not in the very least. I've decided she's a throwback, come from generations away. Probably the spitting image of some long-dead ancestor. Whatever, to me it's all a mystery."

"No matter. She seems to have come fully equipped. Which is all that really counts."

"Have the Keelings been told?"

"Yes, I sent a cable to Ambrose's ship, and Sophie tele-phoned his mother at her hotel."

Penelope made a face. "Brave old Sophie. And what did Dolly Keeling have to say?"

"Apparently she sounded delighted. Always hoped it would be a little girl."

"Bet she's telling all her cronies and Lady Bloody Beamish that it's a seven-month baby."

"Oh, well, if appearances matter so much to her, what harm does it do?" Lawrence hesitated for a moment and then continued. "She said as well that it would be very nice if the baby could be called Nancy."

"Nancy? Where on earth did she get that from?"

"That was her mother's name. It might be a good idea. You know," he made a small expressive gesture with his hand, "help to smooth things over a little bit."

"All right, we'll call her Nancy." Penelope sat up to peer at the baby's face. "Nancy. Actually, it suits her quite well."

Lawrence, however was less concerned about the baby's name than he was about her behaviour.

"Not going to yell all the time, is she? Can't stand yelling babies."

"Oh, Papa, of course not. She is very placid. She just eats her mother, and then sleeps, and then wakes up and eats her mother again."

"Little cannibal."

"Do you think she'll be pretty, Papa? You've always had a discerning eye for a pretty face."

"She'll be all right. She'll be a Renoir. Fair and bloomy as a rose."

And then, Doris. Most of the evacuees, unable to bear their exile another moment, had returned, in dribs and drabs, to London, but Doris, Ronald, and Clark stayed on and were now permanent residents of Cam Cottage and part of the family. In June, during the retreat of the British Expeditionary Force from France, Doris' husband Bert had been killed. The tidings were brought to them by the telegraph boy, cycling up the hill from the Porthker-ris Post Office. He had opened the gate in the wall and come whistling through the garden, where Sophie and Penelope were hard at work grubbing weeds from the border.

"Telegram for Mrs. Potter."

Sophie knelt up, her hands covered in earth, her hair awry, and an expression on her face that Penelope had never seen before. "Oh, man Dieu."

She took the orange envelope and the boy went away. The door in the wall banged shut behind him.

"Sophie?"

"It must be her husband."

After a little, "What are we to do?" Penelope whispered.

Sophie did not reply. She simply wiped her hand on the seat of her cotton trousers and slit the envelope open with a black-nailed thumb. She took out the message and read it, and then folded it and put it back into the envelope.

"Yes," she said. "He is dead." She got to her feet. "Where is Doris?"

"Up in the paddock, hanging out washing."

"And the boys?"

"They'll be back from school any moment now."

"I must tell her before they come. If I am not back, keep them busy. She must have time. Before she tells them, she must have time."

"Poor Doris." It sounded painfully inadequate, banal to the point of idiocy, but what else could one say?"

"Yes. Poor Doris."

"What will she do?"

What Doris did was to be immensely brave. She wept, of course, unleashing her grief and rage in a sort of tirade against her young husband, who had been such a bloody fool as to go and get himself killed. But once that was over and she had pulled herself together, and she and Sophie were drinking a comforting hot strong cup of tea together, sitting over the kitchen table, her thoughts were all for her sons.

"Poor little buggers, what's life going to be like for them without a dad?"

"Children are resilient."

"How the hell am I going to manage?"

"You will."

"Suppose I ought to go back to Hackney. Bert's mum . . . well, she'll need me, maybe. She'll want to see the boys."

"I think that you should go. Make certain that she is all right. And if she is, I think you should come back to us. The boys are happy here, they have made their friends, it would be cruel to uproot them now. Let them keep what security they have."

Doris stared at Sophie. She sniffed a bit. She had only just stopped crying and her face was swollen and blotchy. "But I can't just stay here, indefinite-like."

"Why not? You are happy with us."

"You're not just being kind?"

"Oh, my dear Doris, I don't know now what we would do without you. And the boys are like our own children. We would miss you so much if you left us."

Doris thought about this. "I'd rather stay than anything. I've never been so happy as what I've been here. And now, with Bert gone . . ." Her eyes filled with tears again.

"Don't cry, Doris. The boys mustn't see you crying. You must show them how to be brave. Tell them to be proud of their father, dying for such a cause, to free all those poor people in Europe. Teach them to be good men, just as he was."

"He wasn't all that good. He was a bloody nuisance some-times." The tears receded, and the ghost of a smile showed on Doris' face. "Coming home drunk from the football; falling into bed with his boots on."

"Don't forget those things," Sophie told her. "They are all part of the person that he was. It is good to remember the bad times as well as the good. After all, that is what life is all about."

And so Doris stayed. And when Penelope's baby was born, she could not wait to see it. A little girl. Doris had always longed for a daughter, and now, with Bert dead, it did not look as though she would ever have one. But this baby . . . She was the only one of them instantly besotted by the infant.

"Ooh, she's lovely."

"Do you think so?"

"Penelope, she's beautiful. Can I pick her up?"

"Of course."

Doris stooped and gathered the child into her practised and capable arms, stood gazing down at her with an expression on her face of adoring motherhood that made Penelope feel slightly ashamed, because she knew that she was incapable of such transparent devotion.

"We none of us know who she looks like."

But Doris did. Doris knew exactly who she resembled. "She's the spitting image of Betty Grable."

And no sooner had mother and child returned to Cam Cottage than Doris took Nancy over, and Penelope, assuaging a certain guilt by telling herself that she was doing Doris a good turn, was happy to let her. It was Doris who bathed Nancy and washed her nappies, and, when Penelope grew bored with breastfeeding, made up the bottles and nursed the infant herself, sitting on a low chair in the warm kitchen, or by the sitting room fire. Ronald and Clark were equally devoted, bringing their school friends home to admire the new arrival. As the winter slowly passed, Nancy thrived, grew hair, teeth, grew fatter than ever. From the tool-shed Sophie produced Penelope's old high-wheeled, strap-slung perambulator, and this was polished up by Doris, and pushed, with some pride, up and down the hills of Porthkerris, with many stops to show Nancy off to any passer-by who happened to be interested, and many who were not.

Nancy's temperament remained sweet and placid. She lay in her pram in the garden, either sleeping, or tranquilly observing passing clouds or the fluttering branches of the white cherry tree. When the spring came and the blossoms fell, her blankets were scattered with white petals. Soon she was lying on a rug, reaching for a tinkling rattle. Then she was sitting up, hitting two clothes-pegs together.

She was a source of much amusement to Sophie and Lawrence and a source of much comfort and joy to Doris. But Penelope, dutifully playing with the child, building bricks, turning the pages of battered picture books, privately decided that she was dreadfully dull.

Meanwhile, beyond the frontiers of this tiny domestic world, the storm of the war, reverberating, dark-clouded, gathered momentum. Europe was occupied, Lawrence's beloved France overrun, and no day passed that he did not anguish for that country, and fear for old friends. In the Atlantic the U-boats prowled, hunting the slow convoys of naval destroyers and helpless merchant ships. The Battle of Britain had been won, but at terrible cost of planes, pilots, and airfields, and the Army, re-formed after France and Dunkirk, were taking up positions in Gibraltar and Alexandria, in anticipation of the next onslaught of German military might.

And, of course, the bombing had started. The endless raids on London. Night after night, the warning sirens sounded, and night after night, the massive formations of Heinkels, black-crossed and sinister, throbbed in, across the Channel, out of the darkness of France.

At Cam Cottage, they listened each morning to the news, and their hearts bled for London. On a more personal level, Sophie's concern was for Oakley Street, and the people who lived there. The Friedmanns, on her instructions, had moved from the attics to the basement, but the Cliffords stayed where they had always been, on the second floor, and every time there was news of a raid (which was most mornings), Sophie imagined them dead, wounded, blown up, or buried in rubble.

"They are too old to be enduring this dreadful experience,"

she told her husband. "Why don't we ask them to come and live here, with us."

"My darling girl, we have no space. And even if we had, they wouldn't come. You know that. They are Londoners. They would never leave."

"I would be happier if I could see them. Talk to them. Make certain that they are all right ..."

Covertly, Lawrence watched his young wife, sensing her restlessness. For two years, she had been stuck here, at Porthker-ris, his Sophie who had never lived more than three months in any place during the whole of their married

life. And Porthkerris in wartime was grey and dull and empty, very different from the lively town to which they had thankfully escaped every summer before the war. She was not bored, for she was never bored, but day-to-day life became, steadily, increasingly difficult, as food grew short, rations grew smaller, and a new and more tiresome shortage cropped up every day—shampoo, cigarettes, matches, camera films, whisky, gin—any tiny luxury that helped to oil the drudge of existence. Housekeeping also became more difficult. Everything had to be queued for, and then lugged back up the hill from the town, because none of the tradespeople had petrol to deliver any longer. Petrol was perhaps the greatest deprivation of all. They still had the old Bentley, but it spent most of its life in the recesses of Grabney's Garage, simply because they were not allowed enough fuel to drive it more than a few miles.

And so, he understood the restlessness. Wise in the ways of women, he understood and sympathized. She needed, he knew, to get away from them all for a few days. He bided his time, waiting for an opportunity to bring the subject up, but it seemed now that they were never alone; the little house buzzed with activity and voices. Doris and the boys, Penelope and now the baby filled every room, every waking hour, and when they finally fell into bed each night, Sophie was so exhausted that she was usually asleep by the time that Lawrence climbed in beside her.

Finally, one day, he caught her on her own. He had been digging potatoes, painfully, for his crippled hands had difficulty in wielding the spade and groping for the earthy shaws, but he finally had filled a basket and carried it indoors, through the back-door, where he found his wife sitting at the kitchen table disconsolately shredding a cabbage.

"Potatoes." He dumped them on the floor by the stove.

She smiled. Even when she was down in the dumps, she could always provide that smile for him. He pulled up a chair and sat and looked at her. She was too thin. There were lines around her mouth, around her beautiful dark eyes.

He said, "Alone at last. Where is everybody?"

"Penelope and Doris have taken the children down to the beach. They will be back presently, for lunch." She took another chop or two at the cabbage. "And I am giving them this to eat, and the boys will say that they hate it."

"Just cabbage. Nothing else."

"Macaroni cheese."

"You make the best."

"It is boring. Boring to cook and boring to eat. I don't blame them for complaining."

He said, "You have too much to do."

"No."

"Yes. You are tired and fed up."

She looked up and met his eyes. After a little, "Does it show so much?" she asked him.

"Only to me, who knows you so well."

"I am ashamed. I hate myself. Why should I be discontented? But I feel so useless. What am I doing? Making nets and cooking meals. I think of women all over Europe, and I hate myself, but I can't help it. And if I have to go and queue for another hour for an oxtail that some other person has just bought, I think I shall start to .have hysterics."

"You should go away for a day or two."

"Go away?"

"Go to London. See your house. Stay with the Cliffords. Reassure yourself." He reached out and put his hand over hers, covering it with earth from the potato patch. "We listen to the news of the bombing, and we're horrified, but

disaster relayed is often more frightening than the horror itself. The imagination bolts, the heart sinks in dread. But, in truth, nothing is ever so bad as we think it is going to be. Why don't you go to London and find that out for yourself?"

Looking, already, more cheerful, Sophie considered this. "Will you come too?"

He shook his head. "No, my dear. I am too old for junketings, and junketings are exactly what you need. Stay with the Cliffords, giggle with Elizabeth. Go shopping with her. Get Peter to take you out to lunch at the Berkeley or L'Ecu de France. I believe the food there is still excellent, despite all the shortages. Call up your friends. Go to a concert, the theatre. Life goes on. Even in London in wartime. Especially, perhaps, in London, in wartime."

"But will you not mind if I go without you?"

"I shall mind more than I can say. Not a moment will pass when I shall not miss you."

"For three days? Could you bear it for three days?"

"I can bear it. And when you come back you can spend three weeks telling me everything you have done."

"Lawrence, I love you so much."

He shook his head, not refuting this, but simply letting her know that she had no need to tell him. He leaned forward and kissed her mouth, and then got to his feet and went to the sink to wash the mud from his hands.

The night before she was due to catch the train to London, Sophie went to bed early. Doris was out, gone to some hop in the town hall, and the children already asleep. Penelope and Lawrence sat up for a little, listening to a concert on the radio, but then Penelope began to yawn, put away her knitting, kissed her father good night, and made her way upstairs.

The door to Sophie's bedroom stood open, the light still shone. Penelope put her head around the door. Sophie was in bed, and reading.

"I thought you came up early to get your beauty sleep."

"I am too excited to sleep." She laid down her book on the eiderdown. Penelope went to sit beside her. "I wish you were coming with me."

"No. Papa's right. You'll have much more fun on your own."

"What shall I bring back for you?"

"I can't think of anything."

"I shall find something special. Something that you never dreamed you wanted."

"That'll be nice. What are you reading?" She picked up the book. "Elizabeth and her German Garden. Sophie, you must have read that a hundred times."

"At least. But I always go back to it. It comforts me. Soothes me. It reminds me of a world that once existed and will exist again when the war is finished."

Penelope opened it at random and read aloud. "What a happy woman I am, living in a garden, with books, babies, birds and flowers and plenty of leisure to enjoy them." She laughed and laid the book down again. "You've got all those things. It's just the leisure you're missing out on. Good night." They kissed.

"Good night, my darling."

She telephoned from London, her voice joyous over the crackling line.

"Lawrence. It's me. Sophie. How are you, my darling? Yes, I am having a wonderful time. You were quite right, nothing is as bad as I thought it would be. Yes, of course, there is bomb damage, great holes in terraces of houses,

like teeth knocked out, but everybody is brave and cheerful and carrying on as though nothing had happened. And there is so much going on. We have been to two concerts, we heard Myra Hess at lunch-time, so perfect, you would have loved her. And I have seen the Ellingtons and that nice boy, Ralph, who was studying at the Slade; he is in the RAF now. And the house is fine, standing up to all the bangs and thumps, and it is so lovely to be back, and Willi Friedmann is growing vegetables in the garden. . . ."

When he could get a word in edgewise, "What are you doing this evening?" Lawrence asked.

"We are going out for dinner with the Dickinses; Peter and Elizabeth and I. You remember them, he is a doctor, he used to work with Peter . . . they live out near Hurlingham?"

"How will you get there?"

"Oh, by taxi, or tube. The tubes are extraordinary, the stations full of sleeping people. They sing and have lovely parties and then they all go to sleep. Oh, my darling, there are the pips. I must hang up. Love to everybody, and I'll be home the day after tomorrow."

That night, Penelope awoke with a terrifying start. Something— some sound, some alarm. The baby, perhaps. Had Nancy cried out? She lay listening, but all she could hear was the frightened thudding of her own heart. This gradually subsided. Then she heard the footsteps crossing the landing, the creaking boards of the staircase, the click as a light was switched on. She got out of bed and went out of her room and leaned over the bannisters. The hall light burned.

"Papa?"

There was no reply. She crossed the landing and looked into his bedroom. The bed was disturbed, but empty. She returned to the landing, hesitated. What was he doing? Was he ill? Listening, she heard him moving about in the sitting room. Presently all was still. He was wakeful, that was all. Sometimes when he was wakeful, he did this: took himself downstairs, built

up the fire, found himself a book to read.

She returned to bed. But sleep eluded her. She lay in the darkness and watched the dusky sky beyond the open window. Down on the beach, a flood tide murmured, rollers shushing in on the sand. Listening to the ocean's stirring, she waited, wide-eyed, for the dawn.

At seven, she got up and went downstairs. He had switched on the radio. There was music. He was waiting for the early-morning news.

"Papa."

He put up a hand, motioning her to be silent. The music faded. The time signal sounded. "This is London. The seven-o'clock news and Alvar Liddell reading it." The calm voice, im-passionate, objective, told them what had happened. Told them of last night's bombing raid on London. . . . incendiaries, landmines, high explosives had all been showered upon the city. Fires still burned, but were under control . . . the docks had been hit. . . .

Penelope put out her hand and switched the radio off. Lawrence looked up at her. He wore his old Jaeger dressing-gown, the stubble on his chin glinted white.

He said, "I couldn't sleep."

"I know. I heard you come down."

"I have been sitting here, waiting for the morning."

"There have been other raids. It will be all right. I'll make tea. Don't worry. We'll have a cup of tea, and then we'll ring Oakley Street. It'll be all right, Papa."

They tried to put a call through, but the operator told them that, after last night's raid, there were no lines to London. All morning, hour by hour, they tried to get through. Without success.

"Sophie will be trying to ring us, Papa, just as we are trying to ring her. She'll be just as frustrated as we are, and just as anxious, because she knows that we are worried."

But it was midday before the telephone finally rang. Penelope, chopping vegetables for soup at the kitchen sink, heard the bell, dropped the knife and ran for the sitting room, wiping her hands on her apron as she went. But Lawrence, sitting beside the instrument, had already picked up the receiver. She went to kneel beside him, leaning close, so as not to miss a word.

"Hello? Cam Cottage here. Hello?"

A buzz, a squeak, a strange burring sound, and then, at last, "Hello." But it was not Sophie's voice.

"Lawrence Stern speaking."

"Oh, Lawrence, this is Lalla Friedmann. Yes, Lalla from Oakley Street. I couldn't get through before. I have been trying for over two hours. I—" Her voice suddenly broke and stopped.

"What is it, Lalla?"

"You aren't alone?"

"Penelope is with me. It's . . . Sophie, isn't it?"

"Yes. Oh, Lawrence, yes. And the Cliffords. All of them. They have all been killed. A land-mine fell directly on the Dick-inses' house. There is nothing left. We went to see, Willi and I. This morning, when they had not returned, Willi tried to ring the Dickinses, but of course it was impossible. So we went ourselves to find out what had happened. We had been before, one Christmas, so we knew the way. We took a taxi, but then we had to walk . . ." Nothing left. ". . . and when we reached the end of the street, it was cordoned off; nobody was allowed there, and the firemen were still working. But we could see. The house had disappeared. Nothing there but a great crater. And there was a policeman and I spoke to him. And he was very kind, but he said there

is no hope. No hope, Lawrence." She began to weep. "All of them. Dead. I am so sorry. I am so sorry to tell you."

Nothing left.

Lawrence said, "It was good of you to go and look for them. And good of you to ring me up. . . ."

"It is the *worst thing I have ever had to do.*"

"Yes," said Lawrence. "Yes." He sat there. After a little, he hung up, his twisted fingers fumbling as he tried to replace the receiver. Penelope turned her head and laid it against the thick wool of his sweater. The silence that ensued was empty of everything. A vacuum.

"Papa."

He put up a hand, stroked her hair.

"Papa."

She looked up at him, and he shook his head. She knew that he wanted only to be left alone. She saw then that he was old. He had never seemed so to her before, but now she knew that he would never be anything else. She got to her feet and went out of the room and closed the door.

Nothing left.

She went upstairs and into her parents' bedroom. The bed, on this ghastly morning, had never been made. The sheets were still awry, the pillow dented from her father's sleepless head. He had known. They both had. Hoping, keeping up their courage, but filled with deadly certainty. They both had known.

Nothing left.

On the table at Sophie's side of the bed lay the book that she had been reading

the night before she went to London. Penelope went and sat there and picked up the book. It fell open in her hands at that well-worn page.

"What a happy woman I am, living in a garden, with books, babies, birds and flowers and plenty of leisure to enjoy them. Sometimes I feel as if I were blest above all my fellows in being able to find happiness so easily."

The words dissolved and were lost, like figures seen through a rain-washed window. To find happiness so easily. Sophie had not only found happiness, but radiated it. And now, there was nothing left. The book slipped from her fingers. She lay down, burying her streaming face in Sophie's pillow, the linen cool as her mother's skin, and smelling sweetly of her scent, as though she had, just a moment before, gone from the room.

ROY BROOKNER

Although a competent games player and a wizard of keen-eyed speed on the squash courts, Noel Keeling was not a man addicted to physical labour. At weekends, if dragooned by his hostess into an afternoon of tree-cutting, or communal gardening, he invariably took on to himself the least arduous of tasks, gathering small branches for a bonfire, or cutting the dead heads off the roses. He would volunteer to mow the lawn, but only if the machine was one he could ride, and made a point of seeing that another person—usually some besotted girl—trundled the wheelbarrow of grass cuttings to the compost heap. If things grew really tough, with fence posts having to be sledge-hammered into rocky ground, or an enormous hole excavated for a newly acquired shrub, he had perfected the art of slinking indoors, where he would eventually be discovered, by exhausted and indignant fellow-guests, at ease in front of the television, watching cricket or golf, with the Sunday newspapers strewn, like leaves, all about him.

Accordingly, he laid his plans. The whole of Saturday would be spent, quite simply, nosing around, sifting through the contents of every trunk, every box, every battered lopsided chest of drawers. (The actual heavy work, the pushing and heaving, and humping of rubbish down the two narrow flights of stairs, could be safely left until the next day, with the new gardener to act as labourer, and Noel having to do nothing more strenuous than give the orders.) If he was successful in his search and came upon what he was looking for ... one, two, or even more of Lawrence Stern's rough oil sketches . . . then he was going to play it very cool. These might be interesting, he would say to his mother, and depending on her reaction would carry on from there. *Might be worth having some expert to cast his eye; I've got this chum, Edwin Mundy* . . .

The next morning he was up early, to cook himself a vast breakfast of bacon, egg, and sausage, four slices of toast, and a pot of black coffee. Eating this at the kitchen table, he watched the rain pour down the window-pane and was glad of it, because there could be no chance of his being seduced out into the garden and asked to perform some task for his mother. When he was onto his

second cup of coffee and fully awake, she appeared in her dressing-gown, looking mildly surprised at his appearance, so early on a Saturday morning, and so spry.

"You won't make too much noise, will you, darling? I'd like Antonia to sleep as long as she can. Poor child, she must have been exhausted."

"I heard you gassing away into the small hours. What were you talking about?"

"Oh, just things." She poured herself some coffee. "Noel, you won't throw anything away, will you, without asking me first?"

"I'm not going to do anything except find out what you've got stashed away up there. The burning and destruction can wait until tomorrow. But you must be sensible. Old knitting patterns and wedding photographs circa 1910 are definitely for the chop."

"I dread to think what you're going to turn up."

"You never know," Noel told her, smiling wide-eyed into her face. "You simply never know."

He left her drinking coffee, and went upstairs. But before he could start work, one or two practical difficulties had to be ironed out. The loft had only one tiny window, set deep in the east gable, and the single light bulb, suspended from the centre beam of the thatched roof, was so weak and dim, it did little to supplement the small gleam of grey daylight. Noel went back downstairs and demanded of his mother a good strong bulb. She unearthed one from a box under the stairs, and he took this back to the loft and, balancing on a rickety chair, unscrewed the old bulb and screwed in the new. But, turning on the switch, he realized that even this did not give enough light to perform the careful investigation he had in mind. A lamp, that was what he needed. There was one right there, an old standard lamp with a crooked broken shade and a long, trailing flex, but no plug. This entailed a further journey downstairs. He took another strong bulb out of the cardboard box and asked his mother if she had a spare plug.

She said that she hadn't. Noel said that he had to have one. She said, in that case, take one from some other appliance. He said that he would need a screwdriver. She told him that there was one in her useful drawer, and, beginning to look a little exasperated, she pointed it out to him.

"That one, Noel, in the dresser."

He opened the drawer to a tangle of picture wire, fuses, hammers, boxes of tacks, and flattened tubes of glue. Stirring around, he came upon a small screwdriver, and with this re-moved the plug from her iron. Upstairs again, he rewired, with some difficulty, the plug to the flex of the old lamp and, praying that it would be long enough, eased it down the stairs and plugged it into the socket on the landing. For what felt like the hundredth time, he went back up the stairs, pressed the switch of the lamp, and breathed a sigh of relief as the light went on. Easily discouraged by the smallest difficulty, he felt quite drained, but now all was illuminated, and he could, at last, begin.

By midday he had worked his way half down the length of the cluttered and dusty attic. Had gone through three trunks, a worm-eaten desk, a tea-chest, and two suitcases. He had found curtains and cushions, a number of wineglasses wrapped in news-paper, photo albums, massive in their sepia dullness, a doll's tea-set, and a pile of age-yellowed pillowcases, worn beyond repair. He had found leather-bound account books, the entries meticulous in faded copperplate handwriting; bundles of letters, tied in ribbon; half-finished tapestries stuck with rusty needles, and some instructions for operating the very latest invention, a knife-cleaning machine. Once, coming upon a large cardboard folder tied with tapes, hope had risen. With hands trembling with excitement, he had untied the tapes, only to be faced with a number of governessy water-colours depicting the Dolomites, and executed by God knows whom. The disappointment was tremendous, but he gathered up his energy and continued with his task. There were ostrich feathers, and silken shawls with long tangled fringes; embroidered table-cloths, yellowed at their folds; jigsaws, and some half-finished knitting. He found a chessboard, but no chess men; playing cards, a 1912 edition of *Burke's Landed Gentry*.

He did not find anything remotely resembling a work of Lawrence Stern.

Footsteps sounded on the stair. He was perched, dusty, and grimy, on a footstool, disconsolately reading a Household Hint on how to launder black woollen stockings, and, looking up, saw Antonia at the top of the stairs. She wore jeans and sneakers and a white sweater, and it crossed his mind that it was a pity about the pale eyelashes, because she had a quite sensational figure.

"Hello," she said; sounding shy and tentative, as though reluctant to disturb him.

"Hello there." He closed the battered book with a bang and dropped it on the floor at his feet. "When did you surface?"

"About eleven o'clock."

"I didn't wake you?"

"No. I didn't hear a thing." She moved towards him, edging through and stepping over the painfully sorted lumber. "How are you getting on?"

"Slowly. The general idea is to sort the wheat from the chaff. Try to get rid of anything that's a possible fire risk."

"I hadn't any idea it would be as bad as this." She stopped to look about her. "Where's it all come from?"

"You may well ask. The attics at Oakley Street. And other attics of other houses, going back through the centuries, by the look of things. It must be an inherited failing, this total inability ever to throw anything away."

Antonia stooped and picked up a scarlet silk shawl. "This is pretty." She draped it around her shoulders, arranging the tangled fringe. "How does it look?"

"Bizarre."

She removed the shawl, folding it with care. "Penelope sent me up to find out if you wanted something to eat."

Noel glanced at his watch and saw, with some surprise, that it was half past twelve. The day had not lightened, and so intent had he been on his task that he had lost all sense of time. He realized that he was not only hungry, but thirsty as well. He pulled himself off the footstool and onto his feet. "What I need more than anything else is a gin and tonic."

"Are you coming back this afternoon?"

"Have to. Otherwise it'll never get done."

"If you like, I'll come and help."

But he did not want her around . . . did not want any person watching. "That's sweet of you, but I'm better on my own, working at my own pace. Come on . . ." He shooed her in front of him, towards the stairs. "Let's go and see what Ma's got for lunch."

By half past six that evening, the long search was over, and Noel knew that he had drawn a blank. The attics of Podmore's Thatch were empty of treasure. Not so much as a single Lawrence Stem Sketch had turned up, and the entire project had been a total waste of time. Coming to terms with this bitter truth, he stood, with his hands in his pockets, and surveyed the trail of confusion which was all that he had achieved. Tired and dirty, with, hopes dashed, his gloom burnt to resentment. This was mostly directed against his mother, whose fault everything was. She had probably, at some time or other, destroyed the sketches, or sold them for a song, or even given them away. Her mindless generosity, along with her squirrel-like obsession with hoarding rubbish, had always maddened him, and now he let that fury flare, silently raging. His time was precious to him, and he had wasted a day going through the flotsam of God knew how many generations, simply because she had never got around to doing it for herself.

By now in a filthy temper, for a moment he actually contemplated

abandoning ship and taking the escape route normally earmarked for One Star weekends, which was to remember suddenly a pressing engagement in London, make his goodbyes, and head for home.

But this was not possible, because he had gone too far and said too much. It was he who had initiated the exercise (house unsafe, fire risk, inadequate insurance, et cetera) and as well told Olivia about the possible existence of the sketches. Now, although he was pretty sure that they didn't exist, he could imagine Olivia's caustic remarks should he light out, leaving the job unfinished, and, thick-skinned as he was, he did not relish the prospect of a tongue-lashing from his clever sister.

There was nothing for it. He would have to stay. With some venom he kicked aside a broken doll's cot and, switching off the lights, took himself downstairs.

During the night, the rain ceased, the low clouds blown away and dispersed by a soft south-east wind. Sunday morning dawned clear-skied and tranquil, the stillness pierced only by a chorus of bird-song. It was this which awoke Antonia. The first rays of sunlight were slanting into her bedroom through the open window; these lay warm on the carpet, picked out the deep pink of the roses that patterned the curtains. She got out of bed and went to inspect the day, leaning bare forearms on the sill, smelling the damp and mossy-scented air. The thatch was so low that it tickled the top of her head, and she saw the dew glittering on the grass, and the two thrushes carolling away in the chestnut tree—the sweet mistiness of a perfect spring morning.

It was half past seven. All yesterday it had rained, and they had not emerged outdoors. Antonia, still unrecovered from traumas and travels, could have asked for nothing better than a house-bound day. She was left alone, snuggled by the fire, with the raindrops streaming down the window-panes and the lights on because it was so grey and dark. She had found a book, an Elizabeth Jane Howard she had never read, and after lunch curled up on the sofa to lose herself in it. From time to time Penelope would appear to put a log on the fire, or search for her spectacles, and later she joined Antonia, not to chat, but to read the papers, and later still, bring tea. Up in the attic, Noel, on his own, had spent the long day, finally appearing in what was, obviously, a very bad temper.

This made Antonia a little uncomfortable. She and Penelope were now in the kitchen, companionably preparing dinner, and one look at Noel's expression was enough to bring on a feeling of doom, and a certainty that his disgruntlement was about to destroy the peaceful mood of the day. To be honest, everything about Noel made her feel a little uncomfortable. He had all of Olivia's dark, quick-tongued vitality, but none of his sister's warmth. He made Antonia feel plain and gauche, and she found it difficult to think of things to say to him that were neither banal nor boring. When he came through the kitchen door, with a face black as thunder and a streak of dust down one side of his cheek, to pour himself a strong whisky and demand of his mother why the hell she'd brought all that clobber down to Gloucestershire from Oakley Street, Antonia's legs had quaked at the prospect of a scene, or, worse, an evening of silent sulks, but Penelope took it all in her stride, was unprovoked by his attack, and was obviously not about to be browbeaten by her son.

"Laziness, I suppose," she told Noel airily. "It was easier to pack it all into the removal van than to start deciding what to do with it. I'd enough on my plate without going through all those old books and letters."

"But who collected them all in the first place?"

"I've no idea."

Defeated, silenced by her good humour, he tossed the whisky down the back of his throat, and at once became a little more relaxed. He even managed a wry smile. "You are," he told his mother, "the most impossible woman."

She accepted this, as well. "Yes, I know, but we can't all be perfect. And just think how good I am at other things. Like cooking meals for you and always having the right sort of drink in the cupboard. Your father's mother, if you recall, never kept anything in her sideboard except bottles of sherry that tasted like raisins."

He screwed up his face in remembered distaste. "What is for dinner?"

"Baked trout with almonds, new potatoes, and raspberries and cream. No less

than you deserve. And you can choose a suitable bottle of wine and then take your drink upstairs and have a bath." She smiled at her son, but her dark eyes were sharp. "I'm certain you need one, after all that hard labour."

And so, after all, it had been an easy evening. Tired, they had all gone to bed early and Antonia had slept through the night. Now, with the resilience of youth, and for the first time for days and days, she felt herself again. She wanted to be out of doors, running through grass, filling her lungs with cool fresh air. The spring morning waited for her and she knew that she must be part of it.

She dressed, went downstairs, took an apple from the bowl on the kitchen dresser, and let herself out through the conservatory and into the garden. Eating the apple, she crossed the lawn. The dew soaked through her canvas sneakers and they left a trail of footsteps on the damp grass. Under the chestnut tree and through the gap in the privet hedge, she found herself in the orchard. A rough path wound down through the unkept grass, already spiked by the daffodil shoots, past the remains of a bonfire, and around a newly trimmed hawthorn hedge. Beyond, she came upon the river, flowing deep and narrow between high banks. She followed this downstream, beneath an arch of willows, and then the willows thinned out and the river wound onwards through wide water meadows filled with grazing cattle; beyond these the gentle hills climbed to the sky. There were sheep on the upland pastures, and in the distance a man, with a dog at his heels, climbed the slope towards them.

Now, she was close upon the village. The old church with its square tower, the golden-stone-slatted cottages, lay in the curve of the road. Smoke rose straight into the motionless air, from chimneys, from newly kindled fires. The sun was climbing in the crystal sky, and its thin warmth made the bridge smell of creosote. It was a good smell. She sat on the bridge, with her damp legs dangling, and finished the apple. She flung the core into the clear, streaming water, and watched it go, swept away forever.

Gloucestershire, she decided, was all quite poetically beautiful, and exceeded anything that she might have imagined. And Podmore's Thatch was perfect, and most particularly of all, so was Penelope. Just being with Penelope made

you feel calm and safe and secure, and as though life—lately so unbearably dreadful and sad—was still something exciting and filled with future joys.

"You can stay," she had told Antonia, "as long as you like," and this was a temptation in itself, but she knew that she couldn't. On the other hand, what was she going to do?

She was eighteen. She had no family, no home, no money, and was qualified to do nothing. During those few days she had spent in London, she had confided in Olivia.

"I don't even know what I want to do. I mean I've never had a great sense of vocation about anything. It would be much easier if I had. And even if I did suddenly decide to be a secretary or a doctor or a chartered accountant, to learn how to do anything costs so much money."

"I could help you," Olivia had said.

Antonia at once became agitated. "No, you mustn't even think of it. I'm not your responsibility."

"In a way, you are. You're Cosmo's child. And I wasn't thinking so much of writing enormous cheques. I was thinking that I could help you in other ways. Introduce you to people. Have you ever thought of modelling?"

Modelling. Antonia's mouth dropped in astonishment. "Me? I couldn't be a model. I'm not a bit beautiful."

"You don't have to be beautiful. You just have to have the right shape and you've got it."

"I couldn't be a model. I get self-conscious if someone points a camera in my direction."

Olivia laughed. "You'd get over that. All you'd need is a good photographer, someone who'd give you confidence. I've seen it happen before. Ugly ducklings blossom into swans."

"Not me."

"Don't be so timid. There's nothing wrong with your face unless it's those white eyelashes. And yet they're wondrously long and thick. I can't think why you don't wear mascara."

Her eyelashes were the greatest source of shame to Antonia, and mention of them made her blush with embarrassment.

"I've tried, Olivia, but I can't. I'm allergic to it, or some-thing. My eyelids swell up, and then my cheeks, and I look like a turnip lantern, and my eyes start streaming and all the black runs down my face. A disaster, but I can't do anything about it."

"Why don't you have them dyed?"

"Dyed?"

"Yes. Dyed black. In a beauty parlour. And then all your troubles would be over."

"But wouldn't I be allergic to dye?"

"I shouldn't think so. You'd have to find out. Anyway, this is all beside the point. We're talking about you getting a job as a photographic model. Just for a year or two. You'd earn good money and you could save a bit, and then when you've decided what you do want to do, you'd have a little capital behind you; be independent. Think about it, anyway, while you're down at Podmore's Thatch. Let me know what you've decided and I'll arrange a sitting."

"You are kind."

"Not at all. Just practical."

Considered objectively, it wasn't a bad idea. The thought of actually doing such a job filled Antonia with alarm, but if she could earn some money that way, surely it was worth a bit of agonizing and embarrassment and having

one's face caked in make-up. And anyway, how ever hard she thought, she couldn't come up with anything else that she really did want to do. She quite liked cooking and gardening and planting things and picking fruit—during the two years she had spent with Cosmo in Ibiza, she had done little else—but it wasn't possible to make much of a career out of picking fruit. And she didn't want to work in an office, and she didn't want to work in a shop, nor a bank, nor a hospital, so what was the alternative?

Across the valley, from the church tower, a single bell began to toll, bringing a sort of melancholy tranquillity to the peaceful scene. Antonia thought of other bells: goat bells in Ibiza, discordant, clanging away in the early mornings across the rocky arid fields that surrounded Cosmo's house. That and the crowing of cocks, and the crickets of the darkness ... all sounds of Ibiza, gone forever, swept away into the past. She thought about Cosmo, and for the first time was able to do this without having her eyes fill with tears. Grief was like a terrible burden, but at least you could lay it down by the side of the road and walk away from it. Antonia had come only a few paces, but already she could turn and look back and not weep. It wasn't anything to do with forgetting. It was just accepting. Nothing was ever so bad once you had accepted it.

The church bell clanged on for ten minutes or so, and then abruptly ceased. The silence that followed it slowly filled with the small sounds of the morning. The flowing water, the lowing of cattle, the distant baa-ing of sheep. A dog barked. A car started up. Antonia realized that she was ravenously hungry. She got to her feet and walked back off the bridge and began to retrace her steps, heading for Podmore's Thatch and breakfast. Boiled eggs, perhaps, and brown bread and butter and strong tea. The very idea of such delicious food filled her with satisfaction. Mindlessly happy for the first time in weeks, she began to run, ducking her head beneath the trailing branches of the willows, lighthearted and free as a girl to whom something wonderful was just about to happen.

By the time she came to the hawthorn hedge and the gate that led into Penelope's orchard, she was out of breath and warm with exertion. Panting, she leaned on the gate for a moment, and then opened it and went through. As she did this, a movement caught her eye, and she looked up and saw a man

wheeling a barrow down the twisting path that led from the garden, making his way beneath Penelope's washing line and between the gnarled apple and pear trees. A young man, tall and long-legged. Not Noel. Somebody new.

She closed the gate. Its click caught his attention and he glanced up and saw her.

"Good morning," he called, and came on, the barrow trundling over the tussocky grass, its wheel squeaking, in need of oil. Antonia stayed where she was, watching his progress. By the burnt-out bonfire he stopped, set down the barrow, and straightened his back to stand, observing her. He wore patched and faded jeans, tucked into rubber boots, and a frayed and baggy sweater over a bright blue shirt. The collar of this was turned up around his neck, and his eyes were the same bright blue; deep-set and unblinking in his weather-tanned face.

He said, "Lovely day."

"Yes."

"Been for a walk?"

"Just down to the bridge."

"You must be Antonia."

"Yes, I am."

"Mrs. Keeling told me you'd be coming."

"I don't know who you are."

"The gardener. Danus Muirfield. I've come to help for the day. Help clear the attic. Burn all the rubbish."

The wheelbarrow contained a few cardboard boxes, old newspapers, a long pitchfork. He took hold of the pitchfork and with it began stirring up the

sodden ashes of the previous fire, scraping them aside to clear a dry patch of ground.

"There's a mountain of stuff that'll have to be burnt," Antonia told him. "I went up to the attic yesterday and saw it all."

"That's all right; we've got the whole day to do it." She liked his saying "we." It seemed to include her, unlike Noel's cool rejection of her tentative offer to help him. It made her feel not only part of the whole project, but welcome as well. "I haven't had my breakfast yet, but as soon as I have I'll come and give you a hand."

"Mrs. Keeling's in the kitchen, boiling eggs." Antonia smiled. "I hoped it would be boiled eggs." But he did not smile back. "You go and eat them," he told her. He drove the prongs of the pitchfork into the black earth and turned to collect a wad of newspaper. "You can't do a hard day's work on an empty stomach."

Nancy Chamberlain, with pigskin-gloved hands firmly clenched on the wheel of her car, drove through the smiling sunlit Cots-wolds towards Podmore's Thatch, and Sunday lunch with her mother. She was in a good mood, her high spirits attributable to a number of factors. The unexpectedly bright day was one of them, the blue skies affecting not only herself but her household as well, so that the children had not quarrelled at breakfast, George had come out with a dry joke or two over his Sunday-morning sausages, and Mrs. Croftway had actually offered to take the dogs for their afternoon walk.

Without the chore of a huge Sunday lunch to be prepared, there had, for once, been time for everything. Time for Nancy to take trouble with her appearance (she was wearing her best coat and skirt, and the crepe de Chine blouse with the bow at the neck); time to deliver Melanie and Rupert to the Wainwrights; time to wave George off to his Diocesan meeting; time, even, to go to church. Going to church always made Nancy feel pious and good, just as attending committee meetings made her feel important. So, for once, her own image of herself matched up to her ambitions. She was a well-organized country lady, with children invited to spend the day with suitable friends, a husband involved in worthwhile duties, and servants devoted.

All this filled her with a sleek and unaccustomed confidence, and as she drove, she planned exactly what she was going to do and say during the course of the afternoon. At a suitable moment, alone with her mother, perhaps over coffee, she would bring up the subject of Lawrence Stern's pictures. Mention the enormous price that *The Water Carriers* had fetched, and point out the short-sightedness of not taking advantage of the market while it was at its peak. She saw herself doing this, reasoning quietly, making it clear that she was thinking only of her mother's good.

Sell. Just the panels, of course, which hung, unobserved and unappreciated, on the landing outside Penelope's bedroom. Not *The Shell Seekers*. There could be no question of disposing of that painting, so loved and so much part of her mother's life, but still, Nancy would quote George and become very businesslike. Suggest reassessment and possibly reinsurance. Surely Penelope, touchy as she was about her possessions, could raise no objection to such sensible and daughterly concern?

The winding road crested the hill and below, in the valley, the village of Temple Pudley was revealed, glittering like a flint in the sunlight. There was little sign of activity save the plume of dark bonfire smoke that poured from her mother's garden. So absorbed had Nancy been in her plans for selling the panels and releasing hundreds of thousands of lovely pounds that she had forgotten the real purpose of the weekend, which was to clear out the loft at Podmore's Thatch and dispose of all the rubbish. She hoped that she would not be roped in for any of the dirty work. She was not dressed for bonfires.

Moments later, as the church clock struck the half hour, she turned in through the gate of her mother's house and drew up by the open door. She saw Noel's old Jaguar parked by the garage, an unfamiliar bicycle leaning against the wall of the house, and a forlorn group of unburnable objects that had obviously been dumped, pending disposal. Some scales designed for weighing infants, a doll's perambulator missing a wheel, an iron bedstead or two, and a couple of chipped chamberpots. She picked her way past these and went indoors.

"Mother."

The kitchen, as always, was redolent with delicious smells, roasting lamb, chopped mint, a newly sliced lemon. Nancy was reminded of childhood and the massive meals that had been concocted then, in the huge basement kitchen at Oakley Street. Breakfast seemed a long time away, and her mouth began to water.

"Mother!"

"I'm here."

Nancy found her in the conservatory, not doing anything, just standing deep in thought. She saw that her mother was dressed, not for an occasion, as Nancy was, but in her oldest clothes. A worn and faded denim skirt, a cotton shirt with a frayed collar, and a darned cardigan with sleeves pushed up to her elbows. Nancy put down her lizard handbag, drew off her gloves, and went to give her parent a kiss.

"What are you doing?" she asked her.

"I'm trying to decide where we should eat lunch. I was just going to lay the table in the dining room, and then I thought, it's such a beautiful day, why not have it here. And it's marvellously warm, even with the door open to the garden. Do admire my freesias! Aren't they precious? How nice to see you and how smart you look. Now, what do you think? Shall we eat out here? Noel can carve in the kitchen and we can all carry our plates through. I think it would be fun. The first picnic of the year, and everybody's so dirty anyway, it might be easier."

Nancy peered in the direction of the orchard and the billowing smoke that poured above the privet hedge and up into the pristine sky.

"How's it all going?"

"Like a bomb. Everybody's hard at work."

"Not you, I hope."

"Me? I've done nothing except cook the lunch."

"And the girl . . . Antonia?" Nancy pronounced the name coolly. She still had not forgiven Olivia and Penelope for the presence of Antonia, and could not help hoping that the arrangement would prove to be a total failure.

But her hopes were dashed.

"She's been up since dawn, and pitched in with the others as soon as she'd eaten her breakfast. Noel's up in the attic, giving orders right, left, and centre, and Danus and Antonia are carting the rubbish and stoking the bonfire."

"I hope she's not going to be a nuisance to you, Mother."

"Oh, heavens no, she's a darling."

"What does Noel think of her?"

"To begin with, he said she wasn't his type because she's got pale eyelashes. Can you imagine it? He's never going to find himself a wife if he refuses to look further than her eyelashes."

"To begin with? Has he changed his mind?"

"Only because there's another young man around, and Antonia seems to have made friends with him. Noel was always the most dreadful dog in the manger, and I think his nose has been quite put out of joint."

"Another young man? Are you talking about your gardener?"

"Danus. Yes. Such a dear boy."

Nancy was shocked. "You mean Antonia's taken up with the gardener?"

Her mother only laughed; "Oh, Nancy, if you could just see your own face. You mustn't be such a snob, and you mustn't make a single judgment until you've met the young man."

But Nancy remained unconvinced. What could be going on? "I hope they're not burning anything you want to keep."

"No. Noel's really being very good. Every now and then, Antonia is sent to fetch me, and I have to go and give my opinion about something or other. There was one small argument concerning a worm-eaten desk. Noel said it was to go on the fire, but Danus said it was too good to burn and that the worm could be treated. So I said that if he wanted to treat the worm . . . lucky old worm ... he could keep the desk for himself. Noel was none too pleased. Stumped upstairs in a sulk, but that's neither here nor there. Now come along, we must make up our minds. Let's have lunch here. You can help me lay the table."

Which they did, companionably together. The leaves of the old pine table were opened up and the table spread with a dark-blue linen cloth. Nancy fetched silver and glasses from the dining room, her mother folded white linen napkins into mitres. The final touch was a pink potted geranium set into a flowered cache pot, placed in the middle of the table. The result was delightful, both pretty and informal, and Nancy, standing back, marvelled, as she always did, at her mother's natural talent for creating not only an-ambience, but a real visual pleasure out of the most mundane of objects. Nancy supposed it was something to do with having an artist for a father, and thought in a dissatisfied way of her own dining room, which, however hard she tried, never looked anything except dark and dull.

"Now," said Penelope, "there's nothing for us to do except wait for the workers to come and eat. Sit here in the sun while I go and tidy myself up, and then I'll bring you a drink. What would you like? A glass of wine? A gin and tonic?"

Nancy said she would like a gin and tonic, and, left alone, removed her jacket and took stock of her surroundings. When her mother had first announced the intention of building a con-servatory, she and George had come out strongly

against the notion. It was a foolish luxury, was their opinion, a wild extravagance that Penelope could not possibly afford. But their advice had been ignored, and the delicate airy addition duly erected. Now, warm, scented, leafy and flower-filled, it was, Nancy had to admit, an enviable place, but she had never managed to find out how much it had cost. Which brought her, inevitably, back to the vexing question of money. When her mother "returned, with her hair dressed, her face powdered, and smelling of her best scent, Nancy, settled in the most comfortable of the basket chairs, was wondering if this was the right moment to bring up the subject of selling the panels, and was even trying out a few tactful opening sentences; but she was forestalled by Penelope's steering the conversation into a quite different and totally unexpected tack.

"Here you are. Gin and tonic ... I hope it's strong enough." For herself she had poured a glass of wine. She pulled forward another chair and sank into it, her long legs outstretched and her face turned up to the warmth of the sun. "Oh, isn't this blissful? What are your family doing today?" Nancy told her.

"Poor George. Fancy being stuck indoors all day, with a lot of moose-faced bishops. And who are the Wainwrights? Have I ever met them? So good for the children to get off on their own. For that matter, so good for all of us to get off on our own. Would you like to come to Cornwall with me?"

Nancy, startled, turned a face of astonishment and disbelief upon her mother.

"Cornwall?"

"Yes. I want to go back to Porthkerris. Quite soon. I've suddenly become possessed by this tremendous urge. And it would be so much more fun if I had somebody with me."

"But . . ."

"I know. I haven't been there for forty years, and it will all be changed and I shan't know anybody. But I still want to go. To see it all again. Why not come too? We could stay with Doris."

"With Doris?"

"Yes, with Doris. Oh, Nancy, you haven't forgotten Doris. You couldn't have. She practically brought you up until you were four years old and we left Porthkerris for good."

Of course Nancy remembered Doris. She had no clear recollection of her grandfather, but she remembered Doris, with her sweet talcum-powdery smell, and her strong arms and the soft comfort of her bosom. The first clear memory of Nancy's life included Doris. She had been sitting in some sort of push-chair in the little fidd behind Cam Cottage, surrounded by foraging ducks and hens, while Doris pegged out a line of washing in the strong sea-breeze. The image was printed on her mind forever, bright and colourful as an illustration in a picture-book. She saw Doris, with her hair blowing and her arms upstretched; saw the flapping sheets and pillowcases; saw the starch-blue sky.

"Doris still lives in Porthkerris," Penelope went on. "She's got a little house, Downalong, we used to call it; the old bit of the town, around the harbour. And now that the boys have gone, she's got a spare bedroom. She's always asking me to go and stay. And she'd love to see you. You were her baby. She cried when we left. And you cried too, though I don't suppose you realized what it was all about."

Nancy bit her lip. Staying with an old servant in a pokey cottage in a Cornish town was not her idea of a holiday. Be-sides . . .

"What about the children?" she asked. "There wouldn't be space for the children."

"What children?"

"Melanie and Rupert, of course. I couldn't go on holiday without them."

"For heaven's sake, Nancy, I'm not asking the children. I'm asking you. And why can't you go on holiday without them? They're old enough to be left with

their father and Mrs. Croftway. Indulge yourself. Get away on your own. It wouldn't be for long. Just a few days, no more than a week."

"When do you plan to go?"

"Soon. As soon as I can."

"Oh, Mother, it's so difficult. I've got so much on my plate . . . the church fete to be planned, and the Conservative Conference. ... I have to have a lunch party that day. And then Me-lanie's Pony Club camp . . ."

Her voice trailed away as she ran out of excuses. Penelope said nothing. Nancy took another sustaining mouthful of the icy gin and tonic and stole a sideways glance at her mother. She saw the clear-cut profile, the closed eyes.

"Mother?"

"Urn?"

"Perhaps later on ... when I haven't so much on my plate. September, maybe."

"No." She was adamant. "It has to be soon." She raised a hand. "Don't worry about it. I know you're busy. It was just an idea."

A silence fell between them, which Nancy found uncomfortable, loaded with unspoken reproach. But why should she feel guilty? She couldn't possibly take off, with so little notice, so little time to set things in order, to Cornwall.

Nancy was not good at sitting in silence. She liked to keep up a constant flow of chat. Trying to drum up some other lively source of conversation, she found her mind a blank. Really, Mother could be dreadfully irritating at times. It wasn't Nancy's fault. It was just that she was so busy, so involved in house, husband, and children. It wasn't fair suddenly to be made to feel so guilty.

It was thus that Noel found them. If Nancy had had a good morning, then Noel had had a gruesome one. Going through all that stuff in the attic

yesterday had been one thing because there had always stayed, at the back of his mind, the conviction that he was about to turn up something immensely valuable. The fact that he hadn't had made this morning's toil no easier. Also, he had been slightly thrown by the appearance of Danus. Expecting some thick-headed, muscle-bound country boy, he had instead been confronted by a cool and silent young man, and had found himself disconcerted by his straight and unblinking blue gaze. The fact that Antonia had taken so instantly to Danus did nothing to improve Noel's disposition, and the sound of their companionable chatter as they journeyed up and down the narrow stairs with armfuls of cardboard boxes and broken furniture became, during the course of the morning, an increasing irritation.

The altercation over the worm-eaten desk was almost the last straw, and by a quarter to one, with everything more or less cleared, and what remained pushed to the side of the wall, he had had more than enough. As well he was dirty. He needed a shower, but more, he needed a drink, so he compromised by washing his face and hands, came downstairs, and poured himself a dry martini of mind-boggling strength. With this in his hand he took himself through the kitchen to the sun-baked conservatory, and his mood was not improved by the sight of his mother and his sister, relaxed in basket chairs and looking as though neither of them had done a stroke of work all day.

At the sound of his footstep, Nancy glanced up. She smiled brightly, as though for once she was actually pleased to see him.

"Hello, Noel."

He did not return the smile, simply leaned a shoulder against the jamb of the open door, and surveyed the pair of them. His mother appeared to have fallen asleep.

"What do you two think you're doing, lounging there in the sunshine, while others work their fingers to the bone?"

Penelope never moved. Nancy's smile lost a little of its spontaneity, but remained there, stuck on her face. Noel eventually acknowledged it with a nod of his head. "Hi," he said, and went to pull a chair away from the

carefully laid lunch table, and take, at last, the weight from his legs.

His mother opened her eyes. She had not been asleep.

"Are you finished?"

"Yes, I'm finished. Done for. A physical wreck."

"I didn't mean you, I meant the attic."

"Just about. All we need is some busy housewife to go up and sweep the floor, and then the job's done."

"Noel, you are a wonder. What would I have done without you?"

But her grateful smile was wasted on him. "I'm ravenous," he told her. "When's lunch?"

"Whenever you want it." She set down her glass of wine and sat up to gaze out beyond the pot plants and into the garden. Smoke continued to billow up into the sky, but there was no sign of the others. "Perhaps someone should fetch Danus and Antonia, and then I'll go and make the gravy."

There was a pause. Noel waited for Nancy to volunteer for this not very arduous task, but she was intent on picking a small piece of fluff from her skirt and generally acting as though she hadn't heard. Noel said, "I haven't the energy." He leaned back, tipping his chair. "You go, Nancy, the exercise will do you good."

Nancy, recognizing this as a dig at her ample figure, instantly took umbrage, as he had known she would do.

"Thank you very much."

"You don't look as if you'd raised a finger all morning."

"Just because I happen to tidy myself up before I come out for lunch." She glanced pointedly in his direction. "Which is more than I can say for you."

"What does George wear for Sunday lunch? A frock-coat?"

Nancy, belligerent, sat up. "If that's meant to be funny . . ."

They snacked on, niggling at each other, sounding much as they always had. In rising exasperation and impatience, Penelope knew that she could not listen for another moment. She got abruptly to her feet. "I shall fetch them," she announced, and her offspring let her go, across the sunlit lawn, across the rough, uncut winter grass, while they stayed where they were, unappreciative of the sweet-scented warmth of the conservatory, not speaking, not looking at each other. They nursed their drinks and their mutual animosity.

She was upset. She had allowed them to upset her. She could feel the blood coursing to her cheeks, her heart begin its uneven jiggling dance. She went slowly, taking her time, breathing deeply, telling herself not to be a fool. They did not matter, those grown-up children of hers, who still behaved like the children they no longer were. It did not matter that Noel thought of no person but himself, or that Nancy had become so smug and self-righteous and middle-aged. It did not matter that none of them, not even Olivia, wanted to come to Cornwall with her.

What had gone wrong? What had become of the babies she had borne and loved and brought up and educated and generally cared for? The answer was, perhaps, that she had not expected enough of them. But she had learned the hard way, in the London years after the war, not to expect anything of any person except herself. Without parents or old friends to support her, she was left with only Ambrose and his mother to turn to, and within months she had realized the futility of doing any such thing. Alone, she was—in more ways than one—thrown back on her own resources.

Self-reliance. That was the keyword, the one thing that could pull you through any crisis fate chose to hurl at you. To be yourself. Independent. Not witless. Still able to make my own decisions and plot the course of what remains of my life. I do not need my children. Knowing their faults, recognizing their shortcomings, I love them all, but I do not need them.

She prayed that she never would.

She was calmer now, able, even, to smile at herself. She went through the gap in the privet hedge and saw the orchard sloping away, dappled in sunlight and shadow. At the end of it the enormous bonfire still crackled and flamed, belching forth smoke. Danus and Antonia were there, Danus raking in the red-hot ashes, Antonia sitting on the edge of the wheelbarrow watching him. They had shed sweaters and were in their shirt-sleeves and talking nineteen to the dozen, their voices clear in the still air.

So absorbed and companionable did they appear, it seemed a pity to disturb them, even to announce that it was time to come indoors and eat roast spring lamb, lemon souffle, and strawberry shortcake. So she stayed where she was, allowing herself the pleasure of simply watching the charming pastoral scene. Then Danus paused to lean on his pitchfork, and make some unheard remark, and Antonia laughed. And the sound of her laughter brought back, with a piercing clarity, ringing across the years, the memory of other laughter, and the unexpected ecstasies and physical joys that happen, perhaps, only once in any person's lifetime.

It was good. And nothing good is ever lost. It stays part of a person, becomes part of one's character.

Other voices, other worlds. Recalling that ecstasy, she was filled, not with a sense of loss, but of renewal and rediscovery. Nancy and Noel and the tedious irritations they had unleashed were forgotten. They did not matter. Nothing mattered but this instant, this moment of truth.

She might have stood there, day-dreaming, at the top of the orchard for the rest of the day, but Danus all at once spied her and waved, and she made a trumpet of her hands to call and tell them that it was lunch-time. He acknowledged this with a gesture of his hand, then drove his pitchfork into the earth and stooped to collect their abandoned sweaters. Antonia got off the wheelbarrow, and he put her sweater around her shoulders and tied the sleeves in a knot beneath her chin. Then they started up the orchard path, up between the trees, walking side by side; both tall and slender and tanned and young, and, to Penelope's eyes, quite beautiful.

She found herself filled with gratitude. Not simply to them for all the hard work they had accomplished during the course of the morning, but for them as well. They had, without saying a word, restored her tranquillity of mind, her sense of values, and she sent up a swift and heartfelt thank-you to the twist of fate (or was it the hand of God?—she wished that she could be certain . . .) that had introduced them, like a second chance, into her life.

One thing that could be fairly said in Noel's favour was that his evil moods were short-lived. By the time the little party finally assembled, he was onto his second dry martini (having refreshed, as well, his sister's glass), and Penelope was much relieved to find them actually chatting quite amicably.

"Here we all are. Now, Nancy, you haven't met Danus, and you haven't met Antonia. This is my daughter, Nancy Chamberlain. Noel, you be in charge of the bar . . . give them both something to drink, then perhaps you'd come and carve the lamb for me. ..."

Noel set down his glass and rose with exaggerated effort to his feet.

"What would you like, Antonia?"

"A lager would be delicious." She leaned against the table, her legs endless in their faded jeans. When Nancy's daughter, Melanie, wore jeans, she looked appalling in them, because her bottom was so big. But jeans on Antonia looked fantastic. Nancy decided that life was really very unfair. She wondered if she should put Melanie on a diet, and at once put the idea out of her head, because Melanie automatically always did the very opposite of anything that her mother suggested.

"How about you, Danus?"

The tall young man shook his head. "Something soft would be great. A juice. Glass of water would do."

Noel bucked slightly, but Danus was adamant, so he shrugged and disappeared indoors. Nancy turned to Danus.

"Don't you drink at all?"

"Not alcohol." He was very good-looking. Well-spoken. A gentleman. Extraordinary. What on earth was he doing, being her mother's gardener?

"Have you never?"

"Not really." He sounded quite untroubled about it all.

"Perhaps," Nancy pursued the subject, because it was so extraordinary to meet a man who would not even down a half-pint of lager, "you don't like the taste?"

He seemed to be considering this, then said, "Yes, perhaps that is why." His face was very serious, but even so Nancy could not be sure whether or not he was laughing at her.

The tender lamb, the roast potatoes, the peas and the broccoli had been gratefully consumed, the wineglasses refilled, and the puddings served. With everybody relaxed and cheerful once more, the conversation turned to how they were all to spend the rest of the day.

"I," Noel announced, pouring cream from a pink-and-white pitcher over his strawberry shortcake, "am calling it a day, drawing stumps, and pulling out. I'll drive back to London, and that way, with a bit of luck, I'll miss the worst of the weekend traffic."

"Yes, I think you should," his mother agreed. "You've done quite enough. You must be exhausted."

"What else is there to be done?" Nancy wanted to know.

"The last of the clobber to be carted and burnt and the floor of the attic swept."

"I'll do that," said Antonia promptly.

Nancy thought of something else. "What about all those things that have been piled up outside Mother's front door? The bedsteads and the broken perambulator. You can't leave them there indefinitely. They make Podmore's Thatch look like a tinker's camp."

There was a pause while everybody waited for someone else to make a suggestion. Then Danus spoke. "We could take them to the dump at Pudley."

"How?" asked Noel.

"If Mrs. Keeling doesn't mind, we could put them in the back of her car."

"No, of course I don't mind."

Noel said, "When?"

"This afternoon."

"Is the dump open on a Sunday?"

"Oh, heavens yes," Penelope assured him. "It's always open. There's a dear little man who lives there, in a sort of shed. The gates are never locked."

Nancy was horrified. "You mean he lives there all the time? In a shed by the dump? What is the local Council thinking of? It must be dreadfully unhygienic."

Penelope laughed. "I don't think he's the sort of person who's fussy about hygiene. Frightfully dirty and unshaven, but quite charming. Once we had a dustmen's strike and we had to hump all our own rubbish, and he couldn't have been more helpful."

"But . . ."

She was interrupted, however, by Danus, which was in itself surprising, because he had scarcely spoken all through the meal.

"In Scotland, there's a dump outside the little town where my grandmother lives, and an old tramp has lived there for thirty years." He enlarged on this. "In a wardrobe."

"He lives in a *wardrobe*?" Nancy sounded more horrified than ever.

"Yes. It's quite a big one. Victorian."

"But how dreadfully uncomfortable."

"You'd think so, wouldn't you? But he seems quite happy. He's a very well-known figure, much respected. Walks all over the countryside in rubber boots and an old raincoat. People give him cups of tea and jam sandwiches."

"But what does he do in the evening?"

Danus shook his head. "I've no idea."

"Why are you so worried about his evenings?" Noel wanted to know. "I should have thought his entire existence so awful that how he spends his evenings is a small thing to bother about."

"Well, it must be dreadfully dull. I mean, he obviously hasn't got a television, or a telephone . . ." Nancy's voice trailed away as she struggled to imagine such deprivations.

Noel shook his head, wearing the exasperated expression that Nancy remembered from the past, when he was a clever little boy trying to make Nancy understand the rules of some simple card game.

"You're hopeless," he told her, and she relapsed into a hurt silence. Noel turned to Danus.

"Do you come from Scotland?"

"My parents live in Edinburgh."

"What does your father do?"

"He's a lawyer."

Nancy, filled with curiosity, forgot her little umbrage. "Did you never want to be a lawyer too?"

"When I was at school, I thought I might have followed in his footsteps. But then I changed my mind."

Noel leaned back in his chair. "I always visualize Scotsmen as being tremendously sporty. Stalking stags and killing grouse and fishing. Does your father do those things?"

"He fishes and plays golf."

"Is he, as well, an Elder of the Kirk?" Noel came out with this in a fake Scottish accent that set his mother's teeth on edge. "Isn't that what you call it in the frozen North?"

Danus, impassive, did not rise.

"Yes, he is an Elder. He's also an Archer."

"I'm not with you. Enlighten me."

"A member of the Honourable Company of Archers. The Queen's Bodyguard when she comes to Holyroodhouse. On such occasions, he puts on an archaic uniform and looks resplendent."

"What does he guard the Queen's body with? Bows and arrows?"

"Right."

For a moment, the two men eyed each other. Then, "Fascinating," said Noel, and took another helping of strawberry short-cake.

The gargantuan meal, at last, was finished, rounded off by freshly made coffee and dark dessert chocolate. Noel pushed back his chair, yawned with enormous satisfaction, and said that he was going up to pack his bag and depart before he fell into a coma. Nancy began, in a desultory way, to stack the empty cups and saucers.

"What are you going to do?" Penelope asked Danus. "Go back to your bonfire?"

"It's burning all right. Why don't we get rid of the stuff that's got to go to the dump first. I'll load it into your car."

There was a momentary pause. Then Penelope said, "If you can wait till I've cleared up the dishes, I'll drive you."

Noel stopped, mid-yawn, his arms above his head. "Oh, come off it, Ma, he doesn't need a chauffeur."

"Actually," said Danus, "I do. I don't drive."

There was another, longer pause, during which time both Noel and Nancy gazed at him in open-mouthed disbelief.

"You don't drive? You mean, you can't? How the hell do you get about?"

"I bicycle."

"What an extraordinary chap you are. . . . Have you got high principles about air pollution, or something?"

"No."

"But . . ."

Antonia broke into the conversation. She said very quickly, "I can drive. If you'll let me, Penelope. I'll drive, and Danus can show me the way."

She looked at Penelope across the table, and simultaneously they smiled, like two women sharing a secret. Penelope said, "How kind that would be. Why don't you go now, while Nancy and I see to all this, and then when you get back, we can all go down to the orchard and finish the bonfire together."

"Actually," said Nancy, "I have to get home. I can't stay all afternoon."

"Oh, stay, just for a little. I've hardly talked to you. You can't have anything important to do. ..."

She got to her feet, reached for a tray. Antonia and Danus, as well, stood up, said goodbye to Noel, and took themselves off, out through the kitchen. As their mother began to pile the coffee-cups onto the tray, Noel and Nancy sat in silence, but as soon as they heard the front door safely slam, and knew that the others were out of earshot, they both began to speak at once.

"What an extraordinary chap he is."

"So solemn. He never smiles. . . ."

"How did you get hold of him, Ma?"

"Do you know anything about his background? He's obviously well-bred. It seems very fishy that he should be a gardener. ..."

"And all this carry-on about not drinking and not driving. Why the hell doesn't he drive?"

"I think," Nancy pronounced importantly, "that he proba-bly killed somebody while he was drunk, and he's had his licence taken away."

This was so uncomfortably close to Penelope's own anxious speculations that all at once she knew that she could not listen to another word, and sprang to Danus' defence.

"For goodness' sake, at least give the poor man time to get out through the front gate before you start tearing his character to shreds."

"Oh, come off it, Ma, he's an odd fellow and you know it as well as we do. If he's telling the truth, he comes from an eminently respectable and probably well-to-do family. What's he doing slaving away for an agricultural worker's wage?"

"I've no idea."

"Have you asked him?"

"I most certainly haven't. His private life is his own concern."

"But, Mother, did he arrive with any sort of credentials?"

"Of course he did. I engaged him through a garden contractor."

"Do they know if he's honest?"

"*Honest?* Why shouldn't he be honest?"

"You're so naive, Mother, you'd trust any person who looked vaguely presentable. After all, he is working around the house and the garden, and you're on your own."

"I am not on my own. I have Antonia."

"Antonia, by the looks of it, is as besotted by him as you are. . . ."

"Nancy, what gives you the right to say such things?"

"If I wasn't concerned about you, I wouldn't have the need to say them."

"And what do you imagine that Danus might do? Rape Antonia and Mrs. Plackett, I suppose. Murder me, strip my house of its possessions, and head for Europe. That wouldn't do him much good. There's nothing of value here anyway."

She spoke in thoughtless heat, and as soon as the words were out instantly regretted them, for Noel pounced with the speed of a cat upon a mouse.

"Nothing of value! What about your father's pictures? Will nothing I say persuade you to understand that you are vulnerable here; you have no sort of an alarm system, you never lock a door, and without a doubt you are underinsured. Nancy's right. We know nothing about this oddball you've employed as a gardener, and even if we did, it's crazy—under any circumstances—not to take some sort of positive action. Sell, or reinsure, or do bloody something."

"I have a funny feeling that you would like me to sell."

"Now, don't start getting het up. Think rationally. Not *The Shell Seekers*, of course, but certainly the panels. Now, while the market's high. Find out what the wretched things are worth, and then put them up for sale."

Penelope, who all this time had been standing, now sat down again. She put an elbow on the table and rested her forehead in the palm of her hand. With her other hand, she reached for the butter knife, and with it began to score a deep pattern of marks on the coarse weave of the dark-blue table-cloth. After a bit, "What do you think, Nancy?" she asked.

"Me?"

"Yes, you. What do you have to say about my pictures and my insurance and my private life in general?"

Nancy bit her lip, took a deep breath, and then spoke, her voice coming out clear and high-pitched, making her sound as though she were making a speech at the Women's Institute. "I think ... I think Noel is right. George believes that you should reinsure. He told me so, after he read about the sale of *The Water Carriers*. But the premiums would, naturally, be very high. And the insurance company may insist on tighter security. After all, they have to consider their client's investment."

"You sound to me," said her mother, "as though you are quoting George word

for word, or else reading from some incomprehensible manual. Have you no ideas of your own?"

"Yes," said Nancy, sounding normal again. "I do. I think you should sell the panels."

"And raise, maybe, a quarter of a million?"

She spoke the words casually. The discussion was going better than Nancy had dared to hope, and she felt herself grow warm with excitement.

"Why not?"

"And once I've done that, what am I expected to do with the money?"

She looked at Noel. He shrugged elaborately. He said, "The money you give away when you're alive is worth twice the money you give away when you're dead."

"In other words, you want it now."

"Ma, I didn't say that. I'm simply generalizing. But face it; to go to bed with a nest-egg like that would be tantamount to simply handing it over to the Government."

"So you think I should hand it over to you."

"Well, you've got three children. You could unload a certain amount of it onto them, split into three. Keep a bit for yourself, to enjoy life. You've never been able to do that. Always had your nose to the grindstone. You used to travel all over the place with your parents. You could travel again. Go to Florence. Back to the south of France."

"And what would you two do with all that lovely money?"

"I suppose Nancy would spend it on her children. As for me, I'd move on."

"Into what?"

"New fields, pastures green. Set up on my own . . . commodity broking, perhaps ..."

He was his father all over again. Perpetually dissatisfied with his lot, envious of others, materialistic and ambitious, and un-shakeable in his belief that the world owed him a living. It could have been Ambrose who spoke to her, and this, as nothing else could have done, finally caused Penelope to lose her patience.

"Commodity broking." She made no effort to keep the scorn from her voice. "You must be out of your mind. You'd be as well to put your entire capital on a single horse, or a turn of the roulette wheel. As well you are quite shameless and sometimes you fill me with despair and disgust." Noel opened his mouth to defend himself, but she talked him down, raising her voice. "Do you know what I think? I don't think you give a hoot what happens to me, or to my house or my father's pictures. You care only what happens to yourself, and how swiftly and easily you can get your hands on yet more money." Noel closed his mouth, his face tightening in anger and the colour draining from his thin cheeks. "I haven't sold the panels and I may never sell them, but if I do I shall keep everything for myself, because it is mine, and mine to do as I like with, and *the greatest gift a parent can leave a child is that parent's own independence*. As for you, Nancy, and your children, it was you and George who made the decision to send them to those ridiculously expensive schools. Perhaps if you'd been a little less ambitious for them, and had spent more time on teaching them manners, they'd have turned out a great deal more appealing than they are at the moment."

Nancy, with an immediacy that surprised even herself, sprang to the defence of her offspring. "I'll thank you not to criticize my children."

"It's about time somebody did."

"And what right have you to say a word against them? You take no interest in them. You show more interest in your endless eccentric friends and your wretched garden. You never even come and see them. Never come to see us,

how ever often we invite you . . ."

It was Noel who lost his patience. "Oh, for God's sake, Nancy, shut up. Your bloody children are neither here nor there. We're not talking about your children. We're trying to have an intelligent discussion. ..."

"They have everything to do with it. They're the future generation . . ."

"God help us. ..."

". . . and a great deal more worthy of financial support than some hare-brained scheme of yours for making yet more money. Mother's right. You'd squander the lot of it, gamble it away ..."

"Coming from you, that's laughable. You haven't a single opinion of your own, and you know bloody nothing about bloody anything. ..."

Nancy sprang to her feet. "I've had enough. I'm not staying here to be insulted. I'm going home."

"Yes," said her mother. "I think it's time you both went. And I think, as well, that it's a very good thing Olivia isn't here. Listening to this appalling conversation, she would destroy you both. For that reason alone, if she were with us, I am perfectly certain that neither of you would have had the courage to even start such a disgraceful discussion. And now . . ." She, too, got to her feet, and picked up the tray. "You are both, as you never cease to tell me, busy people. There can be no point in wasting the rest of the afternoon in fruitless argument. I, meantime, shall go and start the washing-up."

As she headed towards the kitchen, Noel fired his final malicious shot. "I'm sure Nancy would love to help you. Nothing she likes better than getting down to a sinkful of dishes."

"I've already said, I've had enough. I'm going home. And as for the washing-up, there's no need for Mother to martyr herself. Antonia can do it when she gets back. After all, isn't she meant to be the housekeeper?"

Penelope, at the open door, stopped dead. She turned her head and looked at Nancy, and there was an expression of disgust in her dark eyes that caused

Nancy to suspect that she had actually gone too far.

But her mother did not throw the tray of coffee-cups at her. She simply said very quietly, "No, Nancy. She is not meant to be a housekeeper. She is my friend. My guest."

She went. Presently they heard the sound of taps running, the clatter of china and cutlery. A silence fell between them, disturbed only by a large bluebottle, which, under the mistaken delusion that it was suddenly high summer, decided that this was the moment to break cover and emerge from its winter hiding. Nancy reached for her jacket, put it on. Buttoning it, she raised her head and looked at Noel. Across the table, their eyes met. He pulled himself to his feet.

"Well," he said quietly. "You made a right bloody mess of that."

"Speak for yourself," Nancy snapped.

He left her, disappearing upstairs to collect his things. Nancy stayed where she was, waiting for him to return, determined to retain her dignity, to nurse her hurt feelings, to suffer no loss of face. She filled in the time checking on her appearance, combing her hair, powdering her flushed and mottled face, applying a layer of lipstick. She was deeply upset and longed to escape, but hadn't the nerve to do it on her own; Mother had always had a way with her, and Nancy was determined that she was going to leave this house without making any sort of an apology. After all, what had she got to apologize for? It was Mother who had been so impossible, Mother who had said all those unforgivable things.

When she heard Noel return, she snapped shut her compact, slipped it into her bag, and went through to the kitchen. The dishwasher whirred, and Penelope, her back to them, scoured saucepans at the sink.

"Well, we're on our way," said Noel.

Their mother abandoned the saucepans, shook her hands dry, and turned to face them. Her apron and her reddened hands did nothing to detract from her dignity, and Nancy remembered that her rare outbursts had never lasted more than a few moments. She had never, in her life, borne a grudge, never sulked.

Now, she even smiled, but it was a funny sort of smile. As though she was sorry for them, had, in some way, defeated them.

She said, "It was good of you to come," and sounded as though she meant it. "And thank you, Noel, for all your hard work."

"No problem."

She reached for a towel and dried her hands. They all trooped out of the kitchen, through the front door, to where the two cars waited on the gravel sweep. Noel slung his grip into the back of the Jaguar, got in behind the wheel, and, with a cursory wave of the hand, shot out through the gate to disappear in the direction of London. He had not said goodbye to either of them, but neither mother nor daughter commented on this. Instead, in silence, Nancy too got into her car, fastened her safety-belt, drew on her pigskin gloves. Penelope stood watching these preparations for departure. Nancy could feel her mother's dark gaze upon her face, could feel the blush start, creep up her neck into her cheeks.

Penelope said, "Be careful, Nancy. Drive safely."

"I always do."

"But, just now, you're upset."

Nancy, staring at the driving wheel, felt tears rush to her eyes. She bit her lip. "Of course I'm upset. Nothing is so upsetting as family rows."

"Family rows are like car accidents. Every family thinks, 'It couldn't happen to us,' but it can happen to everybody. The only way to avoid them is to drive with the greatest care and have much consideration for others."

"It isn't that we don't consider you. We're simply thinking of your own good."

"No, Nancy, that is not so. You just want me to do what you want me to do, which is to sell my father's pictures and hand over the loot before I die. But I'll sell my father's pictures when I choose to. And I'm not going to die. Not

for a long time." She stepped back. "Now, off you go." Nancy wiped the stupid tears from her eyes, switched on the ignition, put the car into gear, let off the hand-brake. "And remember to give my love to George."

She was gone. Penelope stood there, on the gravel outside her open door, long after the sound of Nancy's car had been swallowed into the still warmth of the miraculous spring afternoon. Glancing down, she saw a groundsel thrusting its way between the stone chips. She stooped and pulled it out, tossed it away, and then turned and went indoors.

She was alone. Blessed solitude. The saucepans could wait. She went through the kitchen and into the sitting room. The evening would turn chilly, so she lit a match and kindled the fire. When the flames were licking to her satisfaction, she got up off her knees and went to her desk and found the torn scrap of newspaper with the advertisement for Boothby's, which Noel, a week ago, had drawn to her attention. *Ring Mr. Roy Brookner*. She laid it in the centre of her blotter, secured it with her paperweight, and then returned to the kitchen. Opening a drawer, she took from it her small, sharp vegetable knife, and then made her way upstairs to her bedroom. This was now filled with golden afternoon sunlight pouring through the west window, winking on silver and reflected in mirrors and glass. She put the knife on her dressing-table and went to open the doors of the huge Victorian wardrobe, which only just fitted beneath the sloping ceiling. The wardrobe was filled with her clothes. She took them all out and laid them, in annfuls, on her bed. This involved a certain amount of to-ing and fro-ing, but gradually the big bed, with its cotton crochet cover, was piled with every sort of garment, resembling the jumble stall at the church fete, or possibly the ladies' cloakroom at some manic party.

But the wardrobe stood empty, its back wall revealed. Years ago, this had been papered in a dark and heavily embossed design, but beneath these variations could be discerned other irregularities: the panels and strappings that made up the fabric of the solid old piece of furniture. Penelope took up the knife and reaching into its capacious interior, ran her fingers over the bumpy surface of the wallpaper, feeling her way by her sense of touch. Finding what she sought, she inserted the blade of the knife low down, in the angle of back and floor, and drew it upwards, slit-ting the paper as though she

were opening an envelope. She judged the measurements with concentrated care. Two feet on the vertical, three feet across, and then two feet down again. Unsupported, the flap of wallpaper sagged, curled, and finally collapsed, to reveal the object that had been hidden behind it for the past twenty-five years. A battered cardboard folder, tied with string and secured to the mahogany panels by straps of sticky tape.

That evening, in London, Olivia rang Noel.

"How did you get on?"

"All done."

"Did you find anything exciting?"

"Not a bloody thing."

"Oh, dear." He could hear the amusement in her voice, and silently cursed her. "All that hard work for nothing. Never mind. Better luck next time. How's Antonia?"

"She's okay. I think she's taken a fancy to the gardener."

He had hoped to shock her. "Well, that's very nice," said Olivia. "What's he like?"

"Odd."

"Odd? Do you mean queer?"

"No. I mean he's odd. Fish out of water. Square peg in a round hole. Upper-class, public school, so what's he doing being a gardener? Another thing—he doesn't drive a car and he doesn't drink. And he never smiles. Nancy's convinced he's hiding a dark secret, and for once I'm inclined to agree with her."

"How does Mumma like him?"

"Oh, she likes him all right. Treats him like a long-lost nephew."

"In that case, I shouldn't worry. Mumma's no fool. How is she?"

"The usual."

"Not too tired?"

"Fine, as far as I could see."

"You didn't say anything about the sketches? Mention them? Ask her about them?"

"Not a word. If they ever existed, she's probably forgotten about them. You know how vague she is." He hesitated, and then went on casually. "Nancy was there for lunch. Started quoting George on reinsurance. There was a bit of a row."

"Oh, Noel."

"You know what Nancy's like. Tactless as hell, stupid bitch."

"Was Mumma upset?"

"A bit. I smoothed things over. But now she's even more stubborn than ever about things."

"Well, I suppose it's her affair. Anyway, thank you for taking Antonia down."

"My pleasure."

Monday morning again. By the time Penelope came downstairs, Danus had arrived and was already hard at work in the vegetable garden. The next caller was the postman in his little red van, and then Mrs. Plackett, stately on her bicycle, with her apron in her bag and the news that the Pudley ironmonger was having a sale and why didn't Mrs. Keeling buy herself a new coal shovel.

They were discussing this important project when Antonia appeared, and was duly introduced to Mrs. Plackett. Pleasantries were exchanged, and their various weekend activities relayed. Then Mrs. Plackett collected Hoover and dusters and climbed the stairs. Monday was her day for the bedrooms. Antonia began to fry bacon for her breakfast, and Penelope took herself into her sitting room, shut the door, and sat down at her desk to telephone. It was ten o'clock. She dialled the number.

"Boothby's, Fine Art Dealers. Can I help you?"

"Would it be possible to speak to Mr. Roy Brookner?"

"Just hold on for a moment."

Penelope held on. She felt nervous.

"Roy Brookner." A deep voice, cultured, very pleasant.

"Mr. Brookner, good morning. My name is Mrs. Keeling, Penelope Keeling, and I'm calling from my home in Gloucestershire. In *The Sunday Times* last week you had an advertisement regarding Victorian paintings. It gave your name and the number to ring."

"Yes?"

"I wondered if you would be in this neighbourhood sometime in the near future?"

"You have something you want me to look at?"

"Yes. Some works by Lawrence Stern."

There was the very smallest hesitation. "Lawrence Stern?" he repeated.

"Yes."

"You're sure they are Lawrence Sterns?"

She smiled. "Yes, quite sure. Lawrence Stern was my father."

Another slight pause. She imagined him reaching for a note pad, unscrewing the cap of his fountain pen.

"Could you give me your address?" Penelope did so. "And your telephone number?" She did this as well. "I'm just consulting my engagement diary. Would this week be too soon?"

"The sooner the better."

"Wednesday? Or Thursday?"

Penelope calculated, laid swift plans. "Thursday would be best."

"What time on Thursday?"

"The afternoon? About two o'clock?"

"Splendid. I have another call to make in Oxford; I can deal with that in the morning and then come on to you."

"If you make for Pudley, that's the easiest. The village is signposted."

"I shall find the way," he assured her. "Two o'clock on Thursday. And thank you, Mrs. Keeling, for calling me."

Waiting for him to arrive, Penelope pottered about her conservatory, watering a cyclamen, snipping off dead geranium heads and browned leaves. The weather had turned gusty, the east wind bringing with it enormous sailing clouds and blinking sunshine. But the early warmth was doing its work, for already there were yellow daffodil heads bobbing in the orchard, the first primroses were showing their pale faces, and the sticky buds of the chestnut were splitting open, to reveal the frilly, delicate green of the baby leaves.

She was dressed in her tidiest clothes, as befitted the importance and

formality of the occasion, and occupied her mind by trying to decide how Mr. Brookner would look. With the only clues his name, and his voice over the telephone, there was little to go on, and every time she thought about it, she came up with a different image. He would be very young, a brainy student, with a bulging forehead and a pink bow-tie. He would be elderly, academic, immensely knowledgeable. He would be businesslike and bouncy, with jargon at his fingertips and a mind like an adding machine.

He was, of course, none of these things. When, a little after two o'clock, she heard the slam of a car door, shortly followed by the ring of the front-door bell, she set down the watering can and went through the kitchen to let him in. Opening the door, she was faced with his back view, standing there on the gravel gazing about him, as though appreciative of country quiet and rural surroundings. He turned at once. A very tall and distinguished gentleman, with dark hair sliding back from a high tanned forehead and deep-brown eyes observing her politely from behind heavy horn-rims. He wore a quietly patterned and well-cut tweed suit, a checked shirt, and a discreetly striped tie. Given a bowler hat and a pair of field-glasses, he could have graced the smartest of race meetings.

"Mrs. Keeling."

"Yes. Mr. Brookner. Good afternoon." They shook hands.

"I was just admiring the view. What a beautiful spot, and a charming house."

"I'm afraid you have to come into it through the kitchen. I haven't got a front hall. ..." She led the way indoors, and he was immediately diverted by the beguiling prospect of the far door leading into the conservatory, at that moment filled with sunshine, and bosky with greenery.

"I wouldn't bother about a front hall if I had a kitchen as pretty as this . . . and a conservatory as well."

"I built the conservatory, but the rest of the house is very much as I found it."

"Have you lived here long?"

"Six years."

"Do you live alone?"

"Most of the time. At the moment I have a young friend staying, but she's gone off for the afternoon. She's driving my gardener to Oxford . . . They've taken the motor mower in the back of my car and they're going to get it sharpened."

Mr. Brookner looked a little surprised.

"You have to go all the way to Oxford to get it sharpened?"

"No, but I wanted them out of the way while you were here," Penelope told him bluntly. "And they're buying seed potatoes as well, and some stuff for the garden, so the trip won't be wasted. Now, would you like a cup of coffee? . . ."

"No, thank you."

"Right." He stood there, unimpatient, and looking as though he might be prepared to hang about for ever. "Well, in that case, I suppose we'd better not waste any more time. Shall we go up and look at the panels first?"

"Whatever you say," said Mr. Brookner.

She led him out of the kitchen and up the narrow stairs to the tiny landing.

". . . here they are, hanging on either side of my bedroom door. These were the very last paintings my father ever did. I don't know if you knew, but he suffered most dreadfully from arthritis. By the time these were done, he could scarcely hold his brushes, and so, you see, they were never finished." She stood aside, making room for Mr. Brookner to move forward, inspect, stand back—(only a foot or two, otherwise he'd have gone backwards down the stairs)—move in again. He said nothing. Perhaps he didn't like them. To cover her sudden nervousness, she began to speak again. "They've always

been a bit of a joke. We had this little house in Porthkerris, you see, up at the top of the hill, and never any money to spend on it, so it became dreadfully shabby. The hall there was decorated in an old Morris paper, but it grew worn and torn and my mother couldn't afford to replace it, so she suggested that Papa should paint two long decorative panels that would hide the worst of the worn bits. And she wanted something in his old style, allegorical, fabulous, that she could keep for ever and call her own. So he did, and these were the result. But he couldn't finish them. However, Sophie . . . my mother . . . didn't mind. She said she loved them even better just the way they were."

Still he made no comment. She wondered if he was plucking up his courage to tell her that they were worth nothing, when, all at once, he turned and smiled.

"You call them unfinished, Mrs. Keeling, and yet they are marvelously complete. Not so finely detailed, of course, or meticulous as those great works he executed at the turn of the century, but still, perfect in their own way. And what a colourist he was. Look at the blue of that sky."

She was filled with gratitude towards him. "I am so pleased you like them. My children have always either ignored them, or been particularly scathing about them, but they've always given me enormous pleasure."

"And so they should." He turned from his absorbed inspection. "Is there anything else you want me to see, or is that all?"

"No. I have more downstairs."

"May we go and look?"

"Of course."

Downstairs again, and into the sitting room. His eyes at once fell upon *The Shell Seekers*. Before his arrival, she had switched on the small strip light that illuminated the picture, and now it waited for his consideration. At this moment, on this particular day, it seemed to Penelope more dear than ever, fresh and bright and cool as the day it had been painted.

After a long time, "I didn't know," said Mr. Brookner, "that such a work existed."

"It's never been exhibited."

"When was it done?"

"Nineteen twenty-seven. His last big picture. The North Beach at Porthkerris, painted from his studio window. One of the children is myself. It's called *The Shell Seekers*. When I was married, he gave it to me as a wedding present. That was forty-four years ago."

"What a present. What a possession, for that matter. You're surely not having to contemplate selling this?"

"No. I'm not selling this. But I wanted you to see it."

"I'm glad I have."

His eyes went back to the picture. After a bit, she realized that he was simply occupying himself until she should choose to make her next move.

"That's all, I'm afraid, Mr. Brookner. Except for some sketches." -

He turned from *The Shell Seekers*, his features impassive. "Some sketches?"

"By my father."

He waited for her to enlarge on this, and when she did not, "Am I going to be allowed to see them?" he asked.

"I don't know if they're worth anything, or even if they would interest you."

"I can't say until I've had a look at them." "Of course not." She reached behind the sofa and produced the battered cardboard folder tied with string. "They're in here." Mr. Brookner, taking it from her, lowered himself into the seat of a widelapped Victorian chair. He laid the folder on the carpet at his

feet, and with long, sensitive fingers, untied the knotted string.

Roy Brookner was a man of considerable experience in his job, and over the years had become immune to both shock and disappointment. He had even learned to deal with the worst nightmare of all, which was the classic one of the little old lady, finding herself, probably for the first time in her life, short of money, and deciding to have appraised, and then to sell, her most treasured possession. Boothby's would be informed of this intention, and Roy Brookner would duly make the appointment, and the— probably long—journey to see her. And at the end of the day his would be the heart-breaking task of informing her that the painting was not a Landseer; the Chinese jar, thought to be Ming, was nothing of the sort; and the ivory seal of Catherine de Medicis did not, in fact, date from that lady's period, but the late nineteenth century; and so, they were worthless.

Mrs. Keeling was not a little old lady, and she was the daughter of Lawrence Stern, but even so, he opened the covers of the folder without much hope. What he expected to discover he really did not know. What he found was of such heart-stopping importance that, for a moment, he could scarcely believe his eyes.

Sketches, Penelope Keeling had said, but she had not told him what sketches. They were, painted in oil, on canvas, the canvases ragged-edged and still showing the rusty impression of tack marks where once they had been nailed to their stretchers. One by one, taking his time, he took them up, gazed in incredulous wonder, laid them aside. The colours were unfaded, the subject matters instantly recognizable. In mounting excitement, he started a mental catalogue. *The Spirit of Spring. The Lover's Approach. The Water Carriers. The Sea-God. The Terrazzo Garden . . .*

It was almost too much. Like a man half-way through an enormous gourmet meal, he found himself sated, incapable of continuing. He paused, his hands stilled, hanging loosely between his knees. Penelope Keeling, standing by the empty fireplace, awaited his judgement. He looked up and across the short distance that separated them. For a long moment neither of them spoke. But the expression on his face told her everything she wanted to know. She smiled, and the smile lit up her dark eyes, and it was as though all the years

that she had lived had never happened, and for an instant he saw her as the beautiful young woman she must once have been. And the thought occurred to him that if he had been young when she was young, he would probably have fallen in love with her.

He said, "Where have these come from?"

"I've had them for twenty-five years, hidden in the back of my wardrobe."

He frowned. "But where did you come upon them?"

"They were in my father's studio, in the garden of our house in Oakley Street."

"Does anyone else know of their existence?"

"I don't think so. But I have a feeling that Noel, my son, had begun to suspect—though why, I have no idea—that they did exist. But I can't be sure of this."

"What makes you think so?"

"He's been searching around, going through the attic. And became extremely bad-tempered when he found nothing. I'm certain he was looking for something specific, and I'm fairly sure it was the sketches."

"It sounds a little as though he knows what they would be worth." He reached down to turn over another canvas. "*Amoret-ta's Garden*. How many are there altogether?"

"Fourteen."

"Are they insured?"

"No."

"Is that why you hid them?"

"No. I hid them because I didn't want Ambrose to find them."

"Ambrose."

"My husband." She sighed. Her smile died, taking with it that vibrant flash of youth. She was her age again, a handsome, grey-haired woman in her sixties and tired of standing. She left the fireplace and went to sit in the corner of the sofa, resting one arm along its back. "You see, we never had any money. That was the crux of the matter, the root of all the trouble."

"Did you live with your husband at Oakley Street?"

"Yes. After the war. I'd spent all the war in Cornwall because I had a child to look after. And then my mother was killed in the Blitz, so I stayed on to care for Papa as well. And he handed Oakley Street over . . . and a ..." Suddenly she laughed, hopeless, shaking her head. "So garbled. It makes no sense. How can you possibly understand?"

"You could try starting at the beginning and going right through to the end."

"That would take all day."

"I have all day."

"Oh, Mr. Brookner, I would bore you to death."

"You are Lawrence Stern's daughter," he told her. "You could read me the telephone directory from cover to cover and I should remain fascinated."

"What a nice man you are. In that case . . ."

"In 1945 my father was eighty. I was twenty-five, married to a Lieutenant in the Navy, and the mother of a four-year-old child. For a little while I had been in the Wrens—that's when I met Ambrose—but when I knew I was having a baby, I got my discharge and went home to Porthkerris. I stayed there for the rest of the war. I scarcely saw Ambrose during those years. He was at sea most of the time, in the Atlantic, and then the Mediterranean, and

finally in the Far East. I'm afraid it didn't bother me very much. Ours was a thoughtless wartime affair, a relationship that never would have got off the ground in peacetime.

"As well, there was Papa. He'd always been an enormously youthful and energetic man, but after Sophie was killed, he grew suddenly old before my very eyes, and there could be no question of my leaving him. But then the war ended, and everything changed. All the men came home, and Papa said that it was time for me to go back to my husband. I'm ashamed to say that I didn't want to, and it was then that he told me that he'd made over the title deeds of his house in Oakley Street, so that I would always have a base, security for my children, and financial independence. After that, I had no excuse to stay. Nancy and I left Porthkerris for the last time. Papa came to see us off at the station, and say goodbye to us, and that was a last time as well, because he died the following year, and I never saw him again.

"The house in Oakley Street was enormous. So big that Papa and Sophie and I had always lived in the basement, and let out the upper floors to lodgers. That way, we could make the establishment, more or less, wash its face. I carried on with that arrangement. A couple called Willi and Lalla Friedmann had lived there all through the war, and they stayed on. They had a little girl, and she was company for Nancy, and they were my permanent tenants. For the rest of the house, it was a fairly floating population, coming and going. Artists, mostly, and writers, and young men trying to get a toe in the door of television. My sort of people. Not Ambrose's.

"Then Ambrose came home. Not only did he come home, but he left the Navy and accepted a job in his father's old family firm, the publishers Keeling and Philips, in St. James. I was rather surprised when Ambrose told me this, but I think on the whole he did the right thing. I found out later that he'd blotted his copy-book when he was out in the Far East—antagonized his Captain and got a bad personal report. So, if he had stayed in the Service, I don't suppose he'd have got very far.

"So there we were. We didn't have much, but we had more than most young couples. We were young, we were healthy, Ambrose had a job, and we had a house to live in. But apart from that, we had nothing, no common ground on

which to build any sort of a relationship. Ambrose was intensely conventional and something of a social snob ... he had great ideas about always making friends with the right people. And I was eccentric and careless and, I suppose, impossibly unreliable. But the things that were important to Ambrose seemed trivial to me, and I couldn't share his enthusiasms. And then, there was the vexing question of money. Ambrose never gave me anything. I suppose he reckoned I had my own private means, which in a way I had, but I was perpetually strapped for cash. As well, in my family, money was something that one, hopefully, had, but never spoke about. During the war, I'd managed on my Naval Allowance, and Papa used to put a little each month into my account to pay the housekeeping bills, but as there were no luxuries to spend money on, and everybody was bone-shabby anyway, it didn't seem to matter very much.

"But, married to Ambrose, living in London, put a very different complexion on things. By now my second daughter Olivia had been born, so that was another mouth to feed. As well, the old house was in a dreadful state of repair. Not bombed, thankfully, but cracked and dilapidated and generally falling to bits. It had to be rewired, and the roof had to be repaired. Then the plumbing went wrong, and of course everything needed paint-ing. When I spoke to Ambrose about this, he told me it was my house and so my responsibility, so in the end I sold four precious paintings by Charles Rainier that had belonged to Papa, and those raised enough cash to do the most rudimentary of repairs, but at least the roof stopped leaking, and I could stop agonizing as to whether or not the children were going to electrocute themselves by stuffing their fingers into the old-fashioned wall sockets.

"And then, the final straw. Ambrose's mother, Dolly Keeling—she'd spent the entire war bomb-dodging in Devon—came back to live in London. She took a little house in Lincoln Street, and from the moment she arrived, she began to make trouble. She'd never liked me. I don't really blame her. She never forgave me for starting the baby, for 'trapping' Ambrose into marriage. He was her only child and she was intensely possessive. So, she re-possessed him. All at once, being married to Ambrose was rather like looking after another person's dog. Every time you open the door, it bolts for home. Ambrose bolted for his mother. He used to drop in for a little drink on his way home from the office . . . the tea-and-sympathy syndrome, I suppose. He

used to take her shopping on Saturday mornings, drive her to church on Sundays. It was enough to put anyone off going to church for life.

"Poor man. Divided loyalties are not easy companions to live with. And he deeply needed the adulation and attention that he got from Dolly and which I was incapable of giving him. As well, Oakley Street was never the most peaceful place in the world. I liked my friends around me; Lalla Friedmann and I had always been very close. And I liked children. Lots of children. Not just Nancy, but all her little school friends as well. In fine weather, the garden swarmed with them, hanging upside-down from ropes, or sitting in cardboard grocery cartons. And the little school friends all had mothers, who drifted in and out, and sat in the kitchen, drinking coffee and gossiping. There was a constant activity—jam being made, or somebody cutting out a dress or making scones for tea, and always toys all over the floor.

"Ambrose couldn't bear it. He said that it got on his nerves, returning from work to such bedlam. He began to resent the close quarters we lived in, especially as we owned the whole of the spacious house. He began to talk about chucking the tenants out, giving us room to spread. He talked about a dining room for dinner parties, and a drawing room for cocktail parties, and a bedroom and dressing room and bathroom, en suite, for our-selves. And I lost my temper and asked him what we were going to live on if we didn't have the rents coming in. And he went into a three-week sulk, and spent more time than ever with his mother.

"Just existing became an uphill struggle. Money was something that we argued about all the time. I didn't even know what he earned, so I had no sort of hold on him that way. But I knew he must earn something, so what did he do with it? Buy drinks for his friends? Buy petrol for the little car his mother had given him? Buy clothes? He was always a very natty dresser. I became intensely curious. I began nosing around. I found and read his bank statement, and saw that he was over a thousand pounds overdrawn. I was so naive, so simple, I finally decided that he'd found himself a mistress and was spending his entire salary on keeping her in mink coats and a Mayfair flat.

"Finally, he told me himself. He had to. He owed five hundred pounds to a bookmaker, and he had to pay the debt within a week. I was making soup, I

remember, stirring the big pot so that the dried peas wouldn't stick to the bottom. And I asked him how long he'd been backing horses, and he said for three or four years. And I asked about other things, and then it all came out. I think he was what nowadays would be called a compulsive gambler. He used to play at private gaming clubs. He had taken one or two big risks on the stock exchange and they hadn't come off. And all the time, I'd never had the slightest suspicion. But now he confessed, was even slightly shamefaced, but desperate. He had to get the money.

"I told him I hadn't got it. I told him to go to his mother, but he said that he'd been to her before and she'd helped him, but he hadn't the nerve to go to her again. And then he said, why not sell the pictures, the three Lawrence Sterns, which was all I had of my father's work. And when he said that I became almost as frightened as he was, because I knew that he was quite capable of simply waiting until he had the house to himself, removing the pictures and carting them off to a sale-room. The Shell Seekers, as well as being my most treasured possession, was also my comfort and solace. I couldn't live without it, and he knew this, so I told him I'd raise the five hundred pounds, and I did, by selling my engagement ring, and my mother's engagement ring as well. And after that, he became quite cheerful again, and his old perky, self-satisfied self. For a little he stopped gambling. He'd had a bad fright. But before long, it started again, and we were back to the old hand-to-mouth existence.

"Then, in 1955, Noel was born, and at the same time we were faced with the first of the big school bills. I still had the little house in Cornwall, Cam Cottage. After Papa died, it belonged to me, and I clung on to it for years, letting it out to any person who would rent it, and telling myself that one day I should be able to take my children there, to spend a summer. But I never did. And then I got a marvellous offer for the house, too good to refuse, and I sold it. When I did that, I knew that Porthkerris had gone for ever and the last link broken. When I sold Oakley Street, I had plans to return to Cornwall. To buy a little granite cottage with a palm tree in the garden. But my children intervened and talked me out of it and finally my son-in-law found Podmore's Thatch, and so, after all, I shall spend the twilight of my years in Gloucestershire, and not within sight and sound of the sea."

"I've told you all this, and I still haven't got to the point, have I? I still haven't told you about finding the sketches."

"They were in your father's studio?"

"Yes, hidden away behind an artist's accumulation of years."

"When did it happen? When did you find them?"

"Noel was about four. And, to accommodate our growing family, we had taken in another couple of rooms. But the tenants filled the rest of the house. Then, one day, a young man appeared at the door. He was an art student, very tall and thin and poor-looking and quite charming. Someone had told him that I might be able to help him, because he had won a place at the Slade, but could find nowhere to live. I hadn't a corner to put him, but I liked the look of him, and I asked him in and gave him a meal and a glass of lager, and we talked. By the time he was ready to go, I was so taken with him, I couldn't bear the fact that I was unable to help him. And then I thought of the studio. A wooden shed in the garden, but stoutly built and watertight. He could sleep there, and work there; I could give him his breakfast, and he could come into the house to use the bathroom and do his washing. I suggested this, and he jumped at it. So then and there, I found the key, and we went out and inspected the studio. It was dirty and dusty and stacked with old divan beds and chests of drawers, as well as my father's easels and palettes and canvases, but it was sound and rainproof and it had a northern skylight, which made it all the more desirable to the young man.

"We agreed on a rent and a day of entry. He went, and I started work. It took days, and I had to get my friend the rag-and-bone man to help me, and bit by bit, he loaded all the old rubbish into his little cart and drove it away. It took a number of journeys, but at last we were down to the final load. And it was then, at the very back of the studio, lost behind an old chest, that I found the folder of sketches. I recognized them immediately for what they were, but had no idea of their worth. At that time Lawrence Stern was unfashionable, and if a painting of his came up, it went, maybe, for five or six hundred pounds. But finding those sketches was like being given a present from the past. I had so little of his work. And I thought that if Ambrose knew about

them, he was immediately going to demand that they be sold. So I took them indoors, and up to my bedroom. I taped them to the back of my wardrobe, and then I found a roll of wallpaper and papered them in. And that's where they've been ever since. Until last Sunday evening. Then, I knew, all at once, that it was time to let them see again the light of day, and to show them to you.

"So now you know." She glanced at her watch. "What hours it's taken to tell you. I'm sorry. Would you like a cup of tea? Have you time for a cup of tea?"

"Yes, I have time. But I'm still greedy for more." She raised her brows in question. "Please don't think me curious or impertinent, but what became of your marriage? What became of Ambrose?"

"My husband? Oh, he left me. . . ."

"Left you?"

"Yes." To his astonishment he saw her face light up with amusement. "For his secretary."

"Soon after I found the sketches and had hidden them, Ambrose's old secretary, Miss Wilson, who'd been with Keeling and Philips for ever, retired, and a new girl came to take her place. She was young, and I suppose she must have been quite pretty. She was called Delphine Hardacre. Miss Wilson had always been called Miss Wilson, but Delphine was never referred to as anything but Delphine. One day Ambrose told me he was going up to Glasgow on business; the printing side of the firm was based there, and he stayed away for a week. Afterwards, I found out that he hadn't been to Glasgow at all, but up to Huddersfield with Delphine, to be presented to her parents. The father was immensely rich, something to do with heavy engineering, and if he thought Ambrose was a bit old for his daughter, this was obviously balanced out by the fact that she'd found a nice class of man for herself, and was besotted by him. Soon after this, Ambrose came home from the office and told me that he was leaving. We were in our bedroom. I'd washed my hair and was brushing it dry, sitting at my dressing-table, and Ambrose sat on the bed behind me, and the entire conversation took place

through the medium of my mirror. He said he was in love with her. That she gave him everything I never had. That he wanted a divorce. Once divorced, he would marry her, and meantime, he was leaving Keeling and Philips, as was Delphine, and they were moving north to make a home for themselves in Yorkshire, where her father had offered him a position in his company.

"I must say for Ambrose, once he got around to organizing himself, he made a good job of it. It was all so neat, so cut and dried, such a perfect *fait accompli* that there really wasn't anything for me to say. There wasn't anything I wanted to say. I knew that I didn't mind his going. I would be better on my own. I would keep my children, and I would have my house. I agreed to everything, and he got off the bed and went downstairs, and I went on brushing my hair, and felt very peaceful.

"A few days later his mother came to see me; not to commiserate, nor, to give her her due, to blame, but simply to make quite certain that because of Ambrose's defection, I would not keep the children, either from him or from her. And I told her that my children were not my possessions, to give or withhold, but people in their own right. They must do what they wanted, see who they wanted to see, and I would never stop them. Dolly was much relieved, because although she'd never had much time for Olivia and Noel, she worshipped Nancy, and Nancy loved her. They were of like mind, those two, with everything in common. When Nancy married, it was Dolly who arranged her big London wedding, and, because of this, Ambrose made the journey from Huddersfield to give her away. That was the only occasion we ever saw each other after the divorce. He had changed, become very prosperous-looking. He'd put on a lot of weight, his hair had gone grey, and his complexion was very red. I remember, that day, that he wore, for some reason, a gold watch-chain, and he looked the very picture of a man who had lived in the North for the whole of his life and done nothing but make money.

"After the wedding, he went back to Huddersfield, and I never saw him again. He died about five years later. He was still a comparatively young man, and it was a dreadful shock. Poor Dolly Keeling, she outlived him by years, but she never got over losing her son. And I was sorry, too. I think with Delphine he at last found the life he was looking for. I wrote to her, but she never answered my letter. Perhaps she thought that I was presumptuous

to write. Or perhaps she simply didn't know what to say in reply.

"And now I really am going to make some tea." She rose to her feet, her hand raised to secure the tortoiseshell hairpin that pierced her knot of hair. "Will you be all right on your own for a moment or two? Are you warm enough? Would you like me to light the fire?"

He assured her that he would be, he was, he did not need a fire, so she left him, absorbed once more in the sketches, and went out to the kitchen and filled the kettle and put it on to boil. She felt very peaceful, just as she had felt that summer evening, brushing her hair and listening to Ambrose telling her that he was leaving her for good. This, she told herself, was how Catholics must feel when they have been to confession—cleansed, freed, and finally exonerated. And she was grateful to Roy Brookner for having listened; and grateful as well, that Boothby's had sent her a man not simply professional, but human and understanding as well.

Over tea and gingerbread, they became, once more, businesslike. The panels would be sold. The sketches catalogued and taken to London for appraisal. And *The Shell Seekers*? That, for the moment, would stay where it was, over the fireplace of the sitting room at Podmore's Thatch.

"The only hitch about selling the panels," Roy Brookner told her, "is the time factor. As you know, Boothby's have just mounted a big sale of Victorian paintings, and there won't be another for at least six months. Not in London. Maybe our New York sale-room would be able to handle them, but I'd have to find out when they are scheduling their next sale."

"Six months. I don't want to wait six months. I want to sell them now."

He smiled at her impatience. "Would you consider a private buyer? Without the competition of an auction, you mightn't get such a good price, but perhaps you'd be prepared to take the risk."

"Could you find me a private buyer?"

"There is an American collector, from Philadelphia. He came over to London

with the express intention of bidding for *The Water Carriers*, but he lost the sale to the representative of the Denver Museum of Fine Arts. He was very disappointed. He has no Lawrence Sterns, and they come on the market so seldom."

"Is he still in London?"

"I'm not sure. I could find out. He was staying at The Con-naught."

"You think he might want the panels?"

"I'm certain he would. But of course the sale would depend on how much he was prepared to offer."

"Will you get in touch with him?"

"Of course."

"And the sketches?"

"It's up to you. It would be worth waiting a few months before we sold them . . . give us time to advertise and arouse interest."

"Yes, I see. Perhaps in their case it would be better to wait."

So it was agreed. Roy Brookner, then and there, commenced to catalogue the sketches. This took some time, but when he had finished, and presented her with a signed receipt, he returned them to their folder and neatly bound and tied the string. After that was done, she led him out of the room and back up the stairs to the landing, and he gently lifted the panels from the wall, leaving only a few cobwebs behind and two long strips of unfaded wallpaper.

Outside, all was loaded into the back of his impressive car, the sketches in the boot, and the panels, carefully wrapped in a tartan rug, laid on the back seat. With these stowed to his satisfaction, he stepped back and slammed the car door shut. He turned to Penelope.

"It's been a pleasure, Mrs. Keeling. And thank you."

They shook hands. "I've so enjoyed meeting you, Mr. Brookner. I hope I didn't bore you."

"I've never been less bored in my life. And as soon as I have any news, I'll be in touch."

"Thank you. And goodbye. Safe journey."

"Goodbye, Mrs. Keeling."

He telephoned the next day.

"Mrs. Keeling. Roy Brookner here."

"Yes, Mr. Brookner."

"The American gentleman I mentioned to you, Mr. Lowell Ardway, is no longer in London. I rang The Connaught, and they told me that he's gone to Geneva. His intention is to return direct to the United States from Switzerland. But I have his address in Geneva, and I'll write today to tell him about the panels. I'm certain when he knows they are available, he'll return to London to look at them, but we may have to wait a week or two."

"I can wait for a week or two. I just couldn't bear to wait for six months."

"I can assure you, you won't have to do that. And as for the sketches, I showed them to Mr. Boothby and he was immensely interested. Nothing so important has come on the market for years."

"Have you . . ." It seemed almost indelicate to inquire. "Have you any idea what they might be worth?"

"In my estimation, no less than five thousand pounds each."

Five thousand pounds. Each. Replacing the receiver, she stood there, in her

kitchen, trying to comprehend the enormity of the figure. Five thousand pounds multiplied by fourteen was . . . impossible to do it in her head. She found a pencil and worked out the sum on her shopping list. It came to seventy thousand pounds. She reached for a chair and sat down, because her knees had, quite suddenly, gone weak.

Thinking about it, it was not so much the idea of riches that astonished her, but her own reaction to it. Her decision to summon Mr. Brookner, to show him the sketches, to sell the panels, was going to change her life. It was as simple as that, but still, took a little getting used to. Lawrence Stern's two insignificant, unfinished paintings, which she had always loved but never thought of any value, were now with Boothby's, awaiting an offer by an American millionaire. And the bundle of sketches, hidden, and out of mind for years, had all at once become worth seventy thousand pounds. A fortune. It was like winning the pools. Considering her altered status, she remembered the young woman who had done just this thing, and whom Penelope had watched, in disbelief, on television, pouring champagne over her head and shrieking, "Spend, spend, spend!"

An astonishing scene, like something from a manic fairytale. And yet now she found herself in more or less the same situation, and realized—and this was the astonishment—that it neither appalled nor overwhelmed her. Instead, she was filled with the gratitude of a person lavished with unexpected largesse. The greatest gift a parent can leave a child is that parent's own independence. That was what she had said to Noel and Nancy, and she knew that it was true and the freedom of security was priceless. Also, there were the possibilities of self-indulgent pleasures.

But what pleasures? She was inexperienced in extravagance, having saved and contrived and penny-pinched for the whole of her married life. She had felt no resentment or envy of other people's luxuries, but simply had been grateful to be able to raise and educate her children and still keep her head above water. It was not until she had sold the house in Oakley Street that she was able to lay claim to any sort of capital, and this had at once been prudently invested—to produce a modest income and be spent the way she most enjoyed spending money. On food, wine, enter-taining her friends. Then there were presents—in these she was immensely generous—and, of course, her garden.

Now, if she wanted, she could do up the house from floor to ceiling. Everything she owned was worn and shabby beyond belief, but she liked things that way. The battered Volvo was eight years old, and had been second-hand when she bought it. Perhaps she should splash out on a Rolls-Royce, but there was nothing wrong with the Volvo—yet—and it would be something of a sacrilege to load up the boot of a Rolls with bags of peat and earthy pots of plants for the garden.

Clothes, then. She had, however, never been interested in clothes, an attitude of mind set for ever by the long years of war and the deprivation of the years that followed it. Many of her favourite garments had been purchased at the Temple Pudley Church Jumble Sale, and her naval officer's boat cloak had kept her warm for forty winters. She could always give herself a mink coat, but she had never relished the idea of wearing a garment made out of a lot of dear little furry dead animals, and she'd look a fool wandering down the village street on a Sunday morning to pick up the papers dressed up to the nines in mink. People would think she'd gone mad.

She could travel. But somehow, at sixty-four and not, it had to be faced, in the best of health, she knew that she was too old to start out across the world on her own. The days of leisurely car journeys, the Train Bleu and the mail-boats, were over. And the thought of foreign airports and ripping through space in supersonic jets she had never found particularly appealing.

No. None of these things. For the moment, she would do nothing, say nothing, tell nobody. Mr. Brookner had come and gone and no person knew of his visit. Until he got in touch with her again, it was better to carry on as if nothing had happened. She told herself that she would put him out of her mind, but found this impossible. Each day, she waited to hear from him. Every time the telephone rang, she dashed for it, like an eager girl awaiting a call from her lover. But, unlike that eager girl, as the days went by and nothing happened, she stayed unanxious, unperturbed. There was always tomorrow. There was no hurry. Sooner or later he would have news for her.

Meantime, life went on and spring, in more ways than one, was in the air. The orchard was bright with drifts of daffodils, their yellow trumpets dancing

in the breeze. Trees were misted in the tender green of new foliage, and in the sheltered beds close to the house the wallflowers and polyanthus opened their velvety faces, filling the air with nostalgic scent. Danus Muirfield, with the vegetable garden neatly planted, had given the lawn its first cut of the season and was now engaged in hoeing, raking, and mulching all the borders. Mrs. Plackett came and went, started in on an orgy of spring-cleaning and washed all the bedroom curtains. Antonia pegged them out, like banners, on the line. Her energy was enormous, and she gladly took on any task that Penelope could not be bothered to do for herself, like driving to Pudley to do the huge weekly shopping, or clearing out the store cupboard and scrubbing all the shelves. When she was not occupied indoors, she could usually be found in the garden, erecting a trellis for the sweet-pea seedlings, or clearing the terrace tubs of their early narcissus and filling them with geraniums and fuchsia and nasturtiums. If Danus was there, she was never far from his side, and their voices floated across the garden as they laboured together. Seeing them, pausing to watch from an upstairs window, Penelope was filled with satisfaction. Antonia was a different person from that strained and exhausted girl that Noel had driven down from London; she had lost the pale sadness that she had brought from Ibiza, lost the dark rings beneath her eyes. Her hair shone, her skin bloomed, and as well there was an aura about her, undefinable, but still, to Penelope's experienced eye, unmistakable. Antonia, she suspected, had fallen in love.

"I think the nicest thing in the world is doing something constructive in a garden on a fine morning. It's a combination of the best of everything. In Ibiza, the sun was always so hot and you got dreadfully sweaty and sticky, and then you'd have to go and jump into the pool."

"We haven't got a pool here," Danus pointed out. "I suppose we could always go and jump into the Windrush."

"It would be icy. I put my feet in the other day and it was terrible. Danus, will you always be a gardener?"

"Why do you suddenly ask that?"

"I don't know. I was just thinking. You seem to have so much behind you."

School and going to America and then your Horticultural degree. It seems a bit of a waste if you're never going to do anything but plant other people's cabbages and pull up other people's weeds."

"But I'm not always going to do that, am I?"

"Aren't you? Then what are you going to do?"

"Save up until I've got enough to buy a bit of land, have my own place, grow vegetables, sell plants, bulbs, roses, gnomes, any-thing anybody wants to buy."

"A garden centre?"

"I'd specialize in something . . . roses or fuchsias, just to be a bit different from all the others."

"Would it cost an awful lot? To start up, I mean?"

"Yes. The cost of land's high, and it would need to be large enough to make it a viable proposition."

"Couldn't your father help you? Just to get started."

"Yes, he could if I asked him. But I'd prefer to do it on my own. I'm twenty-four now. Perhaps by the time I'm thirty I'll be able to establish myself."

"Six years to wait seems for ever. I'd want it now."

"I've learned to be patient."

"Whereabouts? I mean, where would you have this garden centre?"

"I'm not bothered. Wherever it was needed. I'd prefer to stay this end of the country, though. Gloucestershire, Somerset."

"I think Gloucestershire's the best. It's so beautiful. And think of the market.

All those rich commuters from London, buying gorgeous golden stone houses and wanting their gardens filled with goodies. You'd make a fortune. If I were you, I'd stay right here. Find yourself a little house and a couple of acres. That's what I'd do."

"But you're not going to open a garden centre. You're going to be a model."

"Only if I can't think of anything else to do."

"You're a funny creature. Most girls would give their eyes for a chance like that."

"Wouldn't that rather defeat the purpose?"

"Besides, you wouldn't want to spend your life hoeing tur-nips."

"I wouldn't grow turnips. I'd grow delicious things like corn on the cob and asparagus and peas. And don't look so sceptical. I'm very proficient. In Ibiza we never bought a single vegetable.

We grew them all, and fruit as well. We had orange trees and lemons, too. Daddy used to say there was nothing more splendid than a gin and tonic with a slice of freshly picked lemon. They taste quite different to horrid, bought, shop ones."

"I suppose you could grow lemons in a glasshouse."

"The nice thing about lemon trees is that they fruit and flower at the same time. That way they always look pretty. Danus, did you never want to be a lawyer like your father?"

"Yes, I did at one time. Thought I'd follow in the old man's footsteps. But then I went to America, and after that, things sort of changed. And I decided to spend my life using my hands rather than my head."

"But you do use your head. Gardening takes a lot of thought, a lot of knowledge and planning. And if you get your garden centre, you'll have to do

all the accounts and the ordering and the taxes. ... I don't call that not using your head. Was your father disappointed that you stopped wanting to be a lawyer?"

"To begin with. But we talked it over and he came around to seeing my point of view."

"Wouldn't it be utterly awful to have a father you couldn't talk to? Mine was perfect. You could tell him anything. I wish you could have met him. And I can't even show you my darling Ca'n D'alt, because some other family are living in it now. Danus, was it anything special that made you switch careers? Was it something that happened in America?"

"Perhaps."

"Was what happened something to do with why you don't drive a car and never take a drink?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"I just think about it sometimes. I just wondered."

"Does it bother you? Would you like me to be like Noel Keeling, racing up and down the motorway in an E-type, and reaching for a drink every time things get rough?"

"No, I wouldn't want you to be like Noel. If you were like Noel, I shouldn't be here, helping you. I'd be lying in a deck-chair, leafing over the pages of a magazine."

"Then why don't you just leave well alone? Here, you're planting a seedling, not hammering in a nail. Do it gently, like you were putting a baby to bed. Tuck it in, no more. It has to have room to grow. It has to have space to breathe."

She was bicycling. Freewheeling downhill between fuchsia hedges hung with pink and purple ballerinas. The road ahead curved white and dusty, and in the

distance was a sea blue as sapphire. There was a Saturday-morning feeling. She wore sand-shoes. She came to a house, and it was Cam Cottage, but it wasn't Cam Cottage because it had a flat roof. Papa was there, wearing his wide-brimmed hat, sitting on a camp-stool, with his easel set up before him. He didn't have arthritis, and he was painting long strokes of colour on the canvas, and when she stood by him to watch, he did not look up, but said, "One day they will come, to paint the warmth of the sun and the colour of the wind." She looked over the edge of the roof, and it was a garden like Ibiza, with a pool. Sophie was swimming in the pool, to and fro. She was naked; her hair wet and sleek as a seal's fur. There was a view from the roof, but it wasn't the bay, it was the North Beach, with the tide out, and she was herself, searching, with a scarlet bucket filled with huge shells. Scallops and mussels and shining cowries. But she wasn't searching for shells, she was searching for something, somebody else; he was somewhere around. The sky became dark. She made her way across the deep sand, struggling against the wind. The bucket grew impossibly heavy, so she set it down and left it. The wind brought a sea mist with it, curling in over the beach like smoke, and she saw him walking out of the smoke towards her. He was in uniform but his head was bare. He said, "I've been looking for you," and took her hand, and together, they came to a house. They went in through the door, but it wasn't a house, it was the Art Gallery in the back streets of Porthkerris. And Papa was there again, sitting on a battered couch in the middle of the empty floor. He turned his head. "I would like to be young again," he told them. "To be able to watch it all happening."

She was filled with happiness. She opened her eyes and the happiness stayed, the dream more real than reality. She could feel the smile on her face, as though some person had set it there. The dream faded, but the sense of tranquil content remained. Her eyes took in, contentedly, the shadowy details of her own bedroom. The gleam of the brass bedrail, the looming shape of the huge wardrobe, the open windows with curtains moving lightly in the flow of sweet night air.

I would like to be young again. To be able to watch it all happening.

She was all at once very wide awake and knew that she would not sleep again. She pushed back the blankets and got out of bed, felt for her slippers,

reached for her dressing-gown. In the darkness, she opened her door and went downstairs to the kitchen. She switched on the light. All was warm and orderly. She filled a saucepan with milk and put it on to heat. Then she took a mug down from the dresser, put in a spoonful of honey, filled it to the brim with hot milk, stirred. Carrying the mug, she went across the dining room, into the sitting room. She switched on the light that illuminated *The Shell Seekers*, and in its gentle glow, stirred the fire to life. As it blazed, she carried the mug to the sofa, arranged cushions, curled up in a corner with her feet tucked beneath her. Above her the picture shone out into the half-light, brilliant as a stained-glass window with the sun behind it. It was her own personal mantra, pervasive as a hypnotist's charm. She gazed, concentration intent, unblinking, waiting for the spell to work, the magic to happen. She filled her eyes with the blue of sea and sky, then felt the salty wind; smelt seaweed and damp sand; heard the scream of gulls, the drumming of the breeze in her ears.

Safely there, she could allow herself to recall the various and many occasions in her life when she had done just this thing— shut herself away, alone, closeted with *The Shell Seekers*. Thus she had sat, from time to time, during those bleak London years just after the war, bedevilled, sometimes near defeated, by shortages, by lack of money and a paucity of affection; by Ambrose's hopelessness and a frightening loneliness that, for some reason, could not be filled by the company of her children. Thus she had sat the night Ambrose packed his bags, abandoned his family, and headed for Yorkshire, prosperity, and the warm young body of Delphine Hardacre; and, again, when Olivia, most precious of Penelope's offspring, left Oakley Street for good, to set up her own establishment and embark upon her brilliant career.

You must never go back, they all told her. *Everything will be changed*. But she knew that they were wrong because those things that she most craved were elemental, and blessedly, unless the world blew itself up, remained unchanging.

The Shell Seekers. Like an old and trusted friend, the picture's constancy filled her with gratitude. And, as one becomes possessive of friends, she had clung to it, lived with it, refused even to speak of letting it go. But now, all at once, things were different. There was not simply a past, but a future as well. Plans to be made, delights in store, a whole new prospect ahead. Besides, she

was sixty-four. There weren't that number of years left to be wasted, gazing nostalgically back over her shoulder. She said aloud, "Perhaps I don't need you any more." The picture made no comment. "Perhaps it is time to let you go."

She finished her drink. Laid down the empty mug, reached for the rug that lay folded over the back of the sofa, settled down on the soft pillows with the blanket for warmth, spread over the length of her body. *The Shell Seekers* would keep company, keep watch, smile down upon her sleeping form. She thought of the dream, and Papa saying, *They will come, to paint the warmth of the sun and the colour of the sky.* She closed her eyes. I would like to be young again.

RICHARD

By the summer of 1943, Penelope Keeling, along with most other people, felt as though the war had been going on for ever, and moreover, would continue for ever. It was a treadmill of boredom—shortages and black-out, relieved by occasional flashes of horror, terror, or resolution, as British battleships were blown out of the sea, disaster befell Allied troops, or Mr. Churchill came on the wireless to tell everybody how splendidly they were doing.

It was like the last two weeks before you had a baby, when you knew for certain that the baby was never going to come, and you were going to look like the Albert Hall for the rest of your life. Or being in the middle of a very long, curving railway tunnel, the brightness of day long left behind, and the tiny spark of light at the end of the tunnel not yet in evidence. It would be there one day. Of that no person had the slightest doubt. But meantime all was darkness. You just trod on, one foot at a time, dealing with the day-to-day problems of feeding people, keeping them warm, seeing the children had shoes, and trying to stop the fabric of Cam Cottage from falling into neglect and disrepair.

She was twenty-three, and sometimes thought that except for next week's film at the little cinema down in the town, there didn't seem to be anything to look forward to. Going to the cinema had become quite a cult with her and Doris. Doris called it going to the pictures, and they never missed a single show. Totally unselective, they sat through anything that came their way, simply to escape, if only for an hour or two, from the tedium of their existence. At the end of the show, having dutifully stood to attention for the cracked record of "God Save The King," they would stumble out into the pitch-dark street, either incapable with excitement, or awash with sentiment, and make their way home, walking arm in arm, giggling feebly, tripping over kerbstones, and climbing, by the light of the stars, the steep streets that led to home.

As Doris invariably remarked, it made a nice change.

Which it did. One day, Penelope supposed, this grey limbo of war would end, but it was hard to believe and difficult to imagine. Being able to buy steaks and marmalade oranges; not being frightened to listen to the news bulletins; letting the lights from the windows stream out into the darkness without danger of a random bomber or a stream of abuse from Colonel Trubshot. She thought about returning to France, driving down to the south, to the mimosa and the hot sun. And bells, ringing from silenced church towers, not to warn of invasion but to celebrate Victory.

Victory. The Nazis defeated, Europe freed. Prisoners of war, herded into camps all over Germany, would come home. Servicemen would be demobilized, families reunited. This last was Penelope's own private stumbling-block. Other wives prayed for and lived for their husbands' safe return, but Penelope knew that she did not very much mind if she never saw Ambrose again. This was not heartless, it was just that as the months passed, her memories of him had faded and become, somehow, less and less likely. She wanted the war to finish—only a lunatic would wish for anything else—but she did not relish the prospect of starting all over again with Ambrose—her scarcely known and almost forgotten husband—and trying to come to terms with her thoughtless marriage.

At times, when she was feeling low, a shameful hope would seep up out of her subconscious and skulk around at the back of her mind. A hope that something would happen to Ambrose. Not that he should be killed, of course. That was unthinkable. She wished no person dead, and certainly not a man as young, handsome, and life-loving as he. But if only, between Mediterranean battles and night patrols and U-boat hunts, he could sail into harbour and there come upon some young lady—a nurse, per-haps, or a Wren Officer—infinitely more attractive than his wife, with whom he would fall violently in love, and who, in the fulness of time, would take Penelope's place by his side and fulfil all Ambrose's wildest dreams of happiness.

He would, of course, write to tell her of this amorous entanglement.

Dear Penelope.

I hate to do this, but there is only one way to tell you. I have met Another.

What has happened between us is too big for either of us to fight. Our love for each other . . . et cetera, et cetera . . .

Every time she received one of his infrequent missives—usually impersonal aerogrammes, one page reduced to the size and shape

of a snapshot—her heart lifted in the faint hope that here at last was just such a letter, but she was invariably doomed to disappointment. Reading the few scrawled lines giving her news of wardroom friends whom she had never met, or describing a party in some other nameless ship, she knew that nothing had changed. She was still married to him. He was still her husband. And she would slip the aerogramme back into its envelope, and later—perhaps days later—sit down to try to answer it, writing an even duller letter to Ambrose than he had written to her. "We had tea with Mrs. Penberth. Ronald has joined the Sea Scouts. Nancy can draw a house." '

Nancy. Nancy was no longer a baby, and as she grew and developed, Penelope became fascinated by the child, and unexpectedly maternal. Seeing her turn from infant to toddler was like watching a bud open into a flower—a slow process, but delightful. She was, as Papa had promised, a Renoir, rose and gold, with sweeping dark lashes and small pearly teeth, and she remained the precious pet of Doris and most of Doris' friends. Sometimes Doris would wheel the perambulator home from some gathering, bearing in triumph an outgrown smock or party dress bequeathed by another young mother. This would be washed and immaculately ironed and Nancy tricked out in her new finery. Nancy loved being tricked out. "Isn't she a beauty," Doris would coo, as much to Nancy as anyone else, and Nancy would smile, much satisfied, and smooth the skirts of her new dress with fat and appreciative fingers.

At such moments, she was Dolly Keeling all over again, but even this did not spoil Penelope's pleasure and amusement. "You're a little madam," she told Nancy and hoisted the child up into her arms to hug her. "A real little hoot."

Keeping Nancy and the boys clothed and the household fed took up almost every moment of her and Doris' time. Rations had shrunk to laughable proportions. Every week, she walked down the steep streets to the town and Mr. Ridley's grocer's shop. She was "registered" with Mr. Ridley. There, she

handed over the family ration books and was sold, in return, minute quantities of sugar, butter, margarine, lard, cheese, and bacon. The meat ration was even worse, because you had to queue down the pavement for hours, without any idea of what you were queueing for, and when you bought vegetables or fruit at the greengrocer's, they were all tipped into your string bag, just the way they were, earth and all, because there was no paper for paper bags and it was considered unpatriotic to ask for one.

Strange recipes, dreamed up by the Ministry of Food, appeared in the papers, purporting to be not only economical but nourishing and delicious as well. Mr. Woolton's sausage pie, made with nigh-fatless pastry and a chunk of corned beef. A certain cake, rendered moist with the help of grated carrot, and a casserole dish that consisted almost entirely of potato. *GO EASY ON BREAD, EAT POTATOES INSTEAD*, they were exhorted by poster, just as they were exhorted to *DIG FOR VICTORY*, and warned that *CARELESS TALK COSTS LIVES*. Bread was wheat, which had to be imported, at immense peril to ships and lives, from the other side of the Atlantic. White bread had long since disappeared from the shelves of the bakers' shops, and its place taken by something called a National Loaf, which was greyish-brown and had husky shreds in it. Tweed bread, Penelope called it, and pretended to like it, but Papa pointed out that it was exactly the same colour and texture as the new utility lavatory paper, and decided that the Minister of Food and the Minister of Supply—the two gentlemen presumably responsible for such necessities of life—had somehow got their lines crossed.

It was all very difficult, and yet, at Cam Cottage, they were better off than most. They still had Sophie's ducks and hens, and made full use of the copious eggs that these obliging creatures produced, and they had Ernie Penberth.

Ernie was a Porthkerris man, had lived Downalong all his life. His father was the town greengrocer, making his collections and deliveries in a horse-drawn cart; his mother, Mrs. Penberth, a redoubtable character, was a pillar of the Women's Guild and regular chapel-goer. As a boy, Ernie had contracted tuberculosis and spent two years in the sanatorium at Tehidy, but once recovered, had been employed by Sophie on the most casual of terms, turning up when needed to do odd jobs about the place or to help with the heavy

digging in the garden. His appearance was not impressive, for he was short of stature and sallow-skinned, and because of his illness had failed his medical for the Army. So, instead of going to the war as a soldier, Ernie worked on the land, helping a local hard-pressed farmer whose own sons had been called up. Any spare time, however, that could be gleaned from this arduous labour, was dedicated to helping out the little household at Cam Cottage, and, over the years, Ernie made himself increasingly indispensable, for he proved to be a man who could turn his hand to anything; not only growing magnificent vegetables, but mending fences and lawn-mowers, unfreezing pipes and fixing fuses. He could even wring a chicken's neck, when none of the rest of them could contemplate putting to death some faithful old bird, who'd kept them in eggs for years, but was now fit only for the pot.

When food grew really short, and the meat ration shrank to a joint of oxtail for six people, Ernie, by some magic, always came to the rescue, turning up at the back door bearing a rabbit, or a couple of mackerel, or a brace of wood pigeon he had shot himself.

Meantime, Penelope and Doris did what they could to help inject a little variety into mealtimes. It was at this period that Penelope instigated the habit of a lifetime, which was to carry, whenever she went out for a walk, a haversack, bucket, or basket. Nothing was too humble to be spied, collected, and carted home. A turnip or cabbage, fallen from a cart, was borne back to Cam Cottage in triumph to form the basis of some nourishing vegetarian dish or broth. Hedgerows were gleaned for blackberries, rose hips, elderberries; and early dew-spangled meadows searched for mushrooms. They lugged home twigs and fir cones for kindling fires, fallen branches, driftwood from the beach to be sawn into logs—anything burnable that would keep the hot-water boiler going and the sitting room fire alight. Hot water was specially precious. Baths were not allowed to be more than three inches deep—Papa painted a sort of Plimsoll line, and above this no person was allowed to go—and they had fallen into the economical habit of queueing up for the same bath-water; children first and then the grown-ups, the final occupant soaping furiously before the water turned chill.

Clothes were another vexing problem. Most of everybody's clothes ration went on keeping the children shod and replacing old and worn sheets and

blankets, and there was nothing left over for personal needs. Doris, who was dressy, found this a great frustration, and was forever fashioning herself some new garment out of an old one, letting down a hem, or cutting up a cotton dress to make a blouse. Once she turned a blue laundry bag into a dirndl skirt.

"It's got *LINEN* embroidered on the front," Penelope pointed out when Doris modelled it for her approval.

"Perhaps people will think that's what I'm called."

Penelope was unbothered by the way she looked. She wore her old clothes, and when they fell to bits, raided Sophie's cupboards and purloined anything that still hung there. "How can you bear to?" Doris asked her, feeling that Sophie's clothes were sacred, and perhaps she was right. But Penelope was cold. She buttoned herself into a Shetland cardigan that had belonged to her mother, and would not allow herself a twinge of sentiment.

Most of the time she went bare-legged, but when the cold east winds of January blew, she reverted to the thick black stockings left over from her days in the WRNS, and when her threadbare overcoat finally disintegrated, she cut a hole in the middle of an old car rug (Black Watch tartan with a woollen fringe) and wore it as a poncho.

Papa said she looked like a Mexican gypsy in it, but he smiled as he said it, delighted by her enterprise. He did not smile, these days, very often. He had grown, since Sophie's death, im-mensely old and frail. His old leg wound from the First World War had started, for some reason, to play up. The cold, damp wintry weather caused him considerable pain, and he had taken to walking with a stick. He was bowed, he had grown very thin, his crippled hands curiously waxy and lifeless, like the hands of a man already dead. Incapable now of doing very much around the house and garden, he spent most of his time, mittened and shawled in rugs, by the sitting room fire, reading the newspapers or well-loved books, listening to the wireless, or writing letters in his painful, uncertain hand, to old friends who lived in other parts of the country. Sometimes, when the sun shone and the sea was blue and dancing with white-caps, he would announce that he felt like a little fresh air, whereupon Penelope would fetch his caped overcoat and his big hat and

his stick, and they would set out together, arm in arm, to make their way down the steep streets and alley-ways and into the heart of the little town, strolling along the harbour wall, watching the fishing boats and the gulls, perhaps calling in at The Sliding Tackle for a drink of anything that the landlord could produce from beneath his counter; and if he had nothing to produce, then downing tumblers of watery, lukewarm beer. Other times, if he was feeling strong enough, they went on as far as the North Beach and the old studio, locked now and seldom entered; or took the sloping lane that led to the Art Gallery, where he was happy to sit, contemplating the collection of paintings that he and his colleagues had somehow gathered together, and lost in an old man's silent and lonely memories.

And then in August, by which time Penelope had resigned herself to the fact that nothing exciting was ever going to happen again, it did. It was the boys, Ronald and Clark, who started the ball of speculation rolling. They returned from school in high dudgeon, having missed their afternoon game of football because they were, it seemed, no longer allowed to use the town rugger field at the top of the hill. It, along with two of Willie Pendervis' best pasture fields, had been requisitioned, surrounded by miles of barbed-wire fencing, and forbidden to all. The reason for this was the cause of much discussion. Some said it was to be an armoury depot in readiness for the Second Front. Others, a prisoner-of-war camp; or, yet again, a powerful wireless station for sending secret coded messages to Mr. Roosevelt. Porthkerris, in short, was rife with rumour.

Doris was the bearer of the next mysterious manifestation of warlike activity. Out for a walk with Nancy, she came home by way of the main road, and returned to Cam Cottage bursting with news.

"That old White Caps Hotel—the one that's stood empty for months . . . Well, it's all been done up. Painted and scrubbed, bright as a penny, and the car-park's full of trucks and those American Jeep things, and there's a smashing Royal Marine Commando on guard at the gate. That's right. Royal Marines. I saw his cap badge. Fancy that. Bit of fun having a few soldiers round the place ..."

"Royal Marines? What on earth are they doing here?"

"Perhaps they're going to invade Europe. Do you suppose it's the start of the Second Front?"

Penelope considered this unlikely. "Invade Europe from Porthkerris? Oh, Doris, they'd all drown themselves trying to get round Land's End."

"Well, it's got to be something."

And then, overnight, it seemed, Porthkerris lost its North Pier. More barbed-wire entanglements appeared, clear across the harbour road, just past The Sliding Tackle, and all beyond, including the Fish Market and the Salvation Army hut, were declared Admiralty property. The deep-water moorings at the end of the pier were cleared of fishing boats, and their place taken by a dozen or so small landing craft. All of this was discreetly guarded by a handful of Royal Marine Commandos, wearing bat-tledress and green berets. Their presence in the town caused a mild stir, but still nobody could come up with a reasonable explanation of what it was all about.

It was not until the middle of the month that they were finally enlightened. There had come a spell of perfect weather, warm and breezy, and this particular morning Penelope and

Lawrence had taken themselves out of doors, she to sit on the front-door step and shell peas for lunch, and he to recline in a deck-chair set up on the grass, with his hat tipped over his eyes to shade them from the glare. As they sat there, in companionable silence, a sound reached their ears—the bottom gate being opened and shut. Both looked up, and presently observed General Watson-Grant making his way up the stone steps between the fuchsia hedges.

While Colonel Trubshot was in charge of the ARP in Porthkerris, General Watson-Grant commanded the local Home Guard. Lawrence detested Colonel Trubshot, but he had a lot of time for the General who, although he had spent most of his Army life stationed in Quetta and skirmishing with the Afghans, had, on retirement, put these warlike activities behind him and, instead, absorbed himself in peaceful pursuits and accomplishments, for he was a keen gardener and the possessor of a considerable collection of stamps.

Today he did not wear his Home Guard uniform but a cream drill suit, probably fashioned in Delhi, and a battered panama hat with a faded black silk ribbon. He carried a stick, and glancing up to see Penelope and Lawrence waiting for him, raised this in greeting.

"Good morning. Another lovely day."

He was a small man, spare as a whip, with a stubbly moustache and a leather-coloured skin, legacy of years on the North-West Frontier. Lawrence watched his approach with pleasure. The General called only from time to time, but his visits were always welcome. "Not interrupting you, am I?"

"Not at all. We're doing nothing but enjoy the sun. Forgive me if I don't get up. Penelope, get the General another chair."

Penelope, who wore her cooking apron and no shoes, set aside the colander of pea pods and stood up.

"Good morning, General Watson-Grant."

"Ah, Penelope. Nice to see you, my dear. Busy with the cookhouse? Left Dorothy slicing beans."

"Would you like a cup of coffee?"

The General considered her offer. He had walked a long way, and was not a coffee man, preferring gin. Lawrence knew this, and made the token gesture of looking at his watch. "Twelve o'clock. Surely something a little stronger. What have we got, Penelope?"

She laughed. "I don't think very much, but I'll look."

She went into the house, dark after the brightness of the out of doors. Found, in the dining room sideboard, a couple of bottles of Guinness, tumblers and a bottle opener. She put these on a tray, carried them out and set them down on the front-door step, and then went back to fetch the General his chair. This she set up for him, and he settled himself gratefully, perched forward, with

his bony knees sticking up and his narrow trousers riding high, revealing knobbly ankles in yellow socks and leather brogues shiny as chestnuts.

"This is the life," he remarked.

Penelope took the cap off a bottle and poured his drink. "It's Guinness, I'm afraid. We've had no gin for months."

"Just the ticket. As for the gin, we finished our ration a month ago. Mr. Ridley's promised me a bottle when his next allocation comes through, but heaven knows when that's going to be. Well. Cheers."

He downed half the long drink in what appeared to be a single swallow. Penelope returned to her pea-podding and listened while the two elderly men inquired after each other's health and exchanged a few scraps of gossip and comments on the weather and the general state of the war. She was, however, pretty certain that this was not the reason for the General's visit and, when there came a pause in the conversation, she chipped in.

"General Watson-Grant, I'm sure you're the very person to tell us what's going on in Porthkerris. The camp on the rigger pitch, and the harbour closed, and the Royal Marines moving in. Everybody's guessing, but nobody knows. Ernie Penberth is our usual source of information, but he's harvesting, and we haven't seen him for three weeks.

"As a matter of fact," said the General, "I do know."

Lawrence said quickly, "Don't tell us if it's secret."

"I've known for some weeks but it's all been kept under wraps. However, now I can tell you. It's a training exercise. Cliff-climbing. The Royal Marines are instructing."

"And who are they going to instruct?"

"A company of United States Rangers."

"United States Rangers? You mean we are about to be in-vaded by Americans?"

The General looked amused. "Better Americans than Ger-mans."

"Is the camp for the Americans?" Penelope asked.

"Exactly so."

"Have the Rangers arrived yet?"

"No, not yet. I imagine we'll know when they do. Poor devils. They've probably spent their lives on the prairie or the flat plains of Kansas, never seen the sea in their lives. Imagine being dumped down at Porthkerris and then invited to climb Boscarben Cliffs."

"Boscarben Cliffs?" Penelope felt quite faint. "I can't think of anything worse than being taught to climb at Boscarben. The cliffs there are perpendicular and about a thousand feet high."

"I suppose that's the whole idea," said the General. "Though, I must say I agree with you, Penelope. The very prospect gives me vertigo. Rather them than me, poor bloody Yanks." Penelope grinned. The General had never minced his words, and this was one of the things she most liked about him.

"And the landing craft?" Lawrence asked.

"Transport. They'll take them round to the cliffs by sea. Should think they'll be dead with mal de mer before they've even landed the craft on the shingle at the foot of the cliffs."

Penelope felt even sorrier for the poor young Americans. "They'll wonder what's hit them. And what will they do with their spare time? Porthkerris isn't exactly a hotbed of wild social activity, and The Sliding Tackle's not the most lively pub in the world. Besides, there's nobody here. All the young people have gone. Nobody left but grass widows and little children and old people. Like us."

"Doris will be thrilled," Lawrence observed. "American soldiers, all talking like film stars, will make a nice change."

The General laughed. "It's always a problem to know what to do with a lot of randy soldiery. But by the time they've been up and down the Boscarben Cliffs a couple of times, I don't suppose they'll have much energy left for . . ." He paused, searching for an acceptable word. "Gallivanting" was all he could come up with.

It was Lawrence's turn to laugh. "I think it's all very excit-ing." He was struck by a bright idea. "Let's go and gawp, Penelope. Now that we know what it's all about, let's go and see for ourselves. We'll go this afternoon."

"Oh, Papa. There's nothing to see."

"Plenty to see. Bit of new blood around the place. We could do with something happening, provided it's not a stray bomb. Now, General, your drink is finished . . . have the other half."

The General considered this proposal. Penelope said quickly, "There isn't any more. Those were the last two bottles."

"In that case"—the General laid his empty tumbler on the grass by his feet—"I should be on my way. See how Dorothy's getting on with tiffin." He pulled himself, with some difficulty, out of the sagging deckchair, and they all followed suit. "That was splendid. Most refreshing."

"Thank you for coming. And putting us in the picture."

"I thought you might like to know. Thought you were probably wondering what it was all about. It makes everything feel a bit more hopeful, doesn't it? As though we might be staggering towards the conclusion of this flaming war." He tipped his hat. "Goodbye, Penelope."

"Goodbye. And my regards to your wife."

"I'll convey them."

"I'll see you to the gate," said Lawrence, and they moved off together. Penelope, watching them make their way down the garden, was reminded of two old dogs. A dignified St. Bernard and a wiry little Jack Russell. The reached the steps and began, with some care, to descend them. She stooped to pick up the pan of shelled peas and the colander of pods and carried them indoors, to find Doris and relay everything that General Watson-Grant had told her and Lawrence.

"Americans." Doris could scarcely believe their good for-tune. "Americans in Porthkerris. Oh, thank God for that, a bit of life at last. Americans." She repeated the magic word. "Well, we thought of a lot of funny things, didn't we, but we never came up with Americans."

General Watson-Grant's visit had the effect on Lawrence of a shot in the arm. Over lunch they all talked of nothing else, and when Penelope emerged from the kitchen, after clearing the meal away and washing up the dishes, she found him waiting for her, already dressed for outdoor activity, with a worn corduroy jacket to protect his old bones from the nippy breeze, and a scarlet muffler wound round his neck. He wore his hat and his mittens, and sat patiently, leaning against the hall chest, with his hands resting on the horn handle of his stick.

"Papa."

"Let's be off then."

She had a thousand things to do. Vegetables to be thinned and weeded, the grass to be cut, and a pile of ironing to be dealt with.

"You really want to go?"

"Said I did, didn't I? Said I wanted to go and gawp,"

"Well, you'll have to wait a moment or two, till I find a pair of shoes."

"Get a move on then. We haven't all day."

Which was exactly what they had, but she didn't say this. She went back into the kitchen, to tell Doris the plan, and to give Nancy a quick kiss, and then ran upstairs to put on sneakers, wash her face, brush her hair and tie it back with an old silk scarf. She took a cardigan out of a drawer, tied it round her shoulders, ran downstairs again.

He waited just as she had left him, but when she appeared, heaved himself to his feet.

"You look beautiful, my darling."

"Oh, Papa, thank you."

"On our way then, to inspect the Military."

As soon as they were out of doors, she was glad that he had made her come, for it was a perfect afternoon, bright and blue with the tide in and the bay capped with scuds of white foam. Trevoise Head was drowned in haze, but the breeze was cool and smelt salty. Reaching the main road, they crossed it and stood for a moment gazing out over the buttress-like wall that formed part of the cliff. They looked down onto roof-tops and steep gardens and crooked lanes which led to a small railway station and so down onto the beach. Before the war, in August the beach would have been crowded, but now it was almost deserted. The barbed-wire entanglements, which had been erected in 1940, still stood between the putting green and the sand, but there was an open gap in the middle, and through this a handful of families had made their way, with children running, screaming to paddle, and dogs chasing the gulls along the edge of the waves. Far below, out of the wind, a tiny walled garden revealed itself, where pink roses smothered an old apple tree and a palm rattled its dry leaves in the wind.

After a little, they sauntered on, down the slope of the hill. The road curved, and the White Caps Hotel was revealed, a detached stone house in a row of similar houses, with heavy sash windows facing out over the bay. It had stood empty and dilapidated for some time, but now they saw that it had been

freshened up with white paint and looked startlingly trim. The tall iron railings which fronted the car-park had been painted too, and the car-park was full of khaki trucks and Jeeps. At the open gateway, a young Marine stood guard.

"Well, I never did," Lawrence remarked. "Doris got it right for once."

They drew closer. Saw the white flagstaff, the flag snapping in the wind. Newly scrubbed granite steps led up to the front door sparkling in the sunshine. They paused to stare. The young Marine, on guard at the pavement's edge, stared back at them, impassive.

After a bit, "We'd better get moving," Lawrence said. "Otherwise, we'll be shunted on, like a couple of street-walkers."

But before they could do this, there came a flurry of activity from inside the building. The inner glassed door was opened, and two uniformed figures appeared. A Major and a Sergeant. They ran down the steps with a fine military clatter of booted feet, crossed the gravel and got into one of the Jeeps. The Sergeant drove. He started the engine, backed, and turned. As they came through the gate, the young Marine on guard saluted and the Officer returned his salute. Emerging onto the main road, they paused for a second, but there was no traffic, and at once the Jeep turned out and down the hill in the direction of the town, at some speed and creating a good deal of din.

Penelope and her father watched it disappear beyond the curved terrace of quiet houses. When the sound of the Jeep engine had died away, "Come," said Lawrence, "let's get on."

"Where are we going?"

"To see the landing craft, of course. And then the Gallery. We haven't been for weeks."

The Gallery. That meant goodbye to any plans for the rest of the afternoon. Ready with objections, Penelope turned towards him, but saw his dark eyes bright with the prospect of pleasure, and hadn't the heart to spoil his fun.

She smiled, assenting, slipped her hand beneath his arm.

"All right. The landing craft, and then the Gallery. But let's take our time. No point in getting exhausted."

The Gallery, even in August, was always chill. The thick granite walls kept out the warmth of the sun, and the tall windows let in all the draughts. As well, the floor was slate-flagged, and there was no form of heating, and today the wind, gusting up from the North Beach, delivered from time to time great clouts upon the building, causing the framework of the northern skylight to shudder and rattle. Mrs. Trewey, who was on duty by the door, sat at an old card table piled with catalogues and picture postcards, with a rug around her shoulders and a small electric fire scorching her shins.

Penelope and Lawrence were the only visitors. They sat side by side on the long, aged leather couch that stood in the middle of the floor. They sat in silence. This was the tradition. Lawrence did not wish to talk. He liked to be left alone, perched forward, his chin resting upon his hands, supported by his stick, intent upon the familiar works, remembering, communing contentedly with his old friends, many of whom were now dead.

Penelope, accepting this, sat back, huddled into her cardigan, with her long bare brown legs stretched out in front of her. Her sneakers had holes in the toes. She thought about shoes. Nancy needed shoes, but she needed a new thick sweater as well, with the winter coming on, and there were insufficient clothes coupons for both. It would have to be shoes. As for a sweater, perhaps Penelope could unearth some old hand-knitted garment, unravel the wool, and re-knit it for Nancy. This had been done before, but it was a tedious and fiddly job, and she did not relish the prospect. How wonderful it would be to go and buy new wool, rose pink or primrose yellow, thick and soft, and knit Nancy something really pretty.

Behind them the door opened and shut. A draught of cold air stirred and died. Another visitor. Neither Penelope nor her father shifted. Footsteps. A man. A few words were exchanged with Mrs. Trewey. And then came the slow, halting tread of booted feet as the newcomer made his way around the room.

After ten minutes or so, he moved into the edge of Penelope's vision. Still

thinking about Nancy's sweater, she turned her head and looked at him, and saw the back view of what could only be the Royal Marine Major who had been driven away, so dashing, in the Jeep. Khaki battledress, green beret, a crown on his shoulder-straps. Unmistakable. She watched his progress as he moved slowly towards them, his hands clasped behind his back. Then, when he was only a few yards away, he turned, aware of their presence, perhaps diffident of disturbing them. He was tall and wiry, his face unremarkable save for a pair of astonishingly light and clear blue eyes.

Penelope met his glance, and felt embarrassed to be caught staring. She turned away. It was left to Lawrence to break the ensuing silence. All at once he became aware of the newcomer, and raised his head to see who it could be.

There came another gust of wind, another shudder and rattle of glass. When this had died, Lawrence said, "Good afternoon."

"Good afternoon, sir."

Beneath the brim of his great black hat, Lawrence's eyes narrowed in puzzlement. "Aren't you the man we watched set off in the Jeep?"

"That's right, sir. You were on the other side of the road. I thought I recognized you." His voice was cool, lightly pitched.

"Where's your Sergeant?"

"Down at the harbour."

"It hasn't taken you long to find this place."

"I've been here three days, and this is the first opportunity I've had to pay a visit."

"You mean, you knew about the Gallery?"

"But of course. Who doesn't?"

"Far too many people." Another pause while Lawrence's eyes travelled over the stranger. On such occasions, he had a sharp and brilliant regard, which many people, subjected to it, found unnerving. The Royal Marine Major, however, did not appear to be unnerved. He simply waited, and Lawrence, liking his coolness, visibly relaxed. He said abruptly, "I'm Lawrence Stern."

"I thought you might be. I hoped you would be. I'm honoured to meet you."

"And this is my daughter, Penelope Keeling."

He said, "How do you do," but made no move to come forward and shake her hand.

Penelope said, "Hi."

"You'd better tell us your name."

"It's Lomax, sir. Richard Lomax."

"Well, Major Lomax." Lawrence patted the worn leather beside him. "Come and sit down. You make me feel uncomfortable, standing there. Never was much of a one for standing."

Major Lomax, still looking unperturbed, complied with this suggestion, coming to settle himself on Lawrence's other side. He leaned forward, relaxed, his hands between his knees.

"It was you who started up the Gallery, wasn't it, sir?"

"Me and a lot of other people. Early nineteen twenties, it was. This used to be a chapel. Stood empty for years. We got it for a song, but then had the problem of filling it with only the best of paintings. To form a nucleus of a rare collection, we all donated a favourite work. See." He leaned back, and used his stick as a pointer. "Stanhope Forbes. Laura Knight. What a particular beauty that is."

"And unusual. I always associate her with circuses."

"That was done at Porthcurno." His stick moved on. "Lamorna Birch. Munnings. Montague Dawson. Thomas Millie Dow. Russell Flint . . ."

"I must tell you, sir, that my father had one of your paint-ings. Unfortunately, when he died, his house was sold and the picture went as well. . . ."

"Which one was that?"

They talked on. Penelope stopped listening. She stopped brooding about Nancy's wardrobe, and started thinking about food instead. Supper this evening. What could she give them? Macaroni cheese? There was a rind of Cheddar left over from the week's ration, which could be grated into a sauce. Or cauliflower cheese. But they'd had cauliflower cheese two nights ago, and the children would complain.

". . . you have no modern works here?"

"As you can see. Does that bother you?"

"No."

"You like them, though?"

"Mir6 and Picasso I love. Chagall and Braque fill me with joy. Dali I hate."

Lawrence chuckled. "Surrealism. A cult. But soon, after this war, something splendid is going to happen. I and my generation, and the generation which followed it, have gone as far as we can go. The prospect of the revolution which will come to the world of art is something which fills me with enormous excitement. For that reason only, I should like to be a young man again. To be able to watch it all happening. Because, one day, they will come. As we came. Young men with bright visions and deep perceptions and tremendous talent. They will come, not to paint the bay and the sea and the boats and the moors, but the warmth of the sun and the colour of the wind. A whole new concept. Such stimulation. Such vitality. Marvellous." He sighed.

"And I shall be dead before it even begins. Do you wonder I feel regretful? To miss all that."

"There is only so much each man can do in his lifetime."

"True. But it is hard not to be greedy. It is human nature always to want more."

Another silence fell. Penelope, thinking of supper, glanced at her watch. It was a quarter to four. By the time they reached Cam Cottage it would be nearly five.

She said, "Papa, we should go."

He scarcely heard her. "Hm?"

"I said, it's time we started for home."

"Yes. Yes, of course." He collected himself, gathered himself up, but before he could struggle to his feet, Major Lomax was upright and ready to help him. "Thank you . . . very kind. Age is a terrible thing." He was finally erect. "Arthritis is worse. I haven't painted for years."

"I'm sorry."

When they were finally ready to make their way, Major Lomax walked to the door with them. Outside, in the windy cobbled square, his Jeep was parked. He was apologetic. "I'd like to be able to drive you home, but it's against regulations to take civilians in Service vehicles."

"We prefer to walk," Lawrence assured him. "We take our time. "Nice to talk to you."

"I hope I'll see you again."

"But of course. You must come and have a meal with us."

He stood considering this brilliant idea. Penelope, with a sinking heart, knew exactly what he was going to say next. She dug him in the ribs with her elbow but he ignored her warning, and it was too late. "Come and have supper this evening."

She hissed at him furiously. "Papa, there isn't anything for supper. I don't even know what we're going to eat."

"Oh." He looked hurt, let down, but Major Lomax made it all right. "So very kind of you, but I'm afraid this evening is no good for me."

"Another time, maybe."

"Yes, sir. Thank you. Another time I should like that very much."

"We're always around."

"Come on, Papa."

"Au revoir then, Captain Lomax." He raised his stick in farewell, took heed at last of Penelope's urging, and moved forward. But still, he was put out.

"That was rude," he reproached her. "Sophie never refused a guest, even if there was nothing more to offer him than bread and cheese."

"Well, he couldn't have come anyway."

Arm in arm, they made their way down' the sloping cobbles towards the harbour road, and the first stage of the long walk home. She did not look back but still had the feeling that Major Lomax stayed where he was, standing by his Jeep, watching their progress until they finally turned the corner by The Sliding Tackle and were lost from his view.

The excitement and stimulation of the afternoon, added to the long walk and copious intakes of fresh air, rendered the old man very tired. It was with some relief that Penelope finally steered him up the garden and through the open front door of Cam Cottage, where he at once collapsed into a chair and

sat, slowly getting his breath. She removed his hat and hung it up, unwound the muffler from his neck. She took one of his mittened hands between her own and rubbed it gently, as though this small attention might bring the life back to his waxy twisted fingers.

"Next time we go to the Gallery, Papa, we'll get a taxi to take us back."

"We should have taken the Bentley. Why didn't we take the Bentley?"

"Because we can't get any petrol for it."

"Not much use without petrol."

After a little, he was sufficiently recovered to make his way into the sitting room, where she settled him into the familiar sagging cushions of his chair.

"I'll make you a cup of tea."

"Don't bother. I'll have a little sleep."

He leaned back and closed his eyes. She knelt at the fire and put a match to paper, waited until sticks and coal had kindled. He opened his eyes. "A fire in August?"

"I don't want you getting cold." She stood up. "You're all right?"

"Of course." He smiled at her, a smile of grateful love. "Thank you for coming with me. It was a good afternoon."

"I'm happy you enjoyed it."

"Enjoyed meeting that young man. Enjoyed talking to him. Haven't talked like that for a long time. A long time. We will have him here for a meal, won't we? I'd like to see him again."

"Yes, of course."

"We'll get Ernie to shoot some pigeon. He'd like pigeon. . . ." His eyes closed again. She left him.

By the end of August, the harvest had been gathered in, the United States Rangers had taken possession of the new camp at the top of the hill, and the weather had broken.

The harvest was a good one, and the farmers were well satisfied. Doubtless, in the fulness of time, they would be given a pat on the head by the Ministry of Agriculture. As for the American troops, they made less impact on Porthkerris than had been feared. Gloomy forebodings by staunch chapel-goers proved un-founded, and there were no drunks, brawls, or rapes. On the contrary, they seemed exceptionally well-behaved and well-mannered. Young, rangy, and crew-cut, wearing camouflage jackets and red berets, they padded the streets in their rubber-soled boots and, apart from a few statutory wolf whistles and friendly overtures to the children, whose pockets soon bulged with chocolate and chewing-gum, their presence made little difference to the day-to-day life of the little town. Under orders, perhaps for security reasons, they kept a low profile, and made the journey between the camp and the harbour sardined into the backs of trucks or driving Jeeps with trailers piled with ropes, crampons, and grappling irons. On these occasions, they would whistle dutifully at any lady who happened to pass, as though anxious to live up to the wild reputation that had preceded them. But as the days went by and their exhaustive training proceeded, it became clear that General Watson-Grant had been right, and men who spent their waking hours enduring wild sea journeys and the chilling face of the Boscarben Cliffs had no thought in mind, at the end of the day, but a hot shower, food, and sleep.

To add to their discomfort, the weather, after weeks of sunshine, had become appalling. The wind swung around to the north-west, the barometer dropped, and the rain came in squalls, low grey clouds of it, pouring in from the ocean. Down in the town, the wet cobbles of narrow streets shone like fish scales, and gutters ran with rogue water and sodden scraps of rubbish. At Cam Cottage, the flower borders were blown to wet ribbons, an old tree lost a branch, and the kitchen was festooned with wet washing, because there was no other place to dry it.

It was enough, as Lawrence remarked, gazing from the window, to damp any person's ardour.

The sea was grey and angry. Stormy rollers thundered in onto the North Beach, depositing a fresh scouring of flotsam far beyond the usual high-water line. But, as well as flotsam, other and more interesting objects were washed up. The sad remains of a merchant ship, torpedoed and sunk out in the Atlantic months or weeks before, and finally carried ashore by the tides and the prevailing wind: a lifebelt or two, some shattered decking, and a number of wooden crates.

Ernie Penberth's father, out in the early morning with his horse and vegetable cart, was the first to spy them. At eleven o'clock on the same day, Ernie appeared at the back door of Cam Cottage. Penelope was peeling apples, and looked up from this task to see him there, his black oilskin dripping with water and a saturated cap pulled down over his nose. But he was grinning.

"Like some tinned peaches, would you?"

"Tinned peaches? You're pulling my leg."

"My dad's got two crates of them down at the shop. Picked them up off the North Beach. Got them back and opened them up. Californian tinned peaches. Good as fresh."

"What a windfall! Can I really have some?"

"He's put aside six for you. Thought the children would like them. Says if you like, to go down; you can get them any time."

"He is a saint! Oh, Ernie, thank you. I'll go this afternoon, before he changes his mind."

"He won't do that."

"Do you want to eat with us?"

"No, better get back. Thanks all the same."

As soon as lunch was over, Penelope duly set out, booted, buttoned into an old yellow oilskin, and with a woollen hat pulled down over her ears. She carried two sturdy shopping baskets, and once she had become accustomed to the force of the wind—which threatened, from time to time, to hurl her off her feet—and gusts of rain, driving, needle-sharp, into her face, the wild weather became exhilarating and she began to enjoy herself. Dropping down into the town, she found it strangely deserted. The storm had driven everyone indoors, but the feeling of isolation, of having the place to herself, served only to increase her satisfaction. She was made to feel intrepid, like an explorer.

Mr. Penberth's greengrocery store was Downalong, half-way along the harbour road. It was possible to reach by a maze of back lanes, but instead she chose the way that led by the sea and, turning the corner by the Lifeboat House, stepped out into the teeth of the gale. The tide was high, the harbour a-brim with raging grey water. Screaming gulls were blown in all directions, fishing boats rocked and swayed at anchor, and at the far end of the North Pier, she saw the landing craft bobbing and dancing at their moorings. The weather was obviously too wild even for the Commandos to venture out.

It was with some relief that she came at last to the greengrocer's, a tiny triangular building at the junction of two narrow lanes. As she opened the door and stepped inside, a bell jangled overhead. The shop was empty, smelling pleasantly of parsnips and apples and earth, but when she shut the door, a curtain in the back wall was raised and Mr. Penberth appeared, wearing his usual garb of navy-blue guernsey and mushroom-shaped cap.

"It's me," she said unnecessarily, dripping water all over his floor.

"Thought it might be." He had his son's dark eyes and the same grin, though fewer teeth. "Walk down, did you? That's some bugger of a day. But the gale's blown itself out, it'll be fair by evening. Just heard the shipping forecast on the wireless. Get my message, did you? Ernie tell you about the tinned peaches?"

"Why else do you think I'm here? Nancy hasn't tasted a peach in her life."

"Better come through to the back. Keeping them hidden, I am. People find out I've got tinned peaches, and my life won't be worth living." He held aside the curtain and she carried her baskets through into the cramped and cluttered space at the back of the shop, which did duty as store-room and office. Here simmered a black stove, which was never allowed to go out, and here Mr. Penberth did his telephoning, and made himself cups of tea when business was quiet. Today it smelt strongly of fish, but Penelope scarcely noticed this, her attention being wholly taken up by the piles of cans that were stacked on every available horizontal surface . . . Mr. Penberth's loot of the morning.

"What a find! Ernie said they were on the North Beach. How did you get the crates back here?"

"Fetched my neighbour. He gave me a hand. Humped them home in the cart. Six be enough for you, will it?"

"More than enough."

He loaded three into each of her baskets. "How are you off for fish?" he asked.

"Why?"

Mr. Penberth disappeared beneath the knee-hole of his desk and emerged with the source of the fishy smell. Penelope, looking into the bucket, saw it was nearly filled with blue-and-silver mackerel. "One of the boys was out this morning, swapped me these for some of the peaches. Mrs. Penberth won't eat mackerel, says they're dirty fish. Thought you could use them. Fresh, they are."

"If I could have half a dozen, they'd do us for supper."

"Lovely," said Mr. Penberth. Rummaging, he unearthed an old newspaper, bundled the fish into clumsy parcels, and laid them on top of the peach tins. "There." Penelope picked up the baskets. They were extremely heavy. Mr.

Penberth frowned. "Going to manage, are you? Not too weighty for you? I could bring them up, mind, next time I'm your way in the cart, but the mackerel won't stay fresh for another day."

"I'll manage."

"Well, I hope you'll all enjoy them. . . ." He saw her to the door. "How's Nancy?"

"Blooming."

"Tell her and Doris to come and see us soon. Haven't set eyes on them for a month or more."

"I'll tell them. And thank you, Mr. Penberth, so much."

He opened the door to the chinkle of the bell. "It's a pleasure, my dear."

Weighed down with peaches and fish, Penelope set off for home. Now, well into the afternoon, there were a few more people around, emerging to shop or go about their business. And Mr. Penberth had been right about the weather forecast. The tide had turned, the wind already was beginning to drop, the rain to ease off. She looked up and saw, high in the sky beyond the racing black clouds, a ragged scrap of blue sky. Enough to make a cat a pair of trousers. She walked briskly, feeling relatively cheerful, for once not having to worry over what she was going to give everyone for supper. But after a bit the laden baskets began to take their toll, her hands ached and her arms felt as though they were being tugged out of their sockets. It crossed her mind that perhaps she had been wrong in refusing Mr. Penberth's offer of delivery, but almost at once this thought was chased from her mind by the sound of a fast-approaching vehicle, coming from behind her, from the direction of the North Pier.

The road was narrow and the puddles deep. Not wishing to be drenched in a wave of dirty water, she stepped aside to wait until the oncoming car was safely past. It shot by, and then, a few yards on and with a screech of brakes, almost immediately halted. She saw the open Jeep, the two familiar

uniformed occupants. Major Lomax and his Sergeant. The Jeep stayed where it was, its engine running, but from it Major Lomax, unfolding his long legs, stepped out into the road and walked back to where she stood.

Without preliminaries, he said, "You look overburdened."

Grateful for an excuse to be shed of her baskets, Penelope set them down on the pavement and straightened to face him. "I

am.

"We met the other day."

"I remember."

"Have you been shopping?"

"No. Collecting a present. Six tins of peaches. They were blown up this morning on the North Beach. And some mack-erel."

"How far have you got to carry them?"

"Home."

"Where's that?"

"At the top of the hill."

"Can't they be delivered?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I want to eat them tonight."

Amused, he smiled. The smile did something extraordinary to his face and

caused her to look at, and really see him, for the first time. "Unremarkable" had been her own private verdict, that day he had ambled in on them at the Gallery, but now she saw that, on the contrary, he was not unremarkable in the very least, for his well-ordered features, his strangely brilliant blue eyes, and that unexpected smile assembled themselves into a pattern of quite extraordinary charm.

He said, "Perhaps we can help."

"How?"

"We can't give you a ride, but I can see no reason why Sergeant Burton shouldn't drive your peaches home."

"He'd never find the way."

"You underestimate him." With that, he stooped and picked up the baskets. He said, quite crossly, "You shouldn't be carrying these. You'll hurt yourself."

"I carry shopping all the time. Everybody has to. . . ."

She was ignored. Major Lomax was already on his way back to the Jeep. Penelope, still feebly protesting, went after him. "I can manage. . . ."

"Sergeant Burton."

The Sergeant switched off the engine. "Sir?"

"These are to be delivered." He stowed the baskets firmly onto the back seat of the Jeep. "The young lady will give you directions."

The Sergeant turned to her, waiting politely. With no apparent alternative, Penelope did as she was told. ". . . up the hill, and then right at Grabney's Garage, and then follow the road till you get to the top. There's a high wall and it's called Cam Cottage. You'll have to leave the Jeep on the road and walk through the garden."

"Anyone at home, miss?"

"Yes. My father."

"What's his name, miss?"

"Mr. Stern. If he doesn't hear you ... if nobody answers the bell, just leave the baskets on the doorstep."

"Right, miss." He waited.

Major Lomax said, "That's settled, then. Carry on, Ser-geant. I'll walk the rest of the way. See you back at HQ."

"Sir."

He saluted, started up his engine, and was off, with his cargo looking strangely domestic on the back seat of the Jeep. It rounded the corner by the Lifeboat House and was gone. Penelope was left with the Major. She felt ill at ease, disconcerted by this unexpected turn of events. She also felt unsatisfied with her appearance, which normally troubled her not in the very least. There was, however, nothing to be done about it, except pull off the unbecoming woollen hat and shake loose her hair. She did this, stuffing the hat into the pocket of her oilskin.

He said, "Shall we go?"

Her hands were cold, so she put them into her pockets as well.

"Do you really want to walk?" she asked him doubtfully.

"I wouldn't be here if I didn't."

"Haven't you anything else you should be doing?"

"Like what?"

"An exercise to plan, or a report to be written?"

"No. The rest of the day is my own."

They began to walk. A thought struck Penelope. She said, "I hope your Sergeant doesn't get into trouble. I'm sure he's not allowed to carry people's shopping in his Jeep."

"If anybody gives him a rocket, it's me. And how are you so sure?"

"I was in the Wrens for about two months, so I know all about rules and regulations. I wasn't allowed to carry a handbag or an umbrella. It made life very difficult."

He appeared interested. "When were you in the Wrens?"

"Oh, ages ago. In nineteen-forty. I was in Portsmouth."

"Why did you leave?"

"I had a baby. I got married and I had a baby."

"I see."

"She's nearly three. She's called Nancy."

"Is your husband in the Navy?"

"Yes. He's in the Mediterranean, I think. I'm never very sure."

"How long is it since you've seen him?"

"Oh ..." She could not remember and did not want to. "Ages." As she said this, high above, the clouds parted for an instant, and a watery gleam of sunshine broke through. The wet streets threw back the reflection of this light, and stone and slate were washed in gold. Amazed, Penelope turned up her face to this momentary brilliance. "It really is clearing. Mr. Penberth said

it would. He listened to the weather forecast and he said the storm would blow over. Perhaps it will be a beautiful evening."

"Yes, perhaps it will."

The sunlight disappeared as swiftly as it had come, and all was grey again. But the rain had finally stopped.

She said, "Don't let's go up through the town. Let's go by the sea and up by the railway station. There's a flight of steps that comes out exactly opposite the White Caps Hotel."

"I'd like that. I haven't really found my way around yet, but I suppose you know it like the back of your hand. Have you lived here always?"

"In the summer-time. In winter we lived in London. And in between we went to France. My mother was French. We had friends there. But we've been in Porthkerris ever since the outbreak of war. I suppose we'll all stay here till it ends."

"How about your husband? Doesn't he want you around when he comes ashore?"

They had turned into a narrow lane that ran alongside the beach. Pebbles had been flung up onto this by the high tide, and scraps of seaweed and a ravelled end of tarry rope. She stooped and picked up a pebble and slung it out into the sea. She said, "I told you. He's in the Mediterranean. And even if I could be with him, I couldn't, because I have to take care of Papa. My mother was killed in the Blitz in nineteen-forty-one. So I have to stay with him."

He did not say, I'm sorry. He said again, "I see," and sounded as though he really did.

"It's not just him and me and Nancy. We've got Doris living with us and her two boys. They were evacuees. She's a war widow. She never went back to London." She looked at him. "Papa liked talking to you that day in the Gallery. He was cross with me because I couldn't ask you for supper ... he

said I was very rude. I didn't mean to be. It's just that there wasn't anything I could think of to eat."

"I much enjoyed meeting him. When I knew I was being sent here, it crossed my mind that perhaps I might see the famous Lawrence Stern, but I never really imagined it would happen. I thought he'd be too old and frail to go out and about. When I saw you first, up on the road outside HQ, I knew at once that it had to be him. And then, when I walked into the Gallery and you were actually there, I could scarcely believe my luck. Such a painter, he was." He looked down at her. "Have you inherited his talent?"

"No. It's very frustrating. Often I see something that is so beautiful it hurts, like an old farm building, or foxgloves growing on a hedge, blowing in the wind against a blue sky. And I wish so much that I could capture them, put them on paper, keep them for ever. And, of course, I can't."

"It's not easy to live with one's own inadequacies."

It occurred to her then that he did not look a man who knew what the word "inadequate" meant. "Do you paint?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"Talking to Papa, you sounded so knowledgeable."

"If I did, it was because I was brought up by an immensely artistic and creative mother. As soon as I could walk, I was marched around every gallery and museum in London, and made to go to concerts."

"It sounds as though you might have been put off culture for life."

"No. She did it quite tactfully and made it all immensely interesting. Made it fun."

"And your father?"

"My father was a stockbroker, in the City."

She thought about this. Other people's lives were always fascinating. "Where did you live?"

"Cadogan Gardens. But after he died, my mother sold the house because it was too big, and moved into a smaller one in Pembroke Square. She's there now. She stayed there all through the bombing. She said she'd rather be dead than live anywhere but London."

Penelope thought of Dolly Keeling, snug in her little bolt-hole at the Coombe Hotel, playing bridge with Lady Bloody Beamish and writing long loving letters to Ambrose. She sighed, because thinking about Dolly always made her feel a bit depressed. There was always this guilty feeling that Dolly should be asked to stay at Cam Cottage for a few days, if only to see her granddaughter. Or that Penelope should suggest visiting the Coombe Hotel, taking Nancy with her. But both prospects were so appalling that she never found it too difficult to put them hastily out of her mind, and start thinking about something else instead.

The narrow road leaned uphill. They had left the sea behind them and now walked up between rows of whitewashed, terraced fishermen's cottages. A door opened and a cat emerged, followed by a woman with a basket of washing, which she proceeded to peg out on a line slung across the face of her house. As she did this, the sun came out again, quite strongly now, and she turned a smiling face upon them.

"That's a bit better, isn't it. Never seen such rain as we had this morning. Be lovely before long."

The cat wound itself around Penelope's ankles. She stooped to stroke it. They went on. She took her hands out of her pockets and unbuttoned her oilskin. She said, "Did you join the Royal Marines because you didn't want to be a stockbroker, or because of the war?"

"Because of the war. I'm known as an Hostilities Only Officer. I always think it sounds a bit derogatory. But neither did I want to be a stockbroker. I went to University and read Classics and English Literature, and then I got a

job teaching little boys in a Prep School."

"Did the Royal Marines teach you how to climb?"

He smiled. "No. I was climbing long before that. I was sent to a boarding school in Lancashire, and there was a Master there who used to take a gang of us climbing in the Lake District. I got completely bitten at fourteen years old, and I just went on doing it."

"Have you climbed abroad?"

"Yes. Switzerland. Austria. I wanted to go to Nepal, but it would have meant months of preparation and travelling and I never could spare the time."

"After the Matterhorn, the Boscarben Cliffs must look easy."

"No," he assured her drily, "no, they are not easy."

They continued on their way, ascending, taking the hidden, twisting lanes that the visitors never found, and mounting flights of granite steps so steep that Penelope was left with no breath for conversation. The last flight zigzagged up the face of the cliff between the railway station and the main road, finally to emerge directly opposite the old White Caps Hotel.

Warm with exertion, Penelope rested, leaning against the wall, waiting to catch her breath and for her heart to stop pounding. Major Lomax, coming behind her, appeared to be unaffected. She saw the Marine on guard eyeing them dispassionately across the road, but his expression gave nothing away.

When she could speak, she said, "I feel like a bit of chewed string."

"Small wonder."

"I haven't come that way for years. When I was small, I used to run up all the way from the beach. It was a sort of self-imposed endurance test."

She turned, leaning her arms on the top of the wall, and looked down the way

they had come. The sea, ebbing, was calmer now, reflecting the blue of the clearing sky. Far below, on the beach, a man walked his dog. The wind had dropped to a fresh breeze, scented by the damp mossy smell of gardens soaked by rain. It was a smell loaded with nostalgia, and for once Penelope found herself caught off-guard, and was suffused with a mindless ecstasy that she had not known since she was a child.

She thought of the last couple of years: the boredom, the narrowness of existence, the dearth of anything to look forward to. Yet now, in a single instant, the curtains had been whipped aside, and the windows beyond thrown open onto a brilliant view that had been there, waiting for her, all the time. A view, moreover, laden with the most marvellous possibilities and opportunities.

Happiness—remembered from the days before the war, before Ambrose, before Sophie's shocking death. It was like being young again. But I am young. I am only twenty-three. She turned from the wall to face the man who stood beside her and was filled with gratitude, because in some way it was he who had wrought this miracle of *deja vu*.

She found him watching her, and wondered how much he perceived, how much he knew. But his stillness, his silence gave nothing away.

She said, "I must go home. Papa will be wondering what's happened to me."

He nodded, accepting this. They would say goodbye, part. She would go on her way. He would cross the road, return the salute of the man on guard duty, run up the steps, disappear through the glassed door and perhaps never be seen again.

She said, "Would you like to come to supper?"

He did not instantly reply to this suggestion, and for a dreadful moment she thought he was going to refuse. Then he smiled. "That's very kind."

Relief. "This evening?"

"You're sure?"

"Perfectly. Papa would so like to see you again. You can continue your conversation."

"Thank you. That would be delightful."

"About seven-thirty, then." She sounded horribly formal. "I'm . . . I'm able to ask you because for once we've got something to eat."

"Let me guess. Mackerel and tinned peaches?"

Formality, restraint melted. They dissolved into laughter, and she knew that she would never forget the sound of it, because it was their first shared joke.

She found Doris agog with curiosity. "Here, what's going on? There was I, minding my own business, and this smashing Ser-geant turns up at the door with your baskets. Asked him in for a cup of tea, but he said he couldn't stay. How did you pick him up?"

Penelope sat at the kitchen table and told the whole story of the unexpected encounter. Doris listened with eyes growing round as marbles. When Penelope finished, she let out a screech of coy delight. "Ask me, and it looks like you've got an admirer ..."

"Oh, Doris, I've asked him for supper."

"When?"

"This evening."

"Is he coming?"

"Yes, he is."

Doris' face fell. "Oh, hell." She sat back in her chair, the very picture of despondency.

"Why hell?"

"I won't be here. Going out. Taking Clark and Ronald over to Penzance to see the Operatic Society do The Mikado."

"Oh, Doris. I was counting on you being here. I need someone to help me. Can't you put it off?"

"No, I can't. There's a bus organized, and anyway it's only on for two nights. And the boys have been looking forward to it for weeks, poor little blighters." Her expression became resigned. "Never mind, can't be helped. I'll give you a hand with the cooking before I go, and get Nancy to bed. But I'm not half vexed that I'm missing all the fun. Hasn't been a proper man in the house for years."

Penelope did not mention Ambrose. Instead she said, "What about Ernie? He's a proper man."

"Yes. He's all right." But poor Ernie was dismissed. "He doesn't count, though."

Like a couple of young girls kindled with innocent excitement, they set to work; they peeled vegetables, made a salad, buffed up the old dining room table, gave little-used silver a cursory clean, polished the crystal wineglasses. Lawrence, alerted, heaved himself out of his chair and made his way cautiously down to the cellar where, in happier days, he had stored his considerable stock of French wine. Now, there was little remaining, but he returned bearing a bottle of what he termed Algerian plonk and, as well, a dusty bottle of port, which he proceeded, with the utmost care, to decant. Penelope knew that no greater tribute could be paid to a guest.

At twenty-five past seven, with Nancy asleep in her bed, Doris and the boys departed, and all as ready as it would ever be, she fled upstairs to her room to do something about her own appearance. She changed into a clean shirt, pushed her bare feet into a pair of scarlet court shoes, brushed her hair, plaited it, wound it up into a coil, pinned it in place. She had no powder, no

lipstick, and had used the last of her scent. A long and critical gaze in the mirror afforded small satisfaction. She looked like a governess. She found a string of scarlet beads and fastened them around her neck and, as she did this, heard the gate at the bottom of the garden open and click shut. She went to the window and saw Richard Lomax making his way up the fragrant garden, up the stepped path towards the house. She saw that he, too, had changed, from battledress to the semi-formality of khaki drill and a chestnut shining Sam Browne. He carried, discreetly, a wrapped parcel that could only contain a bottle.

Since saying goodbye, she had been a-brim with the anticipation of seeing him again. But now, watching his approach, knowing that he would in an instant be ringing the front-door bell, she was assailed by panic. Cold feet, Sophie had always called this dropping of the heart, caused by an impetuous action suddenly regretted. Supposing the evening wasn't all right, but turned out to be all wrong, and with no Doris to help her jolly it along? It was perfectly possible that she had been mistaken about Richard Lomax. That the flash of ecstasy, the unexplained happiness, the extraordinary sensation of closeness and familiarity could simply have been part of an illusion, springing from her own rising spirits and the fact that the sun, after days of rain, had decided to shine.

She moved from the window, took a last glance at her reflection, settled the red necklace, and went out of the room and down the stairs. As she did this, the doorbell rang. She crossed the hall and opened the door, and he smiled and said, "I hope I'm not too late, or too early."

"Neither. You found the way."

"It wasn't difficult. What a beautiful garden."

"The storm hasn't done it any good." She stepped back. "Come in."

He did so, removing his green beret with its scarlet flash and silver badge. She closed the door. He laid his beret on the chest and turned to face her. He held up the wrapped parcel and said, "This is for your father."

"How kind."

"Does he drink Scotch?"

"Yes . . ."

It was going to be all right and she hadn't been wrong about him. He wasn't ordinary. He was immensely special because he had brought with him, into Cam Cottage, not only a certain glamour but ease as well. She remembered the spiky misery of having Ambrose there. The tensions and the silences and the way everybody, affected by the prickly atmosphere, became irritable and crotchety. But with this tall stranger came only the most comfortable of presences. He might have been an old friend of many years, calling to renew acquaintance, to catch up on mutual news. The sense of *deja vu* returned, more strongly than ever. So strong was it, that she half expected the sitting room door to be flung open and Sophie to emerge, laughing and talking nineteen to the dozen, and throwing her arms around the young man's neck, and kissing him on both cheeks. Oh, my darling, I have so been looking forward to seeing you again.

". . . but we haven't had a bottle in the house for months. He'll be delighted. He's in the sitting room, waiting for you. . . ." She went to open the door. "Papa. Our guest has come . . . and he's brought you a present. . ."

"This posting of yours," said Lawrence. "How long is it for?"

"I've no idea, sir."

"And you wouldn't tell me even if you knew. Do you suppose next year we'll be ready to invade Europe?"

Richard Lomax smiled, but was giving nothing away. "I should hope so."

"These Americans . . . They seem to be keeping themselves very much to themselves. We'd imagined every sort of high jinks."

"They haven't exactly come here for a holiday. As well, they're highly

professional soldiers and a totally self-contained unit. They have their own officers, their own canteen, their own recreations."

"How do you get on with them?"

"Very well, on the whole. They're fairly wild . . . perhaps not as disciplined as our own troops but, individually, very courageous."

"And you're in overall charge of the whole operation?"

"No. Colonel Mellaby is the Officer Commanding. I'm simply the Training Officer."

"Like working with them?"

Richard Lomax shrugged. "It's certainly different." "And Porthkerris. Had you ever been here before?" "No. Never. My holidays were usually spent in the North, climbing mountains. But I'd always known about Porthkerris, because of the artists who'd come here. I'd seen paintings of the harbour, in the various galleries my mother insisted I visit, and it's extraordinary how unique, how instantly recognizable it was. Unchanged. And the light. The glaring light off the sea. I could scarcely believe it, until I experienced it for myself."

"Yes. It has a magic. You never get used to it, how ever long you live here."

"You've been in Porthkerris for some years now?" "Since the early nineteen-twenties. I brought my wife here just after we were married. We had no house, so we camped out in my studio. Like a couple of gypsies."

"Is that your wife's portrait in the sitting room?" "Yes. That was Sophie. She must have been about nineteen when that was painted. Charles Rainier did it. We all took a house near Varengeville one spring. It was meant to be a holiday, but he became restless if he wasn't working, so Sophie agreed to sit for him. It took less than a day, but it was one of the best things he'd ever done. But, of course, he had known her all her life, as I had. Known her since she was a child. You can work fast when you are so close to your model."

The dining room was shadowy in the dying light. Only the candles provided illumination and the last shafts of the sinking sun, piercing through the windows in beams that struck back a reflected lustre from crystal and silver and the polished surface of the circular mahogany table. The dark wallpaper contained the room like the lining of a jewel box, and beyond the swags of heavy, faded velvet, caught back with frayed silken ropes and tassels, airy lace curtains stirred in the draught from the open casement.

It was growing late. Soon the window would have to be closed, the black-out curtains drawn. Their meal was over. The soup, the grilled fish, the delicious treat of peaches had been consumed and the plates cleared away. From the sideboard, Penelope had fetched a dish of Cox's orange pippins, windfalls from the tree at the top of the orchard, and set it in the middle of the table. Richard Lomax had taken one, was peeling it with a pearlhandled fruit knife. His hands were long, with square-tipped fingers. She watched them dealing so neatly with the knife, the unbroken coil of peel dropping onto the plate. He sliced the apple into four neat quarters.

"Do you still have the studio?"

"Yes, but it's deserted now. I seldom go there. I cannot work and the walk is too far for me."

"I'd like to see it."

"Any time. I have the key." Across the table, he smiled at his daughter.

"Penelope will take you."

Richard Lomax sliced the apple quarters again.

"Charles Rainier ... is he still alive?"

"As far as I know. Provided he hasn't opened his mouth too wide and been murdered by the Gestapo. Hopefully not. His home is in the south of France. If he behaves himself, he should survive. . . ."

She thought of the Rainier's house, the roof smothered in bougainvillea, the red rocks dropping down to the gentian sea, the feathery yellow mimosa. She thought of Sophie, calling down from the terrace to say that it was time to stop swimming because lunch was ready. In the face of such dazzling images, it was hard to realize that Sophie was dead. This evening—ever since Richard Lomax's arrival—she had been with them; not dead, but alive; even now, sitting in the empty chair at the head of the table. It was not easy to find good reason for this persistent illusion: that everything was as it had been. That nothing had changed. Whereas, in truth, everything had changed. Fate had been cruel; flung the war at them, torn their family life apart; seen Sophie and the Cliffords killed in the Blitz. Fate, perhaps, had thrown Penelope at Ambrose. But it was she who had let him make love to her, started Nancy, and finally married him. Looking back, she did not regret the making love, which she had enjoyed just as much as he had; even less did she regret the arrival of Nancy, and indeed, now, could not imagine life without her deliciously pretty and engaging child. What she did regret, most bitterly, was that idiotic marriage. You mustn't marry him unless you love him, Sophie had said, but for once in her life Penelope had not heeded Sophie's advice. Ambrose was her first relationship, and she had no one to compare him with. Her parents' blissful marriage did not help. She imagined that all marriages were just as blissful, so getting married was a good idea. Faced with the situation, Ambrose, when he had got over his initial dismay, seemed to think it was a good idea too. So they had gone ahead and done it.

A dreadful, ghastly mistake. She didn't love him. Had never loved him. She had nothing in common with him, and not the least wish ever to see him again. She looked across at Richard Lomax, his quiet face turned towards Lawrence. Her eyes dropped to his hands, now clasped on the table before him. She thought of taking his hands in hers, and lifting them and pressing them to her cheek.

She wondered if he was married too.

"I never met the man," Lawrence was saying, "but it seemed to me that he must have been a very dull fellow." They were still on the subject of portrait painters. "One might have expected unimagined misdemeanours and

indiscretions ... he certainly had ample opportunity . . . but as it was, it doesn't appear that he ever put a foot wrong. Beerbohm did a cartoon o'f him, you know, gazing from his window at a long queue of society ladies all waiting to have themselves immortalized by him."

Richard Lomax said, "I liked his sketches better than his portraits."

"I agree. All those elongated ladies and gentlemen in hunt-ing gear. Ten feet tall and impossibly arrogant." He reached for the port decanter, filled his glass, and handed the decanter on to his guest. "Tell me, do you play backgammon?"

"Yes, I do."

"Fancy a game?"

"I'd be delighted."

It was nearly dark. Penelope got up from the table and closed the windows and pulled all the curtains, the horrible black ones and the lovely velvet ones. Saying something about coffee, she went out of the room and down the passage to the kitchen. She did the kitchen blackout and then turned on the light, to the expected disorder of saucepans, dirty plates and cutlery. She put the kettle on. She heard the men move through to the sitting room, heard coal being shovelled onto the fire, all to the continuous and companionable murmur of conversation.

Papa was in his element, having the time of his life. If he enjoyed the backgammon, it was likely that he would invite Richard Lomax back for another session. Finding a clean tray, taking coffee-cups from the cupboard, she smiled.

The game finished just as the clock struck eleven. Lawrence had won. Richard Lomax, conceding defeat with a smile, got to his feet. "I think it's time I went."

"I'd no idea it was as late as that. I've enjoyed myself. We must do it again."

Lawrence thought about this, and added, "If you'd like to."

"Very much, sir. I'm afraid I can't make any specific plans, because my time isn't my own. ..."

"That's all right. Any evening. Just drop in. We're always here." He began to struggle out of his chair, but Richard Lomax stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. "Don't get up. . . ."

"Well . . ." Gratefully the old man sank back against the cushions. "Maybe I won't. Penelope will see you out."

While they played, she had sat knitting by the fire. Now she drove her needles into the ball of wool and stood up. He turned to smile at her. She went to open the door, heard him say, "Good night, sir, and thank you again. . . ."

"Not at all."

She led the way through the dark hall and opened the front door. Outside, the garden was drowned in a blue light, heavy with the scent of stock. An eyelash of a moon hung in the sky. Far below, on the beach, the sea whispered. He emerged to stand beside her on the doorstep, his beret in his hand. They both gazed upwards, at threads of cloud and the faint gleam of the moon. There was no wind, but a damp chill emanated from the lawn, and Penelope, hugging herself, shivered.

He said, "I've hardly talked to you all evening. I hope you don't think I was being very ill-mannered."

"You came to talk to Papa."

"Not entirely, but I'm afraid that's how it worked out."

"There'll be another time."

"I hope so. Like I said, my time is scarcely my own ... I can't make plans or

dates. . . ."

"I know."

"But I'll come when I can."

"Do that."

He pulled on his beret, settled it on his head. The moonlight flashed on the silver badge. "It was a delicious dinner. Mackerel has never tasted so good." She laughed. "Good night, Penelope."

"Good night, Richard."

He turned and walked away, swallowed into the bloomy dusk of the garden, and was gone. She waited to hear the gate click shut behind him. Standing there in her thin shirt, she found her arms rough with goose bumps. She shivered again and went back into the house closing the door behind her.

Two weeks passed before they saw him again. For some extraordinary reason this did not fret Penelope. He had said that he would come when he could, and she knew that he would. She could wait. She thought about him a great deal. During the busy days, he was never completely out of her mind, and at night he invaded her dreams, causing her to wake with drowsy content, smiling, clinging to the memory of the dream before it should fade and die.

Lawrence was more concerned than she. "Haven't heard from that nice chap Lomax," he would grumble from time to time. "I was looking forward to another session of backgam-mon."

"Oh, he'll come, Papa," she reassured him, tranquil because she knew it was true.

Now it was September. Indian Summer. Chilly evenings and nights, and days of cloudless skies and glowing, golden sun. Leaves were starting to change colour, to drop, drifting in the still air, onto the grass of the lawn. The border in front of the house was bright with dahlias, and the last roses of the summer

opened their velvety faces and filled the air with a fragrance which, because it was so precious, seemed twice as strong as the scents of June.

A Saturday. Over lunch, Clark and Ronald announced that they were going down to the beach, to meet a gang of their school friends and swim. Doris, Penelope, and Nancy were not invited to join them. Accordingly, they took themselves off, scampering down the garden path as though there was not a moment to be lost, laden with towels and spades, a packet of jam sandwiches, and a bottle of lemonade.

With the boys out of the way, the warm afternoon fell silent and empty. Lawrence retired to the sitting room for a little snooze by the open window. Doris took Nancy out into the garden. Penelope, with the dishes done and the kitchen straight, walked up to the orchard and unpegged the day's massive wash. Back in the kitchen, she folded the piles of sweet-scented linen, sheets, and towels; set shirts and pillowcases aside for ironing. Later. That could be done later. The outdoors beckoned. She went out of the kitchen and across the hall, where only the grandfather clock ticked, and a drowsy bee buzzed at a window-pane. The front door stood open, golden light streaming across the worn carpet. Across the lawn, Doris sat in an old garden chair with a basket of mending on her lap, and Nancy played contentedly in her sand-pit. The sand-pit had been built by Ernie and the sand brought up from the beach in Mr. Penberth's vegetable cart. In fine weather, it kept Nancy endlessly amused. She sat there now, wearing a pair of patched overalls and nothing else, and built sand-pies with an old tin bucket and a wooden spoon. Penelope joined them. Doris had spread an old blanket on the ground and she lay on this and watched Nancy, amused by the concentration on the child's face, entranced by the sweep of dark lashes on rounded cheek, the dimpled hands patting the sand.

"You haven't been ironing, have you?" Doris asked.

"No. Too hot."

Doris held up a shrunken shirt, its ragged collar split like a grin. "Suppose there's any point in mending this?"

"No. Turn it into a polishing rag."

"We've got more polishing rags in this house than clothes. You know, when this bleeding war ends, the best thing for me is going to be able to go out and buy clothes. New clothes. Dozens of them. I'm sick and tired of making do. Look at this jersey of Clark's. I mended it last week and there's another great hole in the elbow. How the hell do they do it?"

"They're growing lads." Idle, Penelope rolled onto her back, unbuttoning her shirt, pulling her skirt above her bare knees. "They can't help bursting out of their clothes." She closed her eyes against the glare of the sun. "Remember how skinny and pale they were when you first came here? You'd scarcely recognize them now, so brawny and brown, and Cornish as they could be."

"I'm glad they're not older." Doris broke off a length of darning wool and threaded her needle. "Wouldn't want them to be soldiers. Couldn't bear to . . ."

She stopped. Penelope waited. "What couldn't you bear?" she prompted.

Doris' reply came in an agitated whisper. "We've got a visi-tor."

The sun blanked out. A shadow lay across her supine body. She opened her eyes and saw, standing at her feet, the dark outline of a man's form. In some panic, she sat up, rearranging her sprawled legs, reaching to re-button her shirt. . . .

"I'm sorry," said Richard. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"Where did you spring from?" She scrambled to her feet, dealt with the final button, and pushed her hair out of her face.

"I came in by the top gate, across the garden."

Her heart was racing. She hoped she was not blushing. "I never heard you."

- "Is this a bad time to call?"

"Not a bit. We're not doing anything."

"I've been stuck in an office all day, and suddenly I could bear it no longer. I thought, with a bit of luck, I'd find you here." His eyes moved from Penelope to Doris, who sat in her chair as though mesmerized, the mending basket still in her lap, the threaded needle held aloft, like some sort of symbol. "I don't think we've ever met. Richard Lomax. You must be Doris."

"That's right." They shook hands. Doris, mildly flustered, added, "Pleased to meet you, I'm sure."

"Penelope told me about you, and your two sons. Are they not around?"

"No, they've gone swimming with their chums."

"Sensible fellows. You were out the other night when I came for dinner."

"Yes. I took the boys to The Mikado."

"Did they enjoy it?"

"Oh, loved it. Ever such good tunes. And funny too. They didn't half laugh."

"I'm glad." He turned his attention to Nancy, who sat staring up at him, nonplussed by the arrival of this tall stranger into her life. "Is this your little girl?"

Penelope nodded. "Yes. This is Nancy."

He squatted to her height. "Hello." Nancy stared. "How old is she?"

"Nearly three."

There was sand on Nancy's face and the seat of her overalls was damp. "What are you doing?" Richard asked her. "Making sand-pies? Here, let me have a go." He took up the little bucket and removed the wooden spoon from

Nancy's unresisting hand. He filled the bucket, pressed down the sand, and turned it out into a perfect sand-pie. Nancy instantly demolished it. He laughed and gave her back her toys. "She has all the right instincts," he remarked, and settled himself on the grass, removing his beret and unbuttoning the tight collar of his khaki battledress.

Penelope said, "You look hot."

"I am. It's too warm to be dressed like this." He undid the rest of the buttons and removed the offending garment, rolling up the sleeves of his cotton shirt and at once becoming quite human-looking and comfortable. Perhaps encouraged by this, Nancy clambered out of the sandpit and came to sit on Penelope's knee, where she had a good view of the new arrival and could stare, unblinking, at his face.

"I never can guess how old other people's children are," he said.

"Do you have children of your own?" Doris asked innocently.

"Not that I know of."

"Come again?"

"I'm not married."

Penelope bent her head, laid her cheek against the silky fronds of Nancy's hair. Richard leaned back on his elbows, turned his face up to the sun. "It's as hot as midsummer, isn't it? Where else should one be but sitting in a garden? Where's your father?"

"Having a sleep. He's probably awake by now. In a moment, I'll go and tell him you're here. He's longing to see you and have another game of backgammon."

Doris looked at her watch, stowed her needle, and set down the mending basket on the grass. She said, "It's nearly four o'clock. Why don't I go and make us all a cup of tea? You'd like one, wouldn't you, Richard?"

"I can't think of anything I'd like more."

"I'll tell your father, Penelope. He likes having tea in the garden."

She left them. They watched her go. Richard said, "What a nice girl. ..."

"Yes."

Penelope began to pick daisies, to fashion them into a chain for Nancy.

"What have you been doing all this time?"

"Scrambling on the cliffs. Bouncing around in the surf in those God-forsaken landing craft. Getting wet. Drafting orders, planning exercises, and writing long reports."

They fell silent. She added another daisy to the chain. After a bit, he said abruptly, "Do you know General Watson-Grant?"

"Yes, of course. Why do you ask that?"

"Colonel Mellaby and I have been asked to have a drink with him on Monday."

She smiled. "So have Papa and I. Mrs. Watson-Grant rang up this morning to invite us. Mr. Ridley, the grocer, came up with a couple of bottles of gin and they decided it was a good excuse to throw a little party."

"Where do they live?"

"About a mile away; up the hill, out of the town."

"How will you get there?"

"The General's going to send his car for us. His old gardener can drive. He gets petrol, you see, because of being in the Home Guard. I'm sure it's all dreadfully illegal, but it's very kind of him, because otherwise we couldn't

go."

"I hoped you'd be there."

"Why?"

"So that I'll know somebody. And because I thought, afterwards, I could take you out for dinner."

The daisy chain had grown quite long. She held it out like a garland between her hands. She said, "Are you inviting Papa and me, or just me?"

"Just you. But if your father wants to come . . ."

"He won't. He doesn't like being out late."

"Will you?"

"Yes."

"Where shall we go?"

"I don't know."

"There's the Sands Hotel . . . ?"

"That's been requisitioned since the beginning of the war. Now, it's full of convalescent wounded."

"Or the Castle?"

The Castle. Her spirits sank at the very thought of the place. During Ambrose's first unfortunate visit to Cam Cottage, Penelope, in desperation, and casting about for some way to amuse her husband, suggested that they go to the Castle for the Saturday night dinner-dance. The evening had been no more successful than the rest of the weekend. The chill and formal dining-room had been half empty, the food dull, and the other residents aged. From

time to time a dispirited band had played a selection of out-of-date tunes, but they couldn't even dance, because Penelope by then was so enormous that Ambrose could not get his arms around her.

She said quickly, "No, don't let's go there. There are old waiters like tortoises, and most of the people staying are in wheel-chairs. It's dreadfully depressing." She considered the question, and came up with a far more cheerful suggestion. "We could go to Gaston's Bistro."

"Where's that?"

"Just above the North Beach. It's tiny, but the food's not bad. Sometimes, on birthdays and things, Papa takes me and Doris there."

"Gaston's Bistro. It sounds highly unexpected. Are they on the phone?"

"Yes."

"I'll ring and book a table."

"Doris, he's asked me out for dinner."

"Get away! When?"

"On Monday. After the Watson-Grants' party."

"Did you say you'd go?"

"Yes. Why? Do you think I should have refused?"

"Refused? You'd have needed your head examined. I think he's lovely. I dunno, reminds me of Gregory Peck in a funny way."

"Oh, Doris, he's not a bit like Gregory Peck."

"Not to look at, but he's got that quiet way. You know what I mean. What are you going to wear?"

"I haven't thought. I'll find something."

Doris became exasperated. "You know, you drive me nuts sometimes. Go and get something new. You never spend a brass farthing on yourself. Go down the town to Madame Jolie and see what she's got."

"I haven't got any clothing coupons. I spent my last on horrible tea-towels and a warm dressing-gown for Nancy."

"For goodness' sake, you only need seven. Surely between the six of us we can rustle up seven clothing coupons. And if we can't, I know where I can buy Black Market ones."

"That's against the law."

"Oh, to hell with the law. This is an occasion. Your first date for years. Live dangerously. On Monday morning, go down the town and buy yourself something pretty."

She could not remember when she had last been inside a dress shop, but as Madame Jolie was really Mrs. Coles, the Coastguard's wife, and fat and homely as anybody's grand-mother, there was no reason to feel intimidated.

"My dear life, I haven't seen you in here for years," she remarked as Penelope came through the door.

"I want a new dress," Penelope told her, wasting no time.

"I haven't anything very special in stock, dear, most of it that Utility stuff. Can't get anything else. But there is one pretty red that would fit you. Red was always your colour. Patterned in daisies this one is. It's rayon, of course, but it's got a nice silky feel."

She fetched it. Penelope, closeted into a minute curtained cubicle, pulled off her clothes and slipped the red dress over her head. It felt soft, and smelt excitingly new. Emerging from be-hind the modest curtain, she did up the

buttons and buckled the red patent belt.

"Oh, it's perfect," said Madame Jolie.

She went to the long mirror and gazed at her reflection, trying to see herself with Richard's eyes. The dress had a square neck and padded shoulders, and a skirt of flaring pleats. The wide belt made her waist appear tiny, and when she turned to inspect the back view, the skirt fanned out as she moved, and the effect was so feminine, so becoming, that she found herself filled with delight at her own appearance. No garment had ever given her such confidence. It was a bit like falling in love, and she knew that she had to possess it.

"How much is it?"

Madame Jolie groped down the back of her neck for the price ticket. "Seven pounds ten shillings. And seven coupons, I'm afraid."

"I'll have it."

"You've made the right decision. Fancy that, the first dress you tried on. Thought of it the moment you walked in. Might have been made for you. What a stroke of luck."

"Papa, do you like my new dress?" She took it out of the paper bag, shook it out of its folds, held it in front of her. In his chair, he took off his spectacles and leaned back on the cushions with half-closed eyes, the better to get the effect.

"That's a good colour for you . . . yes, I like that. But why have you suddenly bought yourself a new dress?"

"Because we're going for a drink with the Watson-Grants this evening. Had you forgotten?"

"No, but I've forgotten how we're getting there."

"The General's sending his car for us."

"How kind."

"And someone will bring you back. Because I'm going out for dinner."

He put his spectacles on again and, for a long moment, surveyed his daughter over the top of them. Then he said, "With Richard Lomax," and it wasn't a question.

"Yes."

He reached for his newspaper. "Good."

"Papa, listen. You think I should go?"

"Why shouldn't you?"

"I'm a married lady."

"But not a bourgeois nitwit."

She hesitated. "Suppose I get involved."

"Is that likely?"

"It might be."

"So. Get involved."

"You know something, Papa? I really like you."

"I am gratified. Why?"

"A thousand reasons. But mostly because we've always been able to talk."

"It would be a disaster if we couldn't. As for Richard Lo-max, you are no

longer a child. I don't wish to see you hurt, but your mind is your own. You make your own decisions."

"I know," she said. She did not say "I have."

They were the last to arrive at the Watson-Grant's party. This was because, by the time John Tonkins, the General's old gardener, called to collect them, Penelope was still at her dressing-table, agonizing as to how to do her hair. She had finally decided to wear it up and then, at the last moment and in some exasperation, torn out all the pins and shaken it loose. After that, she had to find some sort of coat, for warmth, for the new dress was flimsy and the September evenings chill. She had no coat, only her tartan poncho, and that looked so terrible that more moments had to be wasted searching for an old cashmere shawl of Sophie's. Clutching this, running downstairs in search of her father, she found him in the kitchen, having decided on the spur of the moment that he had to clean his shoes.

"Papa. The car's there. John's waiting."

"I can't help that. These are my good shoes and they haven't been cleaned for four months."

"How do you know it's four months?"

"Because that was the last occasion we went to the Watson-Grants'."

"Oh, Papa." His crippled hands struggled with the tin of boot polish. "Here. I'll do them."

She accomplished this as swiftly as she could, wielding brushes and getting brown polish all over her hands. She washed her hands while he was putting on his shoes, and then knelt to tie the laces for him. At last, at Lawrence's pace, they made their way out of the house and across the garden to the top gate, where John Tonkins and the old Rover awaited them.

"I'm sorry we've kept you, John."

"Doesn't matter to me, Mr. Stern." He held the door open and Lawrence painfully inserted himself into the front seat. Penelope got into the back. John took his place at the wheel and they were off. But not very fast, for John Tonkins was wary of his employer's car and drove as though it were a time bomb that might explode if he went faster than thirty miles an hour. Finally, at seven o'clock, they trundled up the drive of the General's enviable garden, which burgeoned with rhododendron, azalea, camellias, and fuchsia, and drew to a crunching halt at the front door of the house. Three or four other cars were already parked on the gravel. Penelope recognized the Trubshots' old Morris, but not the khaki staff car with its Royal Marine insignia. A young Marine driver sat behind the wheel, whiling away the time by reading Picture Post. Getting out of the Rover, she found herself secretly smiling.

They went indoors. Before the war, a uniformed parlourmaid would have been waiting to let them in, but now, there was nobody. The hall was empty and a buzz of conversation led them across the sitting room to where, in the General's conservatory, the party was already in full swing.

It was a very large and elaborate conservatory, built by the Watson-Grants when the General had finally retired from the Army and they left India for good, and which they had furnished with potted palms, long rattan chairs, camel stools, tiger-skin rugs, and a brass gong slung between the ivory tusks of some long-defunct elephant.

"Oh,, there you are at last!" Mrs. Watson-Grant had spied them and came to greet them. She was a small, spare woman with shingled hair, tanned to leather by the cruel suns of India, a chain-smoker and an inveterate bridge player. In Quetta, if rumours were to be believed, she had spent most of her life on the back of a horse, and had once stood her ground in the face of a charging tiger and coolly shot it dead. Now, she was reduced to running the local Red Cross and Digging for Victory in her vegetable garden, but she missed the social whirl of the old days, and it was typical that, having laid her hands on a couple of bottles of gin, she instantly threw a party. "Late as usual," she added, for she had never been one for calling a spade anything but a spade. "What'll you drink? Gin and orange, or gin and lime? And, of course, you know everybody. Except perhaps Colonel Mellaby and Major Lomax ..."

Penelope looked about her. Saw the Springburns from St. Enedoc and Mrs.

Trubshot, tall and wraith-like, veiled in lilac chiffon and wearing an enormous hat with a velvet bow and a buckle. With Mrs. Trubshot was Miss Pawson, standing there four-square in a pair of lace-up shoes with rubber soles thick as tank-treads. She saw Colonel Trubshot, who had button holed the unknown Colonel Mellaby and was holding forth as usual, doubtless airing his opinions on the conduct of the war. The Royal Marine Colonel was a great deal taller than Colonel Trubshot, a handsome man with a bristling moustache and thinning hair, and he had to stoop slightly in order to hear what was being said. From the expression on his face of polite, attentive boredom, Penelope guessed that it was not fascinating. She saw Richard standing at the far side of the room, with his back to the garden. Miss Preedy was with him. Miss Preedy, wearing an embroidered Hungarian blouse and a folk-weave skirt and looking as though she were about to spring into a Gopak. He said something to her, and she burst into a gale of giggles, tucking her head demurely to one side, and he looked up, caught Penelope's eye, and sent her just the ghost of a wink.

"Penelope." General Watson-Grant materialized at her elbow. "You've got a drink? Thank God you're here. I was afraid you wouldn't come."

"I know. We're late. We kept poor John Tonkins waiting."

"No matter. I just felt a bit anxious for these Royal Marines. Poor chaps, invited to a party and then find themselves in a roomful of washed-up old odds and sods. I'd have asked more cheerful company for them, but I couldn't think of any. Only you."

"I shouldn't worry. They look quite happy."

"I'll introduce you."

"We already know Major Lomax."

"Do you? When did you meet him?"

"Papa got talking to him in the Gallery."

"They seem nice fellers." The General's eye, hostly, strayed. "I'm going to rescue Mellaby. He's had ten minutes of undiluted Trubshot, and that's enough for any man."

He left her as abruptly as he had appeared, and, abandoned, Penelope went to talk to Miss Pawson and hear about her stirrup-pumps. The party progressed. For some time Richard neither sought her out nor claimed her, but this did not matter, for it simply extended the anticipation of finally finding herself at his side and being with him again. As though performing some ritual dance, they circled, never within earshot; smiling into other faces, listening to other conversations. Eventually, finding herself by the open door that led out into the garden, Penelope turned to set down her empty glass, but was diverted by the prospect of the General's garden. The sloping lawn streamed with golden light, clouds of midges danced in the dark shade of the trees. The still air was alive with the cooing of wood-pigeons and sweet with the scents of a warm September evening.

"Hello." He had come to stand beside her.

"Hello."

He took the empty glass out of her hand. "Do you want another drink?"

She shook her head. "No."

He found space on a table bearing a potted palm and set the glass down. "I spent half an hour feeling anxious because I thought perhaps you weren't going to arrive."

"We're always late for everything."

He glanced about him. "I am entranced by this marvellous ambience. We could be in Poona."

"I should have warned you."

"Why should you? It's delightful."

"I think a conservatory is the most enviable of rooms. One day, if I ever have a proper house of my own, I shall build one. Just as big and spacious and sunny as this."

"And will you fill it with tiger skins and brass gongs?"

She smiled. "Papa says all that's missing is the punkah wallah."

"Or perhaps a horde of dervishes, erupting from the shrub-bery, bent on death and destruction. Do you suppose our host shot the rug?"

"More likely Mrs. Watson-Grant. The drawing room is set about with photographs of her in a pith helmet, with the spoils of the chase laid out at her feet."

"Have you met Colonel Mellaby?"

"Not yet. He's been lionized. I couldn't get near him."

"Come and I'll introduce you. And then, I think, he'll say it's time for us to leave. He'll take us as far as the HQ in the staff car, and then we'll have to walk. Do you mind?"

"Not at all."

"And your father ...?"

"John Tonkins will take him home."

He put a hand beneath her elbow. "Come, then. . . ."

It happened as he said it would. Introduced to Penelope Colonel Mellaby made a little polite small talk, and then glanced at his watch and announced that it was time to depart. Farewells were said. Penelope confirmed that Lawrence would be taken home to Cam Cottage, and kissed him good night. The General saw the three of them to the door, and Penelope gathered up her

shawl from the chair where she had left it. Outside, the Royal Marine driver, hastily stowing his Picture Post, sprang from the car and held open the door. The Colonel got into the front and Penelope and Richard took the back seats. In a stately fashion they drove away, but the Royal Marine driver was not nearly so timid as poor John Tonkins had been, so that in no time they had reached the old White Caps Hotel and were piling out again.

"You two are going out for dinner? Take the car and my driver if you want."

"Thank you, sir, but we'll walk. It's a lovely evening."

"Certainly is. Oh well, have a good time." He gave them an avuncular nod, dismissed his driver, turned on his heel, and made his way up the steps to disappear through the door.

Richard said, "Shall we go?"

It was indeed a beautiful evening, pearly and still; the calm sea translucent, gleaming like the inside of a shell. The sun had set, but the huge sky stayed streaked with the pink of its afterglow. They walked, dropping down into the town, by empty pavements and past shuttered shops.

There were few people about, but, mingling with these locals, strayed aimless groups of American Rangers, with a leave pass under their belts and no apparent way of diverting themselves. One or two had found girls, giggling sixteen-year-olds who hung on to their elbows. Others queued up outside the cinema, waiting for it to open, or trod the streets in their soft-soled boots, searching for likely pubs. When they spied Richard approaching, these groups were apt to melt mysteriously out of sight.

Penelope said, "I'm sorry for them."

"They're all right."

"It would be nice if people could ask them to parties, too."

"I don't think they'd have very much in common with General Watson-Grant's guests."

"He was a bit embarrassed at having asked you to meet a washed-up lot of odds and sods."

"Did he say that? He was quite wrong. I found them all fascinating."

This seemed a bit of an overstatement. "I like the Spring-burns. He farms over at St. Enedoc. And I love the Watson-Grants."

"How about Miss Pawson and Miss Preedy?"

"Oh, they're lesbians."

"I suspected. And the Trubshots?"

"The Trubshots are a cross we all mutually bear. She's not so bad, but he's a pain in the neck; he's head of the ARP, and he's always running people in for showing chinks of light, and they have to go to court and be fined."

"Not the best way, I admit, to win friends and influence people, but I suppose he's just doing his job."

"You're much nicer than Papa and I are about him. And the other thing we can never understand is why such a shrimp of a man married such a tall lady. He scarcely comes up to her waist."

Richard thought about this. He said, "My father had a small friend who did exactly the same thing. And when my father asked him why he hadn't chosen a female of his own size, he replied that if he had, they would always have been known as that funny little couple. Perhaps that's why Colonel Trubshot proposed to Mrs. Trubshot."

"Yes, perhaps it is. I never thought of that."

She led him towards the North Beach by the shortest route, through back lanes and cobbled squares, up an enormously steep hill, and then down a twisting, stepped alley-way. Emerging from this, they stepped out onto the

curved, cobbled road that skirted the north shore. A row of long, whitewashed cottages faced out over the bay, the flood tide, and the long breakers.

He said, "I've seen this bay often enough from the sea, but I've never actually been here. . . ."

"I like it better than the other beach. It's always empty and wild, and somehow much more beautiful. Now, we're nearly there. It's that little cottage with the sign hanging out and the window-boxes."

"Who is Gaston?"

"A genuine Frenchman, from Brittany. He used to fish out of Newlyn, in a crabber. He married a Cornish girl, and then he lost his leg in a dreadful accident at sea. After that he couldn't go fishing any longer, so he and Grace, that's his wife, opened this place. They've been running it now for nearly five years." She hoped he was not thinking it all looked a bit humble. "Like I said, it's not very grand."

He smiled, reaching out to open the door. "I don't like grand places."

Overhead, a bell tinkled. They went inside to a flagged passageway, and were at once assailed by the smell of mouth-watering food, spiced with garlic and herbs, and the sound of muted music. A jinky accordion. Paris, and nostalgia. An open archway led into the little dining room, beamed and whitewashed, the tables set with red gingham cloths and folded white napkins. There were candles and mugs of fresh flowers on each table, and in a mammoth fireplace, driftwood sparked and flickered.

Two of the tables were already occupied. A white-faced young Flight Lieutenant and his girl-friend ... or perhaps his wife . . . and an elderly couple who looked as though they might well have strayed to Gaston's as a change from the tedium of the Castle Hotel. However, the best table, the one in the window, stood empty.

As they hesitated, Grace, who had heard the bell ring, appeared, with something of a flourish, through the swing-door at the back of the room.

"Good evening. Major Lomax, is it? You booked a table. I've put you in the window. Thought you'd like the view, and ..." Over his shoulder, she spied Penelope. Her freckled, sun-browned face, under its thatch of bleached hair, split into an astonished grin. "Hello. What are you doing here? I didn't know you were coming."

"No, I don't suppose you did. How are you, Grace?"

"Lovely. Hard-worked as ever, of course, but we don't talk about that. Brought your father, have you?"

"No, not this evening."

"Oh well, nice to get out on your own for a change." Her eyes strayed, with some interest, to Richard.

"You don't know Major Lomax."

"It's nice to meet you. Now, where do you want to sit? Facing the view? You might as well make the most of it, because we'll have to draw the dratted black-out in a moment. Want something to drink, do you, and then I'll get the menu and you can order."

"What can we have to drink?"

"Not much . . ." She wrinkled her nose. "There's some sherry, but it's South African and tastes of raisins." She leaned across Richard, making a play of rearranging his cutlery. "Like some wine?" she breathed into his ear. "We always keep a bottle or two for Mr. Stern when he comes. I'm sure he wouldn't object if you was to have one."

"But how splendid."

"Don't make too much of a song and dance about it, though. There are others present. I'll get Gaston to decant it, and then they won't see the label." She dropped a mammoth wink, produced a menu, and left them to it.

When she had gone, Richard sat back in his chair and looked amazed. "What treatment. Does this always happen?"

"Usually. Gaston and Papa are tremendous friends. He doesn't ever come out of the kitchen, but when Papa's here and the other customers have all gone, he'll emerge with a bottle of brandy, and he and Papa'll sit into the small hours, putting the world to rights. And the music is Grace's idea. She says the room is so small, it stops people listening to other people's conversations. I know just what she means. In the dining room at the Castle, all you can hear is whispering and knives and forks scratching on plates. I'd rather have music. It makes it feel a bit like being in a film."

"Does that appeal to you?"

"It creates an illusion."

"Do you like the cinema?"

"Love it. Doris and I go twice a week, sometimes, in the winter-time. Never miss a show. There's not much else to do in Porthkerris these days."

"But it was different before the war?"

"Oh, of course, everything was different. And we were never here during the winter because we always spent it in London. We had a house in Oakley Street. We still do, but we don't go there." She sighed. "You know, one of the things I most hate about this war is being stuck in one place. It's difficult enough getting out of Porthkerris with only one bus a day and no petrol for the car. I suppose that's the price you pay for having been brought up to a nomad's existence. Papa and Sophie never stayed long in any one place. On any excuse, without any warning, we used to pack up and head for France or Italy. It made life marvellously exciting."

"You were an only child?"

"Yes. And very spoiled."

"I don't believe that."

"It's true. I was always with grown-ups, and treated like an adult. My best friends were my parents' friends. But that doesn't sound so odd when you remember how young my mother was. More like a sister, really."

"And beautiful."

"You're thinking of her portrait. Yes, she was lovely. But more than that, she was warm and funny and loving. Hot-tem-pered one moment, and laughing the next. And she could make a home anywhere. She carried a sort of security about with her. I can't think of a single person who didn't love her. I still think about her every day of my life. Sometimes, she seems very dead. And other times, I can't believe that she isn't somewhere in the house and that a door won't open and she'll be there. We were dreadfully self-sufficient—selfish, I suppose. We never wanted, nor needed, other people. And yet, when I think about it, our houses constantly bulged with visitors, quite often stray acquaintances who simply didn't have anywhere else to go. But friends, too. And family. Aunt Ethel and the Cliffords used to come every summer."

"Aunt Ethel?"

"Papa's sister. She's a great character, mad as a hatter. But she hasn't been to Cam Cottage for ages, partly because Doris and Nancy have taken over her room, and partly because she's left London and gone to live in wild Wales with some potty friends who breed goats and do hand-loomng. You can laugh but it's true. She always had the oddest chums."

"And the Cliffords?" he prompted, longing to hear more.

"That's not so funny. The Cliffords don't come because they're dead. They were killed by the same bomb that killed Sophie. ..."

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize."

"Why should you? They were Papa's dearest friends. They shared Oakley

Street with us. When it happened, when he heard over the telephone, he changed. He became very old. Quite suddenly. In front of my eyes."

"He's a fantastic man."

"He is very strong."

"Is he lonely?"

"Yes. But then most old people are."

"He is fortunate to have you."

"I could never leave him, Richard."

They were interrupted by the arrival of Grace, bursting through the swing-doors with two carafes of white wine in her hands.

"There we are." She set them on the table, with another meaningful wink carefully concealed from the eyes of the other diners. "And now, I'm sorry but it's getting dark, and I'm going to have to do the blackout." She dealt deftly with the layers of curtains, tucking them in at the sides so that no gleam of light should penetrate. "Have you decided what you're going to eat?"

"We haven't even looked at the menu. What would you recommend?"

"I'd have the mussel soup and then the fish pie. The meat's rotten this week. Tough as old bones and nothing but gristle."

"All right, we'll go for fish."

"And nice fresh broccoli and green beans? Lovely. Won't be a moment."

She took herself off, whisking empty plates from other tables as she went. Richard poured the wine. He raised his glass. "Good health."

"Santi."

The wine was light and cool and fresh. It tasted of France, and other summers, other times. Penelope set down her glass. "Papa would approve of that."

"Now, tell me more."

"What, about Aunt Ethel and her goats?"

"No, about you."

"That's boring."

"I don't find it so. Tell me about being in the Wrens."

"That's the last thing I want to talk about."

"Didn't you enjoy it?"

"I hated every moment."

"Then why did you join?"

"Oh, a stupid impulse. We were in London and . . . something happened. ..."

He waited. "What happened?"

She looked at him. She said, "You'll think I'm a fool."

"I doubt it."

"It's a long story."

"We have time."

And so she took a deep breath and began to tell him; starting with Peter and Elizabeth Clifford, and carrying on to that evening when she and Sophie had gone up to their flat for coffee and met, for the first time, the Friedmanns.

"The Friedmanns were young. They were refugees from Munich. They were Jewish." Across the table, Richard listened, his eyes upon her, his face quiet. She realized that she was saying things that she had never been able to bring herself to tell to Ambrose. "And Willi Friedmann started to talk about what was happening to the Jews in Nazi Germany. What people like the Cliffords had been trying to tell the world for years, but nobody wanted to listen. And for me, it made the war a personal thing. Horrifying; frightening; but personal. So the next day, I went out and walked into the first recruiting office I came to, and joined the Wrens. End of story. Pathetic, really."

"Not pathetic in the very least."

"It wouldn't have been if I hadn't almost instantly regretted it. I was homesick, and I didn't make any friends, and I hated having to live with a lot of strangers."

Richard was sympathetic. "You're not the only person to feel that way. Where did they send you?"

"Whale Island. The Royal Naval Gunnery School."

"Is that where you met your husband?"

"Yes." She looked down, picked up her fork, drew, with its prongs, a criss-cross pattern on the checked table-cloth. "He was a Sub Lieutenant, doing his

courses."

"What's he called?"

"Ambrose Keeling. Why do you ask?"

"I thought I might have come across him, but I never have."

I don't suppose you would," she told him coolly. "He's much younger than you are. Oh, good ..." Her voice rose in relief. "Here's Grace with our soup." She added swiftly, "I've just realized how hungry I am," so that Richard would think that she was relieved because the soup had arrived, and not because there was now good reason to stop talking about Ambrose.

It was eleven o'clock before they finally set out for home, making their way through the lightless lanes of shuttered houses, climbing the hill. It had become much colder, and Penelope bundled herself in Sophie's shawl and was grateful for its scented comfort. High above, clouds sailed across a sky flung with stars, and as they ascended, leaving the crooked streets of Downalong far below them, the wind made itself felt, fresh and strong, blowing from the Atlantic.

They came at last to Grabney's Garage, and the last hill. Penelope paused, to push her hair out of her face, and gather the shawl more securely about her shoulders.

He said, "I'm sorry."

"Why?"

"Such a walk. I should have got a taxi."

"I'm not tired. I'm used to it. I do it two or three times a day."

He took her arm, lacing his fingers with hers, and they set off once more. He said, "I'm going to be fairly occupied during the next ten days, but when the opportunity presents itself, perhaps I can drop in and see you all. Have

another game of backgammon."

"Any time," she told him. "Just appear. Papa would love to see you. And there's always some sort of a meal on the table, even if it's only soup and bread."

"That's kind."

"Not kind at all. You're the kind one. I haven't had such a lovely evening for years. ... I'd forgotten how it felt, being taken out for dinner."

"And after four years of Service life, I'd forgotten what it felt to be anywhere except a Mess, with a lot of other men who do nothing but talk shop. So perhaps we're doing each other a good turn."

They came to the wall, the tall gate. She stopped and turned to him.

"Do you want to come in for a cup of coffee or anything?"

"No. I'll get back. I've got an early start."

"As I said, Richard. Come any time."

"I will," he said. He put his hands on her shoulders and stooped to kiss her cheek. "Good night."

She went in through the gate, through the garden, into the sleeping house. In her bedroom, at her dressing-table, she halted, gazing at the dark-eyed girl who stood there, framed in the long mirror. She loosened the knot of the shawl, let it fall to the floor at her feet. Slowly, one by one, she began to undo the buttons of the daisy-patterned red dress, but then abandoned the buttons and, instead leaned forward to inspect her face, to put up a hand and touch, with tentative fingers, the cheek he had kissed. She found herself blushing, saw the rosy glow suffuse her face. Laughing at herself, she undressed, turned off the lights, drew back the curtains, and got into bed; to lie wide-eyed, watching the dark sky beyond the open window, hearing the murmur of the sea, feeling the beat of her own heart; to go over, in her mind, every

single word that he had spoken during the course of the evening.

Richard Lomax was true to his promise. Over the next few weeks he came and went, and his random appearances, unexpected and unannounced, soon became totally taken for granted by the occu-pants of Cam Cottage.

Lawrence, inclined to be despondent at the start of another long, house-bound winter, cheered up the moment he heard Richard's voice. Doris had already made up her mind that he was lovely, and the fact that he was always willing to play football with her sons, or help them mend their bicycles, did nothing to quench her enthusiasm. Ronald and Clark, at first a little in awe of such a splendid figure, soon lost all inhibitions, called him by his Christian name, and asked endless questions as to how many battles he had been in, if he had ever parachuted from an aeroplane, and how many Germans he had slain. Ernie liked him because he was unpretentious, prepared to get his hands dirty and, unasked, sawed, split, and stacked a monumental pile of logs. Even Nancy finally thawed, and one evening, when Doris was out and Penelope occupied in the kitchen, allowed Richard to take her upstairs and give her a bath. For Penelope, it was an extraordinary time—a time of reawakening, as though, for longer than she cared to remember, she had been only half alive. Now, day by day, her inner vision cleared, and her perceptions were sharpened by a new awareness.

One manifestation of this was the sudden significance of popular songs. There was a wireless in the kitchen at Cam Cottage which, because Doris enjoyed its company, was seldom turned off. Sitting on a corner of the dresser, it relayed Workers' Playtime, read news bulletins, talked and sang to itself, for all the world like some lunatic relation, heard but not heeded. But one morning, as Penelope scraped carrots at the sink, Judy Garland came on.

*It seems we stood and talked like this before
We looked at each other in the same way then,
But I can't remember where or when.
The clothes you're wearing are the clothes you wore,
The smile you are smiling you were smiling then . . .*

Doris burst in. "What's wrong with you?"

"Urn?"

"Standing there at the sink with a knife in one hand and a carrot in the other; gazing out the window. Feeling all right, are you?"

There were other, less banal, instances of this sharpening sensitivity. The most ordinary of prospects caused her to stop and stare. The last of the leaves dropped from the trees, and the bare branches made lace against pale skies. Sun after rain turned cobbled streets blue as fish scale.,, dazzling to the eye. Autumn winds, whipping the bay to a scud of white-caps, brought with them, not cold, but a surging sense of vitality. She was filled with physical energy, tackling tasks she had put off for months, cleaning silver, labouring in the garden, and at weekends rounding up the children and taking them for massive walks, up onto the moor, down to the cliffs beyond the North Beach. Best of all, perhaps strangest of all, when days passed and Richard did not come, she suffered no anxious speculation. She knew that, sooner or later, he would be there, bringing with him that same aura of ease and familiarity that had struck her so instantly on the occasion of his first visit. And when he did appear, it was like a marvellous bonus, a gift of joy.

Trying to analyse, to find a reason, for her own tranquil acceptance of the situation, she discovered that there was nothing ephemeral about either her relationship with Richard Lomax, nor the rare new quality of her days. On the contrary, she was aware only of a sort of timelessness, as though it was all part of a plan, a predestined design, conceived the day she was born. What was happening to her had been meant to happen, was going to go on happening. Without any recognizable beginning, it did not seem possible that it could ever have an end.

". . . there was a day, in the middle of every summer, called Open Day. All the artists buffed up their studios . . . and some of them needed a good deal of buffing . . . and set out their work and their finished canvases, and the general public went around, from one studio to another, inspecting, and sometimes buying. Of course, some of the visitors simply did the rounds out of curiosity . . . rather like nosing around other people's houses . . . but a lot of bona fide buyers came as well. Like I said, some of the studios were fairly grubby and basic, even in those days, but Sophie always gave Papa's a tremendous spring clean, and filled it with flowers, and gave the visitors shortbread biscuits and

glasses of wine. She said a little refreshment helped the sales along. ..."

It was now the end of October, a Sunday, and early in the afternoon. During his sporadic visits to Cam Cottage, Richard had reiterated, more than once, his desire to see Lawrence Stern's studio, but somehow a suitable opportunity had never arisen. Today, however, he was, for once, free, and Penelope, impulsively abandoning other plans, had offered to take him. Now, they were on their way, walking as usual, the big old key heavy in the pocket of her cardigan.

The weather was cool and fresh, a west wind blowing gusts of sunshine and shadow across the sea, the low -clouds forming and dispersing to reveal glimpses of an egg shell-blue sky. The harbour road was almost deserted, the few summer tourists having long departed. All shops were shut, and the locals, being Sabbath-observing Methodists, were keeping themselves to themselves, sleeping off Sunday dinners, or perhaps pottering in hidden gardens.

"Are there any of your father's pictures still in the studio?"

"Heavens no. Well, maybe the odd half-finished sketch or canvas. Nothing more. When he was working he was grateful to be able to sell everything he produced, sometimes letting them go scarcely before the paint was dry. It was our living, you see. All except The Shell Seekers. That was never even exhibited. For some reason it was a very personal picture. He would never consider selling it." They had turned off the harbour road and were now climbing up into the baffling warren of narrow streets and alleys that lay beyond. "I came this way the day war was de-clared to fetch Papa and take him home for lunch. When the church clock struck eleven, all the gulls, perched on the tower, took off, and flew up into the sky." They rounded the last corner and the North Beach was revealed, and, as always, the force of the wind came as a shock, causing them to hesitate for a second, catching their breath, before continuing down the twisting lane that led to the studio.

Penelope fitted the key in the heavy door and turned it. The door swung open and she led the way inside and was at once assailed by shame, for it was months since she had been down here, and the huge airy room presented an

instant impression of disarray and neglect. The air felt cold and yet stuffy; all smelled of turpentine, wood-smoke, tar, and damp. The cold clear northern light, which flooded in through the tall windows, picked out in cruel detail the general dilapidation and muddle.

Behind her, Richard closed the door. She said bluntly, "It looks dreadful. And it's damp." She crossed the floor, unlatched the window and, with some difficulty, forced it open. Like a flood of icy water, the wind poured in. She saw the deserted beach, the tide far out, the line of white rollers misted in spume.

He came to join her. He said, with some satisfaction, "*The Shell Seekers*."

"Of course. It was painted from this window." She turned back to survey the scene. "Sophie would have a fit if she could see Papa's studio looking like this."

The floor, and indeed every horizontal surface, was coated with a film of sand. A table was stacked with a pile of dog-eared magazines, an unemptied ashtray, a forgotten bathing towel. The velvet curtain which draped the model's chair was faded and dusty, and a pile of cinders lay on the hearth in front of the old pot-bellied stove. Beyond this, two divans were set in the angle of the wall, spread with striped blankets and scattered with cushions, but the cushions sagged and a marauding mouse had been at one of them, eaten a hole in the corner and left a trail of stuffing.

Scarcely knowing where to start, Penelope set about trying to improve the situation. She found an old paper sack and into this emptied the leaking cushion and the contents of the ashtray, and set all aside to be later dumped into the nearest dustbin. She snatched the other cushions from the divans, flung them to the floor, stripped off the blankets and took them to the open window, to be shaken vigorously out into the cold fresh air. Mouse-droppings and bits of fluff were whisked away by the wind. Once the blankets and the cushions, plumped up, had been replaced, things immediately began to look marginally better.

Meanwhile Richard, apparently unbothered by the disorder, was prowling, taking all in, fascinated by the clues and clutter of another man's lifetime, the

memorabilia and objets trouvés which stood all about. Shells and sea pebbles and scraps of driftwood, collected and preserved for their colour and form; photographs thumbtacked to the walls; the plaster cast of a hand; a pottery jug filled with sea-birds' feathers and dried grasses, fragile as dust. Lawrence's easels and stacks of old canvases and sketch-books; the trays of dried out paint-tubes; the old palettes and jars of brushes, stained with the vermilion and ochre and cobalt and burnt sienna that he had loved to use.

"How long is it since your father worked?"

"Oh, years."

"And yet this is all still here."

"He would never throw anything away, and I haven't the heart to."

In front of the pot-bellied stove, he paused.

"Why don't we light the fire? Wouldn't that help to dry the place up?"

"It might. But I haven't any matches."

"I have." He squatted, gingerly to open the doors of the stove and stir the ashes with the stub end of a poker. "And there's some newspaper here, and a bit of kindling and some driftwood."

"What if a jackdaw's made a nest in the chimney?"

"If he has, we'll soon know." Straightening, he took off his green beret, tossed it aside, unbuttoned his battledress jacket. Rolling up the sleeves of his shirt, he set to work.

While Richard cleared out dead ashes and twisted scraps of newspaper into spills, Penelope unearthed, from behind a stack of surf-boards, a broom and began to sweep the sand from tables and floors. She found a sheet of cardboard, collected the sand onto this, and emptied it out of the window. The beach was no longer deserted. In the distance, out of nowhere, a pair of

tiny figures had appeared. A man and a woman with a dog. The man threw a stick for the dog and it ran into the surf to retrieve it. She shivered. The air was cold. She half-shut the window and latched it and, with no more to be accomplished, went to curl up in the corner of the divan, just as, when she was a child, at the sleepy end of a long sunlit day of swimming and play, she had snuggled next to Sophie to be read a book or told a story.

Now she watched Richard, and there was the same safe and peaceful feeling. Somehow he had coaxed and cajoled the beginning of a fire. Twigs snapped and crackled. A flame flickered. He fed in, cautiously, a bit of wood. She smiled, for he seemed to her as intent as a schoolboy building a camp-fire. He looked up and caught the smile.

"Were you ever a Boy Scout?" she asked him.

"Yes. I even learned to tie knots and make a stretcher out of two poles and a raincoat."

He stacked on a log or two and the tarry wood spluttered and flared. He closed the doors of the stove, adjusted the draught, and stood up, wiping his hands on the seat of his trousers.

"That's it."

"If we had some tea and some milk, we could boil a kettle and have a hot cup of tea."

"That's about as good as saying if we had some bacon, we could have bacon and eggs, if we had some eggs." He pulled up a stool and sat facing her. There was a streak of soot on his right cheek but she didn't tell him about it. "Is that what you used to do? Make tea down here?"

"Yes, after surfing. The very thing, when you were all cold and shivery. And there were always gingerbread biscuits to dunk in the tea. Some years, if there'd been bad storms during the winter, the sand came up to the window, in great banks. But other years, it was like it is today, with a twenty-foot drop, and we had to climb down to the beach by a rope ladder." She

rearranged her legs, settled more comfortably into the cushions. "Nothing like nostalgia. I'm like an old person, aren't I? I seem to talk all the time about the way things used to be. You must find it very boring."

"I don't find it boring at all. But sometimes I get the impression that your life ended the day war broke out. And that's wrong, because you're very young."

"I'm twenty-four. Just," she amended.

He smiled. "When was your birthday?"

"Last month. You weren't there."

"September." For a moment he considered this and then nodded, in a satisfied way. "Yes. That's right. That fits."

"How do you mean?"

"Do you ever read Louis MacNeice?"

"I never heard of him."

"An Irish poet. The best. I shall now introduce you to him, reciting from memory, and probably embarrassing you most dreadfully."

"I don't embarrass easily."

He laughed. Without preamble, he began:

*"September has come, it is hers
Whose vitality leaps in the autumn,
Whose nature prefers
Trees without leaves and a fire in the fireplace.
So I give her this month and the next
Though the whole of my year should be hers who has rendered already
So many of its days intolerable or perplexed But so many more so happy. >
Who has left a scent on my life, and*

*left my walls Dancing over and over with her shadow
Whose hair is twined in all my waterfalls
And all of London littered with remembered kisses."*

A love poem. Unexpectedly, a love poem. She was not embarrassed but found herself deeply moved. The words, spoken in Richard's quiet voice, aroused a flurry of emotions, but sadness too. All of London littered with remembered kisses. She thought back to Ambrose and the night they had gone to the theatre, and out to dine and then back to Oakley Street, but the memories were flat and colourless and did nothing to stir her senses as the words of the poem had done. All of which was, to say the least of it, depressing.

"Penelope."

"Urn . . . ?"

"Why do you never talk about your husband?"

She looked up sharply, for a dreadful instant wondering if she had been actually thinking aloud.

"Do you want me to talk about him?"

"Not particularly. But it would be natural. I've known you all ... what is it ... nearly two months now, and in all that time you've never voluntarily spoken of him nor mentioned his name. Your father's the same. Each time we get remotely near the subject, the conversation is changed."

"The reason for that is simple. Ambrose bores him. Ambrose bored Sophie too. They had nothing in common. Nothing to say to each other."

"And you?"

She knew that she had to be honest, not only with Richard but with herself. "I don't talk about him because it's something I'm not very proud of. I don't come out of it very well."

"Whatever that means, you don't imagine I would think any the less of you?"

"Oh, Richard, I have no idea what you would think."

"Try me."

She shrugged, at a loss for words. "I married him."

"Did you love him?"

Once more she strove for truth. "I don't know. But he was good-looking and kind, and the first real friend I made after I joined up and was sent to Whale Island. I'd never had a ..." She hesitated, searching for the right word, but what was there to say except boy-friend? "I'd never had a boy-friend before, never had any sort of a relationship with a man of my own age. He was good company, and he liked me, and it was new and it was different."

"Was that all?" He appeared totally nonplussed, as well he might, after this garbled explanation.

"No. There was another reason. I was pregnant with Nancy." She arranged her face into a bright smile. "Does that shock you?"

"For God's sake, of course it doesn't shock me."

"You look shocked."

"Only because you actually married the man."

"I didn't have to marry him." It was important to reassure him, lest he was picturing Lawrence with a shotgun and Sophie in tears of recrimination. "Papa and Sophie were never like that. They were the original free souls. Ordinary social conventions meant nothing to them. I was on leave when I told them about the baby coming. Under normal circumstances, I might just have stayed at home and had Nancy, and Ambrose would have been none the wiser. But I was still in the Wrens. My leave finished and I had to go back to

Portsmouth, and so of course I had to see Ambrose again. And I had to let him know about the baby. It was only fair. I told him that he didn't have to marry me ... but . . ." She hesitated, actually finding it impossible to remember exactly what had happened. ". . . once he'd got used to the idea, he seemed to think that we ought to get married. And I was rather touched because I hadn't really expected him to do anything of the sort. Once we'd made up our minds, there was no time to be lost because Ambrose had finished his courses and was about to be sent to sea. So it was fixed, and that was it. Chelsea Registry Office on a fine May morning."

"Had your parents met him?"

"No. And they couldn't come to the wedding because Papa was ill with bronchitis. So they didn't meet until months later, when he came down to Carn Cottage on a weekend leave. And the moment he walked into the house, I knew that it was all wrong. It was the most terrible, horrible mistake. He didn't belong to us. He didn't belong to me. And I was horrible to him. Enormously pregnant and bored and irritable. I didn't even try to make it fun for him. That's one of the things I'm ashamed of. And I'm ashamed because I always thought of myself as mature and intelligent, and at the end of the day all I did was to make the silliest decision any woman can."

"You mean getting married."

"Yes. Admit it, Richard, you would never have done anything so foolish."

"Don't be too sure. I came very close to it three or four times, but at the last moment common sense always caused me to draw back."

"You mean that you knew you weren't in love, that it wasn't right for you?"

"Partly that. And partly the fact that, for the past ten years, I've known that this war was coming. I'm thirty-two now. I was twenty-two when Hitler and the Nazi party first came on the scene. At University, I had a great friend, Claus von Reindorp. A Rhodes scholar and a brilliant student. He wasn't a Jew, but a member of one of the old German families. We talked a lot about what was happening in his homeland. Even then, he was filled with

foreboding. One summer, I went to Austria to climb in the Tyrol. I was able to feel the temperature for myself, see the writing on the wall. Your friends, the Cliffords, were not the only people to realize that there were terrible times ahead."

"What happened to your friend?"

"I don't know. He went back to Germany. For a little, he wrote to me and then the letters stopped. He simply disappeared out of my life. I can only hope that, by now, he is safely dead."

She said, "I hate this war. I hate it as much as anybody. I want it to end, for the killing and the bombing and the battles to stop. And yet I dread its ending, too. Papa is growing old. He can't have much longer to live, and without him to take care of, and without a war, I shall have no reason not to go back to my husband. I see myself and Nancy living in some horrible little villa in Alverstoke or Keyham, and the prospect fills me with dread."

The admission was out. The words hung in a silence between them. She suspected disapproval and needed, more than anything, reassurance. In some distress she turned to him. "Do you hate me for being so selfish?"

"No." He leaned forward and laid his hand over her own where it lay, palm up, upon the striped blanket. "The very opposite." Her hand was freezing cold but his touch was warm, and she closed her fingers around his wrist, needing his warmth, willing it to spread, to reach every part of her being. Instinctively, she lifted his hand and pressed it to her cheek. At precisely the same moment, they both spoke. "I love you."

She looked up and into his eyes. It was said. It was done. It could never be unsaid.

"Oh, Richard."

"I love you," he repeated. "I think I've been in love with you since the first moment I set eyes on you, standing with your father on the other side of the road, with your hair blowing in the wind, and you looking like some

ravishing gypsy."

"I didn't know ... I really didn't know . . ."

"And from the very beginning, I knew that you were married, and yet that made no difference at all. I couldn't get you out of my mind. And looking back, I don't think I even tried. And when you asked me to Cam Cottage, I told myself it was because of your father, because he enjoyed my company and his games of backgammon. So I came, and I came back ... to see him, of course, but as well, because if I was with him, I knew that you would never be far away. Surrounded by children and endlessly occupied, but still there. That was all that mattered."

"That was all that mattered to me, too. I didn't try to analyse it. I only knew that everything changed colour when you walked through the door. It felt as though I'd known you always. Like the best of everything, in the past and the future, all happening at once. But I didn't dare to call it love. . . ."

He was beside her now, no longer sitting a yard away, but beside her, his arms around her, holding her so close that she could feel the vital drum-beat of his heart. Her face was pressed to his shoulder, his fingers twined and tangled in her hair. "Oh, my darling, darling girl." She drew away, her face turned up to his, and they kissed like lovers who have been parted for years. And it was like coming home, and hearing a door being shut, and knowing that you were safe; with the intrusive world shut out, and nothing and nobody to come between you and the only person in the world you wanted to be with.

She lay on her back, her dark hair spilling out over the old faded cushions.

"Oh, Richard . . ." It was a whisper, but she was not capable of more. "I never knew. I never even guessed that I could feel like this . . . that it could be like this."

He smiled. "It can be better than this."

She looked up into his face and knew what he was saying, and knew that she wanted nothing more. She began to laugh, and his mouth came down on her

open, laughing mouth, and words, sweet as they had been, became all at once unnecessary and no longer enough.

The old studio was no stranger to love. The pot-bellied stove, bravely burning, comforted with its warmth; the wind, streaming in through the half-open windows, had seen it all be-fore. The blanketed divans, where once Lawrence and Sophie had shared their mutual joy, received this new love like kindly accomplices. And afterwards, in the deep peace of passion spent, all was tranquillity, and they lay quiet, entwined in each other's arms, watching the clouds tumbling across the sky and listening to the timeless thunder of breakers pounding up onto the empty beach.

She said, "What will happen?"

"How do you mean?"

"What will we do?"

"Continue to love each other."

"I don't want to go back. To things as they were before."

"We can never do that."

"But we have to. We can't escape reality. And yet I want there to be tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow and to know that on all those tomorrows I can spend every waking hour with you."

"I want that too." He sounded sad. "But it's not to be."

"This war. I hate it so much."

"Perhaps we should be grateful. That it brought us to-gether."

"Oh, no. We would have met. Somehow. Somewhere. It was written in the stars. The day I was born, some celestial Civil Servant put a rubber stamp on you, with my name on it, in great big capital letters. This man is reserved for

Penelope Stern."

"Except I wasn't a man the day you were born. I was a prep-school boy, struggling with the inky miseries of my Latin grammar."

"It makes no difference. We still belong together. You were always there."

"Yes. I was always there." He kissed her then, reluctantly, raised his wrist to look at his watch. "It's nearly five o'clock. . . ."

"I hate the war, and I hate clocks, too."

"Unfortunately, my darling, we can't stay here forever."

"When shall I see you again?"

"Not for a bit. I've got to go away."

"For how long?"

"Three weeks. I shouldn't be telling you, so you mustn't breathe a word."

She was filled with alarm. "But where are you going?"

"I can't say. . . ."

"What are you going to do? Is it dangerous?"

He laughed. "No, you ninny, of course it's not dangerous. A training exercise . . . part of my job. So no more questions."

"I'm frightened that something will happen to you."

"Nothing will happen to me."

"When will you be back?"

"The middle of November?"

"Nancy has a birthday at the end of November. She'll be three."

"I'll be back then."

She thought about it. "Three weeks," she sighed. "It seems for ever. . . ."

"Absence is the wind that blows out the little candle, but fans the embers of a fire to a great blaze."

"Still, I could do without it."

"Will it help to remember how much I love you?" "Yes. A bit."

The winter was upon them. Bitter east winds assaulted the countryside, and moaned down across the moor. The sea, turbulent and angry, turned the colour of lead. Houses, streets, the very sky appeared bleached with cold. At Cam Cottage, fires were lighted first thing in the morning and kept going all day, fuelled with small rations of coal and anything else that would burn. The days grew short, and with the black-out curtains drawn at tea-time, the nights very long. Penelope reverted to her poncho and her thick black stockings, and taking Nancy out for her afternoon walks involved much bundling of the child into woollen sweaters, leggings, bonnets, and gloves.

Lawrence, his old bones chilled, warmed his hands at the fire and became restless and morose. He was bored.

"Where's Richard Lomax got to? Hasn't been here for three weeks or more."

"Three weeks and four days, Papa." She had started counting them.

"Never stayed away so long before."

"He'll be back for his backgammon."

"What's he doing with himself?"

"I've no idea."

Another week passed, and still there was no sign of him. Despite herself, Penelope began to worry. Perhaps he was never coming back. Perhaps some Admiral or General, sitting in state at Whitehall, had decided that Richard was destined for other things, and had posted him off to the North of Scotland, and she would never see him again. He hadn't written, but perhaps he was forbidden to. Or perhaps . . . and this was almost unthinkable . . . with the Second Front looming in the future, he had been parachuted into Norway or Holland; an advance scout sent to pave the way for Allied troops . . . her anxious, overworked imagination turned and fled from the prospect.

Nancy's birthday was imminent, and this was a good thing, for it gave Penelope something else to think about. She and Doris were planning a small party. Invitations to tea were sent out to ten little female friends. Ration points were squandered on chocolate biscuits, and Penelope, with hoarded ounces of butter and margarine, made a cake.

Nancy was now old enough to look forward to her special day, and for the first time in her short life realized what it was all about. It was about presents. After breakfast, she sat on the hearthrug by the sitting room fire and opened her parcels, watched, in some amusement, by her mother and her grandfather, and, adoringly, by Doris. She was not disappointed. Penelope gave her a new doll and Doris clothes for the doll, lovingly contrived from scraps of material and odds and ends of knitting wool. There were a sturdy wooden wheelbarrow from Ernie Penberth, and a jigsaw puzzle from Ronald and Clark. Lawrence, always on the lookout for signs of inherited talent, had bought his grandchild a box of coloured pencils; but Nancy's best present of all came from her grandmother, Dolly Keeling. A large box to be opened, layers of tissue paper torn away; and finally, a new dress. A party dress. Layers of white organdie, trimmed with lace and smocked in pink silk. Nothing could have given Nancy more delight.

Kicking aside her other gifts, "I want to put it on now," she announced, and started then and there to struggle out of her dungarees.

"No, it's a party dress. You can put it on this afternoon, for your party. Look, here's your doll, dress her up in her new clothes. Look at the party dress Doris has made for her. And it's got a petticoat as well, with lace. ..."

Later in the morning, "You'll have to move out of the sitting room, Papa," Penelope told him. "We've got to have the party in here, and space to play games." She heaved the table to the edge of the floor.

"And where am I meant to take myself? The coal shed?"

"No. Doris has lit the fire in the study. You can be quiet and peaceful in there. Nancy doesn't want any males about the place. She's made that very clear. Even Ronald and Clark have to stay out of the way. They're going to have tea with Mrs. Penberth."

"Aren't I allowed to come and eat birthday cake?"

"Yes, of course you are. We mustn't allow Nancy to become too dictatorial."

The little guests arrived at four o'clock, urged through the front door by mothers or grannies, and for a gruelling hour and a half Doris and Penelope were in sole charge. The party followed the usual pattern. All had brought small gifts for Nancy, which had to be opened. One child wept and said she wanted to go home, and another, a bossy little madam with ringlets, asked if there was going to be a conjuror. Penelope told her briskly that there wasn't.

Games were played. "I sent a letter to my love and on the way I dropped it," they all piped in unison, sitting cross-legged in a circle on the sitting room floor. One little guest, perhaps overexcited, wet her knickers and had to be taken upstairs and lent a dry pair.

*The farmer's in his den
The farmer's in his den
Heigh-ho, my daddy-o,
The farmer's in his den.*

Penelope, already exhausted, looked at the clock and could scarcely believe

that it was only half past four. There was still an hour to be survived before mothers and grannies would reappear to claim their little darlings and take them away.

They played "Pass the Parcel." All went well until the bossy child in ringlets said that Nancy had snatched the parcel and it was her turn to undo the paper. Nancy objected and got a clout over the ear from the ringleted one, whereupon she promptly/ hit back. Penelope made soothing noises and tactfully separated them. Doris appeared at the door and said that tea was ready. No announcement had ever been more welcome.

Games were thankfully abandoned and they all trooped into the dining room, where Lawrence was already seated in his carver chair at the head of the table. The curtains were drawn, the fire lighted, and all was festive. For a moment, the children were silenced, either by the awe-inspiring sight of the old man, sitting there like a patriarch, or else by the prospect of food. They gazed at the starched white cloth, the bright mugs and plates, the straws for sucking lemonade and the crackers. The feast included jellies and sandwiches, iced biscuits and jam tarts, and, of course, the cake. They took their places at the table, and for a little while all was silent, save for the sound of munching. There were accidents, of course: sandwiches dropped on the carpet and a mug of lemonade upset, soaking the table-cloth, but this was all routine and speedily dealt with. Then crackers were pulled, paper hats unfolded and placed on heads, and garish brooches and trinkets pinned to dresses. Finally, Penelope lit the three candles on the cake, and Doris turned off the overhead light. The dark room became a stage set, a magic place, the candle flames reflected in the wide eyes of the children who sat around the table.

Nancy, in the place of honour beside her grandfather, stood up on her chair and he helped her to cut the cake.

*"Happy birthday to you . . .
Happy birthday to you.
Happy birthday, dear Nancy ..."*

The door opened and Richard walked in.

"I couldn't believe it. When you appeared, I thought I was seeing things. I couldn't believe it was true." He seemed thinner, older, grey with fatigue. He needed a shave, and his battledress was creased and soiled. "Where have you been?"

"The back of beyond."

"When did you get back?"

"About an hour ago."

"You look exhausted."

"I am," he admitted. "But I said I'd be here for Nancy's party."

"You stupid man, that didn't matter. You should be in bed."

They were alone. Nancy's little visitors had all departed, each one with a balloon and a lollipop. Doris had taken Nancy upstairs to give her a bath. Lawrence had suggested a glass of whisky, and had gone in search of a bottle. The sitting room was still in disorder, with all the furniture out of place, but they sat, unconcerned, in the midst of it all, Richard prone in an armchair, and Penelope on the hearthrug at his feet.

He said, "The whole exercise took longer . . . was more complicated . . . than we'd anticipated. I couldn't even write you a letter."

"I guessed that."

A silence fell. In the warmth of the fire, his eyelids drooped. Fighting sleep, he sat up, rubbed his eyes, ran a hand over his stubbly chin. "I must look a total wreck. I haven't shaved, and I haven't slept for three nights. Now I'm incapable. Which is sad, because I'd planned to take you out and have you to myself for the rest of the evening, and hopefully the rest of the night as well; but somehow I don't think I can make it. I'd be no use. Fall asleep in the soup. Do you mind? Can you wait?"

"Of course. I don't mind anything now that you're safely back again. I had terrifying visions of you being intrepid and getting killed or captured."

"You overestimate me."

"When you were away, it felt like for ever, but now you're here again and I can actually look at you and touch you; it's as though you'd never been away at all. And it wasn't just me that missed you. It was Papa, too, pining for his backgammon."

"I'll come up one evening and we'll have a game." He leaned forward and took her face in his hands. He said, "You are just as ravishingly beautiful as I remembered you." His tired eyes crinkled up in amusement. "Perhaps more so."

"What's so funny?"

"You. Had you forgotten that you are wearing a most un-becoming paper hat?"

He stayed only for a little while, long enough to drink the whisky Lawrence had brought him. After that, exhaustion took over and, swallowing yawns, he pulled himself to his feet, apologized for being such dull company, and said good night. Penelope saw him out. In the darkness beyond the open door, they kissed. Then he left her, making his way down the garden, headed for a hot shower, his bunk, and sleep.

She came indoors and closed the door. She hesitated for a moment, needing time to collect her flying thoughts, and finally went into the dining room, found a tray, and started in on the tedious business of clearing up the remains of Nancy's party.

She was in the kitchen, washing up at the sink, when Doris joined her.

"Nancy's asleep already. Wanted to go to bed in her new dress." She sighed. "I'm bushed. I thought that party was never going to end." She flicked a towel from the rack, and came to dry. "Has Richard gone?"

"Yes."

"Thought he'd be taking you out for supper tonight."

"No. He's gone back to catch up on his sleep."

Doris wiped and stacked a pile of plates. "Still, it was nice, him turning up like that. Expecting him, were you?"

"No."

"Thought not."

"Why do you say that?"

"I was watching you. You went all white in the face. All bright-eyed. Like you was going to faint."

"I was just surprised."

"Oh, come off it, Penelope. I'm not a fool. It's like forked lightning when you two are together. I could see the way he looked at you. He's potty about you. And by the looks of you, since he walked into your life, it's mutual."

Penelope was washing a Peter Rabbit mug. She turned it over in her hands, in the soapy water. "I didn't realize it showed so much."

"Well, don't sound so miserable about it. Nothing to be ashamed of, having a fling with a handsome chap like Richard Lomax."

"I don't think I'm just having a fling. I know I'm not. I'm in love with him."

"Get away."

"And I don't exactly know what I'm going to do. . . ."

"It's as serious as that?"

Penelope turned her head and looked at Doris. Their eyes met, and it occurred to her, at that moment, that they had become, over the years, very close. Sharing responsibilities, sorrows, frustrations, secrets, jokes, and laughter, they had built themselves a relationship that went beyond the bounds of mere friendship. In fact, as much as any person could, Doris . . . worldly, practical, and infinitely kind . . . had filled the aching void left by Sophie's death. And so it was easy to confide.

"Yes."

There was a pause. "Sleeping with him, are you?" asked Doris, marvellously casual.

"Yes."

"How the hell did you manage that?"

"Oh, Doris, it wasn't very difficult."

"No ... I mean . . . well, where?"

"The studio."

"I'll be buggered," said Doris, who only swore when she found herself at a total loss for words.

"Are you shocked?"

"Why should I be shocked? It's nothing to do with me."

"I'm married."

"Yes, you're married, worse luck."

"Don't you like Ambrose?"

"You know I don't. Never said as much, but a straight question deserves a straight answer. I think he's a rotten husband and a rotten father. He scarcely ever comes to see you, and don't tell me he doesn't get leave. He hardly ever writes. And he doesn't even send Nancy a birthday present. Honest, Penelope, he's not worthy of you. Why you ever married the man is a mystery to me."

Penelope said hopelessly, "I was having Nancy."

"That's a bloody reason if ever I heard one."

"I never thought you'd say that."

"What do you think I am? Some sort of a saint?"

"Then you don't disapprove of what I'm doing?"

"No, I don't. Richard Lomax is a real gentleman, head and shoulders over a twerp like Ambrose Keeling. And why shouldn't you have some fun? You're only twenty-four and, God knows, life's been dull enough for you these past few years. I'm just surprised you haven't gone off the rails before, the sort of woman you are. Except, let's face it, before Richard came, we were a bit short of local talent."

Despite herself, despite everything, Penelope started to laugh. "Doris, I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Lots of things, I expect. At least now I know which way the wind's blowing. And I think it's great."

"But how will it end?"

"There's a war on. We don't know how anything's going to end. We just have to grasp each fleeting moment of joy as it whizzes by. If he loves you and you love him, then you just go ahead. I'm right behind you both and I'll do everything I can to help. Now, for God's sake, let's get these dishes out of the way before the boys get home and it's time to start cooking the sup-per."

It was December. Before they knew it, Christmas was upon them, with all its attendant trimmings. It was hard, in the denuded shops of Porthkerris, to buy anything suitable for anybody, but presents were somehow assembled and wrapped and hidden, just like any other year. Doris made a War Time Christmas Pudding from a Ministry of Food recipe, and Ernie promised to wring the neck of a likely fowl, in lieu of a turkey. General Watson-Grant provided, from his garden, a little spruce, and Penelope dug out the box of Christmas-tree decorations—the baubles and trinkets left over from her own childhood, the gilded fir-cones and paper stars and chains of tarnished tinsel.

Richard had Christmas leave, but was going to London to spend a few days with his mother. Before he left, however, he came to Carn Cottage to deliver his gifts for them all. They were wrapped in brown paper and tied with red ribbon, and labelled with stickers bright with holly and robins. Penelope was deeply touched. She imagined him shopping, buying the ribbon; sitting, perhaps on his bed, in his austere cabin at the Royal Marine HQ, painstakingly wrapping, and tying bows. She tried to imagine Ambrose doing anything so personal and time-consuming, but failed.

She had bought, for Richard, a scarlet lamb's-wool muffler. It had cost not only money but precious clothing coupons as well, and probably he would think it hopelessly impractical, for it could not be worn with uniform and he was never in plain clothes. But so luxurious was it, so cheerful and Christmassy, that Penelope had been unable to resist. She wrapped it in tissue paper, and found a box for it, and, when Richard had piled his gifts beneath their tree, she gave him the package to take with him to London.

He turned it over in his hands. "Why don't I open it now?"

She was horrified. "Oh, no, you mustn't. You must keep it till Christmas morning."

"All right. If you say so."

She did not want to say goodbye. But, "Have a happy time," she told him, smiling.

He kissed her. "You too, my darling." It was like being torn apart. "Happy Christmas."

Christmas morning started early as ever, and was the usual riot of excitement, with all six of them gathered in Lawrence's bed-room, the grown-ups drinking mugs of tea, and the children bundled on his big bed to open their stockings. Trumpets tootled, and tricks were played and apples eaten, and Lawrence put on a false nose with a Hitler moustache, and everybody fell about with laughter. Breakfast came next, and then, traditionally, they all trooped into the sitting room and started in on the presents piled under the tree. Excitement rose. Soon the floor was piled with paper and tinselled string, the air filled with shrieks of glee and satisfaction. "Oh, thanks, Mum, it was just what I wanted. Look, Clark, a *hooter* for my *bike*."

Penelope had set Richard's present aside, and left it to open last of all. The others were not so strong-minded. Doris tore the paper off hers and produced from the wrappings a silk scarf, of extravagant size and richness, and patterned in all the colours of the rainbow.

"I've never had such a thing before!" she crowed, and proceeded to fold it into a triangle, toss it over her head, and knot it beneath her chin. "How do I look?"

Ronald told her. "Like Princess Elizabeth on her pony."

"Ooh," she was delighted. "Very la-di-da."

For Lawrence, there was a bottle of whisky; for the boys, proper lethal, professional catapults. For Nancy, a doll's tea-set, white china, gold-rimmed, and painted with tiny flowers.

"What's he given you, Penelope?"

"I haven't opened it yet."

"Open it now."

She did so, with all their eyes upon her. Untied the bow and folded back the crisp brown paper. Inside was a white box, edged in black. Chanel No 5. She took the lid off the box and saw the square bottle set in folds of satin, the crystal stopper, the precious golden liquid contents.

Doris was open-mouthed. "I've never seen such a size of a bottle. Not outside a shop, I haven't. And Chanel No 5! You aren't half going to smell good."

Inside the lid of the box was a tightly folded blue envelope. Surreptitiously, Penelope removed this and put it into the pocket of her cardigan. Later, when the others were clearing up the littered paper, she went upstairs to her room and opened the letter.

My darling girl.

Happy Christmas. This has come to you from across the Atlantic. A good friend of mine was in New York, where his cruiser was re-fitting, and he brought it back when they returned to England. To me, the scent of Chanel No. 5 evokes everything that is glamorous and sexy and light-hearted and fun. Lunch at the Berkeley; London in May with the lilac blossom out; laughter, and love; and you. You are never out of my thoughts. You are never out of my heart.

Richard.

It was the same dream. She thought of it as Richard's country. Always the same. The long, wooded land, the house at the end of it, flat-roofed, a Mediterranean house. The swimming pool, and Sophie swimming there, and Papa at his easel, his face blanked out by the shadow cast by the brim of his hat. And then the empty beach, and the knowledge that she was seeking not for shells but for a person. He came, and she saw him coming, from far off, and was filled with joy. But before she could reach his side, the mist rolled in from the sea, a dark fog rising like a tide, so that at first he appeared to be wading in it, and then drowning.

"Richard."

She awoke, reaching for him. But the dream dissolved and he was gone. Her hands felt only the cold sheets on the other side of the bed. She could hear the sea murmuring on the beach, but there was no wind. All was quiet and still. So what had disturbed her, what lay at the edge of consciousness? She opened her eyes. Darkness was fading and, beyond the open window, the sky pale with the coming dawn, the half-light making clear the details of her own familiar room. The brass rail at the end of the bed, her dressing table, the tilted mirror reflecting the sky. She saw the little armchair, the open suitcase on the floor beside it, already half-packed. . . .

That was it. The suitcase. Today. I am going away today. On holiday; for seven days; and with Richard.

She lay and thought about him for a bit, and then remembered that puzzling dream. Never altering. Always the same sequence. Nostalgic images of lost content; then the searching. The whole fading to uncertainty and that final sense of loss. But, on analysis, perhaps after all it was not so puzzling, for the dream had first invaded her sleep soon after Richard returned from London at the beginning of January, and had recurred at irregular intervals during the past two and a half months.

Which had proved a time of the most painful frustration because, so occupied and involved had he become in his job, that she had scarcely seen him. The Training Exercise, in proportion to the bitter weather, had visibly intensified. This was made evident by the increasing number of troops and Army vehicles to be seen about the place. Convoys now frequently choked the narrow streets of the town and the harbour, and the Commando establishment on the North Pier seethed with military activity.

Things, quite obviously, were hotting up. Helicopters hovered out at sea and, after the New Year, a company of sappers had appeared overnight, made their way out to the deserted moorland beyond the Boscarben Cliffs, and there set up a firing range. It looked sinister with barbed wire, red warning flags, and huge War Department signs warning the civilian population to keep out, and threatening death and destruction if they didn't. When the wind was in the right direction, the sporadic sounds of gun-fire, day and night, could be clearly heard in Porthkerris. At night-time, it was particularly disquieting

because, woken with a

start and a pounding heart, you could never be quite sure exactly what was taking place.

From time to time, Richard did appear, unheralded as always. His step in the hall, his raised voice never failed to fill her with joy. Usually these visits came after supper, when he would sit with herself and Papa, drink coffee, and later, play backgammon into the small hours. Once, telephoning and making the arrangement at the very last moment, he had taken her down to Gaston's for dinner, where they drank a bottle of Gaston's excellent wine and talked their way through weeks of absence from each other.

"Tell me about Christmas, Richard. How was your Christmas?"

"Quiet."

"What did you do?"

"Took in concerts. Went to the Midnight Service at Westminster Abbey. Talked."

"Just you and your mother?"

"A few friends dropped in. But most of the time just the two of us."

It sounded companionable. She was curious. "What did you talk about?"

"Lots of things. You."

"Did you tell her about me?"

"Yes."

"What did you tell her?"

He reached across the table and took her hand. "That I'd found the only

person in the world with whom I wanted to spend the rest of my life."

"Did you tell her that I'm married, and that I have a child?"

"Yes."

"What was her reaction to that piece of news?"

"Surprise. Then sympathy and understanding."

"She sounds nice."

He smiled. "I like her."

Then, before they realized what was happening, the long winter was nearly over. In Cornwall, spring comes early. A scent in the air, a warmth in the sun makes itself evident, whilst the rest of the country continues to shiver. This year was no different. In the

midst of warlike preparations, gun-fire, and hovering helicopters, migrating birds made their appearance in sheltered valleys. Despite the tall headlines in the newspapers, the speculation and rumours of the imminent invasion of Europe, the first of the balmy days stole up upon them, blue-skied, sweet-smelling, halcyon. Buds swelled on trees, the moor was misted green with young bracken, and the roadside banks starred with the creamy faces of wild primroses.

On just such a day, Richard found himself free, without any pressing demands upon his time, and they were able, at last, to return to the studio. To light the fire and let it light their love; to inhabit once more their own private and secret world; to assuage their separate needs and allow them to become a single, shining entity.

Afterwards, "How long until we come here again?" she wanted to know.

"I wish I knew."

"I am greedy. I always want more. I always want a tomor-row."

They sat by the window. Beyond, all was sunlit, the sands a dazzling white, the deep-blue sea dancing with sunpennies. Gulls, drifting on the wind, wheeled and screamed, and just below them, by a rock pool, two small boys searched for shrimps.

"Right now, tomorrows are at a premium."

"You mean the war?"

"Like birth and death, it is part of life."

She sighed. "I do try not to be selfish. I remind myself of the millions of women in the world who would give all they had to be in my shoes, safe and warm and fed and with all my family about me. But it isn't any good. I just feel resentful because I can't be with you all the time. And somehow what makes it worse is that you're actually *here*. You're not guarding Gibraltar, or fighting in the jungles of Burma, or on some destroyer in the Atlantic. You're *here*. And yet the war comes between us, and keeps us apart. It's just that, with everything boiling up, and endless talk of the invasion, I have this terrible feeling that time is slipping by. And all we can grab is a few stolen hours."

He said, "I have a week's leave at the end of the month. Will you come away with me?"

While she spoke, she had been watching the two boys and their shrimping nets. One of them had found something, deep in the green weed. He squatted to inspect it, soaking the seat of his trousers. A week's leave. A week. She turned her head and looked at Richard, convinced that she had either misheard him, or that he was teasing her out of her dissatisfaction.

He read the expression in her face, and smiled. "I really mean it," he assured her.

"A whole week?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I was saving it. The best for the end."

A week. Away from everything; everybody. Just the two of them. "Where would we go?" she asked cautiously.

"Anywhere you want. We could go to London. Stay at the Ritz and do the round of theatres and night-clubs."

She considered this. London. She thought of Oakley Street. But London was Ambrose, and Oakley Street a house haunted by the ghosts of Sophie and Peter and Elizabeth Clifford. She said, "I don't want to go to London. Is there an alternative?"

"Yes. An old house called Tresillick, over on the south coast, on the Roseland Peninsula. It's neither large nor grand, but it has gardens sloping down to the water, and an enormous purple wistaria smothered all over its face."

"You know this house?"

"Yes. I stayed there one summer when I was still at University."

"Who lives there?"

"A friend of my mother's. Helena Bradbury. She's married to a man called Harry Bradbury, a Captain in the Royal Navy commanding a Cruiser with the Home Fleet. After Christmas, my mother wrote to her, and a couple of days ago I got a letter from her, inviting us to stay."

"Us?"

"You and me."

"She knows about me?"

"Obviously."

"But if we stay with her, won't we have to sleep in different bedrooms and be dreadfully discreet?"

Richard laughed. "I've never known such a woman as you for raising difficulties."

"I'm not raising difficulties. I'm being practical."

"I don't imagine those sort of problems will arise. Helena is renowned for her broadmindedness. She was brought up in Kenya, and for some reason ladies who were brought up in Kenya are seldom bound by prissy conventions."

"Have you accepted her invitation?"

"Not yet. I wanted to talk to you first. There are other considerations. Your father is one of them."

"Papa?"

"Will he raise objections to my taking you off on my own?"

"Richard, you surely know him better than that."

"Have you told him about us?"

"No. Not in so many words." She smiled. "But he knows."

"And Doris?"

"I did tell Doris. She thinks it's all splendid. She thinks you're lovely, just like Gregory Peck."

"In that case, there's nothing to stop us. So . . ." He got to his feet. ". . . Come

on. Get your skates on and get moving. We have business to attend to."

There was a telephone-box on the corner by Mrs. Thomas' shop, and they crowded into it together and closed the door, and Richard put through a call to Tresillick. Penelope, standing so close, could hear the phone ringing at the other end.

"Hello." The female voice, ringing loud and clear, was clearly audible to Penelope, and nearly deafened Richard. "Helena Bradbury here."

"Helena. It's Richard Lomax."

"Richard, you devil! Why haven't you been in touch with me before?"

"I'm sorry, but there's really been no opportunity—"

"Get my letter?"

"Yes. I—"

"Coming to stay?"

"If we may."

"Wonderful! I'm just livid to think you've been in this neck of the woods all this time, and I didn't know until I heard from your mother. When are you both coming?"

"Well, I've got a week's leave coming up at the end of March. Would that be okay by you?"

"End of March? Oh, hell. I shan't be here. Going up to Chatham to spend a bit of time with the old man. Can't you make it another time? No, of course you can't. Silly bloody question. Well, no matter. Come anyway. The house is yours, you can just take it over. There's a Mrs. Brick, she lives in the cottage. She has a key. Comes and goes. I'll leave some food in the larder. Just make yourselves at home. ..."

"But that's too kind—"

"No skin off my nose. If you feel like paying your way, you can cut the grass for me. Just too sickening that I shan't be here. Never mind, another time. Drop me a line and let me know when Mrs. Brick should expect you. Must fly now. Nice to talk. Goodbye."

She rang off. Richard, left with the humming receiver in his hand, slowly replaced it.

He said, "A lady of few words but swift action," putting his arms around Penelope and kissing her. For the first time, standing there in the smelly, stuffy telephone-box, she allowed herself to believe that it really was going to happen. They were going away together, not on leave, that horrible Service word, but on holiday.

"Nothing can stop it, can it, Richard? Nothing can go wrong?"

"No."

"How shall we get there?"

"We shall have to work it out. A train to Truro, perhaps. A taxi."

"But wouldn't it be more fun to drive?" She was struck by a brilliant idea. "We'll take the Bentley. Papa will lend us the Bentley."

"Haven't you forgotten something?"

"What's that?"

"The small matter of petrol."

She had indeed forgotten. But, "I shall speak to Mr. Grabney," she told him.

"And what will he do?"

"He will get us petrol. Somewhere. Somehow. Black Market, if necessary."

"Why should he do that?"

"Because he is my friend and I have known him all my life.

You wouldn't object to driving me to Roseland in a borrowed Bentley fuelled with Black Market petrol?"

"No. Provided that I have a written affidavit to the effect that we're not going to end up in jail."

She smiled. Her imagination flew ahead. She saw them setting off, bowling down the high-hedged lanes of the south, with Richard at the wheel and their luggage piled on the back seat. She said, "You know something? By the time we go, it will be spring again. It really will be spring."

It was a secret house, tricky to locate, buried deep in a remote and inaccessible corner of the country that had not changed, either its ways or its appearance, for centuries. From the road it was invisible, protected from all eyes by woods and a rutted driveway, bordered by high banks of hydrangea. Finally discovered, it revealed itself as a house that had stood, four-square, for centuries, gathering about it outbuildings, stables, and protective walls, all verdant with flowering creepers, ivy, mosses, and ferns.

In front of the house, the garden, half-wild and half-cultivated, sloped in a series of lawns and terraces down to the shores of a winding, wooded tidal creek. Narrow paths beckoned seductively, leading the way through clumps of camellia, azalea, and Pink Pearl rhododendrum. At the water's edge, the unkempt grass was yellow with drifts of wild daffodils, and there was a rickety wooden jetty, where a small dinghy dipped at its mooring.

The wistaria which covered the face of the house had not yet bloomed, but there was blossom everywhere, and alongside the terrace stood a wild white cherry. When the wind touched it, the petals drifted like blown snow.

As promised, Mrs. Brick had been there to meet them, emerging from the front door as the old Bentley drew up at the back of the house and came to a thankful halt. Mrs. Brick had wild white hair and a wall-eye, sturdy stockings, and a pinafore which tied at the waist.

"You Major and Mrs. Lomax, are you?"

Penelope was silenced by this mode of address, but Richard took it coolly in his stride. "Yes, that's right." He climbed down from the car. "And you must be Mrs. Brick." He approached her, holding out his hand.

It was Mrs. Brick's turn to be disconcerted. She wiped her reddened hand on the back of her pinafore before putting it in his.

"That's right." It was difficult to decide exactly where the wall-eye was looking. "Just stayed to see you in. Mrs. Bradbury said.. Shan't be here tomorrow. Got your bags, have you?"

They followed her indoors, into a slate-flagged hallway with a stone staircase curving to the upper floor. The treads of this staircase were worn down with the usage of years, and there was a damp, musty smell, not unpleasant and vaguely reminiscent of antique shops.

"Just show you round. Dining room and drawing room . . . under dust-sheets. Mrs. Bradbury hasn't used them since the war. Uses the library, in here. Need to keep the fire going, keep you warm. And if the sun shines, you can open the French windows, go out on the terrace. Now come and I'll show you the kitchen. . . ." They trailed obediently after her. "Have to riddle the range and fill it every evening, otherwise there won't be no hot water. . . ."

Demonstrating this, she took hold of a brass knob and plunged it in and out once or twice, causing a sinister disturbance in the bowels of the old stove. "There's a cold ham in the larder and I got in milk and eggs and bread. Mrs. Bradbury said."

"You've been very kind."

But she had no time to waste on pleasantries. "Now. Up-stairs." They gathered up suitcases and bags and followed her. "Bathroom and lavvy here,

down the passage." The bath stood on legs and the taps were copper and the lavatory cistern had a chain and an handle with PULL written on it. "Pesky old lavvy this one is. If it doesn't work the first time, you have to wait a bit and then try again."

"Thank you for telling us."

There was no time, however, to dwell upon the complexities of the plumbing, for already she was bustling away and ahead of them, to open another door at the head of the stairs, thus releasing onto the landing a gust of airy sunshine from the room beyond. "Here we are. Put you in the best guest, got a view from here, you have. Hope the bed's all right. Put a hot-water bottle in dry out the damp. And mind how you step out onto the balcony.

The wood's rotten. Might fall through. That's it, then." She had done her duty. "I'll be *off*."

Penelope, for the first time, managed to get a word in. "Shall we see you again, Mrs. Brick?"

"Oh, I'll be in and out. Odd hours. Keep an eye on you. Mrs. Bradbury said."

And with that, she was gone.

Penelope could not look at Richard. She stood, with her hand clenched over her mouth, somehow managing to control her mirth, until she heard the slam of a door and knew that Mrs. Brick was out of earshot. After that it didn't matter. She lay on her back on the huge downy bed, and finally wiped the tears of laughter from her cheeks. Richard came to sit beside her.

He said, "We'll have to make up our minds which one is her good eye, otherwise it might lead to unsurmountable complications."

" 'Pesky old lavvy this one is.' She was just like the White Rabbit, saying 'Faster, faster.' "

"How does it feel to be Mrs. Lomax?"

"Unbelievable."

"I expect Mrs. Bradbury said."

"I see now what you meant about ladies who were brought up in Kenya."

"Will you be happy here?"

"I think I might manage it."

"How can I help to make you happy?"

She began to laugh again. He stretched out beside her and took her, thoughtfully and without haste, into his arms. Beyond the open window, small sounds made themselves evident. The cry of distant gulls. Closer to hand, the soft murmur of a wood-pigeon. A breeze moved, rustling the branches of the white cherry tree. Slowly, the waters of a flood tide crept up, to fill the empty mudbanks of the creek.

Later, they unpacked and settled in. Richard put on old corduroys, a white polo-necked sweater, worn suede brogues. Penelope hung his uniform at the very back of the wardrobe, and they kicked the suitcases out of sight, beneath the bed. "It feels," said Richard, "like the beginning of the school holidays. Let's go and explore."

They inspected the house first, opening doors, discovering unexpected stairways and passages, getting their bearings. Downstairs, in the library, they opened the French windows, glanced at the titles of some of the books, found an old wind-up gramophone and a pile of delectable records. Delius, Brahms, Charles Trenet, Ella Fitzgerald.

"We can have musical evenings."

A fire smouldered in the huge fireplace. Richard stooped to pile on more logs from the basket by the hearth and, straightening, came face to face with an envelope addressed to himself, and propped against the clock that stood in the

middle of the mantel-piece. He took it down and slit it open, and inside found a mes-sage from their absent hostess.

Richard. The lawn-mower is in the garage, tin of petrol alongside. Key of the wine cellar hanging over the cellar door. Help yourself to contents. Have a good time. Helena.

They took themselves out of doors, by way of the kitchen and the warren of stone-flagged larders, sculleries, store-rooms, and laundries that lay beyond, opening a final door and emerging onto a cobbled stable-yard strung with washing lines. The old stables were now put to use as garages, tool-sheds, and wood-stores. They found the mower and, as well, a pair of oars and a furled sail.

"These will be for the dinghy," Richard observed in a satis-fied way. "When the tide comes up, we can go for a sail."

Farther on, they came to an ancient wooden door set in a lichened granite wall. Richard put his shoulder to it and shoved it open, and they found themselves in what had once been the vegetable garden. They saw the sagging glasshouses and a broken cucumber frame, but the weeds of years had taken over, and all that could be discerned of the garden's former glory was a clump of overgrown rhubarb, a carpet of mint, and one or two very old apple trees, gnarled as ancient men but, yet, misted with pale-pink blossom. The warm air was filled with the scent of this.

It was sad to see such a wilderness. Penelope sighed. "A shame. It must have been lovely once. All box hedges and neat beds."

"It was like that when I stayed before the war. But then there were two gardeners. Impossible, on your own, to keep a place like this going."

They emerged by a second door, found a path leading down to the creek. Penelope picked a bunch of daffodils, and they sat on the jetty and watched the tide seeping in. When they felt hungry, they went back to the house and ate bread and ham and some wrinkled apples that they found in the larder. Late in the afternoon, when the tide was high, they borrowed oilskins from

the Bradbury's cloakroom, collected the oars and the sail, and took out the little dinghy. In the shelter of the creek, they made slow progress, but once out into open water, the breeze caught them. Richard slammed down the centre-board and hauled in the main sheet. The little dinghy listed alarmingly, but held its own, and they sped, close-hauled and spray-drenched, across the deep and choppy waters of the Passage.

It was a secret house and, as well, a house that seemed to slumber in the past. Life here, it was clear, had never been anything but quiet and leisurely, lived at a snail's pace; and like a very old and erratic clock, or perhaps a very old and erratic person, it had lost all sense of time. This gentle influence was very strong. By the end of the first day, sleepy and stunned by the soft air of the south coast, Richard and Penelope, unresisting, were seduced by Tresillick's drowsy spell, and after that, time ceased to have importance or even to exist. They saw no newspapers, never turned on the wireless and, if the telephone rang, they left it to ring, knowing that the call was not for them.

The days and nights flowed slowly into each other, unbroken by the necessity for regular meals, or urgent appointments, or the tyranny of clocks. Their only contact with the outside world was Mrs. Brick who, true to her word, came and went. Her visits were irregular, to say the least of it, and they never had any idea when she would turn up. Sometimes they would come upon her at three o'clock in the afternoon, polishing, scrubbing, or wielding an old-fashioned sweeper over the worn carpets. One morning, very early, when they were still in bed, she burst in upon them, bearing a tray of tea, but before they had collected their wits and found words to thank her, she had drawn back the curtains, commented on the weather, and gone.

As Richard remarked, it could have been very embarrassing.

As well, like some benevolent hobgoblin, she kept them provided with food. Going into the kitchen to forage for a meal, they would find, on the slate shelf in the larder, a dish of ducks' eggs, a trussed fowl, a pat of farm butter, or a freshly baked loaf of bread. Potatoes were peeled and carrots scraped, and once she had left them a couple of Cornish pastries so enormous that even Richard was unable to finish his.

"We haven't even given her our ration cards," Penelope pointed out in some

wonder. She had lived with ration cards for so long that this abundance seemed to her nothing short of a miracle. "Where on earth does it all come from?"

They were never to find out.

The weather, that early spring, was fitful. When it rained, which it did with drowning intensity, they either put on waterproofs and went for long wet walks, or stayed by the fireside, with books to be read, or a game of piquet to be played. Some days were blue and warm as summer. They spent them out of doors, picnicking on the grass, or supine on battered old garden chairs. One morning, feeling energetic, they took the Bentley and drove the short distance to St. Mawes, to wander around the village, inspect the sailing boats, and end up having a drink on the terrace of the Idle Rocks Hotel.

It was a day of cloud and sunshine, the sun blinking in and out, the soft, sweet air spiced by the freshness of the salt breeze. Penelope leaned back in her chair, her eyes on a brown-sailed fishing boat chugging its way out to the open sea.

"Richard, do you ever think about luxury?" she asked him.

"I don't crave it, if that's what you mean."

"Luxury, I think, is the total fulfilment of all five senses at once. Luxury is now. I feel warm; and, if I wish, I can reach out and touch your hand. I smell the sea and, as well, somebody inside the hotel is frying onions. Delicious. I am tasting cold beer, and I can hear gulls, and water lapping, and the fishing boat's engine going chug-chug-chug in the most satisfactory sort of way."

"And what do you see?"

She turned her head to look at him, sitting there with his hair ruffled, and wearing his old sweater, and the leather-patched Harris tweed jacket that smelt of peat. "I see you." He smiled. "Now it's your turn. Tell me your luxury."

He fell silent, entering the spirit of the game, considering. At last, "I think,

perhaps, contrast," he told her. "Mountains, and the bitter cold of snow, all glittering beneath a blue sky and a savage sun. Or lying, baking, on a hot rock, and knowing that, when you can't bear the heat another moment, the cold, deep sea is only a yard away, waiting for you to dive."

"How about being out on a freezing wet day, and coming home, chilled to the bone, and being able to wallow in an im-mensely hot, deep bath?"

"That's a good one. Or spending a day at Silverstone, deafened by racing cars, and then, on the way home, stopping off at some vast, incredibly beautiful cathedral, and going in, and just listening to the silence."

"How awful it would be to crave for sables and Rolls-Royces and huge, vulgar emeralds. Because I'm certain that, once you got them, they would become diminished, simply because they were yours. And you wouldn't want them any more, and you wouldn't know what to do with them."

"Would it be the wrong sort of luxury to suggest that we have lunch here?"

"No, it would be a lovely one. I was wondering when you were going to suggest it. We can eat fried onions. My mouth's been watering for the past half hour."

But their evenings, perhaps, were the best of all. With the curtains drawn and the fire blazing, they listened to music, working their way through Helena Bradbury's collection of records, and taking turns to get up and change the needle and wind the handle of the old wooden gramophone. Bathed and changed, they dined by the fireside, drawing up a low table, setting it with crystal and silver, eating whatever Mrs. Brick had left for them, and drinking the bottle of wine which Richard, acting on instructions, had fetched up from the cellar. Outside, the night wind, blowing offshore, nudged and rattled against the windows, but this only served to underline their own seclusion, their snugness and their undisturbed solitude.

One night, very late, they listened to the whole of the *New World Symphony*. Richard lay on the sofa, and Penelope sat on a pile of cushions on the floor, her head leaning against his thigh. The fire had collapsed to a pile of ashes,

but as the last notes finally died away, they did not move, simply staying as they were, with Richard's hand on her shoulder, and Penelope lost in dreams.

He stirred at last, and broke the spell.

"Penelope." - "Yes."

"We have to talk."

She smiled. "We've done nothing else."

"About the future."

"What future?"

"Our future."

"Oh, Richard . . ."

"No. Don't look so worried. Just listen. Because it's important. You see, one day, I want to be able to marry you. I find it impossible to contemplate a future without you, and this means, I think, that we should get married."

"I already have a husband."

"I know, my darling. I know only too well, but still, I have to ask you. Will you marry me?"

She turned, and took his hand, and laid it against her cheek. She said, "We mustn't tempt Providence."

"You don't love Ambrose."

"I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to talk about Ambrose. He doesn't belong here. I don't want even to say his name aloud."

"I love you more than words can say."

"I too, Richard. I love you. You know that. And I can think of nothing more perfect than to be your wife, and to know that nothing can ever separate us again. But not now. Don't let's talk about it now."

For a long time he was silent. Then he sighed. "All right," he said. He bent and kissed her. "Let's go to bed."

Their last day was bright and fair, and Richard, doing his duty and paying his rent, trundled the motor mower from the garage, and cut the grass. It took a long time, and Penelope helped by harrowing the grass cuttings to the compost heap at the back of the stable, and clipping all the edges with a pair of long-handled shears. They did not finish until four o'clock in the afternoon, but the sight of the sloping lawns, smooth as velvet and striped in two different shades of green, was worth all the effort and eminently satisfactory. When they had cleaned and oiled the mower and put it back in its place, Richard announced that he was parched and was about to make them both a cup of tea, so Penelope went back to the front of the house and sat in the middle of the newly mown lawn and waited for him to bring it to her.

The fresh-cut grass smelt delicious. She leaned back on her elbows and watched a pair of kittiwakes, come to perch on the end of the jetty, and marvelled at them, so small and pretty compared to the wild great herring-gulls of the north. Her hands moved over the grass, stroking it as one might stroke the fur of a cat. Her fingers came upon a dandelion which the mower had missed. She pulled at it, tugging the leaves and the shoot, trying to dislodge the root. But the root was stubborn, as dandelions always are, and broke, and she was left with only the plant and half the root in her hand. She looked at it, and smelt its bitter smell and the fresh smell of the damp earth adhering to and dirtying her hands.

A footstep on the terrace. "Richard?" He had come with their tea, two mugs on a tray. He lowered himself beside her. She said, "I have found a new luxury."

"And what is that?"

"It's sitting on a newly mown lawn, all by yourself and without the one you love. You're alone but you know that you're not going to be alone for very long, because he's only gone for a little while, and in a moment or two he's going to come back to you." She smiled. "I think that's the best one yet."

Their last day. Tomorrow, early in the morning, they would be leaving; returning to Porthkerris. She closed her mind to the prospect, refusing to envisage it. Their last evening. They sat as usual, close to the fire, Richard on the sofa, and Penelope curled up on the floor beside him. They did not listen to music. Instead, he read aloud to her MacNeice's *Autumn Journal*; not just the love poem, which he had quoted that far-off day in Papa's studio, but the whole of the book, from beginning to end. It was very late when he came to the last words.

*"Sleep to the noise of running water
Tomorrow will be crossed, however deep;
There is no river of the dead or Lethe
Tonight we sleep
On the banks of the Rubicon—the die is cast
There will be time to audit
The accounts later, there will be sunlight later
And the equation will come out at last."*

He slowly closed the book. She sighed, not wanting it to be finished. She said, "So little time. He knew the war was inevitable."

"I think, by the autumn of nineteen-thirty-eight, most of us did." The book slipped from his hand onto the floor. He said, "I am going away."

The fire had died. She turned her head and looked up into Richard's face and found it filled with sadness.

"Why do you look like that?"

"Because I feel I am betraying you."

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know. I can't say."

"When?"

"As soon as we get back to Porthkerris."

Her heart sank. "Tomorrow."

"Or the next day."

"Will you be coming back?"

"Not immediately."

"Have they given you another job?"

"Yes."

"Who's going to take your place?"

"Nobody. The operation's over. Finished. Tom Mellaby and his administrative staff will be staying on at the RMHQ to wind everything down, but the Commandos and the Rangers will be moving out in a couple of weeks. So Porthkerris will get back its North Pier, and as soon as the rugger pitch has been de-requisitioned, Doris' boys will be able to play football again."

"So it's all over?"

"That part of it is, yes."

"What happens next?"

"We'll have to wait and see."

"How long have you known about this?"

"Two, three weeks."

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"Two reasons. One is that it's still secret, classified information, although it won't be for very much longer. The other is that I didn't want anything to spoil this little time we've had together."

She was filled with love for him. "Nothing could have spoiled it." She said the words, and realized that they were true. "You shouldn't have kept it to yourself. Not from me. You must never keep anything from me."

"Leaving you will be the hardest thing I've ever had to do."

She thought about his going and the emptiness beyond. Tried to imagine life without him and, dismally, failed. Only one thing was certain. "The worst will be saying goodbye."

"Then don't let's say it."

"I don't want it to be over."

"It's not over, my darling girl." He smiled. "It hasn't even begun."

"He has gone?"

She knitted. "Yes, Papa."

"He never said goodbye."

"But he came to see you; to bring you a bottle of whisky. He didn't want to say goodbye."

"Did he say goodbye to you?"

"No. He just walked away, down the garden. That was the way we planned

it."

"When will he be back?"

She came to the end of her row, changed needles, started another. "I don't know."

"Are you being secretive?"

"No."

He fell silent. Sighed. "I shall miss him." Across the room, his dark, wise eyes rested upon his daughter. "But not, I think, as much as you will."

"I'm in love with him, Papa. We love each other."

"I know that. I've known it for months."

"We are lovers."

"I know that too. I've watched you bloom, become radiant. A shine on your hair. I've longed to be able to hold a brush, to paint that radiance and capture it forever. Also, . . ." He became prosaic. ". . . You don't go away for a week with a man and spend the time talking about the weather." She smiled at him, but said nothing. "What will become of you both?"

"I don't know."

"And Ambrose?"

She shrugged. "I don't know that either."

"You have problems."

"A marvellous understatement."

"I am sorry for you. I am sorry for you both. You deserve a better fortune

than to find each other in the middle of a war."

"You . . . you like him, don't you, Papa?"

"I never liked a man so well. I should like him as a son. I think of him as a son."

Penelope, who never wept, all at once felt tears prick at the back of her eyes. But this was no time for sentiment. "You are a villain," she told her father. "I've said so many times before." The tears, mercifully, receded. "You shouldn't be condoning this. You should be cracking your horsewhip and grinding your teeth, and daring Richard Lomax to darken your doorstep ever again."

She was rewarded by a gleam of amusement. "You insult me," he told her.

Richard was gone, the vanguard of a general exodus. By the middle of April, it was clear to the inhabitants of Porthkerris that the Royal Marine Training Scheme, their own small involvement in the war, was over. The American Rangers and the Comman-dos—as quietly and inconspicuously as they had come—de-parted, and the narrow streets of the town were empty and strangely quiet, no longer ringing with the tramp of booted feet, or the din of military vehicles. The landing craft disappeared from the harbour, towed away one night under cover of darkness; barbed-wire barriers were removed from the North Pier; and the Commando Headquarters were de-requisitioned and handed back to the Salvation Army. Up on the hill, the temporary Nissen huts of the American Base stood forlorn and empty, and from the deserted ranges out at Boscarben no longer came the sound of gun-fire.

Finally, all that remained as evidence of the long winter's military activity was the Royal Marine Headquarters at the old White Caps Hotel. Here, the Globe and Laurel still snapped at the mast-head, the Jeeps stayed, parked in the forecourt, the sentry stood on duty by the gate, and Colonel Mellaby and his staff came and went. Their continued presence was a reminder, and gave credence, to everything that had taken place.

Richard was gone. Penelope learned to live without him, because there was

no alternative. You couldn't say "I can't bear it" because if you didn't bear it, the only other thing to do was to stop the world and get off, and there did not seem any practical way to do this. To fill the void and occupy her hands and mind, she did what women, under stress and in times of anxiety, have been doing for centuries: immersed herself in domesticity and family life. Physical activity proved a mundane but comforting therapy. She cleaned the house from attic to cellar, washed blankets, dug the garden. It did not stop her from wanting Richard, but at least, at the end of it, she had a shining, sweet-smelling house and two rows of freshly planted young cabbages.

As well, she spent much time with the children. Theirs was a simpler world, their conversation basic and uncomplicated, and she was comforted by their company. Nancy, at three, had become a little person; engaging, single-minded, and determined; her remarks and pointed observations a source of constant wonder and amusement. But Clark and Ronald were growing up, and their arguments and opinions she found astonishingly mature. She gave them her full attention, helped them with their shell collections, listened to their problems, and answered their questions. For the first time she saw them, not simply as a pair of noisy little boys, with two hungry mouths that had to be fed, but equals. People in their own right. The future generation.

One Saturday, she took the three children to the beach. Returning to Cam Cottage, she found General Watson-Grant there, on the point of departure. He had come to see Lawrence. They had had a pleasant chat. Doris had given them tea. He was now on his way home.

Penelope walked with him to the gate. He paused, to touch with his stick, and admire, a clump of hostas, thick with quilted leaves and tall white spiky flowers. "Handsome things," he remarked. "Wonderful ground cover."

"I love them, too. They're so exotic." They moved on, by the escallonia hedge, which was already bursting with dark-pink buds. "I can't believe summer's here. Today, when the children and I were on the beach, we saw the old man with a face like a turnip, raking all the flotsam from the sands. And there are tents going up already, and the ice-cream parlour has opened. I suppose, before long, the first of the visitors will be arriving. Like swallows."

"Have you had news of your husband?"

". . . Ambrose? He's well, I think. I haven't heard from him for some time."

"Do you know where he is?"

"The Med."

"He'll miss this show, then."

Penelope frowned. "Sorry?"

"I said, he'll miss this show. Going into Europe. The invasion."

She said faintly, "Yes."

"Bloody bad luck on him. I tell you something, Penelope. I would give my right arm to be young again, and to be able to be in the thick of it. It's taken a long time to get this far. Too long. But now the whole country's ready and waiting to pounce."

"Yes. I know. The war has suddenly become terribly important again. Walking down a street in Porthkerris, you can listen to an entire news bulletin, from one house to the next. And people buy newspapers, and read them, then and there, on the pavement outside the paper shop. It's like it was at the time of Dunkirk, or the Battle of Britain, or El Alamein."

They had reached the gate. Once more they stopped, the General leaning on his stick.

"Good to see your father. Came on an impulse. Felt like a bit of a chin-wag."

"He needs company these days." She smiled. "He misses Richard Lomax and his backgammon."

"Yes. He told me." Their eyes met. His regard was kindly, and she found time to wonder just how much Lawrence had thought fit to tell his old friend. "To be honest, I hadn't realized young Lomax had gone. Have you heard from

him?"

"Yes."

"How's he getting on?"

"He didn't really say."

"That follows. I don't suppose security's ever been so tight."

"I don't even know where he is. The address he gave me is nothing but initials and numbers. And the telephone might never have been invented."

"Oh, well. No doubt you'll hear from him soon." He opened the gate. "Now I must be on my way. Goodbye, my dear. Take care of your father."

"Thank you for coming."

"A pleasure." Suddenly, he raised his hat and leaned forward to give her a peck on the cheek. She was left wordless, for he had never in his life done such a thing before. She watched him go, stepping out briskly with his walking-stick.

The whole country's waiting. Waiting was the worst. Waiting for war; waiting for news; waiting for death. She shivered, closed the gate, and made her way slowly back up the garden.

Richard's letter arrived two days later. The first downstairs in the early morning, Penelope saw it lying where the postman had left it, on the hall chest. She saw the black italic writing, the bulky envelope. She took it into the sitting room, curled up in Papa's big chair, and opened it. There were four sheets of thin yellow paper, folded tight.

Somewhere in England

May 20th, 1944

My darling Penelope,

Over the past few weeks I have settled down a dozen times to write to you. On each occasion I have got no further than the first four lines, only to be interrupted by some telephone call, loud hailer, knock on the door, or urgent summons of one sort or another.

But at last has come a moment in this benighted place when I can be fairly certain of an hour of quiet. Your letters have all safely come, and are a source of joy. I carry them around like a lovesick schoolboy and read and reread them, time without number. If I cannot be with you, then I can listen to your voice.

Now, I have so much to say. In truth, it is difficult to know where to start, to remember what we spoke about and when we stayed silent. The unsaid is what this letter is about.

You never wanted to talk about Ambrose, and while we were at Tresillick, and inhabiting our own private world, there seemed little point. But, just lately, he has seldom been out of my mind, and it is clear that he is the only stumbling-block between us, and our even-tual happiness. This sounds appallingly selfish, but one cannot take another man's wife away from him and remain a saint. And so my mind, apparently of its own volition, plots ahead. To confrontation, admission, blame, lawyers, courts, and an eventual divorce.

There is always the possibility that Ambrose will be gentlemanly and allow you to divorce him. To be honest, I see no earthly reason why he should do this, and I am perfectly prepared to stand up in court as the guilty co-respondent and let him divorce you. If this happens, he must have access to Nancy, but that is a bridge we must cross when we reach it.

All that matters is that we should be together, and eventually—hopefully sooner than later—married. The war will, one day, be over. I shall be demobilized and returned, with thanks and a small gratuity, to civilian life. Can you deal with the prospect of being the wife of a schoolteacher? Because this is all I want to do. Where we shall go, where we shall live, and how it

will be, I cannot tell, but if I have any choice, I should like to go back to the north, to be near the lakes and the mountains of the Peak district.

I know it all seems a long way off. A difficult road lies ahead, strewn with obstacles which, one by one, will have to be overcome. But thousand-mile journeys begin with the first step, and no expedition is the worse for a little thought.

On reading this through, it strikes me as the letter of a happy man who expects to live forever. For some reason, I have no fears that I will not survive the war. Death, the last enemy, still seems a long way off, beyond old age and infirmity. And I cannot bring myself to believe that fate, having brought us together, did not mean us to stay that way.

I think of you all at Cam Cottage, imagine what you are doing, and wish I were with you, sharing the laughter and domestic doings of what I have come to think of as my second home. All of it was good, in every sense of the word. And in this life, nothing good is truly lost. It stays part of a person, becomes part of their character. So part of you goes everywhere with me. And part of me is yours, forever. My love, my 'darling,

Richard.

On Tuesday, the sixth of June, the Allied Forces invaded Normandy. The Second Front had started, and the last long battle begun. The waiting was over.

The eleventh of June was a Sunday.

Doris, visited by a fit of religious zeal, had carted her boys off to church, and Nancy to Sunday school, leaving Penelope to cook the lunch. For once the butcher had turned up trumps and produced, from under his counter, a small leg of spring lamb. This was now in the oven, roasting and smelling delicious, and surrounded by crisping potatoes. The carrots simmered, the cabbage was shredded. For pudding, they would eat rhubarb and custard.

It was nearly twelve o'clock. She thought of mint sauce. Still wearing her

cooking apron, she went out of the back door and made her way up the slope of the orchard. It was breezy. Doris had done a big wash and pegged it out on the line, and sheets and towels flapped and snapped in the wind like ill-set sails. The ducks and hens, penned into their run, saw Penelope coming and set up a great cackling, expecting food.

She found the mint, picked a sharply scented bunch of sprigs; but as she walked back through the long grass towards the house, she heard the sound of the bottom gate open and shut. It was too early for the church-goers' return, and so she went by way of the stone steps that led down onto the front lawn and stood there, waiting to see who was coming to call.

The visitor appeared, taking his time. A tall man, in uniform. A green beret. For the fraction of an instant, long enough for her heart to leap, she thought it was Richard, but at once saw that it was not. Colonel Mellaby reached the top of the path and paused. He raised his head and saw her watching him.

Everything, suddenly, was very still. Like a film caught in a single frame because the projector has broken down. Even the breeze dropped. No bird sang. The green lawn lay between them like a battlefield. She was motionless, waiting for him to make the first move.

Which he did. With a click and a whirr, the film started up again. She went to meet him. He looked changed. She had not realized that he was so pale and gaunt.

It was she who spoke first. "Colonel Mellaby."

"My dear . . ." He sounded like General Watson-Grant, being at his very nicest, and from that second she knew, without doubt, what he had come to tell her.

She said, "Is it Richard?"

"Yes. I'm so sorry."

"What's happened?"

"It's bad news."

"Tell me."

"Richard's . . . been killed. He's dead."

She waited to feel something. Felt nothing. Only the bunch of mint clutched tight in her fist; a strand of hair across her cheek. She put up a hand and pushed this aside. Her continued silence lay between them like a great uncrossable chasm. She knew this, and was sorry for him, but could do nothing to help.

At last, with an enormous and visible effort, he continued. "I heard this morning. Before he went, he asked me ... he said if anything happened to him, I was to come at once and let you know."

She found her voice at last. "It was good of you." It didn't sound like her own voice. "When did it happen?"

"On D-Day. He went over with the men he'd trained here. The Second United States Rangers."

"He didn't have to go?"

"No. But he wanted to be with them. And they were proud to have him."

"What happened?"

"They landed on the flank of Omaha Beach with the United States First Division, at a place called Pointe de Hue, near the bottom of the Cherbourg peninsula." His voice was more confident now, he spoke unemotionally, of matters which he understood. "From what I can gather, they had some difficulty with their equipment. The rocket-propelled grapnels became wet during the crossing, and failed to work properly. But they did climb the cliff, and they took the German gun battery at the top. They achieved their objective."

She thought of the young Americans who had spent their winter here in Porthkerris; an ocean away from their own homes, their own families.

"Were there many casualties?"

"Yes. In the course of the assault, at least half of them died."

And Richard with them. She said, "He didn't think he was going to be killed. He said that death, the last enemy, still seemed a long way off. It's good that he thought that, isn't it?"

"Yes." He chewed his lip. "You know, my dear, you don't have to be brave. If you want to cry, don't try to stop it. I'm a married man, with children of my own. I would understand."

"I'm married, too, and I have a child."

"I know."

"And I haven't cried for years."

He was reaching for his breast pocket, unbuttoning the flap. From the pocket he produced a photograph. "One of my sergeants gave me this. He was in charge of the camera, and he took this one day when they were all out at Boscarben. He thought ... I thought . . . that you might like to have it."

He handed it to her. Penelope looked down at the photo-graph. Saw Richard, turning as though to glance over his shoulder, to be caught unawares and smile at the cameraman. In uniform, but bareheaded, and with a coil of climbing rope slung over his shoulder. It must have been a breezy day, just like today, for his hair was ruffled. In the background lay the long horizon of the sea.

She said, "That was very kind. Thank you. I didn't have a photograph of him."

He fell silent. They both stood there, unable to think of anything more to say.

Finally, "You'll be all right?" he asked her.

"Yes, of course."

"I'll leave you then. Lblsss there is anything else I can do."

She thought about this. 'Yes. Yes, there is something. My father is in the house. In the sitting room. You'll find him quite easily. Will you go, now, and tell him about Richard?'

"You really want me to lo that?"

"Somebody has to. And I'm not sure that I'm strong enough."

"Very well."

"I'll be there in a moment. I'll give you time to break the news, and then I'll come."

He went. Up the path, up the front-door steps, through the door. Not only a kindly ma;;, but a courageous one. She stood where he had left her, with her bunch of mint in one hand, and the photograph of Richard in the other. She remembered the ghastly morning of the day that Sophie died, and how she had railed and wept, and longed now for just such a flood of emotion. But there was nothing. She felt simply numb, and cold as ice.

She looked at Richard's face. Nevermore. Never again. Nothing left. She saw his smile. Remembered his voice reading aloud to her.

She remembered the words. Quite suddenly, they were there, filling her mind like a once-forgotten song.

*. . . the die is cast,
There will be time to audit
The accounts later, there will be sunlight later*

And the equation will come out at last.

There will be sunlight later. She thought, I must tell Papa that. And it seemed as good a way as any to start out on the left-over life that lay ahead.

DORIS

Podmore's Thatch. A bird sang, its voice piercing the silence of the grey dawn. The fire had died, but the light over The Shell Seekers burnt on, as it had burnt throughout the night. Penelope had not slept, but now she stirred, like a sleeper awakening from a deep and untroubled dream. She stretched her legs beneath the thick woollen blanket, spread her arms and rubbed at her eyes. She looked about; saw, in the soft light, her own sitting room, the reassurance of possessions, flowers, plants, desk, pictures; the window open onto her own garden. She saw the lower branches of the chestnut tree, the buds not yet sprung into leaf. She had not slept, but wakefulness had not left her fatigued. On the contrary, she was steeped in a sort of calm content, a tranquillity that sprang, perhaps, from the rare self-indulgence of total recall.

Now she had come to the end. The play was over. The illusion of theatre was strong. Footlights dimmed, and in the dying light the actors turned to make their way from the stage. Doris and Ernie, young as they would never be young again. And the old Penberths and the Trubshots, and the Watson-Grants. And Papa. All dead. Long dead. Last of all went Richard. She remembered him smiling, and realized that time, that great old healer, had finally accomplished its work, and now, across the years, the face of love no longer stirred up agonies of grief and bitterness. Rather, one was left feeling simply grateful. For how unimaginably empty the past would be without him to remember. Better to have loved and lost, she told herself, than never to have loved at all. And know that it was true.

From the mantelpiece her golden carriage clock struck six. The night was gone. It was tomorrow. Another Thursday. What had happened to the days? Trying to puzzle out this conundrum, she discovered that two weeks had flown by since Roy Brookner's visit, when he had taken away the panels and the sketches. And still she had had no word from him.

Also, she had heard nothing from either Noel or Nancy. With that last quarrel lying sour between them all, they had simply taken themselves off and remained apart from their mother and resolutely incommunicado. This

bothered her a good deal less than her children probably imagined. In time, no doubt, they would be in touch again, not apologizing, but acting as though nothing untoward had ever taken place. Until such time, she had too much on her mind, and no energy to waste fretting over infantile umbrages and hurt feelings. There were better things to think about and far too much to do. As usual, house and garden had claimed most of her attention. The April days, in typical fashion, altered continuously. Grey skies, livid green leaves, drenching showers, and then sunshine again. The forsythias flamed, butter-yellow; the orchard became a carpet of daffodils and violets and primroses.

Thursday. Danus would come this morning. And perhaps, today, Roy Brookner would ring up from London. Considering this possibility, she found herself convinced that today he would ring. It was more than a feeling. Stronger than that. A premonition.

By now the single bird had been joined in song by a dozen others and the air was filled with their chorus. Impossible now to consider sleep. She got off the sofa, turned off the light, and went upstairs to draw herself an enormously hot and very deep bath.

Her premonition was right, and the call came through in the middle of lunch.

The sweet dawn had collapsed into a grey day, overcast and drizzly and offering no inducement to picnic out of doors, or in the conservatory. So they sat, she and Antonia and Danus, around the kitchen table, to consume an enormous spaghetti bo-lognaise and a platter of crudites. Because of the weather, Danus had spent the morning clearing out the garage. Penelope, going to her desk to find a telephone number, had become waylaid, diverted by its clutter, and stayed there, paying overdue bills, rereading old letters, and throwing out a number of company reports which she had never even bothered to take out of their envelopes. Antonia had cooked the lunch.

"You are not only an excellent gardener's boy, but a first-class cook," Danus told her, grating Parmesan cheese over his spaghetti.

The telephone rang.

Antonia said, "Shall I get it?"

"No." Penelope set down her fork and got to her feet. "It's probably for me anyway." She did not answer the call in the kitchen, but went through to the sitting room, closing doors behind her.

"Hello."

"Mrs. Keeling?"

"Speaking."

"It's Roy Brookner here."

"Yes, Mr. Brookner."

"I'm sorry I've been so long in getting in touch with you. Mr. Ardway was visiting friends in Gstaad, and didn't return to Geneva until a couple of days ago, when he found my letter waiting for him at his hotel. He flew into Heathrow this morning, and I have him here in my office. I've shown him the panels, and told him that you're prepared to sell them privately, and he's very grateful for the opportunity. He has offered fifty thousand for each of them. That's a hundred thousand for the pair. Pounds Sterling, of course, not dollars. Would that be acceptable to you,

or would you prefer to have a little time to think about it? He'd like to return to New York tomorrow but is perfectly prepared, if necessary, to postpone his flight, if you feel you need more time to come to an agreement. Personally, I feel it is a very fair offer, but if ... Mrs. Keeling? Are you still there?"

"Yes, I'm still here."

"I'm sorry. I thought perhaps we'd been cut off."

"No. I'm still here."

"Have you any comment to make?"

"No."

"Would the sum I've mentioned be acceptable to you?"

"Yes. Perfectly acceptable."

"So you'd like me just to go ahead and finalize the sale?"

"Yes. Please."

"Mr. Ardway, I need hardly tell you, is delighted."

"I'm so glad."

"I'll be in touch. And, of course, payment will be made as soon as the transaction has gone through."

"Thank you, Mr. Brookner."

"It's perhaps not the appropriate time to mention it, but there will, of course, be considerable taxes to be paid. You realize that?"

"Yes, of course."

"Have you an accountant, or some person who looks after your affairs?"

"I've got Mr. Enderby, of Enderby, Looseby and Thring. They're solicitors in the Gray's Inn Road. Mr. Enderby took care of everything when I sold Oakley Street and bought this house."

"In that case, perhaps you should get in touch with him and let him know the situation."

"Yes. Yes, I'll do that. . . ."

A pause. She wondered if he was going to ring off.

"Mrs. Keeling?"

"Yes, Mr. Brookner?"

"Are you all right?"

"Why?"

"You sound a little . . . faint?"

"That's because I'm finding it difficult to sound anything else."

"You're quite happy with the arrangement?"

"Yes. Quite happy."

"In that case, goodbye, Mrs. Keeling . . ."

"No, Mr. Brookner, wait. There's something else."

"Yes."

"It's about *The Shell Seekers*."

"Yes?"

She told him what she wanted him to do.

She replaced, very slowly, the receiver. She was sitting at her newly ordered desk, and went on sitting there for some moments. It was very quiet. From the kitchen, she could hear the murmur of voices. Antonia and Danus, who never seemed to run out of things to say to each other. She went back and found them, still sitting at the table, having finished their spaghetti and now moved on to fruit and cheese and coffee. Her own plate had disappeared.

"I put yours in the oven to keep warm," Antonia told her, and rose as if to fetch it, but Penelope stopped her.

"No. Don't bother. I don't want any more."

"A cup of coffee then?"

"No. Not even that." She sat in her chair, her arms folded on the table. She smiled because she could not help smiling, because she loved them both, and was about to offer them what she considered the most precious gift in the entire world. A gift which she had offered to each of her three children and which they had, one by one, turned down.

"I have a proposition to make," she said. "Will you both come to Cornwall with me? Come to Cornwall and we'll spend Easter there? Together. Just the three of us."

*Podmore's Thatch,
Temple Pudley,
Gloucestershire.*

April 17th, 1984.

My darling Olivia,

I am writing to tell you a number of things which have happened and which are about to happen.

That last weekend, when Noel brought Antonia down, and cleared out the attic and Nancy came for Sunday lunch, we had, and I am sure you have not been told about this, a real blazer of a row. It was, inevitably, about money, and the fact that they considered I should sell my father's pictures right now, while the market is high. Their concern, they assured me, was all for myself, but I know them both too well. It is they who need the money.

When they had finally departed, I had time to think it all over, and the next morning telephoned Mr. Roy Brookner of Boothby's. He came down and saw

the panels, and took them away with him. He has found me a private buyer, an American, who has offered me a hundred thousand pounds for the pair. This offer I have accepted.

There are many ways I could spend this sudden windfall but, right now, I am going to do what I have been wanting to do for a long time, and that is go back to Cornwall. As neither you nor Noel nor Nancy felt that you had the time or the desire to come with me, I have invited Antonia and Danus. Danus was at first hesitant about accepting my invitation. It did come rather out of the blue, and I think he was embarrassed, and perhaps felt I was being, in some way, sorry for him and a little patronizing. I think he is a very proud young man. But I finally persuaded him that he would be doing us a kindness; we need a strong male to deal with luggage, porters, and head waiters. In the end, he agreed to speak to his employer and see if he could get the week off. This he has done, and we leave tomorrow morning, Antonia and myself sharing the driving. We shall not stay with Doris as there is not space in her little house for three visitors, so I have booked in at The Sands Hotel, and we shall be there over Easter.

I chose The Sands because I remember it as being unpretentious and homely. When I was a child, whole families used to come from London for the summer holidays. They came year after year, and brought their children and their chauffeurs and their nannies and their dogs, and every summer the management organized a little tennis tournament, and there was" a party in the evening, when the grown-ups foxtrotted in dinner jackets and the children danced Sir Roger de Coverley and were given balloons. During the war, it was turned into a hospital and filled with poor wounded boys tucked up in scarlet blankets; where they were taught how to make baskets by pretty VADs in white caps.

But when I told Danus where we were going, he looked a little astonished. Apparently, The Sands is now very up-market and grand, and I think he was concerned, in the nicest possible sort of way, about the expense. But, of course, it doesn't matter what it costs. This is the first time in my life I have actually written that sentence. It gives me the most extraordinary sensation, and I feel as though I had suddenly become a totally different person. I do not object to this in the very least, and feel as excited as a child.

*Yesterday, Antonia and I drove to Cheltenham and shopped. This new Penelope took over, and you would not have recognized your frugal mother, but I think would have approved. We went quite mad. Bought dresses for Antonia, and a delicious cream satin shirt, and jeans and cotton pullovers and a yellow oilskin and four pairs of shoes. Then she disappeared into a beauty shop to have her fringe trimmed, and I went off on my own and spent money on delightful, unnecessary necessities for my holiday. A new pair of canvas lace-ups, some talcum powder, a huge bottle of scent. Camera films and face cream, and a cashmere pullover the colour of violets. I bought a thermos flask, and a tartan rug (for picnics), and a pile of paperbacks to keep myself amused (including **The Sun Also Rises**—it's years since I read Hemingway). I bought a book on British birds, and another lovely one full of maps.*

When I had completed this orgy of extravagance, I called in at the bank, then treated myself to a cup of coffee, and went to collect Antonia. I found her looking quite unfamiliar and very beautiful. Not only had she had her hair trimmed, but her eyelashes dyed. It totally changes her appearance. At first she was a bit embarrassed about it, but by now has got used to the idea and can be observed, only every now and then, taking admiring glances at herself in the mirror. I have not been so happy for a long time. Mrs. Plackett comes in tomorrow and will clean and lock up the house after we have left. We return on Wednesday the twenty-fifth.

*There is just one more thing. **The Shell Seekers** has gone. I have given it, as a memorial to my father, to the Art Gallery in Porthkerris which Papa helped to found. In a strange way, I need it no longer, and I like to think that others—ordinary people—will be able to share the pleasure and delight that it has always given me. Mr. Brookner arranged for its transport to the West Country, and a van duly arrived and carted it away. The gap over the fireplace is very apparent, but one day I shall fill it with something else. Meantime, I look forward to seeing it hanging, for all the world to see, in its new home.*

I have not written to Noel nor Nancy. They will find out about everything sooner or later, and will probably be extremely resentful and annoyed, but I

*can't help that. I have given them all I can, and they always want more.
Perhaps now they will stop pestering me, and get on with their own lives.*

But you, I believe, will understand.

*My love, as always,
Mumma*

Nancy was feeling a little uncomfortable with herself. The reason for this was because she had not been in touch with her mother since that abortive Sunday when the terrible row over the paintings had blown up, and Penelope had rounded on the pair of them and given her and Noel such a distasteful and distressing piece of her mind.

It wasn't that Nancy felt guilty. On the contrary, she had been deeply hurt. Mother had come out with accusations that could never be unsaid, and Nancy had allowed the days to pass in frigid noncommunication because she expected Penelope to make the first move. To telephone, if not to apologize, then to chat, to ask after the children, perhaps to suggest a meeting. To prove to Nancy that all was forgotten and relations between them once more on a normal footing.

Nothing, however, happened. No such call came through. At first Nancy remained resolutely offended, nursing her um-brage. She resented the sensation that she had been put in the doghouse. She had, after all, done nothing wrong. Simply spoken up, concerned for the good of them all.

But gradually, she became worried. It was not like Mother to sulk. Was it possible that she was unwell? She had worked herself up into a terrible state, and that surely could not be good for an elderly woman who had suffered a heart attack. Had this had its repercussions? She quailed at the thought, pushed the niggle of anxiety out of her mind. Surely not. Surely, if so, Antonia would have been in touch. She was young and probably irresponsible, but even she could not be as irresponsible as that.

Concern became an obsession that Nancy could not get out of her mind. During the last day or so, she had actually gone to the telephone more than

once and picked it up, intending to dial the Podmore's Thatch number, only to replace the receiver because she couldn't think what she was going to say, and could dream up no reason for saying it. And then inspiration struck. Easter loomed. She would invite Mother and Antonia over to the old Vicarage for Easter lunch. This would involve no loss of face, and over roast lamb and new potatoes, they would all become reconciled.

She was engaged in the not very arduous task of dusting the dining room when this brilliant plan occurred to her. She set down the duster and the tin of polish and went straight to the kitchen and the telephone. She dialled the number and waited, smiling socially, all ready to put that smile into her voice. She heard the ringing sound. It was not answered. Her smile faded. She waited for a long time. Finally, feeling totally let down, she replaced the receiver.

She rang again at three in the afternoon and again at six. She rang Faults, and asked the man to check the line. "It's ringing out," he told her.

"I know it's ringing out. I've been listening to it ringing out all day. There must be something wrong."

"Are you certain the person you are calling is at home?"

"Of course she's at home. She's my mother. She's always at home."

"If you leave it with me, I'll check and ring you back."

"Thank you."

She waited. He rang back. There was nothing wrong with the line. Mother, it seemed, was simply not there.

By now Nancy was not so much worried as thoroughly annoyed. She rang Olivia in London.

"Olivia."

"Hello."

"Nancy here . . ."

"Yes. I guessed."

"Olivia, I've been trying to get hold of Mother, and there's no reply from Podmore's Thatch. Have you any idea what can have happened?"

"Of course there's no reply. She's gone to Cornwall."

"To *Cornwall*?"

"Yes. She's gone off for Easter. Taken the car, along with Antonia and Danus."

"Antonia and *Danus*?"

"Don't sound so horrified." Olivia's voice was filled with amusement. "Why shouldn't she? She's been wanting to go for months, and none of us would go with her, so she's taken them for company."

"But surely they're not all staying with Doris Penberth? There wouldn't be room."

"Oh, no, not with Doris. They're staying at The Sands."

"*The Sands*?"

"Oh, Nancy, do stop repeating everything I say."

"But The Sands is the best. One of the best hotels in the country. It's written up everywhere. It costs the *earth*."

"But haven't you heard? Mother's got the earth. She's sold the panels to a millionaire American for a hundred thousand pounds."

Nancy wondered if she was going to be sick, or faint. Probably faint. She could feel the blood pour from her cheeks. Her knees trembled. She reached for a chair.

"A hundred thousand pounds. It's not possible. They couldn't be worth that. Nothing's worth a hundred thousand pounds."

"Nothing's worth anything unless somebody wants it. There's the rarity value as well. I tried to explain all this to you that day we lunched at L'Escargot. Lawrence Sterns seldom come on the market, and this American, whoever he is, probably wants those panels more than anything else in the world. And doesn't care what he pays for them. Luckily for Mumma. I couldn't be more pleased for her."

But Nancy's mind still raced. A hundred thousand pounds. "When did all this happen?" she managed at last.

"Oh, I don't know. Sometime quite recently."

"How do you know about it?"

"She wrote me a long letter and told me everything. Told me about the row she'd had with you and Noel. You are dreadful. I've told you over and over to leave her alone, but you wouldn't. Just nagged incessantly until she couldn't stand it another moment. I guess that's why she finally decided to sell the panels. Probably realized that that was the only way to stop your endless needling."

"That's totally unfair."

"Oh, Nancy, stop pretending to me and stop pretending to yourself."

"They've got a terrible hold on her."

"Who have?"

"Danus and Antonia. You should never have sent the girl to live with Mother.

And I don't trust Danus further than I could throw him."

"Neither does Noel."

"Doesn't that worry you?"

"Not in the least. I have great faith in Mumma's judge-ment."

"And what about the money she's squandering on them?"

Right now. Living in luxury at The Sands Hotel. With her gardener."

"Why shouldn't she squander the money? It's hers. And why shouldn't she squander it on herself and two young people she happens to be fond of? Like I said, she asked us all to go with her and none of us would. We had our chance and we turned it down. We have no one to blame but ourselves."

"When I was invited, The Sands Hotel was never mentioned. It was going to be bed-and-breakfast in Doris Penberth's spare bedroom."

"Is that what stopped you from accepting? The thought of pigging it with Doris? Would you have gone if The Sands Hotel had been dangled in front of your nose, like a carrot before a donkey?"

"You have no right to say that."

"I have every right. I'm your sister, God help me. And there's another thing you should know. Mumma's gone to Porthkerris because she's been yearning to for ages; but as well, she's gone to see *The Shell Seekers*. She's donated it to the Art Gallery there, in memory of her father, and she wants to look at it, hanging in its new home."

"Donated it?" For a moment, Nancy thought she had misheard, or certainly misunderstood her sister. "You mean, she's given it away?"

"Just that."

"But it's probably worth thousands. Hundreds of thousands."

"I'm sure everybody concerned appreciates that."

The Shell Seekers. Gone. The sense of injustice perpetrated upon her and her family left Nancy cold with rage. "She always told us," she said bitterly, "that she couldn't live without that picture. That it was part of her life."

"It was. For years, it was. But I think now that she feels she can do without it. She wants to share it. She wants other people to enjoy it."

Olivia, it was quite obvious, was on Mother's side.

"And what about us? What about her family? Her grandchildren. Noel. Does Noel know about this?"

"I've no idea. I don't suppose so. I haven't seen nor heard of him since he took Antonia down to Podmore's Thatch."

"I shall tell him." It was a threat.

"Do that," said Olivia, and rang off.

Nancy slammed down the receiver. Damn Olivia. Damn her. She lifted the instrument once more and with shaking hands dialled Noel's number. She could not remember when she had been so upset.

"Noel Keeling."

"Nancy here." She spoke grimly, feeling important, calling a family conference.

"Hi." He did not sound enthusiastic.

"I've just been speaking to Olivia. I tried to ring Mother, but there was no reply, so I called Olivia to see if she knew what was going on. She did know, because Mother had written her a letter. She wrote to Olivia, but she never

bothered to get in touch with either you or me."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Mother's gone to Cornwall, and she's taken Danus and Antonia with her."

"Good God."

"And they're staying at The Sands Hotel."

That caught his attention.

"The Sands? I thought she was going to stay with Doris. And how can she afford The Sands? It's one of the most bloody expensive hotels in the country."

"I can tell you how. Mother's sold the panels. For a hundred thousand pounds. Without, I may say, discussing it with any of us. A hundred thousand pounds, Noel. Which, by the looks of it, she intends to squander. And that's not all. She's given The Shell Seekers away. Gifted the picture to the Art Gallery in Porthker-ris, if you please. Simply handed it over, and heaven knows what it must be worth. I think she must be mad. I don't believe she knows what she's doing. I told Olivia what I believe. That those two young people, Antonia and Danus, have got a sinister hold on her. It happens, you know. You read about such things in the papers. It's criminal. It shouldn't be allowed. There must be something we can do to stop it. Noel. Noel? Are you still there?"

"Yes."

"What do you say?"

Noel said "Shit" and rang off.

*The Sands Hotel,
Porthkerris,
Cornwall.*

Thursday, 19th April.

Darling Olivia,

Well, here we all are, and we've been here for a whole day. I cannot tell you how beautiful it all is. The weather is like high summer and there are flowers everywhere. And palm trees, and little cobbled streets, and the sea is the most wonderful blue. A greener blue than the Mediterranean, and then a very dark blue out on the horizon. It is like Ibiza, only better, because everything is green and lush, and in the evenings, when the sun has gone down, it's all damp and smells leafy.

We had a wonderful trip down. I drove most of the way and then Penelope a bit, but Danus didn't because he doesn't drive. Once we'd got onto the motorway it didn't take any time at all, and your mother couldn't believe how fast we were going. When we got to Devon, we took the old road over Dartmoor, and ate our picnic on the top of a rock, with views in all directions, and there were small shaggy ponies who were pleased to consume the crusts of our sandwiches.

The hotel is out of this world. I've never stayed in an hotel before and I don't think Penelope has either, so it's all new experience. She kept telling us how comfortable and cosy it was all going to be, but when we finally came up the drive (between banks of hydrangeas) it was instantly obvious that we'd let ourselves in for a hie of luxury. A Rolls and three Mercedes parked in the forecourt, and a uniformed porter to deal with our luggage. Danus calls it our matched luggage, because each of our suitcases is just as battered and disreputable as the others.

Penelope, however, has taken everything in her stride. By everything, I mean enormously thick carpets, swimming pools, Jacuzzis, private bathrooms, televisions by our beds, huge bowls of fresh fruit, and flowers everywhere. We have clean sheets and towels every day. Our rooms are all in the same corridor, and have adjoining balconies, looking out over the gardens and the sea. From time to time, we step out onto them and converse with each other. Just like Noel Coward's Private Lives.

As for the dining room, it is like being taken out for dinner in the most

expensive restaurant in London. I am sure I shall become quite blase about oysters, lobsters, fresh strawberries, thick Cornish cream, and fillet steaks. It is splendid having Danus with us, because he gives much thought as to what we are to drink with this delicious food. He seems to know an awful lot about wines, but he never drinks himself. I don't know why, any more than I don't know why he doesn't drive a car.

There is so much to do. This morning we went down into the town, and our first port of call was Cam Cottage, where your mother used to live. But it was sad because, like so many houses down here, it has been turned into an hotel, the lovely stone wall demolished, and most of the garden bulldozed into a car-park. But we went into what remains of the garden and the hotel lady brought us out a cup of coffee. And Penelope told us about how it used to be, and how her mother had planted all the old roses, and the wistaria, and then she told us about her being killed in London during the Blitz. I never knew about this. When she told us, I wanted to cry, but I didn't, I just hugged her, because her eyes went all bright with tears, and somehow I couldn't think of anything else to do.

*After Cam Cottage we went on, deep into the heart of the little town, to find the Art Gallery and to see **The Shell Seekers**. The Gallery is not large, but a particularly attractive one, with whitewashed walls and a huge northern skylight. They have hung **The Shell Seekers** in quite the most important position and it looks utterly at home, bathed in the cold brilliant light of Porthkerris, where it was originally conceived. The Art Gallery lady was elderly, and I don't think she remembered Penelope, but she certainly knew who she was and made a great fuss of her. Apart from this, there don't seem to be a great many people still alive whom she knew and remembers from the old days. Except Doris, of course. She is going to see Doris tomorrow afternoon, and have tea with her. She is much looking forward to this, and seems excited at the prospect. And on Saturday, we are going out on the Lands End road, and taking a picnic to the cliffs at Penjizal. The hotel provides picnics in fancy cardboard boxes, with real knives and forks, but Penelope does not consider these proper picnics, so we shall stop off on the way and buy fresh bread and butter and pat6 and tomatoes and fresh fruit and a bottle of wine. If it goes on being as warm as this, I expect that Danus and I shall swim.*

And then on Monday, Danus and I are going to go over to the south coast, to Manaccan, where a man called Everard Ashley is running a nursery garden. Danus was at Horticultural College with this man, and he wants to go and look at the nursery, and maybe get a few tips. Because, in the fulness of time, this is what he wants to do, but it's difficult because you need a lot of capital for such a venture, and he hasn't got any. Never mind, it's always worth picking other people's brains, and it'll be fun to go over and see the other side of this magical county.

From all this, you will gather that I am very happy. I couldn't have believed that, so soon after Cos-mo's death, I could be happy again. I hope it's not wrong. I don't think it is, because it feels nothing but right.

Thank you for everything. For being so endlessly kind and patient and for fixing for me to stay at Podmore's Thatch. Because if you hadn't done that, I wouldn't be here, living the life of Riley with the two people I like absolutely most in the whole world. Except, of course, yourself.

*My love,
Antonia*

Her children, Nancy, Olivia and Noel, had . . . Penelope was forced to admit . . . been maddeningly right. Porthkerris, to all intents and purposes, was changed. Cam Cottage was not the only house with a bulldozed garden, an hotel sign over the gate, and striped umbrellas set up on the newly constructed terrace. The old White Caps Hotel had been hideously enlarged and converted into holiday flats, and the harbour road, where once the artists had lived and worked, had become a fairground of amusement arcades, discos, fast-food restaurants, and souvenir shops. In the harbour itself, most of the fishing boats were gone. Now only one or two remained, and the empty moorings were filled by pleasure craft offering, for enormously inflated sums of money, day trips to see the seals, with a few queasy hours of mackerel fishing thrown in as an added inducement.

And yet, astonishingly enough, it was not so changed. Now, in the spring, the town was still comparatively empty, for the first flood of tourists would not

arrive until Whitsun. There was time to dawdle, space to stand and look. And nothing could ever alter that marvellous blue, silken sweep of the bay, nor the curve of the headland, nor the baffling muddle of streets and slate-roofed houses tumbling down the hill to the water's edge. The gulls still filled the sky with their screams, the air still smelted of salty wind and privet and escallonia, and the narrow lanes of the old town, mazelike, were as confusing as they had ever been.

Penelope walked to visit Doris. It was pleasant to be alone. The company of Danus and Antonia had proved nothing but delight, but still, for a little while, solitude was welcome. In the sunlight of the warm afternoon, she made her way down through the aromatic gardens of the hotel, onto the road above the beach, past terraces of Victorian houses, and descended into the town.

She searched for a florist's. The one she remembered was now a dress shop, filled with the sort of clothes that tourists, mad to spend their money, mistakenly buy. Elasticated sun tops in

Day-glo pink, enormous T-shirts emblazoned with the features of pop stars, and crotch-hugging jeans that caused one pain just to look at them. She found a flower shop at last, in a crooked corner where, a long time ago, an old cobbler in a leather apron, had put new soles on their shoes, and charged them one and three pence for his work. She went in and bought a huge bouquet for Doris. Not anemones or daffodils, but more exotic blooms. Carnations and iris and tulips and freesias, an armful of them, wrapped in crisp, pale-blue tissue paper. A little farther on down the street, she turned into an off-licence and bought, for Ernie, a bottle of The Famous Grouse whisky. Laden with these purchases, she continued on her way, deep into Downalong, where the lanes were so narrow that there was no space for pavements, and the whitewashed houses crowded in on either side, with steep granite steps climbing to brightly painted front doors.

The Penberth house was tucked into the very heart of this labyrinth. Here Ernie had lived with his mother and father, and down these alleys Doris and Penelope and Nancy had come on wartime winter afternoons, to call on old Mrs. Penberth, and be given saffron cakes and strong tea out of a pink teapot.

Now, remembering, it seemed extraordinary to Penelope how long it had taken her to realize that Ernie, in his shy and silent way, was courting Doris. And yet, perhaps, not so extraordinary. He was a man of few words, and his presence at Cam Cottage, saying little, and working like ten men, became, quite naturally, something that they all took for granted. *Oh, Ernie will do it* was the cry when something really horrible had to be accomplished, like a hen slaughtered, or the gutters cleaned out. And he always did. Nobody ever thought of him as an eligible man; he was just one of the family, undemanding, uncomplaining, and perpetually good-natured.

It was not until the autumn of 1944 that the penny finally dropped. Penelope walked into the kitchen at Cam Cottage one morning to find Doris and Ernie having a cup of tea together. They sat at the kitchen table, and in the middle of the table stood a blue-and-white jug crammed with dahlias.

She surveyed the scene. "Ernie, I didn't know you were here. . . ."

He was embarrassed. "Just dropped in." He pushed his cup and saucer away and got to his feet.

She looked at the flowers. Dahlias, with all the work they entailed, were no longer grown at Cam Cottage. "Where did these come from?"

Ernie pushed back his cap and scratched his head. "My dad grew them in his allotment. Brought a few up for ... for you."

"I've never seen such gorgeous ones. They're enormous."

"Yes." Ernie put his cap back on, and shifted his feet. "Got a bit of kindling to chop."

He moved towards the door.

Doris said, "Thanks for the flowers."

He turned, nodded. "Nice cup of tea," he told her.

He went. Moments later, from the backyard, could be heard sounds of chopping.

Penelope sat down at the table. She looked at the flowers. She looked at Doris, though Doris would not meet her eye. Penelope said, "I have a funny feeling that I have disturbed something."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. You tell me."

"Nothing to tell."

"He didn't bring these flowers for us, did he? He brought them for you."

Doris tossed her head. "What's it matter who he brought them for?"

It was then that realization dawned and Penelope could not imagine why she had not latched on before. "Doris, I think Ernie fancies you."

Doris was instantly scathing. "Ernie Penberth? Tell us another."

But Penelope refused to be put off. "Has he ever said any-thing to you?"

"Never says much to anyone, does he?"

"You like him, though?"

"Nothing there to dislike."

Her manner was too offhand to be convincing. Something was up. "He's courting you."

"Courting?" Doris sprang to her feet, collecting cups and saucers with the maximum of clatter. "He wouldn't know how to court a fly." She dumped the china onto the draining board and turned on the taps. "Besides," she added, over the rush of water, "he's such a funny-looking chap."

"You'd never find a nicer—"

"And I've no intention of ending my days with a man who's not even as tall as me."

"Just because he's not another Gary Cooper, that's no reason to turn up your nose. And I think he's nice-looking. I like his black hair and his dark eyes."

Doris turned off the taps and swung around, leaning against the sink and folding her arms. "But he never says anything, does he?"

"With you talking non-stop most of the time, he can scarcely get a word in edgewise. Anyway, actions speak louder than words. Look at him, bringing you flowers." She thought back. "And he never stops doing things for you. Mending the washing line, bringing you little treats from under his father's greengrocery counter."

"So what?" Doris frowned suspiciously. "You trying to get me married off to Ernie Penberth? Trying to get rid of me or something?"

"I am simply," said Penelope in a sanctimonious fashion, "thinking of your future happiness."

"In a pig's eye. Well, you can think again. The day we'd heard Sophie'd been killed, I promised myself I wasn't moving from here until this bloody war is over. And when Richard went . . . well, it just made me more determined than ever. I don't know what you're going to do ... go back to that Ambrose or never go back, but the war's ending soon, and you're going to have to make up your mind, and I'm going to be around to see you through it, whatever you decide. And if you go back to him, then who's going to look after your dad? I'll tell you right now. I am. So we'll have no more talk about Ernie Penberth, thank you very much."

She kept her word. She wouldn't marry Ernie, because she wouldn't leave Papa. It wasn't until after the old man died that she found herself free at last to think about herself and her sons and her own future. She made her

decision. Within two months, she had become Mrs. Ernie Penberth, and she left Carn Cottage for good. Ernie's father had recently died, and old Mrs. Penberth moved out of the house and went to live with her sister, so that Doris and Ernie would have a place to themselves. Ernie took over the family greengrocery business, and he took over Doris' sons as well, but he and Doris never had any children of their own.

And now . . . Penelope paused, looking about her and getting her bearings. She was nearly at her destination. The North Beach was close. She could feel the tug of the wind, and smell its salty tang. Rounding a final corner, she started down a steep hill, at the bottom of which stood the white cottage, set back from the street and fronted by a cobbled yard. Here a string of washing flapped in the breeze, and pots and containers, set all about, were bright with daffodils and crocus and blue grape hyacinths and trailing greenery. The front door was painted blue, and she went across the cobbles, ducking beneath the washing line, and raised her fist to knock upon it. But before she could do this, it was flung open and there stood Doris.

Doris. Dashing and dressy; pretty and bright-eyed as ever, no fatter, no thinner. Her hair was silver-white, short and curly; there were lines on her face, of course, but her smile hadn't altered and neither had her voice.

"I've been waiting for you. Watching from the kitchen window." She might have arrived that very day, straight from Hackney. "What took you so long? Forty years, I've been waiting for this." Doris. With lipstick and earrings, and a scarlet cardigan over a frilled white blouse. "Oh, for God's sake, don't just stand there on the doorstep, come along in."

Penelope went, stepping straight into the tiny kitchen. She put the flowers and the bag containing the whisky bottle down on the kitchen table, and Doris shut the door behind them. She turned. They faced each other, smiling like idiots, lost for words. And then the smiles turned to laughter, and they fell into each other's arms, hugging and holding like a pair of reunited school-girls.

Still laughing, still wordless, they drew apart. It was Doris who spoke first. "Penelope, I can't believe it. I thought perhaps" I wouldn't know you. But

you're just as tall and long-legged and lovely as ever. I was so afraid you'd be different, but you're not. . . ."

"Of course I'm different. I'm grey-haired and elderly."

"If you're grey-haired and elderly, then I've got one foot in the grave. Pushing seventy, I am. Least, that's what Ernie's always telling me when I get a bit above myself."

"Where is Ernie?"

"Thought we'd like to be on our own for a bit. Said he couldn't stand it. Taken himself off to his allotment. It's his life-saver since he retired from the greengrocery business. I said to him, take you away from carrots and turnips and you're like a man suffering from withdrawal symptoms." She screamed with the old noisy familiar mirth.

Penelope said, "I've brought you some flowers."

"Oh, they're beautiful. You shouldn't have. . . . Look, I'll put them in a jug, you go through to the sitting room and make yourself comfortable. I've got the kettle on, too, thought you'd be ready for a cup of tea. . . ."

The sitting room lay beyond the kitchen, through an open door. Going through was a little like stepping back into the past, for all was cosy and cluttered, much as Penelope remembered it from old Mrs. Penberth's day, and the old lady's treasures were yet in evidence. She saw the lustre china in the glass-fronted cabinet, the Staffordshire dogs on either side of the fireplace, the lumpy sofas and armchairs with lace-edged antimacassars. But there were changes too. The huge television set was shingly new, as were the brilliantly patterned chintz curtains; and over the mantelpiece, where once a much-enlarged sepia photograph of old Mrs. Penberth's soldier brother, killed in the First World War, had held pride of place, now hung the portrait of Sophie, painted by Charles Rainier, which Penelope had given to Doris after Lawrence Stern's funeral.

"You can't give me this," Doris had said.

"Why not?"

"Your mother's picture?"

"I want you to have it."

"But why me?"

"Because you loved Sophie as much as any of us. And you loved Papa too, and took care of him for me. No daughter could have done more."

"It's too good of you. It's too much."

"It's not enough! But it's all I've got to give you."

She stood now, in the middle of the room, and looked at the portrait, and thought that after forty years, it had lost none of its appeal and charm and gaiety. Sophie at twenty-five, with her slanted eyes and her enchanting smile and her gamine crop of hair, and a scarlet silk-fringed scarf knotted casually about her sun-browned shoulders.

"Pleased to see it again?" asked Doris.

Penelope turned as she came through the door, bearing the jug of loosely arranged flowers, which she placed, with some care, in the middle of a table.

"Yes. I'd forgotten how charming it was."

"Bet you wish you'd never parted with it."

"No. It's just nice to see it again."

"Gives this place a touch of class, doesn't it? It's been ever so admired. I've even been offered a fortune for it, but I wouldn't sell. I wouldn't let that picture go for all the tea in China. Now come on, let's sit down and make ourselves comfortable and get chatting before that old Ernie comes back. I

wish you were here with me, I've asked you often enough. Are you really staying at The Sands? With all those millionaires! What's happened? Have you won the pools or something?"

Penelope explained her changed circumstances. She told Doris about the gradual, miraculous re-appreciation of Lawrence Stern's work on the world art market; told her about Roy Brook-ner, and the offer for the panels.

Doris was dumbfounded. "A hundred thousand for those two little pictures! It's like nothing I've ever heard. Oh, Penelope, I am pleased for you."

"And I've given *The Shell Seekers* to the Porthkerris gallery."

"I know. I read all about it in the local paper, and then Ernie and I went along and had a look for ourselves. Seemed funny seeing that picture there. Brought back ever such a lot of memories. But won't you miss it?"

"A bit, I suppose. But life has to go on. We're all getting older. Time to put our houses in order."

"You can say that again. And talking of life going on, what do you think of Porthkerris! Bet you didn't recognize the old place. We never know what the folk are going to do next, though heaven knows the developers had their way for a year or two after the war. The old cinema's a supermarket now ... I expect you noticed. And your father's studio was demolished and a block of holiday flats built right there, looking out over the North Beach. And we had a few years of hippies—that was unsavoury, I can tell you. Sleeping on the beach, and peeing any place they fancied. It was disgusting."

Penelope laughed. "And the old White Caps is a block of flats, too. And as for Cam Cottage . . ."

"Didn't it make you *weep*? Your mother's lovely garden. I should have written to warn you how things were."

"I'm glad you didn't. Anyway, it doesn't matter. Somehow, it doesn't matter any more."

"I should think not, living in luxury up at The Sands! Re-member when it was a hospital? You wouldn't have gone near the place unless you had two broken legs."

"Doris, it's not just because I'm feeling rich I'm staying at The Sands and not with you. It's because I've brought a couple of young friends down here with me, and I knew you wouldn't have had space for all of us."

"Of course. Who are they, these friends?"

"The girl's called Antonia. Her father's just died, and she's living with me just now. And the young man is called Danus. He helps me in the garden in Gloucestershire. You'll meet them. They think it's too much for an old lady to walk back up the hill, so they said they would come and fetch me in the car."

"That'll be nice. But I wish you'd brought Nancy. I'd love to see my Nancy again. And why didn't you come back to Porthker-ris before? We can't be expected to fill in forty years in just a couple of hours. . . ."

However, they made a fairly good stab at it, scarcely drawing breath, asking questions, answering them, catching up on children and grandchildren.

"Clark married a girl in Bristol and he's got two kiddies . . . here they are on the mantelpiece; that's Sandra and that's Kevin. She's ever such a bright little girl. And these are Ronald's youngsters ... he lives in Plymouth. His father-in-law runs a furniture factory and he's taken Ron into the business . . . they come down for summer holidays, but they have to put up in a bed-and-breakfast up the road, because there's not space for them here. Now tell me about Nancy. What a little love she was."

And then it was Penelope's turn, but of course she'd forgotten to bring any photographs. She told Doris about Melanie and

Rupert and, with some effort, managed to make them sound attractive.

"Live near you, do they? Are you able to see them?"

"They're about twenty miles away."

"Oh, that's too far, isn't it? But you like living in the country? Better than London? I wasn't half horrified when you wrote and told me about Ambrose walking out on you like that. What a thing to do. But then, he was always a useless sort of a chap. Nice-looking, of course, but I never felt he really fitted in. Even so, walking out on you! Selfish bugger. Men never think of anyone but themselves. That's what I say to Ernie when he leaves his dirty socks on the bathroom floor."

And then, with husbands and families safely disposed of, they began to remember, recalling the long years of war through which they had lived together, sharing not only the sorrows and the fears and the tedious boredom but, as well, the bizarre and ludicrous happenings which, in retrospect, could be nothing but hysterically funny.

Colonel Trubshot, stalking the town in his tinhat and his ARP armband, missing his way in the black-out and falling over the harbour wall and into the sea. Miss Preedy giving a Red Cross lecture to a lot of disinterested ladies and getting herself tangled up in her own bandages. General Watson-Grant drilling the Home Guard on the school playground, and old Willie Chirg-win spearing his big toe with a bayonet and having to be carted off to hospital in an ambulance.

"And going to the cinema," Doris reminded Penelope, wiping tears of laughter from her cheeks. "Remember going to the cinema? Twice a week we used to go and never miss a single show. Remember Charles Boyer in *Hold Back the Dawn*? There wasn't a dry eye in the house. I went through three handkerchiefs and I was still howling when I came out."

"It was lovely, wasn't it? And I suppose there wasn't much else to do. Except listen to *Worker's Playtime* on the radio and Mr. Churchill injecting us with doses of moral courage from time to time."

"The best was Carmen Miranda. I never missed a Carmen Miranda film." Doris sprang to her feet and placed a hand, fin-gers spread, upon her hip.

"Ay-ay-ay-ay-aye, I love you verry much. Ay-ay-ay-ay-aye, I think you're grrrand . . ."

The door slammed and Ernie walked in. Doris, finding this interruption even funnier than her own act, collapsed backwards onto the sofa and lay there, weeping and incapable with mirth.

Ernie, embarrassed, looked from one face to the other. "What's up with you two?" he asked, and Penelope, realizing that his wife was beyond answering his question, pulled herself together, got up out of her chair and went to greet him.

"Oh, Ernie . . ." She wiped her eyes, subdued her hopeless giggles. "I am sorry. What a stupid pair we are. We've been remembering things and laughing so much. Please forgive us." Ernie seemed even smaller than ever, and older too, and his black hair had turned frosty white. He wore an old guernsey and he had taken off working boots and put on his carpet slippers. His hand in hers felt rough and horny as it always had, and she was so pleased to see him, she wanted to embrace him but refrained from doing so, knowing that it would only cause him even more embarrassment. "How are you? How splendid it is to see you again."

"Good to see you too." They shook hands solemnly. His eyes went back to his wife, by now sitting up, blowing her nose and more or less in charge of herself again. "Heard that noise going on, I thought some person was killing the cat. Had tea, have you?"

"No, we haven't had tea. We haven't had time to have tea. We've been talking too much."

"The kettle just about boiled itself dry. I filled it up when I came in."

"Oh, God, I'm sorry. I forgot." Doris got to her feet. "I'll go and make a pot of tea now. Penelope's brought you a bottle of whisky, Ernie."

"Lovely. Thank you very much." He pushed back the cuff of his guernsey and looked at his large workmanlike watch. "Half past five." He glanced up, a

rare twinkle in his eye. "Why don't we skip tea and go straight onto the whisky?"

"Ernie Penberth! You old toper! What a suggestion."

"I think," said Penelope firmly, "that it's an extremely good one. After all, we haven't been together for forty years. If we don't celebrate now, then when are we going to?"

Thus the reunion turned into something of a party. The whisky loosened even Ernie's tongue, and the three of them might have continued to carouse into the evening had it not been for the eventual arrival of Danus and Antonia. Penelope had lost all sense of time, and the ring at the doorbell surprised her just as much as it did Ernie and Doris.

"Now who can that be?" asked Doris, resenting the interruption.

Penelope looked at her watch. "Good heavens, it's six o'clock. I'd no idea it was so late. It'll be Danus and Antonia, come to fetch me. . . ."

"Time goes fast when you're enjoying yourself," Doris re-marked and pulled herself out of her chair to go and answer the door. They heard her say, "Come along in, she's all ready for you. A bit tipsy, like we all are, but none the worse for wear." And Penelope nastily finished her drink and put the empty glass down on the table, so that they would not think that they had interrupted anything. Then they all streamed into the little room, and Ernie hauled himself to his feet, and everybody was introduced. Ernie took himself off to the kitchen and came back with another couple of glasses.

Danus scratched the back of his head and glanced about him, his eyes filled with amusement. "I thought you were meant to be having a tea-party."

"Oh, tea." Doris' voice dismissed the idea of anything so tame. "We forgot about tea. We've been talking and laughing so much, we forgot all about having tea."

Antonia said, "What a lovely room. This is just the sort of house I most love.

And all your flowers in the little courtyard."

"That's what I call my garden. Be nice to have a proper garden, but then, like I always say, you can't have everything."

Antonia's eyes fell upon Sophie's portrait. "Who's the girl in the painting?"

"That? Why, that's Penelope's mum. Can't you see the likeness?"

"She's beautiful!"

"Oh, she was lovely. There was never anyone like her. French she was . . . wasn't she, Penelope? Sounded ever so sexy the way she talked, just like Maurice Chevalier. And when she was vexed, ooh, you should have heard her. Like a little fishwife, she was."

"She looks so young."

"Oh, yes, she was. Years younger than Penelope's dad. Like sisters you were, weren't you, Penelope?"

Ernie, to draw attention, noisily cleared his throat. "Like a drink, would you?" he asked Danus.

Danus grinned and shook his head. "It's more than kind of you, and I hope you don't think I'm being unfriendly, but I don't drink."

Ernie, for once in his life, looked totally nonplussed.

"Ill, are you?"

"No. Not ill. It just doesn't agree with me."

Ernie was obviously much shaken. He turned, without much hope, to Antonia. "Suppose you don't want one neither?"

She smiled. "No. Thank you. And I'm not being unfriendly either, but I have

to drive the car back up the hill and navigate all those steep corners. I'd better not."

Ernie shook his head sadly and screwed the cap back on the bottle. The party was over. It was time to go. Penelope stood up, shook the creases out of her skirt, checked on her hairpins.

"Not off, are you?" Doris was reluctant to finish it all.

"We must go, Doris, though I don't want to in the very least. I've been here long enough."

"Where did you leave the car?" Ernie asked Danus.

"Up at the top of the hill," Danus told him. "We couldn't find anyplace nearer without a double yellow line."

"Right bugger, isn't it? Rules and regulations everywhere. I'd better walk up with you and help you get it turned. Not much room there, and you don't want to start no argument with a granite wall."

Danus, gratefully, accepted his offer. Ernie put on his cap and changed back into his boots. Danus and Antonia said goodbye to Doris, and she said "Pleased to have met you," and the three of them departed together to go and collect the Volvo. Doris and Penelope were, once more, left together. But now, for some reason, the laughter had gone. A silence fell between them, as though having talked so much, they had all at once run out of things to say. Penelope felt Doris' eyes upon her, and turned her head to meet that steady regard.

Doris said, "Where did you find him, then?"

"Danus?" She made her voice light. "I told you. He works for me. He's my gardener."

"Upper-class sort of gardener."

"Yes."

"He looks like Richard."

"Yes." His name was out. Spoken. She said, "You realize he's the only person neither of us has mentioned all afternoon. We remembered everybody else, but never him."

"Didn't seem much point. I only said his name then, because that young man's got such a look of him."

"I know. It struck me, too, the first time I ever set eyes on him. It ... took a little getting used to."

"Is he anything to do with Richard?"

"No. I don't think so. He comes from Scotland. The likeness is just an extraordinary coincidence."

"Is that why you've taken such a fancy to him?"

"Oh, Doris. You make me sound like a sad old lady with a gigolo in tow."

"Charmed you, has he?"

"I like him very much. I like him for the way he looks and I like him for the way he is. He's gentle. Good company. He makes me laugh."

"Bringing him here . . . to Porthkerris . . ." Doris looked anxious for her friend. ". . . not trying to revive old memories, are you?"

"No. I asked my children to come with me. I asked each one in turn, but none of them was able or willing. Not even Nancy. I wasn't going to tell you that, but now I have. So Danus and Antonia came in their place."

Doris did not comment on this. For a little they were silent, each occupied with her own thoughts. Then Doris said, "I dunno. Richard being killed like

that ... it was cruel. I always found it hard to forgive God for letting that man be killed. If ever there was a man who should have lived ... it stays with me, that day we heard. It was one of the worst things that happened during the war. And I could never get it out of my head that, when he died, he took part of you with him, and left no part of himself behind."

"He did leave part of himself."

"But nothing you could touch, or feel, or hold. It would have been better if you'd had a baby by him. That way, you'd have had a good excuse never to go back to Ambrose. You and Nancy and the baby could have made a good hie for yourselves."

"I often thought about that. I never did anything to stop having a baby by Richard; I just never conceived one. And Olivia was my consolation. She was the first child I had after the war, and she was Ambrose's child, but for some reason she was always special. Not different, just special." She went on carefully, choosing her words, admitting to Doris something that she had scarcely admitted to herself, and certainly to no other living person. "It was as though some physical part of Richard had stayed within me. Preserved, like delicious food in an icebox. And when Olivia was born, some atom, some corpuscle, some cell of Richard's became, through me, part of her."

"But she wasn't his."

Penelope smiled, shook her head. "No."

"But she felt like his."

"Yes."

"I can understand."

"I knew you would. That's why I told you. And you'll understand when I tell you that I'm glad Papa's studio was demolished to make way for a block of flats, and has gone forever. I know, now, that I'm strong enough to cope with almost anything, but I don't think I would ever have been strong enough to go

back there."

"No. I can understand that, too."

"There's another thing. When I went back to live in London, I got in touch with his mother."

"I wondered about that."

"It took me a long time to pluck up the courage, but finally I did, and telephoned her. We had lunch together. It was an ordeal for both of us. She was charming, and friendly, but we had nothing to talk about except Richard, and in the end I realized it was too much for her. After that, I left her alone; never saw her again. If I had been married to Richard, I could have comforted and consoled her. As it was, I think I simply added to her personal sense of tragedy."

Doris said nothing. From outside, from beyond the open door, they heard the sound of the Volvo, trundling cautiously down the steep and narrow street. Penelope stooped and picked up her handbag. "That's the car. It's time for me to go."

They went together, through the kitchen and into the sunshine of the little courtyard. They put their arms about each other, and kissed, with much affection. There were tears in Doris' eyes. "Goodbye, Doris darling. And thank you for everything."

Doris dashed the stupid tears away. "Come again soon," she told her. "Don't wait another forty years, or we'll all be pushing up the daisies."

"Next year. I'll come next year, on my own, and stay with you and Ernie."

"What a time we'll have."

The car appeared, stopped at the side of the road. Ernie clambered out of it and stood, like a footman, holding the door open, waiting for Penelope to step inside.

"Goodbye, Doris." She turned to go, but Doris was not finished with her.

"Penelope."

She turned back. "Yes?"

"If he's Richard, then who's Antonia supposed to be?"

Doris was no fool. Penelope smiled. "Myself?"

"The first time I ever came here was when I was seven years old. It was a great occasion, because Papa had bought a car. We'd never had one before, and this was our first expedition. It was the first of many, but I always remember that one, because I simply couldn't get over the astonishing fact that Papa actually knew how to get the engine started, and then drive it."

They sat, the three of them, on the Penjizal cliffs, high above the blue Atlantic, in a grassy hollow sheltered from the breeze by a towering boulder of lichenized granite. All about, studding the turfy grass, were clumps and cushions of wild primroses and the pale-blue, feathery heads of scabious. The sky was cloudless, the air filled with the thunder of rollers and the screams of the wheeling sea-birds. Midday, and in April, warm as midsummer—so warm that they had spread the new tartan rug to loll upon, and found cool shade for the luncheon basket.

"What kind of a car was it?" Danus lay on the sloping turf, propped up on an elbow. He had pulled off his sweater and rolled up the sleeves of his shirt. His muscular forearms were sun-browned, his face, turned towards her, filled with amusement and interest.

"A four-and-a-half litre Bentley," she told him. "It was rather old, but he couldn't afford a new car, and it became the pride of his heart."

"How splendid. Did it have leather straps to hold down the bonnet, like a cabin trunk?"

"Exactly. And a running board, and a hood we could never get the hang of, so we never put it up even if it poured with rain."

"A car like that would be worth a fortune nowadays. What became of it?"

"When Papa died, I gave it to Mr. Grabney. I couldn't think what else to do with it. And he'd always been so kind, keeping it for us in his garage all through the war and never charging us a penny of rent. And another time ... a really important time ... he laid his hands on some Black Market petrol for me. I could never thank him enough for that."

"Why didn't you keep it?"

"I couldn't afford to keep a car in London, and I didn't really need one. I just used to walk everywhere, pushing perambulators filled with babies and shopping. Ambrose was furious when he heard I'd given the Bentley away. It was the first thing he asked about after I got back from Papa's funeral. When I told him what I'd done, he sulked for a week."

Danus was sympathetic. "I'm not sure I blame him."

"No. Poor man. He must have been dreadfully disap-pointed."

Penelope sat up, to gaze out over the edge of the cliff and inspect the state of the tide. It was on the ebb, but still not fully out. When this happened, the great rock pool, which she had promised Danus and Antonia, would at last be revealed, like a huge blue jewel, glinting in the sunlight and perfect for diving and swimming. "Another half hour," she judged, "and you should be able to bathe."

She leaned back once more, propped against the bank, and rearranged her legs. She wore her old denim skirt, a cotton shirt, her new sneakers, and a battered straw gardening hat. The sun was so brilliant that she felt grateful for its speckled shade. Beside her, Antonia, who had been lying with eyes closed, apparently asleep, now shifted, rolling over onto her stomach and resting her cheek on her crossed arms. "Tell us more, Penelope. Did you come here often?"

"Not often. It was a long way to drive, and then such a long walk from the farmhouse where we left the car. And in those days there was no cliff path. So we used to have to fight our way through gorse and brambles and bracken before we finally reached this spot. And then we always had to be certain that it was low tide so that Sophie and I could swim."

"Didn't your father swim?"

"No. He said he was too old. He used to sit up here with his broad-brimmed hat, and his easel, and his little folding stool, and paint or draw. Having, of course, opened a bottle of wine, poured himself a glass, lighted up a cigar, and generally made himself comfortable."

"What about winter? Did you ever come in winter-time?"

"Never. We were in London. Or Paris, or Florence. Porthkerris and Cam Cottage belonged to the summer."

"How perfect."

"No less perfect than your father's divine house in Ibiza."

"I suppose so. Everything's relative, isn't it?" Antonia rolled sideways, propping her chin in her hand. "How about you, Danus? Where did you go for your summers?"

"I hoped nobody would ask that."

"Oh, come on. Tell us."

"North Berwick. My parents took a house every summer there; they played golf while my brother and sister and I sat on the frigid beach with our nannie and built sand-castles in the howling wind."

Penelope frowned. "Your brother? I didn't know you had a brother. I thought it was just your sister and yourself."

"Yes, I had a brother, Ian. He was the eldest of the three of us. He died of meningitis when he was fourteen."

"Oh, my dear, what a tragedy."

"Yes. Yes, it was. My mother and father never really got over it. He was the golden boy, bright and good-looking, and a natural games player—the son that every parent dreams of having. To me, he was a sort of god, because he knew how to do everything. When he was old enough, he played golf, too, and so, eventually, did my sister, but I was always hopeless and not even particularly interested. I used to go off on my own, on my bike, and look for birds. I found that infinitely more entertaining than struggling with the complexities of golf."

"North Berwick doesn't sound a very nice place to go," Antonia remarked. "Didn't you ever go anywhere else?"

Danus laughed. "Yes, of course. My great friend at school was called Roddy McCrae. His parents owned a croft, right up in the north of Sutherland, near Tongue. As well, they had fishing rights on the Naver, and Roddy's father taught me how to cast. When I outgrew North Berwick, I spent most of my holidays with them."

"What's a croft?" Antonia asked.

"A but and ben. A two-roomed stone farmhouse. Dead basic. No plumbing, no electricity, no telephone. The end of the line, the back of beyond, out of touch with the world. It was great."

A silence fell. It occurred to Penelope that this was perhaps only the second time she had heard Danus talk about himself. She felt sad for him. To lose a much-loved older brother at such a tender age must have been a traumatic experience. To feel, perhaps, that he could never quite match up to that brother was worse. She waited, thinking that maybe, having broken the ice of his reserve and actually confided, he might wish to continue. But he did not. Instead, he stirred himself, stretched, and then pulled himself to his feet. "The

tide is out," he told Antonia. "The rock pool is waiting for us. Do you feel brave enough to swim?"

They had gone, scrambling over the cliffs rim to take the precipitous path that led down to the rocks. The pool waited still as glass, glittering and brilliantly blue. Penelope, waiting to watch them reappear, thought of her father. Remembered him with his wide-brimmed hat and his easel and his wine and his contented, concentrated solitude. One of the frustrations of her life had been the fact that she had not inherited his talent. She was not a painter, she could not even draw, but his influence had been enormously strong, and she had lived with this so long that, quite naturally, she was able to observe any prospect with his acute, all-seeing artist's eye. All was exactly as it had always been, except for the winding green ribbon of the cliff path, trodden by walkers, which dipped and climbed through the green young bracken, following the convolutions of the coast.

She gazed at the sea, trying to decide how, if she were Papa, she would endeavour to paint it. For, although it was blue, it was a blue made up of a thousand different hues. Over sand, shallow and translucent, it was jade-green, streaked with aquamarine. Over rocks and seaweed, it darkened to indigo. Far out, where a small fishing boat bucketed its way across the waves, it became a deep Prussian blue. There was little wind, but the ocean lived and breathed; swelled in from distant depths, formed waves. The sun-light, shining through these as they curved to break, transformed them to moving sculptures of green glass. And, finally, all was drowned in light, that unique suffused brilliance that had first brought the painters to Cornwall, and had driven the French Impressionists into a passion of creativity.

A perfect composition. All that was needed were human figures to provide proportion and vitality. They appeared. Far below and minimized by distance, Antonia and Danus made their slow way across the rocks towards the pool. She watched their progress. Danus carried the bathing towels. When at last they reached the flat rock that overhung the pool, he dropped them and walked to the edge of the rock. He flexed and dived, making scarcely a splash as he cleaved the water. Antonia followed. Swimming, they broke the surface of the pool into sunlit splinters. She heard their raised voices, their laughter. Other voices, other worlds. *It was good and nothing good is ever lost.*

Richard's voice. *He looks like Richard.*

She had never swum with Richard, for theirs had been a wartime, winter love affair, but now, watching Danus and Antonia, she felt again, with a physical intensity that was beyond mere recall, that numbing shock of cold water. Remembered the exhilaration, the sense of well-being, as clearly as if her own body were still young, untouched by sickness or the passing years. And there were other pleasures, other delights. The sweet contact of hands, arms, lips, bodies. The peace of passion spent, the joy of waking to sleepy kisses and reasonless laughter. . . .

Long ago, when she was very small, Papa had introduced her to the fascinating delights of a geometrical compass and a sharp pencil. She had taught herself to draw patterns, flower heads, petals and curves, but nothing had given her so much pleasure as simply describing, on a sheet of clean white paper, a circle. So fine, so precise. The pencil moving, drawing the line behind it, and finishing up, with marvellous finality, exactly where it had begun.

A ring was the accepted sign of infinity, eternity. If her own life was that carefully described pencil line, she knew all at once that the two ends were drawing close together. I have come full circle, she told herself, and wondered what had happened to all the years. It was a question which, from time to time, caused her some anxiety and left her fretting with a dreadful sense of waste. But now, it seemed, the question had become irrelevant, and so the answer, whatever it was, was no longer of any importance.

"Olivia."

"Mumma! What a lovely surprise."

"I realized I'd never wished you a happy Easter. I am sorry, but perhaps it's not too late. And I wasn't sure if I would catch you; I thought you might still be away."

"No. I just got back this evening. I've been in the Isle of Wight."

"Who were you staying with?"

"The Blakisons. Do you remember Charlotte? She used to be Food Editor on *Venus*, and then she left to start a family."

"Was it fun?"

"Divine. It always is staying with them. A huge house-party. And all done with no visible effort whatsoever."

"Was that nice American there with you?"

"Nice American? Oh, you mean Hank. No, he's back in the States."

"I thought he was such a specially dear person."

"Yes he was. He is. He's going to get in touch again the next time he comes over to London. But, Mumma, tell me all about you. How are things going?"

"We're having a wonderful time. Living in the lap of lux-ury."

"About time too, after all these years. I had a long letter from Antonia. She sounded ecstatically happy."

"She and Danus have been out all day. They took the car over to the south coast to see some young man with a nursery garden. They're probably back by now."

"How's Danus behaving himself?"

"He's been an enormous success."

"Do you still like him as much?"

"Just as much. If anything, more. But I've never known a man so reserved. Perhaps its something to do with being Scottish."

"Has he told you why he doesn't drink or drive?"

"No."

"He's probably a reformed alcoholic."

"If he is, it's his own business."

"Tell me what you've been doing. Have you seen Doris?"

"Of course. And she's blooming. Lively as ever. And on Saturday, we spent the day out on the cliffs at Penjizal. And yesterday morning, we were all very dutiful and went to church."

"Nice service?"

"Lovely. The Porthkerris church is particularly beautiful, and of course it was stuffed with flowers, and the pews filled with people in astonishing hats, and the music and the singing quite exceptional. We had a rather boring visiting Bishop preaching to us, but the music made up for even the tedium of his sermon. And then at the end, a full procession, and we all surged to our feet and sang 'For All The Saints Who From Their Labours Rest.' Coming home, Antonia and I decided it was quite one of our favourite hymns."

Olivia laughed. "Oh, Mumma. That, coming from you! I didn't even know you had a favourite hymn."

"Darling, I'm not quite an atheist. I just can't help being slightly sceptical. And Easter is always particularly disturbing, with the Resurrection and the promise of afterlife. I can never quite bring myself to believe it. And although I would adore to see Sophie and Papa, there are dozens of other people I can very well do without ever seeing again. And just imagine the crush! Just like being invited to the most enormous, boring cocktail party, where you spend your whole time looking for the amusing people you really want to see." £"

"How about *The Shell Seekers*? Have you seen it?"

"It looks wonderful. Utterly at home. As though it had been there all its life."

"You don't regret giving it away?"

"Not for a moment."

"And what are you doing right now?"

"I've had a bath, and I'm lying on my bed, reading *The Sun Also Rises*, and ringing you up. After that I shall call Noel and Nancy, and then I shall dress for dinner. It's always so dreadfully grand, and there's a man in the restaurant tinkling away at a grand piano. Just like the Savoy."

"How terribly smart. What are you wearing?"

"My caftan. It's fairly threadbare, but if you half-close your eyes, the holes don't show."

"You'll look fantastic. When are you coming home?"

"Wednesday. We'll be back at Podmore's Thatch on Wednesday evening."

"I'll call you there."

"Do that, my darling. God bless you."

" 'Bye, Mumma."

She dialled Noel's number and waited for a moment or two, listening to the phone ringing out, but there was no reply. She put down the receiver. He was probably still off somewhere, in the country, on one of his long and social weekends. She picked up the instrument once more and called Nancy.

"The old Vicarage."

"George."

"Yes."

"Penelope here. Happy Easter!"

"Thank you," said George, but he did not return her greeting.

"Is Nancy around?"

"Yes, she's somewhere. Do you want to speak to her?"

(Why else should I be ringing, you silly man?) "If I could."

"Hold on, and I'll fetch her."

She waited. It was pleasant to lie there, relaxed and warm, propped by massive pillows, but Nancy took so long to come to the phone that she became impatient. What could the girl be doing? To pass the time, she picked up her book, and had even read a paragraph or two before, at last: "Hello."

She laid down the book. "Nancy. Where were you? At the bottom of the garden?"

"No."

"Did you have a good Easter?"

"Yes, thank you."

"What did you do?"

"Nothing in particular."

"Did you have visitors?"

"No."

Her voice was frigid. This was Nancy at her most disagree-able, her most

offended. What could have happened now? "Nancy, what's wrong?"

"Why should anything be wrong?"

"I have no idea, but it obviously is." Silence. "Nancy, I think you'd better tell me."

"I just feel ... a little hurt and upset. That's all."

"What about?"

"What about? You ask me, as if you don't know perfectly well what about."

"I wouldn't ask you, if I knew."

"Wouldn't you be hurt if you were me? I hear nothing from you for weeks. Nothing. And then when I ring Podmore's Thatch to ask you and Antonia to come and spend Easter with us, I find that you've gone. Gone to Cornwall, taking her and that gardener with you, and all without a word to either George or myself."

So that was it. "To be honest, Nancy, I didn't think you'd be interested."

"It's not a question of being interested. It's a question of concern. Just taking off like that, without a word to anyone; anything could happen, and we wouldn't know where you were."

"Olivia knew."

"Oh, Olivia. Yes, of course she knew, and great satisfaction it gave her as well, being able to put me in the picture. I find it astonishing that you find it necessary to tell her what you're up to, and yet not a word to me." She was now in full flood. "Everything that happens, I seem to hear about second-hand, through Olivia. Everything you do. Everything you decide. Getting that gardener to work for you. Having Antonia to live with you, when I'd spent weeks of time and a good deal of hard cash putting advertisements into the newspaper for a housekeeper. Then selling the panels, and *giving away The*

Shell Seekers. Without a word of consultation with George and myself. It's impossible to understand. I am, after all, your eldest child. If you owe me nothing else, you could consider my feelings. And then disappearing off to Cornwall like that, with Antonia and the gardener in tow. A pair of strangers. And yet when I suggested Melanie and Rupert should come, you refused to countenance the idea. Your own grandchildren! But you take a pair of strangers. About whom none of us know anything at all. They're taking advantage of you, Mother. You surely can see that. Think you're a soft touch, no doubt, though I couldn't have believed that you could be so blind. It's all so hurtful ... so thoughtless . . ."

"Nancy ..."

". . . if this is how you behaved towards poor Daddy, it's no wonder he left you. It's enough to make anyone feel rejected and unwanted. Granny Keeling always said that you were the most unfeeling woman she'd ever known. We've tried to be responsible for you, George and I, but you don't make it easy for us. Going off, without a word . . . spending all that money. We all know what staying at The Sands will cost you . . . and giving The Shell Seekers away . . . when you know how much we all need ... so hurtful . . ."

Stored resentments boiled over. Nancy, by now almost incoherent, at last ran out of steam. For the first time, Penelope was able to get a word in edgewise.

"Have you finished?" she asked politely. Nancy made no answer. "May I speak now?"

"If you wish."

"I rang you up to wish you all a Happy Easter. Not to have a row. But if you want one, you can have one. In selling the panels, I simply did what you and Noel have been urging me to do for months. I got a hundred thousand pounds for them, as Olivia probably told you, and for the first time in my life, I decided to spend a little of it on myself. You know I'd been planning to come back to Porthkerris, because I asked you to come with me. I asked Noel, and I asked Olivia too. You all had excuses. You none of you wanted to come."

"Mother, I gave you my reasons. . . ."

"Excuses," Penelope repeated. "I had no intention of coming on my own. I wanted cheerful company, to share my pleasure. So Antonia and Danus have come with me. I am not yet so senile that I cannot choose my own friends. And as for *The Shell Seekers*, that picture was mine. Don't ever forget that. Papa gave it to me as a wedding present, and now, with it hanging in the Art Gallery at Porthkerris, I feel I've simply handed it back to him. To him, and the thousands of ordinary people who will now be able to go and look at it, and perhaps know some of the comfort and pleasure that it's always given me."

"You can have no idea of its worth."

"I have a great deal more idea than you have ever had. You've lived with *The Shell Seekers* all your life, and scarcely looked at it."

"I didn't mean that."

"No, I know you didn't."

"It's . . ." Nancy groped for words. "It's as though you actually wanted to hurt us ... as though you disliked us . . ."

"Oh, Nancy."

". . . and why is it always Olivia you tell things too, and never me?"

"Perhaps because you seem to find it so hard to understand anything I ever do."

"How can I understand when you behave in such an extraordinary way, never taking me into your confidence . . . treating me like a fool. ... It was always Olivia. You always loved Olivia. When we were children, it was always Olivia, so clever and so funny. You never tried to understand me ... if it hadn't been for Granny Keeling ..."

She had reached the point where, awash with self-pity, she was ready to recall every long-ago wrong she imagined had been inflicted upon her. Penelope, exhausted by the conversation, suddenly realized that she could take no more. She had already taken too much, and to have to listen to the adolescent blubs of a forty-three year old woman was more than she could bear.

She said, "Nancy, I think we should finish this conversation."

"... I don't know what I would have done without Granny Keeling. Having her there, just made my life possible. ..."

"Goodbye, Nancy."

". . . because you never had any time for me ... never gave me anything. ..."
Carefully replacing the receiver, Penelope hung up on her daughter. The angry, raised voice was, mercifully, silenced. At the open windows, filmy curtains stirred in the breeze. Her heart, as always after these distressing occasions, was going jiggety-jig. She reached for her pills, took two, washed them down with water, and lay back on the downy pillows, closing her eyes. She thought about simply giving in. She felt quite drained, and for a moment more than ready to succumb to exhaustion, even tears. But she would not be upset by Nancy. She would not weep.

After a little, when her heart had settled down again, she put back the covers and got out of bed. She wore a cool and airy dressing-gown, and her long hair was loose. She went to the dressing-table and sat, eyeing, without much satisfaction, her own reflection. Then she reached for her hairbrush and began, with long, slow, and soothing strokes, to brush her hair.

It was always Olivia. You always loved Olivia.

That was true. From the moment she was born, and Penelope had first set eyes upon her, a tiny dark infant, with a nose too big for its plain little face, she had experienced this indescribable nearness to her. Because of Richard, Olivia was special. But that was all. She had never loved her more than Nancy and Noel. She had loved them all, her children. Loved each one the

best, but for different reasons. Love, she had found, had a strange way of multiplying. Doubling, trebling itself, so that, as each child arrived, there was always more than enough to go round. And Nancy, the first-born, had had more than her share of love and attention. She thought of the small Nancy, so sturdy and engaging, staggering around the garden at Cam Cottage on her short fat legs. Chasing the hens, pushing the wheelbarrow Ernie had made for her, petted and spoiled by Doris, perpetually surrounded by loving arms and smiling faces. What had happened to that little girl? Was it really possible that Nancy had no recall whatsoever of those early days?

Sadly, it appeared that this was so.

You never gave me anything.

That was not true. She knew that it was not true. She had given Nancy what she had given all her children. A home, security, comfort, interest, a place to bring their friends, a stout front door to keep them safe from the outside world. She thought of the big basement in Oakley Street, smelling of garlic and herbs, and warm from the big stove and the open fire. She remembered them all, chattering like sparrows and hungry as hunters, pouring in on dark winter evenings from school; to drop their satchels, tear off their coats, and settle down to consume vast quantities of sausages, pasta, fish cakes, hot buttered toast, plum cake, and cocoa. She remembered that marvellous room at Christmas time, with the sprucey smell of the tree and Christmas cards strung everywhere, like washing, on lines of red ribbon. She thought of the summers, the French windows open to the garden beyond, the shade of the trees, the scent of tobacco plants and the wall-flowers. She thought of the children who had played, screaming aimlessly, in that garden. Nancy had been one of them.

She had given Nancy all this, but she had not been able to give Nancy what she wanted (Nancy never said "wanted," she said "needed"), because there had never been money enough to pay for the material possessions and lavish treats the girl craved. Party frocks, doll's perambulators, a pony, boarding school, a coming-out dance, and a London Season. A large and pretentious wedding had been the peak of her ambitions, but she had achieved this heart's desire only through the timely intervention of Dolly Keeling, who had

arranged (and footed the bill for) the entire extravagant, embarrassing affair.

She laid down her brush at last. She was still enraged with Nancy, but the simple task had calmed her. Once more orderly, she felt better, stronger, in charge of herself, able to make decisions. She coiled, twisted the tail of hair, reached for her tortoise-shell pins, and drove them neatly, and with some force, into place.

Half an hour later, when Antonia came in search of her, she was back in bed. Sitting up, with pillows plumped, possessions to hand, and her book in her lap.

A tap at the door, and Antonia's voice. "Penelope?"

"Come in." The door opened, and Antonia's head appeared around the edge of it. "I just came to . . ." She entered the room, closing the door behind her. "You're in bed!" Her expression was one of the gravest concern. "What's wrong? Are you ill?"

Penelope closed the book. "No, not ill. Just a little tired. And I don't feel like coming down for dinner. I'm sorry. Were you waiting for me?"

"Not for long." Antonia lowered herself onto the edge of the bed. "We went down to the bar, but when you didn't come, Danus sent me up to see if anything was the matter."

Antonia, she saw, was dressed for the evening. She wore a narrow black skirt over which she had belted the oversized cream satin shirt that they had, together, bought in Cheltenham. Her copper-gold hair hung, shining and clean, to her shoulders, and her face, clear-skinned as a sweet apple, innocent of artifice. Save of course those amazingly long, black eyelashes.

"Don't you want anything to eat? Would you like me to call room service and have a tray sent up for you?"

"Perhaps. Later. But I can do that for myself."

"I expect," said Antonia accusingly, "that you've been doing too much, walking too far, without Danus and me to make sure that you didn't."

"I haven't overdone anything. I just got cross."

"But what was there to get cross about?"

"I rang Nancy to wish her a happy Easter and received a flood of abuse in return."

"How horrid of her. What on earth was it all about?"

"Oh, everything. She seems to think I'm senile. That I neglected her as a child and am extravagant in my old age. That I'm secretive and irresponsible and I don't know how to choose my friends. I think it's all been festering for some time, but my bringing you and Danus with me to Porthkerris proved the last straw. It all boiled over and came out on top of me." She smiled. "Oh well. Better out than in, as my darling Papa used to say."

Antonia, however, remained indignant. "How *could* she upset you so much?"

"I didn't let her upset me. I got cross instead. Much more healthy. And let's face it, there is always a funny side to every situation. I hung up on her, and imagined her storming back to George in floods of unbecoming tears, unleashing onto him all the iniquities of her feckless mother. And George, taking refuge behind *The Times*, saying nothing. He's always been the most uncommunicative of men. Why Nancy chose to marry him in the first place is beyond all comprehension. No wonder their children are so miserably unattractive. Rupert with his mannerless ways, and Melanie with her baleful glare, always chewing the end of her pigtails."

"I don't think you're being very kind."

"No, I'm not. I'm being malicious. But I'm glad it's happened, because it's helped me make up my mind. I'm going to give you a present." Her huge leather handbag stood on the bedside table. She reached for it, rummaged deep into its capacious interior. Her fingers found what they were looking for. She withdrew the worn leather jewel case. "Here," she said, and handed

it to Antonia. "These are for you."

"For me?"

"Yes. I want you to have them. Take it. Open it."

Almost reluctantly, Antonia took the jewel case. Pressed the little catch and snapped it open. Penelope watched her face. Watched her eyes widen in disbelief, her mouth drop open with amazement.

"But . . . these aren't for me."

"They are. I am giving them to you. I want you to have them. Aunt Ethel's earrings. She left them to me when she died, and I brought them out to Ibiza that time I stayed with you all, and wore them to Cosmo and Olivia's party. Do you remember?"

"But of course I do. And you can't give them to me. I'm sure they're far too valuable."

"No more so than our friendship. No more so than the pleasure you have brought me."

"But they must be worth thousands."

"I think four thousand. I could never afford the insurance for them, so I had to keep them in the bank. I picked them up that day we went to Cheltenham. And I don't suppose you'll be able to afford the insurance either, so they'll probably have to go back to the bank. Poor things, they don't have much of a life, do they? But you can wear them now, this evening. Your ears are pierced, they won't drop out. Put them on, and let's see how they look."

But Antonia still hesitated. "Penelope, if they're worth so much, shouldn't you keep them for Olivia or Nancy? Or your granddaughter. Perhaps Melanie should have them."

"Olivia will want you to have the earrings, I know. They will remind her of

Ibiza and Cosmo and she will agree with me that it's entirely appropriate that they should be yours. And Nancy has become so tediously greedy and materialistic that she doesn't deserve anything. And as for Melanie, I doubt that she would ever learn to appreciate their beauty. Now, put them on."

Antonia, still looking doubtful, did so, removing them one by one from the worn velvet and slipping the fine golden wires into the lobes of her ears. She pushed back her hair.

"How do they look?"

"Perfect. Exactly what you needed to finish off that pretty outfit. Go to the mirror and see for yourself."

Antonia did so, slipping off the bed and crossing the room to stand in front of the dressing-table. Penelope watched her reflection in the mirror, and thought she had never seen any girl look quite so sensational.

"They are totally right for you. You need to be tall to wear such lavish jewellery. And if ever you find yourself strapped for cash, you can always flog them or hock them to a pawnbroker. A nice little nest-egg for you to fall back on."

But Antonia remained silent, struck wordless by the magnificence of the gift. Then, after a little, she turned from the mirror and came back to Penelope's bedside. She shook her head, and said, "I'm bewildered. I can't think why you should be so kind to me."

"One day, when you're as old as I am, I think you'll find the answer to that."

"I'll make a deal with you. I'll wear them this evening, but tomorrow morning you may have had second thoughts, and if you have, I'll give them back."

"I shan't have second thoughts. Now that I've seen you wear them, I am more certain than ever that they should belong to you. Now, let's not talk about them any more. Sit down again and tell me about your day. Danus won't mind. He can wait another ten minutes. And I want to hear everything. Don't

you love that south coast? So different from here, all woods and water. I spent a week there once, during the war. In a house with a garden that sloped down to a creek. There were wild daffodils everywhere, and kittiwakes sitting on the end of the jetty. I sometimes wonder what's happened to that old house, and who lives there now." But this was all beside the point. "Now. Where did you go? And who did you see? And was it fun?"

"Yes, it was lovely. A lovely drive. And interesting too. We saw this huge market garden; with glasshouses and propagating sheds and a shop where people can come and buy plants and watering cans and things. They grow tomatoes and early potatoes and all sorts of exotic vegetables like mange-tout peas."

"Who owns it?"

"Some people called Ashley. Everard Ashley was at Horticultural College with Danus. That's why we went."

She stopped, as though this were all there was to be said. Penelope waited for more, but Antonia fell silent. Such reticence was unexpected. She glanced sharply at Antonia, but she had dropped her eyes and her hands fiddled with the empty jewel case, opening the lid and snapping it shut again. Penelope felt the stirrings of unease. Something was awry. Gently, she prompted.

"Where did you have lunch?"

"We had it with the Ashleys in the kitchen of their house."

Pleasant visions of an intimate pub lunch in some delectable inn faded and died.

"Is Everard married?"

"No. He lives with his parents. It's his father's farm. They run the place together."

"And Danus wants to do something on the same lines?"

"He says so."

"Have you discussed it with him?"

"Yes. Up to a point."

"Antonia. What is wrong?"

"I don't know."

"Have you had a quarrel?"

"No."

"But something has happened."

"Nothing has happened. That's what's wrong. I get so far, and then I get no further. I think I know him. I think I'm close to him, and then he puts up this reserve. It's like having a gate slammed shut in your face."

"You're fond of him, aren't you?"

"Oh, yes." A tear seeped from beneath the lowered lashes, began to slide down Antonia's cheek.

"In love with him, I think."

A long silence. Antonia nodded.

"But you think that he is not in love with you?"

The tears were falling fast now. Antonia put up a hand and wiped them away.

"I don't know. He couldn't be. We've been together so much over these last few weeks . . . surely by now, he has to know, one way or another . . . there comes a sort of point of no return, and I think we've passed it."

Penelope said, "It's my fault. Here . . ." She reached out to the bedside table and handed Antonia a wad of tissues. Antonia lustily blew her nose. When

she had done this, she asked, "Why should it be your fault?"

"Because I've been thinking only of myself. I wanted company, selfish old woman that I am. And so I asked you and Danus to come here with me. Perhaps, too, I was interfering a little. Matchmaking. It's always fatal. I thought I was being so clever. But perhaps it was all the most dreadful mistake."

Antonia looked despairing. "What *is* it about him, Penelope?"

"He's reserved."

"It's more than reserve."

"Pride, perhaps."

"Too proud to love?"

"Not that, exactly. But I think he has no money. He knows what he wants, but hasn't the cash to lay his hands on it. Any sort of a business needs massive capital these days. And so he has no prospects. Perhaps he feels he's in no position to become involved."

"Involvement wouldn't necessarily mean the responsibility of marriage."

"I think with a man like Danus, it probably would."

"I could just be with him. We would work something out together. We work well together. In every sort of way."

"Have you told him this?"

"I can't. I've tried, but I can't."

"Then I think you must try again. For both your sakes. Tell him how you feel. Lay your cards on the table. You're good friends, if nothing else. Surely you can be truthful with him?"

"You mean, tell him that I love him, and that I want to spend the rest of my life with him, and that I don't care if he hasn't a penny to his name, and I don't even care if he doesn't want to marry me?"

"Put like that, I admit it does sound a little crude. But . . . yes. I suppose that is what I mean."

"And if he tells me to go on my way?"

"You'll be hurt and bruised, but at least you'll know where you stand. And for some reason, I don't think he will tell you to go on your way. I think he'll be honest with you, and you'll find that the explanation for his attitude is something quite apart and separate from his relationship with you."

"How could it be?"

"I don't know. I wish I did. I would like to know why he neither drinks nor drives a car. It's none of my business, but I should like to be told. He's holding something back, of that I'm certain. But knowing him, I cannot believe it's anything shameful."

"I wouldn't really mind if it was." Antonia's tears had ceased. She blew her nose once more and said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bawl like that."

"Sometimes it's better. Better out than in."

"It's just that he's the first man I've ever been really attracted to or close to. If there had been strings of others, I suppose I'd be better at coping. But I can't help the way I feel, and I don't think I can bear the thought of losing him. When I saw him first, at Podmore's Thatch, I knew he was special, knew he was going to be somebody very important in my life. And somehow, when we were there, it was all right. It was easy and natural, and we could talk together, and work together, and plant things, and there wasn't any tension. But here, it's different. It's turned into an unreal situation, something I don't seem to have any control over. . . ."

"Oh, my darling, it is my fault. I am sorry. I thought it would be romantic for you and special. Now you mustn't cry again. You'll ruin your pretty face and spoil the entire evening. . . ."

"I wish I wasn't me. . . ." Antonia blurted. "I wish I was Olivia. Olivia would never get into a mess like this."

"You're not Olivia. You're yourself. You're beautiful and you're young. You have everything before you. Never wish to be another person, not even Olivia."

"She's so strong. So wise."

"And you will be too. You'll wash your face and comb your hair, and go downstairs and tell Danus that I'm having a quiet evening by myself, and then you'll have a drink with him, and go in to dinner, and over dinner you'll tell him everything that you've told me. You're not a child. You're neither of you children. This situation cannot continue, and I won't allow you to make yourself miserable. Danus is a kind man. Whatever happens, whatever he says, he would never deliberately hurt you."

"No. I know that." They kissed. Antonia got off the bed and went through to the bathroom to wash her face. Emerging, she stood at the dressing-table and used Penelope's comb to tidy her hair.

"The earrings will bring you luck," Penelope told her. "And give you confidence. Now, quick, it's time you went. Danus will be wondering what has become of the pair of us. And remember, speak out and don't be afraid. Don't ever be afraid of being honest and truthful."

"I'll try not to."

"Goodnight, my darling."

"Goodnight."

DANUS

Penelope awoke to yet another clear-skied and pristine morning and to pleasant and recognized sounds—the sea, washing gently onto the beach far below; gulls calling, and a thrush, just below her window, making a great din about something or other; a car coming up the drive, changing gear, drawing to a halt on the gravel; a man whistling.

It was ten past eight. She had slept for twelve hours, right around the clock. She felt rested, filled with energy, enormously hungry. It was Tuesday. The last day of the holiday. This realization filled her with some dismay. Tomorrow morning, they must pack up and set off on the long drive back to Gloucestershire. She felt impelled by a sense of selfish urgency, because there were a number of things that she still hadn't done and which she wished to do. She lay making a mental list, for once putting her own priorities first. Danus and Antonia, and the dilemma in which they found themselves, must for the moment take second place.

Later, she would think about their problems. Later, she would talk to them. For the moment, time must be her own.

She got up, took a bath, did her hair, put on her clothes. Then, fresh and scented, cleanly dressed, she sat at the writing table in her room and wrote, on the thick, expensively embossed paper provided by the hotel, a letter to Olivia. It was not a very long letter, more of a note, to let Olivia know that she had given Aunt Ethel's earrings to Antonia. For some reason, it was important that Olivia knew about this. She put the letter into an envelope, addressed, stamped, and sealed it down. Then she picked up her bag and her keys and went downstairs.

She found the foyer deserted, revolving doors standing open to the cool air and fresh scents of morning. Only the hall porter stood behind his desk, and a woman in a blue overall vacuumed the carpet. She said good morning to both of them, posted her letter, and went into the empty dining room to order breakfast. Orange juice, two boiled eggs, toast and marmalade, black coffee.

By the time she had come to the end of this, one or two other guests had filtered down, to take their places, open newspapers, discuss the coming day. Golf games were planned, and sightseeing trips. Penelope listened, and was glad that she did not have to consider any other person. There was still no sign of either Danus or Antonia, and for this she was shamefully grateful.

She left the dining room. It was now nearly half past nine. Crossing the foyer, she paused by the hall porter's desk.

"I'm going down to the Art Gallery. At what time does it open, do you know?"

"About ten o'clock, I think, Mrs. Keeling. Driving down, are you?"

"No. I'm going to walk. It's such a beautiful morning. But perhaps, if I called you when I'm ready, you could arrange for a taxi to come and fetch me."

"Of course."

"Thank you." She left him, stepping out with conscious pleasure into the sunshine and sweet gusts of cool and breezy air, which heightened her sense of freedom and irresponsibility. As a child, Saturday mornings had felt just so, aimless and empty, ready to be filled with unexpected delights. She walked slowly, savouring scent and sound, pausing to gaze at gardens, the glittering expanse of the bay, to watch a man walk his dog across the sands. Thus, by the time she eventually turned off the harbour road and set off up the steep cobbled street that led to the Gallery, she saw that its door stood open, but at such an hour and so early in the year, she found it, understandably, deserted, save for the young man who sat behind the desk at the entrance. He was a cadaverous individual, with long locks of hair, wearing patchworked jeans and an enormous speckled sweater. He yawned as though he had had no sleep, but when Penelope appeared he swallowed his yawn, sat up in his chair, and offered to sell her a catalogue.

"No, I don't need a catalogue, thank you. Later, perhaps, I might buy some postcards."

Dreadfully fatigued, he sank back in his chair. She wondered who had thought fit to employ him as a curator, and then decided that he probably did the job for love.

The Shell Seekers waited for her, impressive in its new home, hung in the centre of the long, windowless wall. She walked across the echoing floor and made herself comfortable on the ancient leather couch where, years ago, she used to sit with Papa.

He had been right. They had come, those young artists, as he had said they would. *The Shell Seekers* was flanked, framed, by abstracts and primitives, all bursting with colour and light and life. Gone were the lesser paintings (*Fishing Boats at Night; Flowers in my Window*) which in the old days had filled in the soaring spaces. Now she recognized the works of other painters, the new artists who had come to take their place. Ben Nicholson, Peter Lanyon, Brian Winter, Patrick Heron. But in no way did they overwhelm *The Shell Seekers*. Rather, they enhanced the blues and greys and shimmering reflections of Papa's favourite picture, and she decided it was a little like going into a room filled with beautiful furniture both traditional and starkly modern, where no piece clashed nor fought with its neighbour, simply because each was the creation of a craftsman, and the very best of its period.

She settled, content and peaceful, to feast and fill her eyes.

When the interruption occurred, and another visitor came through the door behind her, she was scarcely aware of it. A murmured conversation took place. Then footsteps, slowly pacing. And all at once it was as it had been before, on that gusty August day during the war, and she was twenty-three years old again, with holes in her sneakers, and Papa sitting beside her.

And Richard walked in; into the gallery, and into their lives. And Papa told him, "They will come ... to paint the warmth of the sun and the colour of the wind." And that was how it had all begun.

The footsteps approached. He was there, awaiting her attention. She turned her head. Thinking of Richard, she saw Danus. Disorientated, lost in time, she looked at him; a stranger.

He said, "I'm disturbing you."

His familiar voice broke the weird spell. She pulled herself together, shook off the past, arranged her features into a smile.

"Of course not. I was in a dream."

"Shall I leave you in peace?"

"No, no." He was alone. He wore a navy-blue guernsey. His eyes, watching her, seemed strangely brilliant, intensely blue, unblinking. "I'm saying goodbye to *The Shell Seekers*." She shifted her position, patted the worn leather beside her. "Come and join me in my lonely communion."

He did this, sitting half-turned to face her, one arm along the back of the couch, his long legs crossed.

"Are you better this morning?"

She could not remember having been ill. "Better?"

"Last night. Antonia said that you were feeling unwell."

"Oh, that." She dismissed it. "I was just a little tired. I'm perfectly all right this morning. How did you know where to find me?"

"The hall porter told me."

"Where is Antonia?"

"Packing."

"Packing? Already? But we don't leave until tomorrow morning."

"She's packing for me. This is what I've come to tell you. This, and a lot of other things. I have to leave today. I'm catching the train to London and then,

this evening, the night train back to Edinburgh. I have to go home."

She could think of only one reason for such precipitous and urgent action. "Your family. Something's wrong. Is someone ill?"

"No. Nothing like that."

"But why?" Her thoughts flew back to last night and Antonia. Antonia sitting in tears upon her bed. You must be truthful and honest, she had told Antonia, certain, with all the arrogance of experience, that she was giving only the most sound of advice. Instead, it appeared, she had simply meddled, interfered, and destroyed. The plan had misfired. Antonia's brave gesture, her laying of cards upon the table, had in no way cleared the air; frankness had provoked a confrontation—possibly an irredeemable quarrel—and now she and Danus had decided that the only course to take was to part.

There could be no other explanation. She felt herself near tears. "I am to blame," she reproached herself. "It is all my fault."

"There is no blame. What has happened has nothing to do with you."

"But it was I who told Antonia . . ."

He interrupted. "And you were right. And if, last night, she had said nothing, then I would have spoken. Because yesterday, that day we spent together, was a sort of catalyst. Everything changed. It was like crossing a watershed. Everything became very simple and very clear."

"She loves you, Danus. You've surely realized that."

"That's why I have to go."

"Does she mean so little to you?"

"No. The opposite. The very opposite. More than love. She has become part of me. Saying goodbye will be like tearing up my own roots. But I have to."

"I am bewildered."

"I don't blame you."

"What happened yesterday?"

"I think we both suddenly grew up. Or perhaps this thing that's been - happening between us grew up. Up to yesterday, everything we'd done together had been unimportant, quite trivial, harmless. Messing about in the garden at Podmore's Thatch, swimming off the rocks at Penjizal. Nothing important. Nothing serious. I think this was probably my fault. I wasn't looking for a significant relationship. It was the last thing I wanted. And then yesterday we went to Manaccan. I'd talked before to Antonia about my dreams of one day having a place of my own, and she'd discussed it all with me, but in the most casual and light-hearted of ways, and I never realized how deeply she'd taken those discussions to heart. Then Everard Ashley began to show us around, and as we went, an extraordinary thing happened. We became a couple. It was as though, whatever we did, we were going to do it together. And Antonia was as enthusiastic and interested as I was, bubbling over with questions and ideas and plans, and all at once, bang in the middle of a glasshouse full of tomatoes, I knew that she was part of my future. Part of me now. I can't imagine life without her. Whatever I do, I want to do it with her, and whatever happens to me, I want it to happen to both of us."

"And why shouldn't that be allowed to happen?"

"There are two reasons. The first is strictly practical. I have nothing to offer Antonia. I am twenty-four and I have no money, no house, no private means, and my weekly wage is that of a labouring gardener. A market garden, a place of my own, is simply a pipe-dream. Everard Ashley has gone in with his father, but I should have to buy and I have no capital."

"There are banks who lend money. Or perhaps a govern-ment grant?" She thought of his parents. From the scraps of information that Danus had dropped from time to time, the impression given had been one of a family, if not rolling in riches, then certainly not without their fair share of worldly goods. "Couldn't your parents possibly help you?"

"Not, I think, to that extent."

"Have you asked them?"

"No."

"Have you discussed your plans with them?"

"Not yet."

Such defeatism was unexpected and so irritating. Disappointed in him, she found herself losing patience. "I'm sorry, but I cannot see what all the fuss is about. You and Antonia have found each other, you love each other, and you want to spend the rest of your lives together. You must snatch at happiness, hold it tight and never let it go. To do anything else is morally wrong. Such chances never come again. What does it matter if you have to manage on a shoe-string? Antonia can get a job; most young wives do. Other young couples keep their heads above water, simply because they've got their priorities right." He said nothing to this, and she frowned. "I suppose it's your pride. Stupid, stubborn Scottish pride. And if so, you're being extremely selfish. How can you go away and leave her, and make her so unhappy? What's wrong with you, Danus, that you can turn your back on love?"

"I said there were two reasons. And I've told you one of them."

"And what is the other?"

He said, "I am an epileptic."

She found herself frozen to stillness, without words, incapable. She looked at his face, into his eyes, and his gaze was untroubled and his eyes did not drop. She longed to embrace him, to hold him, comfort him, but did not do any of these things. Random thoughts took shape, flew about aimlessly in all directions, like startled birds. The answer to all those unasked questions. This man is Danus.

She took a deep breath. She said, "Have you told Antonia?"

"Yes."

"Do you want to tell me?"

"That's why I'm here. Antonia sent me. She said you, of all people, had to know. Before I go and leave you, I have to give my reasons."

She laid a hand on his knee.

"I am listening."

"I suppose it all starts with my mother and father. And with Ian. I told you, I think, that my father's a lawyer. His family have been lawyers for three generations, and my mother's father was a Law Lord in the Scottish courts. Ian was destined to follow in my father's footsteps, join the family firm, and generally conform to tradition. And he would have been a good lawyer, because anything he set his hand to was always a success. But at fourteen Ian died. And, inevitably, it fell to me to take his place. I never'd even thought about what I wanted to do. I just knew that that was what I had to do. I suppose you could say I was programmed, like a computer. Well, I got through school and, although I was never as bright as Ian, I managed to pass the necessary exams and won a place at Edinburgh University. But I was still very young, so, before I went to University, I took a couple of years off to travel and see a bit of the world. I went to America. I bummed around from coast to coast, did any job that came my way, and then ended up in Arkansas, working on a cattle ranch for a man called Jack Rogers. He had the hell of a spread, it stretched for miles, and I was one of the hands, helping to round up cattle and mend fences, and living in a bunk house with three other guys.

"The ranch was incredibly remote. The nearest town was called Sleeping Creek, and that was forty miles away, and no great shakes when you got there. I used to drive down sometimes, to take Sally Rogers shopping for stores, or to pick up supplies and equipment for Jack. It was a whole day's journey, bumping the truck down a dirt road and ending up coated in brown dust.

"Then one day, towards the end of my time there, I got ill. Felt lousy, started vomiting and shivering and then ran a raging temperature. I must have become delirious because I don't remember being moved out of the bunk house and into the ranch house, but that's where I found myself, with Sally Rogers nursing me. She did a good job and, after a week or so, I'd recovered and was back on my legs again. We decided it had been some virus I'd picked up, and when I could walk three paces without keeling over, I went back to work again.

"And then, soon after, with no warning . . . nothing . . . I blacked out. Went over like a felled tree, flat on my back and stayed unconscious for about half an hour. There seemed to be no reason, but a week later it happened again, and I felt so appall-ingly ill that Sally piled me into the truck and drove me to the doctor in Sleeping Creek. He listened to my tale of woe and made some tests. A week later, I went back to see him and he told me that I had epilepsy. He gave me drugs to take, four times a day. He said I'd be okay if I took them. He said there wasn't anything else he could do for me."

He fell silent. Penelope felt that some comment was expected of her but could think of nothing to say that was neither trite nor banal. There was a long pause and then, painfully, Danus continued.

"I'd never been ill in my life. I'd never had anything worse than measles. I asked the doctor, why? And he asked me a few questions, and we finally ran it down to a kick I'd got on the head at school when I'd been playing rugger. I'd suffered concussion, but nothing worse. Until now. I had epilepsy. I was nearly twenty-one, and I was an epileptic."

"Did you tell those kind people you were working for?"

"No. And I made the doctor promise that he would honour his medical confidence. I didn't want anybody to know. If I couldn't deal with it on my own, then I wasn't going to be able to deal with it at all. Eventually, I came back to this country. I flew to London and caught the night sleeper back to Edinburgh. By then I had made up my mind that I wasn't going to take up that place at Edinburgh University. With time to think about it, I'd discovered the

truth. That I could never take Ian's place. And I was afraid of failing, and letting my father down. As well, there was something else I'd found out during those last months. That I needed to be out of doors. I needed to work with my hands. I wanted no person standing at my shoulder, with expectations of me that I could never fulfil. Telling my parents all this was one of the worst things I've ever had to do. At first, they were disbelieving. And then hurt, and desperately disappointed. I didn't blame them. I was destroying every plan they'd ever made. Finally, they became resigned and made the best of it. But, after all that, I couldn't bring myself to tell them about my epilepsy."

"You never told them? But how could you not?"

"My brother died of meningitis. I felt that, with one thing and another, they'd had enough to cope with. And what good would it have done to load them with yet more worry and anguish. And I was all right. I was taking the drugs and I wasn't blacking out. To all intents and purposes, I was perfectly normal. All I had to do was register with a new young doctor ... a man who knew nothing of me or my medical history. And he gave me a permanent prescription for my drugs. After that, I enrolled for three years at a Horticultural College in Worcestershire. That was all right, too. I was just another ordinary guy. Did everything the other students did. Got drunk, drove a car, played football. But still, I was epileptic. I knew that, if I stopped taking the drugs, it would all start happening again. I pretended not to think about it, but you can't stop what goes on inside your head. It was always there. A great weight, like a loaded haversack that you can never put down."

"If only you'd shared your problem, it mightn't have felt so heavy."

"I did eventually. I was forced into it. When I finished college, I managed to get the job with Autogarden in Pudley. I saw an advertisement in the paper, and applied and was accepted. I worked till Christmas and then I went home for a couple of weeks. Over New Year, I got flu. I was in bed for five days, and I ran out of drugs. I couldn't go and get them for myself, so finally I had to ask my mother to go and pick them up, and then of course it all came out."

"So she knows. Oh, thank heavens for that. She must have wanted to strangle

you for being so secretive."

"In an extraordinary way, I think she was relieved. She'd suspected something was up, and had imagined the very worst but had kept her fears to herself. That's the trouble with my family, we've always kept things to ourselves. It's something to do with being Scottish and independent, and not wanting to be thought a nuisance. That's the way we were brought up. My mother was never demonstrative, never what you might call particularly cosy; but that day, after she'd shot off and got my pills from the chemist, she sat on my bed and we talked for hours. She even talked about Ian, which she'd never done before. And we remembered good times and we laughed. And then I told her that I'd always realized that I was second-best, and that I could never take Ian's place, and, with that, she became her old brisk and businesslike self and told me not to be a blithering idiot; I was my own self and she didn't want me any other way; all she wanted was to see me well again. Which meant another diagnosis and a second opinion. No sooner was I on my feet after the flu than I was sitting in an eminent neurosurgeon's consulting room, being asked a thousand questions. There were more tests and an EEG ... a brain-scan ... but at the end of the day I was told that no accurate diagnosis could be made while I was taking drugs. So I was to go off them for three months and then go back for a second consultation. If I was careful, I should come to no harm, but under no circumstances was I to drink alcohol or drive a car."

"And when is the three months up?"

"It's overdue now. Two weeks overdue."

"But that's foolish. You must waste no more time."

"That's what Antonia told me."

Antonia. Penelope had almost forgotten about Antonia. "Danus, what happened yesterday evening?"

"You know most of it. We met in the bar, and waited for you, and when you didn't come, Antonia went upstairs to find you. And while I was on my own, I sat and made mental lists of every single thing I was going to tell her. And I

imagined that it was going to be hideously difficult, and found myself searching for the right words, and composing ridiculously formal sentences. But then she came back, wearing the earrings that you had given her, and looking so sensationally adult and beautiful that all those carefully prepared phrases flew out of the window, and I just told her what was in my heart. And as I spoke, she started speaking too, and then we began to laugh, because we both realized that we were saying the same thing."

"Oh, my dear boy."

"What I'd been afraid of was hurting or distressing her. She'd always seemed to me so very young and so very vulnerable. But she was amazing. Immensely practical. And, like you, horrified to know that I'd let the weeks slide by without making that second appointment."

"But now it's made?"

"Yes. I called at nine o'clock this morning. I'm to see the neurosurgeon on Thursday, and have another EEG then. I should have the results almost at once."

"You'll ring us up at Podmore's Thatch and let us know."

"Of course."

"If you've been three months without drugs and without a black-out, surely the prognosis is hopeful."

"I can't let myself think about it. I daren't hope."

"But you'll come back to us?"

For the first time, Danus seemed uncertain of himself; he hesitated. "... I don't know. The thing is, I may have to have some form of treatment. It may take months. I may have to stay in Edinburgh. . . ."

"And Antonia? What will happen to Antonia?"

"I don't know. I don't know what's going to happen to me. Right now, I can see no prospect of being able ever to give her the good life she deserves. She's eighteen. She could do anything with her life, have anybody. She only has to ring Olivia, and within months she'll be on the front page of every glossy magazine in the country. I can't allow her to commit herself to me until I can see some sort of a future for the both of us. There really is no alternative."

Penelope sighed. But, against her better judgement, she re-spected his reasoning. "If you have to be parted for a while, it might be best for Antonia to go back to London and Olivia. She can't simply hang around at Podmore's Thatch with me. She'd die of boredom. She'll be better with a job. New friends. New interests . . ."

"Will you be all right without her there with you?"

"Oh, of course." She smiled. "Poor Danus, I am sorry for you. Illness is hateful, whatever form it takes. I am ill. I had a heart attack but would admit it to nobody. I walked out of the hospital and told my children that the doctors were idiots. I in-sisted that there was nothing wrong with me. But, of course, there is. If I get upset, my heart jumps up and down like a yo-yo, and I have to take a pill. At any moment, it might conk out altogether and I shall be left lying with my toes turned up. But until such time, I am really very much happier pretending that nothing at all has happened. And you and Antonia mustn't worry about me being on my own. I have my dear Mrs. Plackett. But it's no good pretending that I shan't miss you both. We've had a good time. And this last week, I could have asked for no better companions. I do thank you for coming to this so special place."

He shook his head in smiling bewilderment. "I'll never know why you've always been so exceptionally kind to me."

"That's easily explained. I took to you right away because of the way you look. Quite uncannily like a man I knew during the war. It was as though, from the very first, I recognized you. Doris Penberth, too, remarked on the resemblance, that evening you and Antonia came to fetch me from her house.

Doris and Ernie and I are the only people left who remember him. He was called Richard Lomax, and he was killed on D-Day at Omaha Beach. Saying that someone was the love of your life sounds the most banal cliché, but that's what he was to me. When he died, something in me died as well. There was never anybody else."

"But your husband?"

Penelope sighed, shrugged her shoulders. "I'm afraid ours was never a very satisfactory marriage. If Richard had survived the war, I should have left Ambrose, and taken Nancy and gone to live with Richard. As it was, I went back to Ambrose. It seemed the only thing to do. And I felt a little guilty about him. I was young and selfish when we married, and we were parted almost at once. The marriage had never had a chance. I felt I owed Ambrose that chance, if nothing else. As well, he was Nancy's father. And I wanted more children. Finally, I knew that I would never, wholly, love again. There could never be another Richard. And it seemed the sensible thing, just to make the best of what I had. I have to admit that Ambrose and I didn't make much of a success of our life together, but I had Nancy, and then I had Olivia, and then Noel. Little children, for all their tedious ways, can be a great comfort."

"Have you ever spoken to your children about this other man?"

"No. I never told them, never spoke his name. For forty years I never spoke of him. Until the other day when I was with Doris, and she talked of Richard as though he'd just that moment walked out of the room. It was lovely. Not sad any longer. I lived with sadness for so long. And a loneliness that nothing and nobody could assuage. But, over the years, I came to terms with what had happened. I learned to live within myself, to grow flowers, to watch my children grow; to look at paintings and listen to music. The gentle powers. They are quite amazingly sustaining."

"You'll miss *The Shell Seekers*."

She was touched by his perception.

"No, Danus. Not any more. *The Shell Seekers* has gone, as Richard has gone. I shall probably never say his name again. And you will keep what I have told you to yourself, for ever."

"I promise."

"Good. Now, as we seem to have talked ourselves to a standstill, isn't it time we thought about moving? Antonia will be thinking that we have disappeared for good." Danus stood up and held out a hand to help her to her feet. These, she discovered, ached. "I am too tired to walk up the hill. We'll ask that long-haired young man to phone for a taxi to take us back to the hotel. And I shall leave *The Shell Seekers* and all the memories of my past behind me. Right here; in this funny little Gallery, where they all started, and where it is entirely appropriate that they should end their days."

PENELOPE

The hall porter of The Sands Hotel, resplendent in his dark green uniform, slammed the car door shut and wished them a safe journey. Antonia drove. The old Volvo moved forward, down the curve of the drive, between the banks of hydrangeas, and turned out into the road. Penelope did not look back.

It was a good day for leaving. The spell of perfect weather seemed, for the time being, to have broken. During the night a mist had rolled in from the sea and all was veiled in moisture, dispersing, to gather again, like smoke. Only once, just before they reached the motorway, did the fog clear, admitting a diffused gleam of sunlight, and the estuary was revealed. It was ebbtide. The mud-flats lay empty of life, save for the eternal, scav-enging sea-birds, and in the distance could be glimpsed the white rollers of the Atlantic breaking in over the sand-bar. Then the steep embankment of the new road reared skywards, and all was gone.

So the leaving, the parting, was over. Penelope settled to the long drive. She thought about Podmore's Thatch, and discovered that she longed to be home. With satisfaction, she anticipated arrival, entering her own house, inspecting her garden, unpacking, opening windows, reading her mail. . . .

Beside her, Antonia asked, "Are you all right?"

"Did you think I should be in tears?"

"No. But leaving somewhere you love is always painful. You waited so long to come back. And now we're going away again."

"I am fortunate. I have my heart in two places, so wherever I am, I am content."

"Next year, you must come again. Stay with Doris and Ernie. That'll give you something to look forward to. Cosmo always said that life wasn't worth living

unless you had something to look forward to."

"Dear man, how right he was." She thought about this. "I'm afraid, for the moment, your future looks a little bleak and lonely."

"Only for the moment."

"It's better to be realistic, Antonia. If you steel yourself for the worst news of Danus, then anything better comes as a wonderful bonus."

"I know that. And I don't have any illusions about him. I realize that it may take a long time and, for him, I hate the prospect. But for me, selfishly, knowing about his being ill makes everything so much easier. We really do love each other and nothing else matters . . . that's the most important thing of all, and that's what I'm going to hang on to."

"You've been very brave. Sensible and brave. Not that I expected anything else of you. I'm really very proud of you."

"I'm not really brave. But nothing's so bad if you can do something. On Monday, driving home from Manaccan, and neither of us saying a word, and knowing something was wrong, and with no idea of what it was . . . that was the worst. I felt that he was tired of me, that he wished I wasn't there, that he'd gone to see his friend on his own. It was really horrible. Isn't misunderstanding the most horrible thing in the world? I'll never let it happen to me again. And I know it won't ever happen again between Danus and me."

"It was as much his fault as yours. But I think that painful reserve is inbred in him, inherited from his parents and very much part of the way he was brought up."

"He told me that was what he loved so much about you. The way you were always more than ready to discuss anything. And, more important, to listen. He told me that, as a child, he never really talked to his parents, and never felt truly close to them. So sad, isn't it? They probably adored him, but just never got around to telling him."

"Antonia, if Danus has to stay in Edinburgh and undergo treatment, or even has to go to hospital for a while . . . have you thought what you want to do?"

"Yes. If I may, I'll stay with you for another week or two. By then we should know which way the wind is going to blow. And if it's a long-term thing, then I'll ring Olivia and accept that offer of help. Not that I want to be a photographer's model. There's really no job I'd dislike more, but if I could earn some decent money doing it, I could put it by and save it up, and then when Danus is well again, at least we'd have the smallest beginnings of a start in life. And that'll give me something to work for. I won't feel I'm totally wasting my time."

As they travelled up the backbone of the county and the coastline receded, the fog had melted and rolled away. On the high ground, sunshine washed over fields and farms and moorland, and the old engine houses of disused tin mines pointed to the cloudless spring sky, jagged as broken teeth.

Penelope sighed. She said, "So strange."

"What's so strange?"

"First it was my life. And then Olivia's. And then Cosmo came. And then you. And now it's your future we talk about. A strange progression."

"Yes." Antonia hesitated, and then went on. "One thing you don't have to worry about. There's not all that much wrong with Danus. I mean, he's not impotent or anything."

The significance of this observation took an instant to sink in. Penelope turned her head and looked at Antonia. Antonia's charming profile was intent on the road ahead, but a faint blush warmed her cheeks.

She turned back to look out of the window, smiling secretly to herself. She said, "I am glad."

The church clock of Temple Pudley struck five o'clock as they turned into the gate of Podmore's Thatch and drew to a halt. The front door stood open, and

smoke curled from a chimney. Mrs. Plackett was there, waiting for them. The kettle sang, and she had made a batch of scones. No home-coming could have been more welcome.

Mrs. Plackett was vociferous, torn between wanting to hear their news and to give them hers.

"Look at you, how brown you are! Must have had the same good weather as we have. Mr. Plackett's had to water our vegeta-bles, ground is so dry. And thanks for the postcard, Antonia. Was that your hotel with all the flags flying? Looked like a palace to me. Had vandals in the churchyard, broke all the flower vases and wrote disgusting words on the tombstones with spray paint. Got a few bits in for you; bread and butter and milk and a couple of chops for your supper. Have a good drive, did you?"

They were finally able to tell her that, yes, they had had a good drive, the roads had been clear, and they were dying for a cup of tea.

It was only then that it dawned on Mrs. Plackett that three people had set off for Cornwall and only two had returned.

"Where's Danus? Drop him off at Sawcombe's, did you?"

"No, he didn't come with us. He had to go back to Scotland. He caught the train yesterday."

"To Scotland? That was a bit unexpected, wasn't it?"

"Yes. But it couldn't be helped. And we had five wonderful days together."

"That's all that matters. Did you see your old friend?"

"Doris Penberth? Yes, of course. And I may tell you, Mrs. Plackett, that we talked ourselves dry." Mrs. Plackett was making the tea. Penelope sat at the table and helped herself to a scone. "You are the dearest thing to be here to meet us."

"Well, I said to Linda, thought I'd best come along. Get the house aired. Pick a few flowers. Know you don't like the house without flowers. And that's another bit of news. Linda's Darren's started walking. Toddled clear across the kitchen the other day." She poured tea. "It's his birthday on Monday. Said I'd give Linda a hand, ask you if you'd mind if I came Tuesday instead. And I cleaned the windows, and put your mail on your desk. . . ." She drew out a chair and seated herself, her large, competent arms crossed on the table before her. " . . . a great pile there was, lying on the mat inside the door. . . ."

She went at last, pedalling homewards on her stately bicycle to give Mr. Plackett his tea. While they gossiped, Antonia had unloaded the car and carried their cases upstairs. She was, pre-sumably, unpacking, for she had not reappeared, and so, as soon as Mrs. Plackett was gone, Penelope did what she had been wanting to do ever since she came through the door. The conservatory first. She filled a can and watered all the pot plants. Then picked up a pair of secateurs and went out into the garden. The grass needed cutting, the iris were out, and the far end of the border was a mass of red and yellow tulips. The first of the early rhododendrons had flowered, and she picked a single bloom and marvelled at its pale-pink perfection, collared in stiff dark-green leaves, and decided that no human hand could achieve such satisfying arrangement of petal and stamen. After a little, holding the flower, she wandered on down through the orchard, awash with fruit blossom, and through the gate to the riverbank. The Windrush flowed quietly by, slipping away beneath the overhanging branches of willow. There were cowslips out, and clumps of pale-mauve mallow, and, as she walked, a mallard emerged from a reedy thicket and proceeded to swim downstream, followed, to Penelope's enchantment, by half a dozen fluffy ducklings. She walked as far as the wooden bridge, and then, having for the moment had her fill, made her way slowly back to the house. As she crossed the lawn, Antonia called from the upstairs window of her bedroom.

"Penelope." Penelope stopped, looked upwards. Antonia's head and shoulders were framed in a tangle of honeysuckle. "It's after six o'clock. Would you mind if I telephoned Danus? I promised I would, just to let him know we're safely back."

"Of course. Use the phone in my bedroom. And send my love."

"I will."

In the kitchen, she found a lustre jug and filled it with water, and into it placed the rhododendron flower. She carried this through to the living room, already lavishly decorated by Mrs. Plackett's unprofessional but loving hands. She put the jug on her desk, picked up her mail, and settled herself in her armchair. The dull buff-coloured letters, most likely containing bills, were dropped to the floor. The others . . . she leafed them through. A thick white envelope looked interesting. She recognized Rose Pilkington's spidery handwriting. She slit the envelope with her thumb. She heard a car turning in at the gate, to draw up and stop at the front door.

She did not move from her chair. A stranger would ring the bell, a friend would simply walk indoors. This visitor did just that thing. Footsteps crossed the kitchen, the hall. The door of the living room opened and her son Noel walked into the room.

She could scarcely have been more surprised. "Noel!"

"Hello." He wore a pair of fawn twill trousers, a sky-blue sweater, a red-spotted cotton handkerchief knotted at his neck. He was very tanned and looked quite amazingly handsome. Rose Pilkington's letter was forgotten.

"Where have you sprung from?"

"Wales." He shut the door behind him. She raised her face, .expecting one of his perfunctory kisses, but he did not stoop to embrace her. Instead, with some grace, he arranged himself in front of the fireplace, his shoulders propped against the mantelpiece, his hands in his trouser pockets. Behind his head, the wall where once *The Shell Seekers* had hung looked bare and empty. "I was there for Easter weekend. Now I'm on my way back to London. Thought I'd drop in."

"Easter weekend? But it's *Wednesday*."

"It was a long weekend."

"How very convenient for you. Did you enjoy yourself?"

"Very much, thank you. And how was Cornwall?"

"Magic. We got back about five o'clock. I haven't even unpacked yet."

"And where are your travelling companions?" His voice had an edge to it. She looked at him sharply, but his eyes veered away and he would not meet her gaze.

"Danus is in Scotland. He went back yesterday, by train. And Antonia is upstairs, in my bedroom, ringing him up to let him know that we have arrived safely."

Noel raised his eyebrows. "From that bit of information, it's hard to guess exactly what has happened. Returning to Scotland seems to indicate that relations became strained while you all lived it up at The Sands Hotel. And yet, at this moment, Antonia is talking to him on the telephone. You'll have to explain."

"There's nothing to explain. Danus had an appointment in Edinburgh which he had to keep. As simple as that." Noel's expression implied that he did not believe her. She decided to change the subject. "Do you want to stay for supper?"

"No, I must get back to London." But he did not shift him-self.

"A drink then . . . would you like a drink?"

"No, I'm all right."

She thought, *I will not let him bully me*. She said, "But I would like one. I would like a whisky and soda. Perhaps you'd be kind enough to get it for me."

He hesitated, and then went through to the dining room. She heard cupboards

being opened, the clink of glass. She stacked the letters that lay in her lap, and laid them neatly on the table beside her chair. When he returned, she saw that he had changed his mind about that drink, and carried two glasses. He gave her one, and returned to his former position.

He said, "And *The Shell Seekers*?"

So that was it. She smiled. "Was it Olivia who told you about *The Shell Seekers*, or was it Nancy?"

"Nancy."

"Nancy was deeply hurt that I'd done such a thing. Person-ally offended. Is that how you feel? Is that what you've come to tell me?"

"No. I just want to know what in God's name induced you to do such a thing."

"My father gave it to me. In giving it to the Gallery, I feel that I've simply given it back to him."

"Have you any idea what that picture is worth?"

"I know what it's worth to me. As for a financial appraisal, it's never been exhibited before and so it has never been valued."

"I rang my friend, Edwin Mundy, and told him what you'd done. He'd never seen the picture, of course, but he had a very clear idea of what it would fetch in a sale-room. Do you know the price he put on it ... ?"

"No, and I don't wish to be told." Noel opened his mouth to tell her but found himself on the receiving end of a warning glance so formidable that he shut it again, and said nothing. "You are angry," his mother told him. "Because, for some reason, both you and Nancy feel that I have given away something which, by rights, belongs to you. It doesn't, Noel. It never did. As for the panels, you should be gratified that I took your advice. You urged me to sell them, and it was you who put me on to Boothby's and Mr. Roy Brookner. Mr.

Brookner found me a private buyer and I was offered a hundred thousand for them. I accepted this. The money is there, to be included in my estate when I die. Doesn't that satisfy you, or do you want more?"

"You should have discussed it with me. I am, after all, your son."

"We had discussed it. Over and over. And each time the discussion came to nothing, or ended in a row. I know what you want, Noel. You want money now. In your hand. To squander as you wish on some wild-goose idea that will in all probability come to nothing. You've got a perfectly good job but you want a better one. Commodity broking. And once you've got that out of your system, and probably lost every penny you possess in the process, then it'll be something else . . . some other pot of gold at the end of a non-existent rainbow. Happiness is making the most of what you have, and riches is making the most of what you've got. You have so much going for you. Why can't you see that? Why do you always want more?"

"You talk as though I think only of myself. I don't. I'm thinking of my sisters as well, and your grandchildren. One hundred thousand sounds a lot, but there'll be taxes to pay, and if you continue to squander it on any lame dog that comes your way and takes your fancy—"

"Noel, don't talk to me as though I were senile. I am perfectly in charge of my senses; I shall choose my own friends and make my own decisions. Going to Porthkerris, staying at The Sands, taking Danus and Antonia to keep me company was the first time in my life, the very first time, that I have experienced the joys of extravagance and generosity. For the first time in my life, I didn't have to weigh the worth of every penny. For the first time, I was able to give with no worry about the cost. It was an experience that I shall never forget, and made all the more heartwarming by the grace and gratitude with which it was received."

"Is that what you want? Endless gratitude?"

"No, but I think you should try to understand. If I'm wary of you and your needs and your schemes, it's because I've lived through it all before with your father, and I'm not about to start again."

"You can scarcely blame me for my father."

"I don't. You were just a little boy when he walked out on us all. But in you he left a lot of himself behind. Good things. His looks, his charm, and his undoubted abilities. But other characteristics as well, which are not so commendable—grand ideas; lavish tastes; and no respect for other people's property. I am sorry. I hate to say such things. But it seems the time has come for you and me to be quite open with each other."

He said, "I had no idea you disliked me so much."

"Noel, you are my son. Can't you see that if I didn't love you beyond all else, I would never trouble to say these things?"

"You have an odd way of showing love. Giving all you possess to strangers . . . nothing to your children."

"You talk like Nancy. Nancy told me that I never gave her anything. What is wrong with you both? You and Nancy and Olivia were my life. For years you were everything I lived for. And yet now, hearing you say such things, I am filled with despair. I feel that somewhere and somehow I have totally and utterly failed you."

"I think," said Noel slowly, "that you have."

After that, there seemed to be nothing more to say. He finished his drink, turned and set the glass on the mantelpiece. He was, it was obvious, about to take his leave, and the thought of his going with the bitterness of their quarrel still between them was more than Penelope could bear. "Stay for supper with us, Noel. We won't be late. You'll be back in London by eleven."

"No. I must go." He moved away.

She pulled herself out of her chair and followed him through the kitchen and out of the door. Without looking at her, or meeting her eyes, he got into his car, slammed the door shut, fastened his seat-belt, switched on the ignition.

"Noel." He faced his mother, his handsome features unsmiling, antagonistic, without love. She said, "I am sorry." He nodded briefly, acknowledging her apology. She tried a smile. "Come back again soon." But the car was already moving, and her words drowned in the roar of its supercharged engine.

When he had gone, she went back indoors. She stood at the kitchen table and thought about supper, and could not think what she meant to do. With an enormous effort she gathered her wits; she made her way to the larder, fetched potatoes, carried the basket to the sink. She turned on the cold tap and watched it run. She thought of tears but was beyond weeping.

She stood there, incapable, for some minutes. Then the kitchen telephone rang sharply once and jerked her back to reality. She opened a drawer, took out her small, sharp knife. When Antonia came running down the stairs to find her, she was peace-fully peeling potatoes.

"I'm sorry, we talked for ages. Danus says he'll pay you for the call. It must have cost pounds." Antonia sat on the table and swung her legs. She was smiling and looked sleek and satisfied as a little cat. "He sent you his dearest love, and says he's writing you a long letter. Not a bread-and-butter letter, a toast-and-mar-malade one. And he's seeing the doctor tomorrow morning, and he's going to ring us the moment he knows what the verdict is. He sounded terrific, not worried in the very least. And he says the sun's shining, even in Edinburgh. I'm sure that's a good sign, aren't you? A hopeful one. If it had been raining, it wouldn't be nearly so cheerful for him. Did I hear voices? Did you have a caller?"

"Yes. Yes, I did. It was Noel, on his way back to London from a weekend in Wales. A very long weekend, he assured me." It was all right, her voice was fine, just right, casual and quite steady. "I asked him to stay for supper, but he wanted to get back. So he had a drink and took himself off."

"I'm sorry I missed him. But there was so much to say to Danus. I couldn't stop chattering. Would you like me to do those potatoes? Or shall I go and find a cabbage or something? Or lay the table? Isn't it lovely to be home? I know it's not my home but it feels like it, and it's somehow so perfect to be

back again. You feel like that too, don't you? You're not regretting anything?"

"No," Penelope told her. "I regret nothing."

The next morning at nine o'clock, she made two telephone calls to London, and two appointments. One of them was with Lalla Friedmann.

Danus' appointment was at ten o'clock and they had worked out the previous evening that it would be at least half past eleven before he could get himself to a telephone, to let them know the doctor's verdict. But the call came just before eleven and it was Penelope who answered it because Antonia was down in the orchard, hanging out a line of washing in the breezy wind.

"Podmore's Thatch."

"It's Danus."

"*Danus!* Oh dear, Antonia's out in the garden. What news? Tell me at once. What news have you for us?"

"I haven't any news."

Penelope's heart dropped with disappointment. "Didn't you see the doctor?"

"Yes, I did, and then I went up to the hospital for my EEG, but . . . and you're never going to believe this . . . the computer there is on the blink and they couldn't give me the results."

"I don't believe it. How utterly exasperating! How long have you got to wait?"

"I don't know. They couldn't say."

"So what are you going to do?"

"Do you remember me telling you about my friend Roddy McCrae? I had a drink with him last night in The Tilted Wig, and he's off tomorrow morning

for a week's fishing in Sutherland. He asked me to go with him, to stay in the croft, and I've decided to accept his invitation, and just light out. If I have to wait two days to hear the results of the brain-scan, I might as well wait a week. And at least I won't be kicking my heels at home, biting the ends off my fingernails and driving my mother insane."

"So when will you return to Edinburgh?"

"Thursday, probably."

"Is there no way that your mother can get in touch with you at the croft, and let you have some news?"

"No. I told you, it's at the back of beyond. And, to be truthful, I've lived so long with this thing, I can wait another seven days."

"In that case, perhaps it's better to go. And, in the mean-time, we'll keep our fingers crossed. We won't stop thinking about you for a single moment. You promise to call us the moment you get back?"

"Of course. Is Antonia around . . . ?"

"I'll fetch her. Hold on."

She left the receiver hanging by its cable and went out through the conservatory. Antonia was ambling back across the grass with the empty washing basket under her arm. She wore a pink shirt, the sleeves rolled up to her elbows, and a navy-blue cotton skirt, blowing in the wind.

"Antonia. Quick, it's Danus . . ."

"Already?" The colour flowed from her cheeks. "Oh, what did he say? What's happened?"

"No news yet because the computer's broken down . . . but let him tell you for himself. He's waiting on the telephone. Here . . . I'll take the basket."

Antonia thrust it at her and fled indoors. Penelope carried the basket to the garden seat which stood outside the sitting room window. Really, life was too cruel. If it wasn't one thing, then it was another. But better, perhaps, under the circumstances, that Danus should take himself off with his friend. The company of an old colleague was sometimes the answer on such occasions. She imagined the two young men in that world of endless moors and towering hills, bitter-cold northern seas, and deep, brown, fast-flowing rivers. They would fish together. Yes, it was a good decision that Danus had made. Fishing was said to be immensely therapeutic.

A movement caught the corner of her eye. She looked, and watched Antonia emerge from the conservatory and come across the grass towards her. The girl looked despondent, dragging her feet like a child. She thumped herself down beside Penelope and said, "Damn."

"I know. It's very frustrating. For all of us."

"Beastly bloody old computer. Why can't they make these things work? And why does it have to happen to Danus?"

"I must say, it is the crudest of luck. But there's nothing to be done, so we must just make the best of it."

"It's all very well for him; he's going off fishing for a week."

Penelope had to smile. "You sound," she told Antonia, "like a neglected wife."

"Do I really?" Antonia became remorseful. "I don't mean to. It's just that another week to wait seems endless."

"I know. But it's much better that he shouldn't just sit around and wait for the telephone to ring. Nothing in this world is more demoralizing. He's much better to be happily occupied. I'm sure you don't grudge him that. And the week will pass. You and I will occupy ourselves happily. I'm going to London on Monday. Would you like to come with me?"

"To London? Why?"

"Just to see some old friends. I haven't been for long enough. If you'd like to come with me, we could take the car. But if you'd rather stay here, perhaps you'd drive me to Cheltenham and I'll catch the train."

Antonia thought about this suggestion. Then she said, "No. I think I'll stay. I might have to go back to London soon enough, and it's a waste to miss a single day in the country. And Mrs. Plackett isn't coming on Monday because of Barren's birthday, so I'll do the housework and cook a delicious dinner for you to come home to. Besides"—she smiled, looking more like her old self again—"there's always the faintest possibility that Danus might find himself within ten miles of a telephone and decide to ring me up. It would be a tragedy if I wasn't here."

And so Penelope went to London alone. As they had planned, Antonia drove her to Cheltenham and she caught the 9:15. In London, she visited the Royal Academy and lunched with Lalla Friedmann. Afterwards, she took a taxi and drove to the Gray's Inn Road, and the offices of Enderby, Looseby & Thring, Solicitors. She gave her name to the girl who sat behind the reception desk and was led up two flights of narrow stairs to Mr. Enderby's private office. The girl knocked and opened the door.

"Mrs. Keeling to see you, Mr. Enderby."

She stood back. As Penelope went through the door, Mr. Enderby rose to his feet and came from behind his desk to greet her.

In the old and penniless days, Penelope would have got herself from the Gray's Inn Road to Paddington Station either by bus or by tube. In her mind, she had actually planned to do this thing, but when she eventually emerged onto the pavement outside the premises of Enderby, Looseby & Thring, she discovered that the prospect of battling her way across London by public transport was, all at once, quite untenable. A cruising taxi approached; she stepped forward and flagged it down.

In the taxi, she sat back, grateful to be alone, absorbed in her thoughts,

recollecting her conversation with Mr. Enderby. Much had been discussed, decided, and accomplished. There was nothing more to be done.

Achievement had been reached, but it had all been exhausting, and she found herself at the end of her rope, both physically and mentally. Her head ached; her feet seemed too large for their shoes. In addition, she felt both grubby and hot, for the afternoon, although overcast and sunless, was warm; the air heavy, stale and used. Gazing from the taxi window, waiting for the traffic lights to change from red to green, she was suddenly overwhelmed and depressed by all she saw. The size of the city; the millions of human beings who thronged the streets, their faces anxious and worried, all hurrying as though fearful of being late for some life-or-death appointment. Once she had lived in London. It had been her home. Here she had brought up her family. Now, she could not imagine how she had endured those years.

She had intended catching the 4:15, but the traffic in the Marylebone Road had reached proportions so appalling that, by the time the taxi passed Madame Tussaud's, she was resigned to missing this and catching a later train. At Paddington, she peeled off notes to pay the enormous, inflated fare, checked on train times, and then found a phone booth and rang Antonia to tell her that she would be arriving in Cheltenham at a quarter to eight. Having done that, she bought herself a magazine, went into the Station Hotel, ordered a pot of tea, and sat down to wait.

The train journey, hot, crowded, and uncomfortable, took for ever, and the relief of finally arriving, alighting, knowing it was over, was enormous. Antonia was there on the platform as she stepped from the train, and it was bliss to be met, kissed, taken in hand, responsible for herself no longer. They went through the barrier and out into the station-yard, and Penelope looked up at the clear evening sky, smelled trees and grass and gratefully breathed, filling her lungs with the sweet fresh air.

"I feel," she told Antonia, "that I have been away for weeks."

Settled into her old Volvo, they headed for home.

"Did you have a good day?" Antonia asked.

"Yes, but I'm totally drained. I feel unwashed and ex-hausted, just like an old refugee. And I'd forgotten what a hassle London can be. Just getting from one place to another uses up most of the day. That's why I missed my train. And the one I caught was packed with commuters, and a man with the hugest bottom in the world chose to come and sit beside me."

"There's chicken fricassee for supper, but perhaps you don't feel like eating so late in the day."

"What I really want is a hot bath, and then my bed. . . ."

"In that case, as soon as we get back, that's what you shall have. And when you're in bed, I shall come and see if you'd like a little supper and, if you do, I shall bring it up on a tray, and you can eat it there."

"You are the dearest child."

"I'll tell you something. Podmore's Thatch feels funny without you."

"How did you spend your lonely day?"

"I cut the grass. I got the motor mower started and it looks terribly professional."

"Did Danus ring?"

"No. But then, I didn't really expect him to."

"Tomorrow's Tuesday. Another two days and we should be hearing from him."

Antonia said, "Yes." They fell silent. The road ahead wound its way up into the Cotswold countryside.

She thought that she would sleep, but she did not. True sleep eluded her; she dozed, and woke. Tossed, turned, dozed again. Half-dreams were devilled by voices, by words and scraps of conversation that made no sense. Ambrose

was there, and Dolly Keeling, rabbiting on about some room she was going to decorate in magnolia. And then Doris, chatting nineteen to the dozen, and cackling with her high-pitched laughter. Lalla Friedmann, young again. Young and frightened, because her husband Willi was going out of his mind. *You never gave me anything. You never gave us anything. You must be insane. They are taking advantage of you.* Antonia was getting into a train and going away for ever. She was trying to tell Penelope something, but the train whistle screamed and Penelope could only see her mouth opening and shutting, and became agitated because she knew that what Antonia was saying was of immense importance. And then the old dream; the empty beach and the blanketing fog and the desolation because there was no other person in the world except her.

The darkness was never-ending. From time to time, arousing herself, she turned on the light to look at her watch. Two o'clock. Half past three. A quarter past four. The sheets of her bed were twisted and rumped, and there was no solace there for limbs heavy with uneasy fatigue. She longed for the light.

It came at last. She watched it come and was calmed. She dozed once more, then opened her eyes. Saw the first low shafts of sunlight, a pale sky clear of cloud; she heard the birds, calling and answering. And then the thrush from the chestnut tree.

The night was, thankfully, over. At seven, unrested, more strangely tired than ever, she climbed slowly from her bed, found her slippers and dressing-gown. Everything seemed the most enormous effort, so that even these simple actions took conscious thought and concentration. She went to the bathroom, washed her face and cleaned her teeth, moving with care, so as to make no sound and possibly disturb Antonia. Back in her room, she dressed, sat at her mirror, brushed and coiled and pinned her hair. She saw the smudges, like bruises, under her dark eyes, the pallor of her skin.

She went downstairs. She thought about making a cup of tea, and then decided against it. Instead, she went out, through the conservatory, unlocking the glass door and stepping into her garden. The air was cool and diamond-sharp. Its impact caused her to shiver and pull her cardigan around her, but it

was refresh-ing too, as cold spring water is refreshing, or a plunge into an icy pool. The newly cut lawn glittered with dew, but the first warm rays of sunshine had touched one corner, and here the dew was melting and the grass showed a different shade of green.

Her spirits rose, comforted as always by the sight of grass, trees, borders ... her own sanctuary, which she had created herself by five years of hard and satisfying labour. All of today she would spend here. There was much to be done.

She reached the terrace, where stood the old wooden seat. In crannies between the slate flags were planted clumps of thyme and aubrietia (which, later in the year, would become fat cushions of white and purple flowers)—but also, inevitably, grew weeds. A brazen dandelion caught her eye and she stooped to tug it out, jerking at the stubborn, sturdy root. But it seemed that even this small physical effort was too much, for, as she straightened, she felt so strange, light-headed, and disorientated, that it occurred to her that she was about to faint. Instinctively, she reached for the back of the seat and, with this to steady her, managed to lower herself into a sitting position. Uncertain, she waited for what was going to happen next. It happened almost instantly. A pain, like a red-hot current, shot up her left arm, encircled her chest, and clamped shut, an ever-tightening band of steel. She could not breathe and she had never known such agony. She closed her eyes and opened her mouth to scream the pain away, but no sound came from her lips. Existence shrank to pain. To pain, and the fingers of her right hand, which were still clenched around the remains of the dandelion. For some reason, it was enormously important to keep holding on to it. She could feel the cold, damp earth that clung to its roots; smell the strong and pungent fragrance of that earth. Far away, and faintly, she heard the thrush singing.

And then, stealing up, came other scents and other sounds. The freshly cut grass of a long-ago lawn; a lawn that sloped to the water's edge, where grew the wild daffodils. The salt smell of a flood tide, rising to fill the creek. The kittiwakes calling. A man's footstep.

The ultimate luxury. She opened her eyes. The pain was gone. The sun was gone. Perhaps behind a cloud. It didn't mat-ter. Nothing mattered.

He was coming.

"Richard."

He was there.

At Ranfurly Road, at a quarter past nine on Tuesday morning, May the first, Olivia stood in her little kitchen, perking coffee, boiling an egg for her breakfast, and leafing through the morn-ing's mail. She had done her hair and her face, as was her custom, but was not yet dressed for the day's work. Amongst her mail, she found a highly coloured picture of Assisi, where one of the Art editors had gone for his holiday. She turned it over to read his facetious greeting, and as she did this, the telephone rang.

Still holding the postcard, she went across the living room to answer the call.

"Olivia Keeling."

"Miss Keeling?" A woman's voice, a country voice.

"Yes."

"Oh, I've caught you! I was so afraid you'd have left for your office. ..."

"No, I don't leave till half past nine. Who is this?"

"Mrs. Plackett. From Podmore's Thatch."

Mrs. Plackett. With painful care, as though its disposal were of the utmost importance, Olivia placed the gaudy postcard on the mantelpiece, propped against the gilt frame of the mirror. Her mouth was dry. "Is Mumma all right?" she somehow asked.

"Miss Keeling, I'm afraid . . . well, it's sad news. I am sorry. Your mother's died, Miss Keeling. This morning. Quite early, before any of us was here."

Assisi; under a sky quite impossibly blue. She had never been to Assisi. Mumma was dead. "How did it happen?"

"A heart attack. Quite sudden it must have been. In the garden. Antonia found her, just sitting there on the garden seat. She'd been weeding. There was an old dandelion in her hand. She must have had a bit of a warning to get to the seat. She ... she didn't look distressed, Miss Keeling."

"Has she been unwell?"

"Not unwell at all. Came back from Cornwall brown as a berry and just her usual self. But yesterday she was in London for the day. . . ."

"Mumma was in London? Why didn't she let me know?"

"I don't know, Miss Keeling. I don't know why she went. She took the train from Cheltenham, and when Antonia met her at the station in the evening, she said Mrs. Keeling was really tired. Had a bath and went to bed, soon as she got home, and Antonia gave her a little supper on a tray. But perhaps she'd overdone things."

Mumma, dead. The dreaded, the unimaginable had happened. Mumma was gone forever, and Olivia, who had loved her almost more than any other human being, could feel nothing except terribly cold. Her arms, in the loose sleeves of her dress-ing-gown, were covered with goose bumps. Mumma was dead. The tears and anguish and agonizing sense of loss were there, and yet not there, and she was grateful for this. Later, she told herself, I shall grieve. For the present, grief would be set aside, like a package to be opened at a more convenient time. It was the old ruse that she had learned from hard experience. The closing of the watertight compartment, the beaming in of all one's concentration onto the practical problem, the highest priority. First things first.

She said, "Tell me about it, Mrs. Plackett."

"Well. I got in this morning, eight o'clock. Don't usually come on Tuesdays, but yesterday was my grandson's birthday, so I changed my day. And came

early, because I've got Mrs. Kitson to clean out as well on Tuesdays. Let myself in with my own key, and nobody around. Was just dealing with the boiler when Antonia came downstairs. Said where was Mrs. Keeling, because her bedroom door was open and her bed was empty. Well, we couldn't think. Then I saw the conservatory door was open, so I said to Antonia, 'She'll be out in the garden.' Antonia went to look. Then I heard her calling my name. And I went running. And I saw."

Olivia gratefully recognized in Mrs. Plackett's voice the tones of a countrywoman who had experienced such crises before. She was a lady of mature years. She had probably faced up to, and coped with, death many times over, and it held no fears or horrors for her.

"First thing I had to do was calm Antonia down. She was really shocked, weeping and crying and shivering like a kitten. But I gave her a cuddle, and set her down with a cup of tea, and she came out of it like a brave girl, and she's sitting here now, in the kitchen with me. Soon as she was all right, I rang the doctor in Pudley, and he came within ten minutes, and I took the liberty of calling Mr. Plackett as well. He's on the late shift just now at the electronics factory, so he was able to come over on his bicycle. He and the doctor, they carried Mrs. Keeling indoors and up the stairs to her room. She's there now, on her bed, decent and peaceful. You don't have to worry yourself about that."

"What did the doctor say?"

"He said a heart attack, Miss Keeling. Probably instant. And he signed the death certificate. Left it here with me. And then I said to Antonia, 'Better ring Mrs. Chamberlain', but she said to ring you first. I should maybe have got in touch earlier, but I didn't want you to think of your poor mother dead, and still out in the garden."

"That was very thoughtful of you, Mrs. Plackett. So nobody else has been told."

"No, Miss Keeling. Just you."

"Right." Olivia looked at her watch. "I'll let Mrs. Chamberlain know, and my brother as well. Then I'll drive down to Podmore's Thatch, just as soon as I've organized myself. I should be with you around lunch-time. Will you still be there?"

"Don't think about it, Miss Keeling. I'll be here as long as you want me to."

"I shall have to stay a few days. Perhaps you could make up a bed for me in the other spare bedroom. And make sure there's enough food in the house. If necessary, Antonia can take the car, and do some shopping in Pudley. It'll be good for her to have something to do." A thought occurred to her. "What about the young gardener—Danus? Is he around?"

"No, Miss Keeling. He's in Scotland. Went straight there from Cornwall. Had an appointment to keep."

"That's unfortunate. Never mind, it can't be helped. Give my love to Antonia."

"Do you want to speak to her?"

"No," said Olivia. "No. Not just now. It can wait."

"I'm sorry, Miss Keeling. I'm sorry to be the one to tell you."

"Somebody had to. And, Mrs. Plackett . . . thank you."

She rang off. She looked out of the window and saw, for the first time, that it was a beautiful day. It was a perfect May morning, and Mumma was dead.

Afterwards, when it was all over, Olivia was to wonder what on earth they would have done without Mrs. Plackett. For all her own experience of life, she had never before had to cope with a funeral. There was, she discovered, much to be done. And the initial hurdle, on arrival at Podmore's Thatch, was the task of dealing with Nancy.

George Chamberlain had answered the telephone at the old Vicarage when

Olivia rang from London, and, for the first time in her life, she had been deeply thankful to hear the lugubrious tones of her brother-in-law. She had told him what had happened as simply and as quickly as she could, explained that she was, herself, going straight to Podmore's Thatch, and then rang off, leaving him to break the sad news to Nancy. She had hoped, for the moment, that that would be the end of it but, as she turned the Alphasud into the gates of Podmore's Thatch, she saw Nancy's car and realized that she was not going to get off as lightly as she had hoped.

She was no sooner out of her own car, than Nancy was there, bursting out of the open door and bearing down with arms outstretched, her blue eyes starting, her face swollen with weeping. Before Olivia could take evasive action, Nancy had flung her arms around her sister, pressing her hot cheek against Olivia's own pale, cool one, and dissolving once more into noisy sobs.

"Oh, my dear ... I came straight over. When George told me, I just came. I had to be with you all. I ... I had to be *here*. ..."

Olivia stood still as stone, enduring for as long as was acceptably polite the messy, distasteful embrace. Then, gently, she detached herself. "That was good of you, Nancy. But there was no need—"

"That's what George said. He said I'd just be a nuisance." Nancy felt up the sleeve of her cardigan for a sodden handkerchief, endeavoured to blow her nose and generally pull herself together. "But of course I couldn't stay at home. I had to be here." She gave herself a little shake, drew her shoulders back. She was being plucky. "I knew I had to come. The drive was a nightmare; I felt quite shaky when I got here, but Mrs. Plackett made me a cup of tea and I'm better now."

The prospect of supporting Nancy in her grief and getting her through the next few hours was almost more than Olivia could bear. "You mustn't stay," she told her sister, casting about for some watertight reason for getting Nancy out of the house. Inspiration struck. "You have your children and George to consider. You mustn't neglect them. I have no one but myself to think about, so I am the obvious person to be here."

"But your job?"

Olivia turned back to her car and retrieved her small suitcase from the back seat.

"It's all fixed. I'm not going back to the office until Monday morning. Come on, let's go inside. We'll have a drink and then you can go home. If you don't need a gin and tonic, I do."

She led the way, and Nancy followed. The familiar kitchen was neat, scrubbed; felt warm, but dreadfully empty.

"What about Noel?" Nancy asked.

"What about him?"

"You told him?"

"Of course. As soon as I'd rung George. I spoke to him at his office."

"Was he very, very shocked?"

"Yes, I think he was. He didn't say very much."

"Is he coming down here?"

"Not at the moment. I told him if I needed him, I'd be in touch."

Nancy, as though incapable of standing for more than two minutes, pulled out a chair and sat at the table. Her dramatic flight from the old Vicarage to Podmore's Thatch had apparently left her no time either to comb her hair, powder her nose, or find herself a blouse that matched her skirt.

She looked not only distraught but a mess, and Olivia knew a surge of the old, irritated impatience. Whatever happened, good or bad, Nancy always made a drama of it and, moreover, cast herself in the leading role.

"She went to London yesterday," Nancy was saying. "We don't know why. Just went off on the train, on her own, for the whole day. Mrs. Plackett said she returned home quite ex-hausted." She sounded offended, as though, yet again, Penelope had pulled a fast one on her. Olivia half expected her to add, *And she never even told us she was planning to die.* To change the subject, she asked, "Where is Antonia?"

"She's gone to Pudley to do some shopping?"

"Have you seen her?"

"Not yet."

"And Mrs. Plackett?"

"Upstairs, I think, getting your room ready."

"In that case, I'll take my bag up and have a word with her. You stay here. When I come back, we'll have that drink, and then you can get back to George and the children. . . ."

"But I can't simply leave you on your own. . . ."

"Of course you can," Olivia told her coolly. "We can keep in touch by telephone. And I'm better on my own."

Nancy finally departed. With her gone, Olivia and Mrs. Plackett were at last able to get down to business.

"We'll have to get in touch with an undertaker, Mrs. Plackett."

"Joshua Bedway. He's the best man for the job."

"Where is he?"

"Right here, in Temple Pudley. He's the village carpenter, does undertaking as a sideline. He's a good man, very tactful and discreet. Does a lovely job."

Mrs. Plackett glanced at the clock. It was nearly a quarter to one. "He'll be home now, having his dinner. Like me to give him a ring?"

"Oh, would you? And ask him to come as soon as possible."

Mrs. Plackett did this, with no histrionics, no pious lowering of the voice. A simple explanation was given and a simple request made. She might have been asking him to come and mend a gate. When she rang off, her expression was satisfied, as though with a job well done.

"That's it, then. He'll be here at three. I'll come with him. Be easier for you to have me here."

"Yes," said Olivia. "Yes, it would be much easier."

They then sat at the kitchen table and made lists. By now, Olivia was onto her second gin and tonic, and Mrs. Plackett had accepted a small glass of port. A real treat, she told Olivia. She was very partial to port.

"Next person to get hold of, Miss Keeling, is the vicar. You'll want a church service, of course, and a Christian burial. Need to fix on a plot in the graveyard, and then a day and a time for the funeral. And then speak about hymns and such-like. You'll have hymns, I hope. Mrs. Keeling loved her concerts, and a bit of music's nice at a funeral."

Discussing practical details made Olivia feel marginally better. She unscrewed her fountain pen. "What's the vicar's name?"

"The Reverend Thomas Tillingham. Mr. Tillingham, he's known as. Lives in the Vicarage, next to the church. Best would be to give him a tinkle, and maybe ask him over tomorrow morn-ing. Give him a cup of coffee."

"Did he know my mother?"

"Oh, yes. Everybody in the village knew Mrs. Keeling."

"She was never exactly a regular church-goer."

"No. Maybe not. But always ready to help with the organ fund, or the Christmas jumble. And every now and then, she'd ask the Tillinghams for dinner. Best lace-mats on the table, and a bottle of her best claret."

It was not hard to imagine. Olivia, for the first time that day, found herself smiling. "Entertaining her friends; that was what she really loved."

"She was a lovely lady in every way. You could talk to her about anything." Mrs. Plackett took a ladylike sip of her port. "And another thing, Miss Keeling. You should let Mrs. Keeling's solicitor know that she's with us no more. Bank accounts, that sort of thing. That will all have to be attended to."

"Yes, I'd thought of that." Olivia wrote: Enderby, Looseby & Thring. "And we'll have to put notices in the papers. *The Times* and *The Telegraph*, perhaps . . ."

"And then, flowers in the church. It's nice to have flowers, and you may not find time to do them yourself. There's a nice girl in Pudley. She's got a little van. When Mrs. Kitson's old mother-in-law died, she did lovely flowers."

"Well, we'll see. But first, we'll have to decide when the funeral is to be."

"And after the funeral . . ." Mrs. Plackett hesitated. "Nowadays a lot of people don't think it's necessary, but I believe it's nice for folk to come back to the house and have a cup of tea and a bit of something to eat. Fruit-cake's nice. Course, it depends on the time of the service, but when friends come a long way—and I've no doubt there'll be many from far afield—it seems pretty thankless to send them away without so much as a cup of tea. And somehow, it makes things easier. You can have a bit of a talk, and talking takes the edge off sadness. Makes you feel you're not alone."

The old-fashioned country custom of a wake had not occurred to Olivia, but she saw the common sense of Mrs. Plackett's suggestion. "Yes, you're perfectly right. We'll organize some-thing. But I should warn you, I'm a useless cook. You'll have to help me."

"You leave it to me. Fruit-cake's my speciality."

"In that case, that seems to be everything." Olivia laid down her pen and leaned back in her chair. Across the table, she and Mrs. Plackett surveyed each other. For a moment, neither spoke. Then Olivia said, "I think, Mrs. Plackett, you were probably my mother's best friend. And right now, I know perfectly well that you're mine."

Mrs. Plackett became embarrassed. "I've done no more than I should, Miss Keeling."

"Is Antonia all right?"

"I think so. She was shocked, but she's a sensible girl. Good idea, sending her to do the shopping. I gave her a list as long as my arm. Keep her busy. Make her feel useful." With that, Mrs. Plackett downed the last of her port, set the empty wineglass on the table, and heaved herself to her feet. "Well, if it's all right with you, I'll take myself home and give Mr. Plackett a bite to eat. But I'll be back at three, to let Joshua Bedway into the house. And I'll stay till he's finished and gone."

Olivia went to the door with her and saw her away, stately as ever on her bicycle. Standing there, she heard the sound of an approaching car, and the next moment the Volvo turned in at the gate. Olivia stayed where she was. Fond as her affections were for Cosmo's daughter, and sorry for the girl as she felt, she knew that she, herself, was incapable of dealing with yet another flood of emotion, another damp and teary embrace. The carapace of reserve, strong as an armour, was, for the time being, her sole defence. She watched as the Volvo drew to a halt, watched Antonia unbuckle her seat-belt and climb out from behind the steering wheel. As she did this, Olivia folded her arms, the body language gesture of physical rejection. Over the roof of the car, across the few feet of gravel that separated them, their eyes met. There was a pause, and then Antonia closed the door of the car with a soft clunk and came, walking, towards her.

"You're here," was all she said.

Olivia unfolded her arms and laid her hands on Antonia's shoulders. "Yes. I'm here." She leaned forward and they kissed, formally, touching cheeks. It was going to be all right There were to be no histrionics. For this deliverance Olivia was deeply grateful, but she felt sad too, because it is always sad when some-one you have known as a child finally grows up, and you know that they will never be truly young again.

At exactly three o'clock, Joshua Bedway was there, driving up in his little van, with Mrs. Plackett beside him. Olivia had harboured fears that he would be attired in inky black, with an expression of gloom to match, but all he had done was to change from his overalls into a decent suit and a black tie, and his sunburnt countryman's face did not look to her as though it could stay sombre for very long.

For the moment, however, he was both saddened and sympathetic. He told Olivia that her mother would be very missed in the village. In the six years that she had lived in Temple Pudley, she had made herself, he said, very much part of the little community.

Oh'via thanked him for his kind words, and with formalities over, Mr. Bedway produced, from some pocket, his notebook. There were one or two details, he told her, and proceeded to list them. Listening to him, it dawned upon her that, at his job, he was a true professional, and for this she was deeply grateful. He spoke of The Plot and The Sexton and The Registrar. He asked questions and Olivia answered them. When he finally closed his notebook, returned it to its pocket, and said, "I think that's all, Miss Keeling; you can safely leave the rest to me," she did just that, gathered up Antonia, and walked out of the house.

They did not go down to the river, but made their way out of the gate and across the road, to climb a stile and follow the old bridle track that climbed the hill behind the village. It led through fields filled with grazing sheep and their lambs; the hawthorn hedges were coming into flower, and mossy ditches were cushioned in wild primroses. At the top of the hill stood a stand of ancient beeches, their roots exposed, eroded by centuries of wind and weather. Reaching these, hot and breathless from the climb, they sat, with a feeling of some accomplishment, and surveyed the view.

It stretched for miles, a great chunk of unspoiled English countryside, basking in the warm sunshine of an exceptional spring afternoon. Farms, fields, tractors, houses, all were minimized by distance to toy size. Steeply below them, Temple Pudley slumbered, a random cluster of gold stone houses. The church was half hidden by yews, but Podmore's Thatch and the white-washed walls of the Sudeley Arms were clearly visible. Smoke, like tall plumes of grey feather, rose from chimneys, and in one garden a man had lighted a bonfire.

It was marvellously quiet. The only sounds were in the bleating of the sheep and the rustle of the breeze in the beech branches overhead. Then, high in the blue, an aeroplane, like a sleepy bee, hummed drowsily across the sky, but did nothing to disturb the peace.

For some time, they did not speak. Since their reunion, Olivia had spent all her time either making or receiving telephone calls (two of these, both quite pointless, were from Nancy), and there had been no chance to talk. Now she looked at Antonia, sitting there on the tussocky grass just a few feet away, in her faded jeans and her pink cotton shirt. Her sweater, discarded during the long hot climb up the hill, lay beside her, and her hair fell forward, hiding her face. Cosmo's Antonia. Despite her own battened-down misery, Olivia's heart went out to her. Eighteen was too young for so many awful things to be happening. But nothing could be changed, and Olivia knew that, with Penelope gone, Antonia had become, once more, her responsibility.

She said, breaking their silence, "What will you do?"

Antonia turned and looked at her. "How do you mean?"

"I mean, what will you do now? Now that Mumma's gone, you no longer have reason to stay at Podmore's Thatch. You'll have to start making decisions. Think about your future."

Antonia turned away again, drew up her knees, and rested her chin on them. "I have thought."

"Do you want to come to London? Take up that offer of mine?"

"Yes, if I may. I'd like to do that. But eventually. Not just now."

"I don't understand."

"I thought that perhaps ... it would be a good idea, if I just stayed here for a bit. I mean . . . what's going to happen to the house? Will it be sold?"

"I imagine so. I can't live here, and neither can Noel. And I don't suppose Nancy would want to move to Temple Pudley. It's not nearly grand enough for her and George."

"In that case, people will want to come and look around, won't they? And you're far more likely to get a good price for it if it's furnished, and there are flowers around the place, and the garden's looking nice. I thought perhaps I could stay and see to everything, and show prospective buyers around, and keep the grass cut. And then, when it is sold, and it's all over, perhaps then I could come back to London."

Olivia was surprised. "But, Antonia, you'd be all alone. By yourself, in the house. Wouldn't you mind that?"

"No. No, I wouldn't mind. It's not that sort of house. I don't think I'd ever really feel alone there."

Olivia considered this idea, and realized that it was, in fact, a sound one.

"Well, if you're sure, I think we'd all be enormously grateful to you. Because none of the family are going to be able to hang around, and Mrs. Plackett has other commitments. Of course, nothing has been decided yet, but I am certain that the house will be sold." She thought of something else. "However, I don't see why you should have to do the garden as well. Surely Danus Muirfield will be coming back to work."

Antonia said, "I don't know."

Olivia frowned. "I thought he'd simply gone to Edinburgh to keep an

appointment?"

"Yes. With a doctor."

"Is he fflr

"He had epilepsy. He's an epaepitic."

Olivia was filled with horror. "An epaepitic? But how per-fectly ghastly. Did Mumma knowr

"No, neither of us knew. He didn't tell us until the very end of our holiday in Cornwall."

Olivia found herself intrigued. She had never set eyes on the young man, and yet all she had heard about him, from both her sister, her mother, and Antonia, only served to whet her interest "What a very secretive person he must be." Antonia made no comment to this. Olivia thought some more. "Mumma told me he didn't drink or drive, and you mentioned that, too, in your letter. I suppose this is why."

"Yes."

"And what happened in Edinburghr

"He saw the doctor and he had another brain-scan, but the computer in the hospital had broken down, so that he couldn't get the results of his tests. He rang us up to tell us this. Last Thursday, it was. And then he went off with a friend to fish for a week. He said that it was better than hanging around at home, kicking his heels."

"And when is he returning from this fishing trip?"

"On Thursday. The day after tomorrow."

"Will he know the result of the brain-scan then?"

"Yes."

"And after that, what happens? Is he coming back to Gloucestershire to work?"

"I don't know. I suppose it depends on how ill he is."

It all sounded rather sad and hopeless. And yet, on consideration, not totally surprising. As long as Olivia could remember, a succession of oddballs and lame ducks—like bees to honey—had found their way into Mumma's life. She had never failed to support and sustain them, and this generosity of energy—and sometimes hard cash—was one of the things about his mother that drove Noel up the wall. And was, perhaps, why he had taken such an instant dislike to Danus Muirfield.

She said, "Mumma liked him, didn't she?"

"Yes, I think she was very fond of him. And he was sweet with her. He looked after her."

"Was she very upset when he told her about his illness?"

"Yes. Not for herself, but for him. And it was a shock to be told. Something unimaginable. Cornwall was magic, and we were having such fun ... it was as though nothing bad could ever happen again. Just a week ago. When Cosmo died, I thought that was the worst. But I don't think any week's ever been so dreadful, or so long as this one."

"Oh, Antonia, I am sorry."

She feared that Antonia was about to succumb to tears, but now Antonia turned and looked at her, and Olivia saw with relief that her eyes were dry and her face, though serious, quite composed.

She said, "You mustn't be sorry. You've got to be glad that there was just time enough for her to go back to Cornwall before she died. She loved every moment of it. I think, for her, it was like being young again. She never ran

out of energy or enthusiasm. Every day was filled. She didn't waste a single moment."

"She was very fond of you, Antonia. Having you with her must have doubled her pleasures."

Antonia said painfully, "That's another thing I have to tell you. She gave me the earrings. The earrings Aunt Ethel left her. I didn't want to take them, but she insisted. I've got them now, in my room at Podmore's Thatch. If you think I should give them back . . . ?"

"Why should you give them back?"

"Because they're very valuable. They're worth four thousand pounds. I feel they should go to you, or to Nancy, or to Nancy's daughter."

"If Mumma hadn't wanted you to have them, she wouldn't have given them to you." Olivia smiled. "And you didn't have to tell me about the earrings, because I already knew. She wrote me a letter to tell me what she'd done."

Antonia was puzzled. "Why did she do that, I wonder?"

"I suppose she was thinking of you and your good name. She wanted no person accusing you of pinching them out of her jewel box."

"But that's weird! She could have told you any time."

"These things are better in writing."

"You don't think she had some sort of premonition? That she knew that she was going to die?"

"We all know that we are going to die."

The Reverend Thomas Tillingham, vicar of Temple Pudley, called at Podmore's Thatch at eleven o'clock the next morning. Olivia did not look forward to the interview. Her acquaintance of vicars was slim and she was

uncertain as to how they would deal with each other. Before his arrival, she endeavoured to prepare herself for all exigencies, but this was difficult to do because she had no idea what sort of a man he was going to be. Perhaps elderly and cadaverous, with a fluting voice and archaic views. Or young and trendy, favouring outlandish schemes for bringing religion up to date, inviting his congregation to shake hands with each other, and expecting them to sing newfangled and jolly hymns to the accompaniment of the local pop group. Either prospect was daunting. Her greatest dread, however, was that the vicar might suggest that, together, he and Olivia should kneel in prayer. She decided that, should such a horrific eventuality arise, she would cook up a little headache, plead ill health, and dash from the room.

But all her fears were, mercifully, unrealized. Mr. Tillingham was neither young nor old; simply a nice, ordinary, middle-aged man in a tweed jacket and a dog-collar. She could perfectly understand why Penelope had liked to ask him for dinner. She met him at the door and led him into the conservatory, which was the most cheerful place she could think of. This proved something of a brainwave for they discussed Penelope's pot plants, and then her garden, and the conversation thus naturally led itself to the matter in hand.

"We shall all miss Mrs. Keeling most dreadfully," Mr. Tillingham said. He sounded truly sincere, and Olivia found it easy to believe that he wasn't referring wistfully to the delicious dinners that he would enjoy no longer. "She was immensely kind, and she added a great flavour to our village life."

"That's what Mr. Bedway said. He's such a nice man. And specially nice for me, because you see I've never had anything to do with a funeral before. I mean, I've never had to arrange one. But Mrs. Plackett and Mr. Bedway, between them, have kept me straight."

As though on cue, Mrs. Plackett now made her appearance, bearing a tray with two mugs of coffee and a plate of biscuits. Mr. Tillingham spooned a great deal of sugar into his mug and got down to churchly business. It did not take very long. Penelope's funeral would take place on Saturday, at three o'clock in the afternoon. They decided on the form of service and then came

to the question of music.

"My wife is the organist," Mr. Tillingham told Olivia. "She would be very happy to play, if you would like her to."

"How kind, and I would like her to. But no mournful music. Something beautiful that people know. I'll leave it to her."

"And hymns?"

They decided on a hymn.

"And a lesson?"

Olivia hesitated. "Like I said, Mr. Tillingham, I'm a total novice at this sort of thing. Perhaps I could leave it all to you."

"But wouldn't your brother like to read the lesson?"

Olivia said, no, she didn't think that that was something that Noel would want to do.

Mr. Tillingham came up with one or two more details, which were swiftly dealt with. He then finished his coffee and rose to his feet. Olivia went with him, through the kitchen and out of the front door, to where his shabby Renault was parked on the gravel.

"Goodbye, Miss Keeling."

"Goodbye, Mr. Tillingham." They shook hands. She said, "You've been so kind." He smiled, a smile of unexpected charm and warmth. He hadn't really smiled before, but now his homely features were so transformed that all at once Olivia stopped thinking about him as a vicar and consequently found it quite easy to come out with something that had been lurking about at the back of her mind ever since he walked into the house. "I don't really understand why you should be so kind and accommodating. After all, we both know that my mother wasn't a regular church-goer. She wasn't ever very

religious. And the idea of Resurrection and afterlife she found very hard to swallow."

"I know that. Once we discussed it, but we came to no agreement."

"I'm not even certain that she believed in God."

Mr. Tillingham, still smiling, shook his head, reached out his hand for the door handle of his car. "I wouldn't worry too much about that. She may not have believed in God, but I'm pretty certain God believed in her."

The house, bereft of its owner, was a dead house, the shell of a body, its heartbeat stopped. Desolate, strangely silent, it seemed to wait. The quiet was a physical thing, inescapable, pressing like a weight. No footstep, no voice, no rattling saucepans from the kitchen; no Vivaldi, no Brahms burbling in comforting fashion from the tape player on the kitchen dresser. Doors closed, stayed closed. Each time she climbed the narrow stairs, Antonia came face to face with the closed door of Penelope's bedroom. Before, it had always stood open, allowing glimpses of garments flung across a chair, gusts of air blowing from the open window, the sweet smell that was Penelope's own. Now, just a door.

Downstairs was no better. Her chair, empty by the sitting room fireplace. The fire unlit, the desk folded shut. No friendly clutter, no laughter, no more warm and spontaneous embraces. In the world where Penelope had lived, existed, breathed, listened, remembered, it had been possible to believe that nothing too dreadful could ever go wrong. Or if it did . . . and to Penelope it had . . . then there were ways of coping, of accepting, of refusing to admit defeat.

She was dead. On that ghastly morning, stepping from the conservatory out into the garden, seeing Penelope slumped there on the old wooden garden seat, with her long legs outstretched and her eyes closed, Antonia had told herself sharply that Penelope was simply resting for a moment; savouring the sharp, early air, the pale warmth of the early sun. The obvious was, for an insane instant, too horrifyingly final to contemplate. Existence without that source of constant delight, that rocklike security was unthinkable. But the

unthinkable had happened. She was gone.

The worst was getting through each day. Days, which previously had never been long enough to contain their various activities, now stretched to eternity; an age ticked by between sunrise and darkness. Even the garden afforded no comfort, because Penelope was not there to bring it to life, and it took a real effort to go out of doors and find something there to do, like pulling weeds or picking an armful of daffodils, to be arranged in a jug and placed somewhere. Anywhere. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered any more.

Being so alone was a terrifying experience. She had never known what it was to feel so alone. Before, there had always been someone. At first, Cosmo; and then, when Cosmo died, the comforting knowledge that Olivia was there. In London, maybe, and miles from Ibiza, but still *there*. At the end of a telephone call saying, "It's all right, come to me, I will take care of you." But Olivia, for the time being, was unapproachable. Practical, organized, making lists, speaking on the telephone—it seemed that she was never off the telephone. She had made it perfectly clear to Antonia, without actually saying so, that this was no time for long, intimate conversations, no time for confidences. Antonia had the wit to realize that, for the first time, she was seeing the other side of Olivia: the cool and competent business woman who had fought her way up the ladder of her career to become Editor of *Venus*, and, in the process, had schooled herself to be ruthless with human frailties and intolerant of sentimentality. The other Olivia, the Olivia that Antonia had first known in what she already thought of as the old days, was in all likelihood too vulnerable for exposure, and for the time being had shut herself away.

Antonia understood and respected this, but it made nothing easier for herself.

Because of this barrier that stood between them, and also because it was obvious that Olivia already had more than enough on her plate, Antonia had told her little about Danus. They had spoken of him casually, up on the windy hilltop while Mr. Bedway was doing the unimaginable things that he had to do at Podmore's Thatch, but nothing important had been said. At least, nothing truly important. He has epilepsy, Antonia had told Olivia. He is an epileptic. But she had not said, I love him- He is the first man I have ever

loved and he feels the same way about me. He loves me, and we have been to bed together, and it wasn't frightening, the way I always thought it would be, it was just utterly right, and it was magic, all at the same time. I don't care what the future holds for us, I don't care about him not having any money. I want him to come back to me just as soon as he can, and if he is ill, I shall wait until he is well again, and I shall take care of him and we will live in the country and grow cabbages together.

She had not said this because she knew that Olivia's mind was on other things . . . there was, indeed, the likelihood that she might not even be interested and would not want to hear. Living together in the same house as Olivia was like sitting next to a stranger on a train. There was no real point of contact, and Antonia found herself isolated in her own unhappiness.

Before, there had always been someone. Now there was not even Danus. He was away, far in the north of Sutherland, un-reachable by telephone or telegram or any normal form of communication. She told herself that he could not have cut himself away from her more completely if he had decided to take a dug-out canoe up the Amazon, or drive a team of huskies across the polar ice-cap. Not being able to get in touch with him was almost unbearable. Penelope was dead, and Antonia needed him. As though telepathy were some sort of a reliable radar system, she spent most of her waking hours sending him positive thought messages, urging him to receive them, to feel impelled to get in touch. To drive, if necessary, twenty miles to the nearest call-box, to dial the number of Podmore's Thatch and so find out what was wrong.

However, this did not happen, and Antonia was scarcely surprised. For comfort, he will ring on Thursday, she told herself. He gets back to Edinburgh on Thursday, and he will ring then, at the very first opportunity. He promised. He will ring to tell me ... us? ... the results of the brain-scan and the doctor's prognosis. (How extraordinary that this now seemed of the lesser urgency.) And then I shall tell him that Penelope is dead, and he will come, by some means or other, and he will be here, and I shall be able to be strong again. Antonia needed that strength in order to endure the ordeal of Penelope's funeral. Without Danus beside her, she was not certain that she was going to be able to cope.

Slowly, slowly, the hours passed. Wednesday dragged by, and it was Thursday. Today he will ring. Thursday morning. Thursday midday. Thursday afternoon.

No call came.

At half past three, Olivia went out, to walk to the church and there meet the girl from Pudley who was going to do the flowers for the funeral service. Left alone, Antonia pottered aimlessly around the garden, achieving nothing, and then wandered down to the orchard to unpeg a line of tea-towels and pillowcases from the washing line. The church clock struck four o'clock, and all at once, like a revelation, she knew that she could not wait another moment. The time had come to take some positive action, and if she did not do so immediately, she would either have hysterics, or bolt down the slope to the banks of the Windrush and there drown herself. She abandoned the washing basket, walked up the garden, through the conservatory and into the kitchen, picked up the telephone and dialled the Edinburgh number.

It was a warm, slumbrous afternoon. The palms of her hands were clammy, her mouth felt dry. The kitchen clock ticked away the seconds at a faster speed than the beating of her own heart. Waiting for some person to answer the call, she found herself undecided as to exactly what she was going to say. If Danus was not there, and his mother came to the telephone, then a message would have to be left for him. *Mrs. Keeling has died. Please, can you tell Danus. And will you ask him to call me. Antonia Hamilton. He has the number.* So far, so good. But would she have the nerve to go on and ask Mrs. Muirfield if there was news from the hospital, or would that be intrusive and enormously unfeeling? Supposing the diagnosis had come through and was unhopeful. Danus' mother would scarcely relish sharing her natural distress with a total stranger, a disembodied voice calling from the depths of Gloucestershire. On the other hand . . .

"Hello?"

With thoughts flying in all directions, Antonia was taken unawares and almost dropped the receiver.

"I ... oh ... is that Mrs. Muirfield?"

"No. I'm sorry, but Mrs. Muirfield is not here at the moment." The voice was female, very Scottish, and immensely refined.

"Well . . . when will she be back?"

"I'm sorry, but I have no idea. She went to a meeting of the Save the Children Fund, and then I think she's going to tea with a friend."

"And Mr. Muirfield?"

"Mr. Muirfield's at his office." The reply was brisk, as though Antonia's query was a stupid one—and it was—and the answer obvious. "He'll not be home until half past six."

"Who is that speaking?"

"I'm Mrs. Muirfield's help." Antonia hesitated. The voice, whose owner perhaps wanted to get on with her dusting, became impatient. "Do you want me to take a message?"

In some desperation, "Danus isn't there, is he?" Antonia asked.

"Danus is away fishing."

"I know. But he was meant to be coming back today and I thought he might have arrived."

"No. He's not come and I've no idea when he's expected."

"Well, perhaps . . ." There was no alternative. ". . . could you take a message?"

"You'll have to wait till I get the paper and pencil." Antonia waited. Some time passed. "Ready now."

"Just say Antonia called. Antonia Hamilton."

"Give me a moment till I write it down. An-Ton-Ia Ham-Il-Ton."

"Yes, that's right. Just say . . . tell him . . . Mrs. Keeling died on Tuesday morning. And the funeral is at Temple Pudley, at three o'clock on Saturday afternoon. He'll understand. He'll maybe," she said, 'praying that he would be able to make it, that he would be there, "he'll maybe want to come."

At Podmore's Thatch, on Friday morning at ten o'clock, the telephone rang. It was the fourth telephone call since breakfast, and all of them had been answered by Antonia, flying from wherever she was in order to be the first person to pick up the receiver. But right now Antonia was out, gone to the village to pick up the daily newspapers and the milk, and so it was Olivia, sitting at the kitchen table, who rose to her feet and took the call.

"Podmore's Thatch."

"Miss Keeling?"

"Speaking."

"Charles Enderby here, of Enderby, Looseby and Thring."

"Good morning, Mr. Enderby."

He did not offer the usual condolences, because he had already done this when Olivia had spoken to him to tell him formally, as Penelope's solicitor, that her mother had died.

"Miss Keeling, I am of course making the journey to Gloucestershire on Saturday in order to attend Mrs. Keeling's funeral, but it's occurred to me that perhaps, if it is convenient to you all, that I might, when it is over, have a meeting with yourself and your brother and sister; just to go over the points of your mother's will that might need explaining, and to put you all in the picture. It seems, perhaps, a little precipitous, and of course you are at perfect

liberty to suggest an alternative date, but it does seem a good opportunity when all the family will be under one roof. It shouldn't take more than half an hour."

Olivia considered the suggestion. "I can't think why we shouldn't. The sooner the better, and it's not often that the three of us are together."

"Would you suggest a time?"

"Well, the service starts at three, and there'll be a cup of tea here afterwards for anybody who wants to come back to the house. I suppose by five o'clock it should all be over. How about five o'clock?"

"Splendid. I'll make a note of that. And will you let Mrs. Chamberlain and your brother know?"

"Yes, of course."

She rang the old Vicavage.

"Nancy. Olivia here."

"Oh, Olivia, I was just about to ring you. How are you? How is everything going? Do you need me at Podmore's Thatch? I can easily come over. I can't tell you how useless I feel, and . . ."

Olivia interrupted, cutting her sister short. "Nancy, Mr. En-derby's been on the phone. He wants a family meeting after Mumma's funeral, to get her will sorted out. Five o'clock. Can you be here?"

"Five o'clock?" Nancy's voice was shrill with alarm. Olivia might have suggested some clandestine and suspicious assign-ment. "Oh, no, not five o'clock. I can't."

"For heaven's sake, why not?"

"George has a meeting with the vicar and the Archdeacon. It's about the

curate's stipend. Terribly important. We'll have to come straight home after the funeral. ..."

"This is important too. Tell him to put the meeting off."

"Olivia, I couldn't do that."

"In that case, you'll have to come to the funeral in two cars, and you'll have to drive yourself home. You've got to be there. ..."

"Can't we meet Mr. Enderby another time?"

"Yes, of course we can, but it won't be nearly so convenient. And I've already told Mr. Enderby that we will be here, so you really have no alternative." Olivia's voice, even to herself, sounded dictatorial and sharp. She added in kinder tones, "If you don't want to drive yourself home that evening, then you can stay the night, and go back the next morning. But you must be there."

"Oh, all right." Nancy gave in, but grudgingly. "But I won't stay the night, thank you all the same. It's Mrs. Croftway's day off and I'll have to cook the children their supper."

Bugger Mrs. Croftway. Olivia stopped trying to be kind. "In that case, will you ring Noel and tell him he's got to be there too. It will be one less thing for me to do, and hopefully will stop you from feeling so useless."

After a long spell of dry weather, during which the level of the river had dropped disastrously and the salmon pools lay shallow and still, the rains came to Sutherland. These were blown in on fat grey clouds, rolling from the west, blotting out sky and sun-shine, settling on the tops of the hills, sinking into the glens, turning to mist, to the light patter of falling raindrops. The heather, burned dry as tinder, drank in the moisture, absorbed it, spilled the excess off into peaty crannies that dribbled into tiny burns, and so into larger burns, and so on down the hillsides into the river itself. A solid day of rain was enough to revitalize the flow of water. It swelled, gathered force, spewed whitely over into deep pools, plunged on, down the gentle slope of the glen, headed for the open sea. By Thursday morning, the prospect of fishing, which

up to now had proved totally unproductive, was all at once rife with exciting possibilities.

Thursday was the day that the two young men had planned to return to Edinburgh. Now they stood in the open doorway of the desolate croft, watching the rain, and discussing the situation. After a week of indifferent sport, the temptation to postpone their return was one that was hard to resist. But there were, of course, obstacles to this course of action.

Eventually, "I don't have to be in the office until Monday," Roddy said. "So far as I'm concerned, it's neither here nor there. The decision's up to you, old chum. You're the one who wants to get home and find out what the bloody doctors have decided. If you can't wait another day to hear their verdict, then we'll pack up and leave now. But it seems to me that you've waited so long, you might as well wait another day and enjoy yourself in the process. And I don't suppose your mother will get her knickers in a twist if you don't show up this evening. You're a big boy now, and if she listens to the weather forecasts, she'll guess what's happened."

Danus smiled. The casual fashion in which Roddy came straight to the nub of his dilemma filled him with gratitude. They had been friends for years, but over the last few days, with only each other for company, had become immensely close. Here, in this remote and inaccessible part of the world, there were few diversions, and in the evenings, once they had cooked their supper and built up the peat fire, there was nothing to do but talk. It was good for Danus to talk, good to come out with everything that he had miserably, ashamedly kept to himself for far too long. He told Roddy about America, and the sudden onset of his illness, and, brought out into the open, his experiences lost much of their terror. With all this out of the way, he was able to confide further. To explain his decision to switch careers; and to outline his plans for the future. He told Roddy about going to work for Penelope Keeling at Podmore's Thatch. He described the idyllic week in Cornwall. Finally, he told him about Antonia.

"Marry the girl," had been Roddy's advice.

"I want to. One day. But I have to get myself sorted out first."

"What is there to sort out?"

"If we married, we'd have children. I don't know if epilepsy is hereditary."

"Oh, balls, of course it isn't."

"And my work isn't exactly lucrative. In fact, I haven't got two brass farthings to rub together."

"Get a loan from your old man. He can't be strapped for cash."

"I could, of course, but I'd rather not"

"Pride will get you nowhere, sport."

"I suppose not." He thought about it, but would not commit himself. "I'll see" was all he would promise.

Now, he turned up his face to the dripping skies and thought about getting home, and the vital verdict, lying in wait for his arrival. He thought about Antonia, filling in the days at Podmore's Thatch, listening for the telephone, waiting for his call.

He said, "I promised Antonia I'd ring today, as soon as I got back to Edinburgh."

"You can do that tomorrow. If she's the girl I think she is, she'll understand." The river, by now, would be in spate. In imagination, Danus felt the weight and pleasing balance of his salmon rod, as yet unused. Heard the spin of the reel, felt the tug of a bite. There was a certain pool where the big fish lurked. Roddy grew impatient. "Come on, make up your mind. Let's live dangerously and give ourselves another day. So far, we've caught nothing but trout and we've eaten those. The salmon are down there waiting for us. We owe it to them to give them a sporting chance."

He was, quite obviously, itching to go. Danus turned his head and looked at

his friend. Roddy's ruddy features held the expression of a small boy yearning for the treat of a lifetime, and Danus knew that he hadn't the heart to deny him. He grinned, gave in. "Okay. We'll stay."

The next day, early, they set off to drive south. The back of Roddy's car was laden with bags, rods, gaffs, waders, creels, and, as well, the two hefty salmon they had landed during the course of the previous afternoon, for the decision to stay on had proved more than worthwhile. The little croft, cleaned, cleared, and safely shuttered, disappeared into the hills behind them. Ahead lay the long narrow road, winding and dipping across the desolate moor of Sutherland. The rain had ceased, but the sky was still smudged by watery clouds, and the shadows of these drifted across the endless miles of bog and heather. With the moor finally traversed, they dropped down into Lairg, crossed the river at Bonar Bridge, and rounded the blue waters of the Dornoch Firth. Then up and over the winding, precipitous slopes of Struie and so to the Black Isle. Now the road was wide and fast and they were able to pick up speed. Old landmarks raced in upon each other, were reached and passed at an alarming rate. Inverness, Culloden, Carrbridge, Aviemore, and then the road curved south from Dalwhinnie, to climb the Cairngorms by the bleak hills of Glengarrie. By eleven o'clock, they had bypassed Perth, and were onto the motorway, slicing through Fife like a surgeon's knife, and the two great bridges that span the Forth revealed themselves, glittering in the bright morning light and looking as though they had been constructed of wire. Across the river, and they were on the approach road to Edinburgh. Observed from a distance, the spires and towers of the ancient city, the crag and bulk of the Castle with its flag snapping at the masthead presented, as always, a silhouette timeless and unchanging as an old print.

The motorway ended. The car slowed down to forty, then thirty miles an hour. The traffic thickened. They came to houses, shops, hotels, traffic lights. They had scarcely spoken during the entire journey. Now Roddy broke the silence.

"It's been great," he said. "We'll do it again sometime." "Yes. Some time. I can't thank you enough." Roddy tapped out a tattoo on the steering wheel with his fingernails. "How do you feel?"

"Okay."

"Apprehensive?"

"Not really. Just realistic. If I have to live with this thing for the rest of my life, then that's what I'll have to do."

"You never know." The lights turned green. The car moved forward. "It might be good news."

"I'm not thinking about it. I'd rather expect the worst and be ready to cope with it."

"Whatever it is ... whatever they've found out . . . you won't let it get you down, will you? I mean, if things look pretty black, don't keep it to yourself. If there's no one else you feel you can talk to, there's always me, ready and available."

"How do you feel about hospital visiting?"

"A cinch, old boy. Always had an eye for a pretty nurse. I'll bring you grapes and eat them all myself."

Queensferry road; the Dean Bridge. Now they were into the wide streets and perfectly proportioned terraces of the New Town. Freshly cleaned, washed in sunshine, their stonework was the colour of honey; in Moray Place the trees were misty with fresh green foliage, and flowering cherries hung heavy with blossom.

Heriot Row. The tall, narrow house that was home. Roddy drew up at the pavement's edge and switched *off* the engine. They got out and unloaded Darius' belongings, including the creel which contained his precious fish, and piled it all on the doorstep.

With this accomplished, "That's it then," said Roddy, but still hesitated, as though reluctant to abandon his old friend. "Want me to come in with you?"

"No," Danus told him. "I'll be fine."

"Ring me at the flat this evening."

"I'll do that."

Roddy delivered an affectionate thump on Danus' shoulder. "*Adids*, then, old sport."

"It's been great, Roddy."

"And good luck."

He got back into his car and drove away. Danus watched him go, then reached into the pocket of his jeans for the latchkey and opened the massive black-painted door. It swung inwards. He saw the long-familiar hallway, the graceful curved staircase. All was immaculate and orderly, the silence broken only by the ticking of the tall clock which had once belonged to Danus' great-grandfather. Furniture gleamed with polish and years of care, and a bowl of hyacinths stood on the chest by the telephone, filling the air with their heavy and sensuous scent.

He hesitated. Upstairs a door opened and shut. Footsteps. He looked up as his mother appeared at the head of the stair.

"Danus."

He said, "The fishing turned good. I stayed an extra day."

"Oh, Danus . . ."

She looked just as she usually did, neat and elegant, wearing a smooth tweed skirt and a lamb's-wool sweater, and without a hair of her grey head out of place. And yet she looked different. She was coming down the stairs towards him . . . running down the stairs, which in itself was extraordinary. He stared at her. On the bottom step she stopped, her eyes on a level with his, her hand closed over the polished newel post at the foot of the bannister.

She said, "You're all right." She wasn't crying, but her blue eyes were brilliant as though with unshed tears. He had never before seen her in such a state of emotional excitement. "Oh, Danus, it's all right. There's nothing wrong with you. There never has been. They rang yesterday evening, and I had a long chat with the specialist. That diagnosis you had in America was totally wrong. All these years . . . and you've never had epi-lepsy at all. You've never been an epileptic."

He could not say anything. His brain had stopped working, had turned to cotton wool, and he could think no coherent thought. And then, only one thought. "But . . ." It took effort even to speak, and the sound of his voice came out in a croak. He swallowed and started again. "But the black-outs?"

"Caused by the virus you contracted and your very, very high temperature. Apparently that can happen. And it happened to you. But it's not epilepsy. It never was. And if only you hadn't been such a stupid clunk and kept it all to yourself, you would have saved yourself all these years of anguish."

"I didn't want you to be worried. I was thinking of Ian. I didn't want you to go through it all a second time."

"I'd go through hell-fire and brimstone rather than have you make yourself miserable. And it was all for nothing. For no reason. You're all right."

All right. Never epilepsy. It had never happened. Like a bad dream, and as terrifying, but it had never really happened. He was all right. No more pills, no more uncertainty. Relief rendered him weightless, as though at any moment he might take off and float to the ceiling. Now, he could do anything. Everything. He could marry Antonia. *Oh, dear God, I can marry Antonia and we can have children, and I simply can't thank you enough. Thank you for this miracle. I'm so grateful. I shall never stop being grateful I shall never forget. I promise you that I shall never forget, I ...*

"Oh, Danus, don't stand there looking like a pudding. Don't you understand?"

He said, "Yes." And then he said, "I love you." Although it was true, and had

always been true, he could not remember ever before having said such a thing to her. His mother promptly burst into tears, which was another new experience, and Danus put his arms around her and held her so tightly that after a bit she stopped crying and started sniffing instead, and feeling, around for her handkerchief. Finally, they drew apart and she blew her nose and wiped her eyes, and touched her hair, settling it back into place.

"So stupid," she told him. "The last thing I meant to do was weep. But it was such wonderful news to have, and your father and I have been sick with frustration, not being able to get hold of you and share it with you, and put your mind at rest. But now I have told you, there's something else I think you should know. A phone message came through for you yesterday afternoon. I was out, but Mrs. Cooper took it down and left it for me to find. I'm afraid it might be rather distressing news, but I hope you won't be too upset. ..."

Already, before his eyes, she was reverting once more to her usual practical manner. Demonstrations of emotion and affection were, for the time being, over. Tucking her handkerchief up her sleeve, she pushed Danus gently out of the way and went to the chest where stood the telephone, to pick up the message pad that lived by the instrument. She leafed over the pages.

"Here it is. From somebody called Antonia Hamilton. You'd better read it for yourself."

Antonia.

He took the pad, saw Mrs. Cooper's pencilled, loopy handwriting.

Antonia Hamilton rang 4 o'clock Thurs says Mrs Keeling died Tues funeral 3 o'clock Temple Pudley Sat afternoon thinks you might like to be there hope I've got it right. L Cooper.

The family gathered for their mother's funeral. The Chamberlains were the first to arrive, Nancy in her own car, and George driving his stodgy and elderly Rover. Nancy wore a navy-blue coat and skirt and a felt hat of quite startling unbecoming-ness. Her features, beneath its jutting brim, were sternly set and brave.

Olivia, dressed, for courage and composure, in her favourite dark grey Jean Muir, greeted and kissed them both. Kissing George felt like kissing a knuckle-bone, and he smelt of mothballs and faintly antiseptic, like a dentist. As though they were guests and strangers, she led them through to the warm and flowery sitting room. And, as though they were guests, she found herself making conversation, apologizing.

"I am sorry I couldn't ask you both for lunch. But as you probably saw, Mrs. Plackett's laid the dining room table for tea, and pushed back all the chairs, and Antonia and I have spent the morning making sandwiches. We lunched off the crusts."

"Don't worry. We had a bite in a pub on the way." Nancy settled herself, with a sigh of relief, in Mumma's chair. "Mrs. Croftway's out for the day, so we had to dump the children with friends in the village. We left Melanie in tears. She's dreadfully cut up about her Granny Pen. Poor child, the first time she's experienced death. Face to face, as it were." Olivia could think of nothing to say to this. Nancy drew off her black gloves. "Where's Antonia?"

"Upstairs. Changing."

George looked at his watch. "She'd better get a move on. It's twenty-five to three already."

"George, it takes exactly five minutes to walk from here to the church."

"Maybe. But we don't want to be rushing in at the last moment. Most unseemly."

"And Mother?" Nancy's voice was hushed. "Where is Mother?"

"She's there, in the church, ready and waiting for us," Olivia told her briskly. "Mr. Bedway suggested a family procession from the house, but somehow I jibbed at the prospect. I do hope you both agree."

"And when does Noel arrive?"

"Any moment now, I hope. He's driving from London."

"The traffic on a Saturday is always heavy," George pronounced. "He'll probably be late."

But his gloomy prophecy proved unfounded, for five minutes later, the country quiet was shattered by the familiar sounds of their brother's arrival: the roar of the Jaguar's engine, the grinding of tyre on gravel as he braked to a halt, the slam of a car door. A moment or so later he had joined them, looking immensely tall and dark and elegant in a grey suit which had no doubt been tailored for him with expensive business lunches in mind, and was somehow too ostentatious for a small country funeral.

No matter, he was here. Nancy and George sat and looked at him, but Olivia rose to her feet and went to give him a kiss. He smelt of Eau Sauvage, and not disinfectant, and for this small mercy she was grateful.

"What sort of a drive did you have?"

"Not too bad, but the traffic was hellish. Hello, Nancy. Hi, George. Olivia, who's the old boy in the blue suit hovering around the garage?"

"Oh, that'll be Mr. Plackett. He's going to come and house-sit while we're all in the church."

Noel raised his eyebrows. "Are we expecting bandits?"

"No, but it's the local custom. Mrs. Plackett insisted. It's either bad luck or not *comme ti faut* to leave the house empty during a funeral service. So she fixed for Mr. Plackett to stay, and he's been told to keep the fires going, and put kettles on the boil, and such."

"How very well organized."

George once more looked at his watch. He was getting res-tive. "I really think we should leave. Come along, Nancy."

Nancy stood, and went to the mirror that hung over Mumma's desk, in order to check the angle of her dreadful hat. This done, she drew on her gloves.

"What about Antonia?"

"Til call her," said Olivia, but Antonia was already downstairs, waiting for them in the kitchen, sitting on the scrubbed wooden table and talking to Mr. Plackett, who had made his way indoors and taken up his post as caretaker. As they came through the kitchen door, she got off the table and smiled politely. She wore a navy-and-white-striped cotton skirt and a white shirt with a frilled collar, over which she had pulled a navy-blue cardigan. Her bright and shining hair was drawn back into a pony-tail and tied with a navy-blue ribbon. She looked young as a schoolgirl, and as diffident, and quite dreadfully pale.

"Are you all right?" Olivia asked her.

"Yes, of course."

"George says it's time we went . . ."

"I'm ready."

Olivia led the way, out through the porch, stepping into the pale, clear sunshine. The others followed, a small and sombre party. As they set out across the gravel, a new sound began. The church bell, tolling gravely. Measured peals rang out over the tranquil countryside, and rooks, disturbed, scattered, cawing from the tree-tops. They're ringing the bell for Mumma, Olivia told herself, and all at once, everything was coldly real. She paused, waiting for Nancy to catch up with her, to walk by her side. And doing this, turning back, she caught sight of Antonia suddenly stopping dead in her tracks. She had been pale before, but now she was as white as a sheet.

"Antonia, what is it?"

Antonia looked panic-stricken, "I ... I've forgotten something."

"What have you forgotten?"

"I ... a ... handkerchief. I haven't got a handkerchief. I must have one ... I won't be a moment. Don't wait. You go on ... I'll catch you up . . ."

And she bolted back into the house.

Nancy said, "How extraordinary. Is she all right?"

"I think so. She's upset. Perhaps I should wait for her . . ."

"You can't wait," George told her firmly. "There's no time to wait. We'll be late. Antonia will be all right. We'll keep a seat for her. Now, come along, Olivia. . . ."

But even as they stood there, hesitating, there occurred yet another interruption: the sound of a car being driven far too fast down the road that ran through the village. It appeared around the corner by the pub, slowed down, and drew up only a few feet away, by the open gate of Podmore's Thatch. A dark green Ford Escort, and unfamiliar. Silenced by surprise, they watched while its driver got out from behind the wheel and slammed the door shut behind him. A young man, unrecognized as his car. A man whom Olivia had never before seen in her life.

He stood there. They all stared, and nobody said a word, and in the end it was he who broke the silence. He said, "I'm sorry. For arriving so precipitously and so late. I had rather a long way to drive." He looked at Olivia and saw the total bewil-derment written all over her face. He smiled. "I don't think we've ever met. You must be Olivia. I'm Danus Muirfield."

But of course. Tall as Noel, but heavier in build, with wide shoulders and a deeply sun-tanned face. A most personable young man, and Olivia found an instant to realize exactly why Mumma had become so fond of him. Danus Muirfield. Who else?

"I thought you were in Scotland" was all she could think of to say.

"I was. Yesterday. It wasn't until yesterday that I heard about Mrs. Keeling. I am most dreadfully sorry. . . ."

"We're just going to the church now. If you . . ."

He interrupted her. "Where's Antonia?"

"She went back into the house. Something she'd forgotten. I don't think she'll be long. If you want to wait, Mr. Plackett's in the kitchen. ..."

George, by now at the end of his patience, could bear to listen no longer.

"Olivia, we have no time to stand and chat. And there can be no question of waiting. We must go. Now. And this young man can hurry Antonia along and make certain that she isn't late. Now, let's stand here no longer. . . ." He began to herd them all forward, as though they were sheep.

"Where will I find Antonia?" Danus asked.

"In her room, I expect," Olivia called back over her shoulder. "We'll keep seats for you both."

He found Mr. Plackett sitting at the kitchen table peacefully reading his *Racing News*.

"Where's Antonia, Mr. Plackett?"

"Went upstairs. Looked in tears to me."

"Do you mind if I go and find her?"

"No skin off my nose," said Mr. Plackett.

Danus left him and ran, two at a time, up the narrow stair-way. "Antonia!" Unfamiliar with the upstairs geography of the house, he opened doors, found a bathroom and a broom cupboard. "Antonia!" Down the small landing and a third door opened into a bedroom, obviously occupied but at the moment empty. At the other side of this stood yet another door; leading into the far

end of the house. Without knocking, he burst through it and there found her at last, sitting forlornly on the edge of her bed, and in floods of tears.

Relief made him feel quite light-headed. "Antonia." He was beside her in two strides, sitting, taking her into his arms, pressing her head onto his shoulder, kissing the top of her head, her forehead, her streaming, swollen eyes. Her tears tasted salty, and her cheeks were wet, but nothing mattered except that he had found her, and was holding her, and loved her more than any human being on earth, and was never, never going to be separated from her again.

At last, "Didn't you hear me call?" he asked.

"Yes, but I didn't think it was true. I couldn't really hear anything except that terrible bell. I was all right until the bell started and then ... all at once I knew I was going to fall to bits. I couldn't go on with the others. I miss her so much. Every-thing's dreadful without her. Oh, Danus, she's dead, and I loved her so much. And I want her. I want her all the time. . . ."

"I know," he told her. "I know."

She continued to sob onto his shoulder. "Everything's been so awful. Since you went. So awful. There wasn't anybody. . . ."

"I'm sorry. . . ."

"And I've been thinking about you so much. All the time. I did hear you calling but I couldn't believe it ... it was really you. It was just that awful bell, and me, making it up. I wanted you to be here so much."

He said nothing. She continued to weep, but the sobs were subsiding, the worst of her storm of grief just about over. After a little, he loosened his grip of her and she drew away, turning her face up to his. A lock of hair fell across her forehead, and he smoothed this back, and then reached for his clean handkerchief and gave it to her. He watched tenderly while she wiped her eyes, and lustily, like a child, blew her nose.

"But, Dan us, where have you been? What happened? Why didn't you

telephone?"

"We didn't get back to Edinburgh until yesterday at noon. The fishing was too good to leave, and I hadn't the heart to deny Roddy his fun. When I got home, my mother gave me your message. But every time I tried to call, the telephone here was engaged."

"It never stops ringing."

"In the end, I just said, to hell with it, and got into my mother's car and drove."

"You drove," she repeated. The significance of this took a second or two to sink in. "You *drove*? Yourself?"

"Yes. I can drive again. And I can drink myself silly if I so choose. Everything's all right. I'm not an epileptic and I never was one. It all started with a mistaken diagnosis by that doctor in Arkansas. I was ill. For a time I was very ill. But it was never epilepsy."

For a terrible moment, he thought she was about to burst into tears again. But all she did was to fling her arms about his neck and hug him so tightly that he wondered if he was about to choke to death. "Oh, Dan us, my darling, it's a miracle."

Gently he disentangled himself, but kept a hold of both her hands. "But that's not the end of it. It's just the beginning. A whole new start. For both of us. Because, whatever I do, I want us to do it together. I don't know what the hell it will be, and I still have nothing to offer you, but please, if you love me, don't let's ever be apart again."

"Oh, no. Don't let's. Ever." She had stopped crying, tears were forgotten, she was his own dear Antonia again. "We'll get that market garden. Somehow. Someday. And we'll find the money somewhere. ..."

"I really don't want you to go to London and be a model."

"I wouldn't if you made me. There must be other ways." All at once, she was struck by a brilliant idea. "I know. I can sell the earrings. Aunt Ethel's earrings. They're worth at least four thousand pounds ... I know it's not very much, but it would be a beginning, wouldn't it? It would give us something to start with.

And Penelope wouldn't mind. When she gave them to me, she said I could sell them if I wanted."

"Don't you want to keep them? To remember her by?"

"Oh, Danus, I don't need the earrings for remembrance. I have a thousand things to remember her by."

All the time they had been talking, the bell from the church tower had continued its tolling. Bong, Bong Bong, out across the countryside. Now, abruptly, it stopped.

They looked at each other. He said, "We must go. We have to be there. We mustn't be late."

"Yes, of course."

They stood up. Swiftly, composedly, she tidied her hair, smoothed her fingers across her cheeks. "Does it show that I've been crying?"

"Only a little. No one will remark upon it."

She turned away from the mirror. "I'm ready," she told him, and he took her hand, and together they went from the room.

As the family walked to church, the toll of the bell grew louder, clanging above them, silencing all other sounds from the village. Olivia saw the cars parked along the pavement's edge, the little stream of mourners making their way beneath the lychgate and up the path that wound between the ancient, leaning gravestones.

Bong. Bong. Bong.

She paused for a moment to exchange a word with Mr. Bedway, and then followed the others into the church. After the warm sunshine out of doors, the cold struck chill, from flagged floors and unheated stone. It was a little like walking into a cave, and there was a strong musty smell, suggestive of death-watch beetle and organ mould. But all was not gloom, for the girl from Pudley had done her work, and everywhere one looked stood profusions of spring flowers. As well, the church, being so small, was filled. This comforted Olivia, who had always found the sight of empty pews intensely depressing.

As they made their way down the aisle, the tolling abruptly stopped. In the ensuing silence, their footsteps clattered on the bare flags. The two front pews stood empty, and they took their places, filing in. Olivia, Nancy, George, and then Noel. This was the moment that Olivia had dreaded, for, at the altar steps, the coffin waited. In cowardly fashion, she averted her eyes and looked about her. Dotted amongst the sea of unfamiliar country faces ... the inhabitants, she supposed, of Temple Pudley, come to pay their last respects . . . she found others, known for years, and converged from far afield. The Atkinsons from Devon; Mr. Enderby of Enderby, Looseby & Thring; Roger Wimbush, the portraitist, who years ago, when he was an art student, had made his home in Lawrence Stern's old studio in the garden of Oakley Street. She saw Lalla and Willi Friedmann, distinguished as ever, with their pale, cultured refugee faces. She saw Louise Duchamp, immensely chic in inky black; Louise, the daughter of Charles and Chantal Rainier, and one of Penelope's oldest friends, who had made the long journey from Paris to England in order to be here. Louise looked up and caught Olivia's eye, and smiled. Olivia smiled back, touched that she had felt impelled to come so far, and grateful for her presence.

With the bells stilled, music now began, seeping into the dusty silence of the church. Mrs. Tillingham, as promised, was playing the organ. The Temple Pudley organ was not a fine instrument, being both breathless and aged, like an old man, but even these defects could not mar the cool perfection of the *Eine Kleine Nacht Musik*. Mozart. Mumma's favourite. Had Mrs. Tillingham known, or had she simply made an inspired guess?

She saw old Rose Piikington, nearing ninety but gallant as ever, wearing a black velvet cape and a violet straw hat so battered that it looked as though it had travelled around the world twice. Which it probably had. Rose's wrinkled nut of a face was tranquil; from it her faded eyes gazed out in peaceful acceptance of what had happened and what was about to happen. Simply to look at Rose made Olivia feel ashamed of her own cowardice. She faced forward, listened to the music, looked at last at Mumma's coffin. But could scarcely see it, because it was awash with flowers.

From the back of the church, from the open doorway, came the sounds of a small disturbance, and hushed voices. Then footsteps made their way swiftly down the aisle, and Olivia turned to see Antonia and Danus slip into the empty pew behind them.

"You made it."

Antonia leaned forward. She was, apparently, recovered, with colour back in her cheeks. "I'm sorry we're so late," she whispered.

"Just in time."

"Olivia . . . this is Danus."

Olivia smiled. "I know," she said.

Overhead, far above, the tower clock struck three.

With the service almost over, and a short tribute spoken, Mr. Tillingham announced the hymn. Mrs. Tillingham played the first few bars, and the congregation, with hymn-books at the ready, rose to their feet.

*For all the Saints who from their labours rest
Who thee by faith before the world confessed
Their name, O Jesu, be forever blest*

Alleluia

The villagers of Temple Pudley were familiar with the tune, and their voices, raised, caused the old worm-eaten rafters to ring. It wasn't perhaps the most suitable hymn for a funeral, but Olivia had chosen it because it was the only one she knew that Mumma really liked. She mustn't forget any of the things that Mumma really liked; not just lovely music, and having people to stay, and growing flowers, and ringing up for long chats just when you most hoped she would. But other things—like laughter, and fortitude and tolerance, and love. Olivia knew she must not let these qualities go from her life, just because Mumma had gone. Because, if she did, then the nicer side of her complex personality would shrivel and die, and she would be left with nothing but her inborn intelligence, and her relentless, driving ambition. She had never contemplated the security of marriage, but she needed men —if not as lovers, then as friends. To receive love, she must remain a woman prepared to give it, otherwise she would end up as a bitter and lonely old lady, with a cutting tongue and probably not a friend in the world.

But the next few months would not be easy. As long as Mumma was alive, she knew that some small part of herself had remained a child, cherished and adored. Perhaps you never completely grew up until your mother died.

*Thou was their Rock, their Fortress and their Might,
Thou, Lord, their Captain in the well-fought fight.*

She sang. Loudly. Not because she had a particularly strong voice, but because, like that child whistling in the dark, it helped to boost her courage.

Thou, in the darkness drear, their one true Light,

Alleluia

Nancy had succumbed to tears. All the way through the service she had kept them resolutely at bay, but all at once she was beyond caring, and let them flow. Her sobs were noisy, and doubtless embarrassing to others, but there was nothing she could do about them except, from time to time, noisily blow her nose. Soon she would have used up all the Kleenex she had stuffed, with some forethought, into her bag.

She wished, beyond all else, that she could have seen Mother again . . . or even just spoken to her . . . after that last, dreadful telephone conversation when Mother had called from Corn-wall, to wish them all a happy Easter. But Mother had behaved in the most extraordinary fashion, and some things, there was no doubt, were better said, aired and out in the open. But finally, Mother had hung up on Nancy, and before Nancy had either the time or the opportunity to put things straight between them, Mother had died.

Nancy did not blame herself. But lately, waking in the middle of the night, she had found herself strangely alone in the darkness, and weeping. She wept now, not minding if people saw, not caring if they listened to her grief. That grief was evident, and she was not ashamed. The tears flowed and she made no effort to stop them, and they flowed like water, damping down the hard, hot embers of her own unacknowledged guilt.

*O may Thy soldiers, faithful, true and bold
Fight as the Saints who nobly
fought of old And win, with them, the victor's crown of gold*

Alleluia

Noel did not join in the singing, did not even go through the motions of holding an open hymnal. He stood, at the end of the pew, motionless, with one hand in his jacket pocket and the other resting on the wooden rail in front of him. His handsome face showed no expression, and it was impossible for any person to imagine what he was thinking.

*Oh, blest communion! Fellowship Divine!
We feebly struggle, they in glory
shine.*

Mrs. Plackett, near the back of the church, raised her voice in joyful praise. Her hymnal was held high, her considerable chest outflung. It was a lovely service. Music, flowers, and now a rousing hymn . . . just what Mrs. Keeling would have enjoyed. And a good turn-out too. All the village had come. The Saw-combes, and Mr. and Mrs. Hodgkins from the Sudeley Arms. Mr. Kitson, the Bank Manager from Pudley, and Tom Hadley, who ran the newsagents, and a dozen or so others. And the family were holding up well,

all except for that Mrs. Chamberlain, sobbing away for all the world to hear. Mrs. Plackett did not believe in letting emotion show. Keep yourself to yourself had always been her motto. Which was one of the reasons she and Mrs. Keeling had always been such friends. A true friend, Mrs. Keeling had been. She was going to leave a real hole in Mrs. Plackett's life. Now she glanced around the crowded church, made a few mental calculations. How many of them would be coming back to the house for tea? Forty? Forty-five, perhaps. With a bit of luck, Mr. Plackett would have remembered to put the kettles on to boil.

Yet all are one in Thee, for all are Thine.

Alleluia.

She hoped there would be enough fruit-cake.

MR. ENDERBY

By a quarter past five the funeral tea was over, the rearguard of the stragglers had said goodbye and taken themselves home. Olivia, seeing them off, watched the last car turn the corner by the gate and then, in some relief, turned and went back into the house. The kitchen hummed with activity. Mr. Plackett and Danus, who had spent the last half-hour directing traffic and endeavouring to untangle a number of ineptly parked cars, had now moved indoors and were helping Mrs. Plackett and Antonia collect and wash up all the tea-things. Mrs. Plackett was at the sink, elbow-deep in suds. Mr. Plackett, obliging as ever, stood at her side and dried the silver teapot. The dishwasher whirred, Danus came through the door with another trayful of cups and saucers, and Antonia was getting the vacuum cleaner out of its cupboard.

Olivia felt unnecessary and at a loss. "What am I supposed to do?" she asked Mrs. Plackett.

"Not a thing." Mrs. Plackett did not turn from the sink; her reddened hands set saucers in the rack with the speed and accuracy of a conveyor belt. "Many hands make light work, I always say."

"It was a fantastic tea. And not a crumb of your fruit-cake left."

But Mrs. Plackett had neither the time nor the inclination to chat. "Why don't you go into the sitting room and take the weight off your feet? Mrs. Chamberlain and your brother and the other gentleman are there now. Another ten minutes and the dining room will be straight, and ready for your little meeting."

It was an excellent suggestion, and Olivia did not argue with it. She was very tired and her back ached from standing. Going through the hall, she thought about nipping up the stairs, soaking in a boiling bath, and then getting into bed, with cool sheets, soft pillows, and an absorbing book. Later, she promised herself. The day was not yet over. Later.

In the sitting room, already cleared of all traces of the tea-party, she found Noel, Nancy, and Mr. Enderby, all disposed in comfortable fashion, and making polite small talk. Nancy and Mr. Enderby sat in the armchairs on either side of the hearth, but Noel had taken up his usual position, with his back to the fire, his shoulders propped against the mantelshelf. As Olivia appeared, Mr. Enderby rose to his feet. He was a man in his early forties, but with his bald head, rimless spectacles, and sober clothes, he appeared much older. Despite this, his manner was easy and relaxed, and during the course of the afternoon Olivia had observed him making himself known to the other guests, replenishing teacups and handing around sandwiches and cake. As well, he had spent some time talking to Danus, which was nice, because Nancy and Noel had chosen to ignore him. The holiday in Cornwall at Mumma's expense and the wild extravagance of The Sands Hotel were obviously still rankling.

"I am sorry, Mr. Enderby, I'm afraid we're running a little late." She sank thankfully into the corner of the sofa, and Mr. Enderby once more sat down.

"No matter. I am in no hurry."

From the dining room came sounds of the vacuum cleaner being wielded. "They've just got to clean up the crumbs and then we can start. How about you, Noel? Have you got some pressing date in London?"

"Not this evening."

"And Nancy? You're not pushed for time?"

"Not really. But I have to collect the children, and I promised that I wouldn't be late." Nancy, having blubbed her way through most of the service, was now recovered and looked quite cheerful again. Perhaps because she had removed her hat. George was already gone, having taken his leave in the churchyard, sent on his way by Nancy with loud admonitions to drive carefully and to give her regards to the Archdeacon, both of which he had promised to do. "And I'd like to be back before dark. I hate driving, by myself, in the dark."

The sound of the vacuum cleaner ceased. The next moment, the door opened and Mrs. Plackett's head, still wearing her funeral hat, came around the edge of it.

"That's it then, Miss Keeling."

"Thank you so much, Mrs. Plackett."

"If it's all right by you, Mr. Plackett and me are on our way home."

"Of course. And I can't thank you enough."

"It's been a pleasure. See you tomorrow."

She went. Nancy frowned. "Tomorrow's Sunday. Why is she coming tomorrow?"

"She's going to help me clear out Mumma's room." Olivia stood up. "Shall we go?"

She led the way into the dining room. All was orderly, and a green baize cloth had been draped over the table.

Noel raised his eyebrows. "Looks like a board meeting." Nobody remarked on this observation. They sat down, Mr. Enderby taking his place at the head of the table, with Noel and Olivia on either side of him. Nancy sat by Noel. Mr. Enderby opened his brief-case and took out various papers, which he laid before him. It was all very formal, and he was in charge. They waited for him to begin.

He cleared his throat. "To begin with, I am very grateful that you all agreed to stay on after your mother's funeral. I hope it hasn't inconvenienced any of you. A formal will-reading is, of course, not strictly necessary, but it did seem to me a fortuitous opportunity, while you are all together under one roof, to let you know how your mother wished to dispose of her estate and, if necessary, to explain any points that you might not fully understand. Now . .

." From the papers before him, Mr. Enderby took up a long envelope and drew out the heavy, folded document. Unfolding it, he spread it on the table. Olivia saw Noel avert his eyes, inspect his fingernails, as though anxious not to be seen glancing out of the corner of his eye, like a schoolboy cheating in examinations.

Mr. Enderby adjusted his spectacles. "This is the last will and testament of Penelope Sophia Keeling nee Stern, dated the eighth of July, 1980." He glanced up. "If you don't mind, I shan't read verbatim, but will simply outline your mother's wishes as we come to them." They all nodded agreement to this. He continued. "To begin with, there are two bequests outwith the family. To Mrs. Florence Plackett, 43 Hodges Road, Pudley, Gloucestershire, the sum of two thousand pounds. And to Mrs. Doris Penberth, 7 Wharf Lane, Porthkerris, Cornwall, five thousand pounds."

"How splendid," said Nancy, for once approving of her mother's generosity. "Mrs. Plackett's been such a treasure. What Mother would have done without her, I really can't imagine."

"And Doris, too," Olivia said, "Doris was Mumma's dearest friend. They went through the war together; they became very close."

"I believe," said Mr. Enderby, "that I have met Mrs. Plackett, but I don't think Mrs. Penberth was with us today."

"No. She couldn't come. She telephoned to explain. Her husband was unwell and she didn't feel that she could leave him. But she was dreadfully upset."

"In that case, I shall write to both these ladies and let them know of the bequests." He made a note. "Now. With that disposed of, we come to family matters." Noel leaned back in his chair, felt in his breast pocket, and took out his silver pen. He began to play with this, loosening the cap with his thumb, and then snapping it shut again. "To begin with, there are specific items of furniture which she wanted each of you to have. For Nancy, the Regency sofa table in the bedroom. I believe your mother used it as a dressing-table. For Olivia, the desk in the sitting room, once the property of Mrs. Keeling's father, the late Lawrence Stern. And for Noel, the dining room table and set

of eight dining room chairs. Which, I imagine, we are sitting on now."

Nancy turned to her brother. "Where will you put them in that rabbit-warren of a flat? There's not room to swing a cat in it."

"Perhaps I shall buy another flat."

"It will have to have a dining room."

"It will," he told her shortly. "Please go on, Mr. Enderby."

But Nancy was not finished. "Is that *all*?"

"I don't understand, Mrs. Chamberlain."

"I mean . . . what about her jewellery?"

Here we go, thought Olivia. "Mumma didn't have any jewellery, Nancy. She sold her rings years ago to pay our father's debts."

Nancy bridled as she always did when Olivia spoke in that hard voice about dear, dead Daddy. There was no reason to be so blunt, to say such things in front of Mr. Enderby.

"What about Aunt Ethel's earrings? The ones Aunt Ethel left her? They must be worth at least four or five thousand pounds. Is there no mention of them?"

"She's already given them away," Olivia told her. "To Anto-nia."

A silence followed this pronouncement. It was broken by Noel, who put his elbow on the table and ran his fingers, in despairing fashion, through his hair. He said, "Oh, dear God." Across the green baize Olivia met her sister's eyes. Very blue, staring, bright with outrage. A flush crept into Nancy's cheeks. She spoke at last. "That cannot be true?"

"I'm afraid"—Mr. Enderby's tones were measured—"that it is true. Mrs. Keeling gave the earrings to Antonia while they were on holiday together in

Cornwall. She told me about the gift the day she came to see me in London, the day before she died. She was adamant that there should be no argument about these, nor question of rightful possession."

"How did *you* know?" Nancy asked Olivia, "that Mother had done such a thing?"

"Because she wrote and told me."

"They should have gone to Melanie."

"Nancy, Antonia was very good to Mumma, and Mumma was very fond of her. Antonia made the last few weeks of her life intensely happy. And she went to Cornwall with her, and kept her company, which none of us could be bothered to do."

"You mean, we should be grateful for *that*? If you ask me, the boot's on the other foot. ..."

"Antonia is *grateful* . . ."

The argument, which might have gone on for ever, was brought to an end by Mr. Enderby, once more discreetly clearing his throat. Nancy subsided into outraged silence, and Olivia breathed a sigh of relief. For the moment it was over, but she was fairly certain that the matter would never rest, and the fate of Aunt Ethel's earrings would be brought up and worried over far into the future.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Enderby. We're holding you up. Please carry on."

He sent her a grateful look, and resumed business. "Now, we come to the residue of the estate. When Mrs. Keeling drew up this will, she made it very clear to me that she wished there to be no disagreement among the three of you as to the disposal of her property. Accordingly, we decided that everything should be sold, and the sum realized divided among you all. In order to do this, it was necessary to appoint trustees of her estate, and it was agreed that the executors, Enderby, Looseby and Thring, should take this on.

Is that quite clear, and quite acceptable? Good. In that case . . ." He began to read. "I devise and bequeath all my estate, both real and personal, unto my trustees upon trust to sell, call in, and convert the same into money. Yes, Mrs. Chamberlain?"

"I don't know what that means."

"It means the residue of Mrs. Reeling's estate, which includes this house and its contents, her portfolio of stocks and shares, and her current bank account."

"All sold, and then added together, and then divided into three?"

"Exactly so. After, of course, outstanding debts, taxes and stamp duties, and funeral expenses have been paid."

"It sounds dreadfully complicated."

Noel reached into a pocket and produced his diary. He pressed it open at a blank page, removed the cap from his pen. "Perhaps, Mr. Enderby, you could elucidate, and we can make some sort of a rough calculation."

"Very well. We'll start with the house. Podmore's Thatch, with its outbuildings and mature garden, is worth, I imagine, no less than two hundred and fifty thousand. Your mother paid a hundred and twenty thousand for it, but that was five years ago, and the value of property has risen considerably since then. As well, it is a highly desirable piece of real estate, and within easy commuting reach of London. The contents of the house I cannot be so certain of. Maybe ten thousand pounds? Then, at the moment, Mrs. Reeling's share portfolio stands at roughly twenty thousand."

Noel whistled. "As much as that? I had no idea."

"Nor me," said Nancy. "Where did all that money come from?"

"It was the residue from the sale of the house in Oakley Street. Carefully invested, after your mother had bought Podmore's Thatch."

"I see."

"And her current account?" Noel had listed all these figures in his diary, and was obviously itching to add them up and get a final grand total.

"Her current account, at the moment, stands high, with the injection of the hundred thousand pounds she received from the sale of the two panels painted by her father, Lawrence Stern, and which were sold to a private buyer by Boothby's. All of this, of course, will be subject to duties and tax."

"Even so . . ." Noel did his swift calculation. "That works out at over three hundred and fifty thousand." Nobody remarked upon this staggering sum. In silence, he screwed the cap back onto his pen, placed it on the table, and leaned back in his chair. "All things considered, girls, not a bad score."

"I am pleased," said Mr. Enderby drily, "that you are satisfied."

"So that's it." Noel stretched hugely, and made as if to rise from his chair. "What do you say that I go and get us all a drink? You'd like a whisky, Mr. Enderby?"

"Very much. But not at this moment. I'm afraid our business is not quite finished."

Noel frowned. "But what else is there to discuss?"

"There is a codicil to your mother's will, dated the thirtieth of April, nineteen-eighty-four. This, of course, re-dates the former will, but as it changes nothing which has already been stated, this is irrelevant."

Olivia thought back. "The thirtieth of April. That was the day she came to London. The day before she died."

"Exactly so."

"She came expressly to see you, Mr. Enderby?"

"I believe so."

"To draw up this codicil?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps you had better read it to us."

"I am about to, Miss Keeling. But before I do so I think I should mention that it is written in Mrs. Keeling's handwriting, and signed by her in the presence of my secretary and my clerk." He commenced to read aloud. "To Danus Muirfield, Tractonnan's Cottage, Sawcombe's Farm, Pudley, Gloucestershire, I leave fourteen rough oil sketches of major works painted by my father, Lawrence Stern, between the years eighteen-ninety and nineteen-ten. These are titled as follows: *The Terrazzo Garden, The Lover's Approach, Boatman's Courtship, Pandora . . .*"

The oil sketches. Noel had suspected their existence, confided these suspicions to Olivia; had searched his mother's house for them, but drawn a blank. Now, she turned her head and looked, across the table, at her brother. He sat there, frozen to stillness, and intensely pale. A nervous tic jerked the angle of his jaw-bone. She wondered how long he would remain silent before exploding into furious protest.

". . . *The Water Carriers, A Market in Tunis, The Love Letter . . .*"

Where had they been, all these years? Who had possessed them? Where had they come from?

". . . *The Spirit of Spring, Shepherd's Morning, Amoretta's Garden ...*"

Noel could last out no longer. "Where were they?" His voice was harsh with outrage. Mr. Enderby, so rudely interrupted, re-mained admirably calm. He had probably anticipated just such an outburst. He glanced up at Noel over the top of his spectacles. "Perhaps you will allow me to finish, Mr. Keeling, and then I will explain."

There was an uncomfortable pause. "Go on, then."

Mr. Enderby, without hurry, continued. "*The Sea-God, The Souvenir, The White Roses, and The Hiding Place*. These works are at present in the possession of Mr. Roy Brookner, of Booth-by's, Fine Art Dealers, New Bond Street, London W1, but are scheduled for sale in New York at the first possible opportunity. If I should die before this sale takes place, then they are for Danus Muirfield either to keep or to sell, according to his personal wishes." Mr. Enderby sat back in his chair and waited for comment.

"Where were they?"

Nobody said anything. The atmosphere had become uncomfortably tense. And then Noel repeated his question. "Where were they?"

"For a number of years, your mother kept them hidden at the back of the wardrobe in her bedroom. She placed them there herself, and wallpapered them into position, so that they should not be found."

"She didn't want us to know about them?"

"I don't think her children really came into it. She was hiding them from her husband. She found the sketches in her father's old studio at Oakley Street. At that time, there were certain financial difficulties, and she didn't want the sketches to be sold in order, simply, to raise some cash."

"When did they finally come to light?"

"She asked Mr. Brookner to come to Podmore's Thatch, to appraise and possibly buy two other works painted by your grandfather. It was then that she showed him the portfolio of sketches."

"And when did you first hear of their existence?"

"Mrs. Keeling told me the whole story the day that she drew up the codicil. The day before she died. Mrs. Chamberlain, did you want to say something . . . ?"

"Yes. I haven't understood a word of what you're saying. I don't know what you're talking about. Nobody's ever mentioned these sketches to me, and this is the very first I've ever heard of them. And what is all the fuss about? Why does Noel seem to think they're so important?"

"They're important," Noel told her with weary patience, "because they're valuable."

"Rough sketches? I thought those would be things you threw away."

"Not if you had any sense."

"Well, how much are they worth?"

"Four, five thousand each. And there are fourteen of them. *Fourteen*," he repeated, shouting the word at Nancy as though she were deaf. "So work that sum out, if you're capable of such advanced arithmetic, which I doubt."

Olivia, in her head, had already worked it out. Seventy thousand. Despite Noel's appalling behaviour, she knew a pang of sympathy for him. He had been so certain that they were there, somewhere, at Podmore's Thatch. Had even spent one long, dis-mally wet Saturday incarcerated in the loft, on the pretence of clearing out his mother's rubbish, but, actually, searching for them. She wondered if Penelope had known the true reason for his industry and, if so, what had prompted her to keep silent. The answer was probably that Noel was his father all over again, and Penelope did not completely trust him. And so she had said nothing, but given them into the custody of Mr. Brookner, and finally, the day before she died, decided to leave them to Danus.

But *why*? For what reason?

"Mr. Enderby . . ." It was the first time she had spoken out since the subject of the codicil was raised, and Mr. Enderby appeared relieved to hear her quiet voice, and gave her his full attention. ". . . did she give any reason for leaving the sketches to Danus Muirfield? I mean"—she chose her words carefully,

not wishing to appear resentful or greedy—"they were obviously very special and personal possessions . . . and she's only known him for a short time."

"I can't, of course, answer that question because I don't know what the answer is. But she was obviously very fond of the young man, and I think wished to help him. I believe he wants to start some small business, and will be grateful for the capital."

"Can we contest it?" Noel asked.

Olivia turned on him. "We're not contesting anything," she told him flatly. "Even if it were legally possible, I would have nothing to do with it."

Nancy, who had been struggling with mental arithmetic, now re-entered the discussion. "But five fourteens are seventy. Do you mean that young man gets seventy thousand pounds?"

"If he sells the sketches, Mrs. Chamberlain, yes."

"But surely, that's dreadfully wrong. She hardly knew him. He was her *gardener*." It took Nancy only moments to work herself up into a state of high agitation. "It's outrageous. I was right about him all along. I always said he had some sinister hold over Mother. I said that to you, didn't I, Noel, over the telephone, when I told you about her giving *The Shell Seekers* away? And Aunt Ethel's earrings . . . given away. And now this. It's the last straw. Everything. Just given away. She can't have been in her right mind. She'd been ill, and her judgement was affected. There's no other possible explanation. There must be some action we can take."

Noel, for once, was on Nancy's side. "I, for one, am not about to sit back and let this all wash over me ..."

". . . she obviously wasn't in her right mind . . ."

". . . there's too much at stake . . ."

". . . just taking advantage ..."

Olivia could bear it no longer. "Stop it. Be quiet." She spoke quietly, but with a controlled fury which the editorial staff of *Venus* had learned, over the years, both to fear and respect. Noel and Nancy, however, had never heard this voice before. They stared at her in some astonishment but, taken off their guard, were startled to silence. In the ensuing quiet, Olivia began to speak.

"I don't want to hear any more. It's all over. Mumma's dead. We buried her today. Hearing you both wrangling away like a couple of mangy dogs, one would think you'd forgotten that. You can't think, or speak, of anything but what you're going to get out of her. And now we know, because Mr. Enderby's just told us. And Mumma was never out of her mind ... on the contrary, she was the most intelligent woman I ever knew. All right, so she was generous to a fault, but never unthinkingly so. She was practical. She planned ahead. How else do you think she managed, all those years we were growing up, with scarcely two pennies to rub together, and a husband who gambled away every brass farthing he could lay his hands on? As far as I'm concerned, I'm more than content, and I think you should be too. She gave us all a magic childhood, and a terrific start in life, and now that she's dead, it's evident that each of us is comfortably provided for. As for the earrings"—she looked at Nancy in cold accusation—"if she wanted Antonia to have them, and not you or Melanie, then I am certain she had good reason." Nancy's eyes dropped. She picked at a scrap of fluff on the sleeve of her jacket. "And if Danus gets the sketches, and not Noel, then I'm certain there was good reason for that as well." Noel opened his mouth, and then changed his mind and shut it again, without saying a word. "She made her own will. She did what she wanted to do. And that is all that matters, and nobody is to say one more word."

Without once raising her voice, she had said it all. In the uncomfortable pause that followed, she sat waiting for Noel or Nancy to offer objections to the tongue-lashing she had delivered to them. After a little, across the table, Noel shifted in his chair. Olivia sent a dagger-glance in his direction, tensed for further infighting, but it seemed that he had nothing to say. In a gesture that admitted defeat more clearly than any spoken word, he put up a hand to rub his eyes, and then to smooth back his dark hair. He straightened his shoulders, adjusted the knot of his black silk tie. Self-possession returned to

him. He even managed a wry smile. "After that little outburst," he said to the company in general, "I think we all deserve that drink." He rose to his feet. "A whisky for you, Mr. Enderby?"

And so, smoothly, he brought the meeting to a close, and, as well, broke the tension. Mr. Enderby, obviously much relieved, accepted Noel's offer, and began collecting his papers together and stowing them away in his brief-case. Nancy, murmuring something about powdering her nose, gathered her tattered dignity about her, picked up her handbag, and left the room. Noel, in search of ice, went after her. Olivia and the lawyer were left alone.

She said, "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. It was a splendid speech."

"You don't think Mumma was out of her mind, do you?"

"Not for an instant."

"You spoke to Danus this afternoon. Did he strike you as a devious character?"

"The very opposite. I would say a young man of integrity."

"But still, I would really like to know what prompted her to leave him such an enormous legacy."

"I don't suppose, Miss Keeling, that we shall ever know."

She accepted this. "When will you tell him?"

"Whenever is a suitable time."

"Do you think now is a suitable time?"

"Yes, if it would be possible to speak to him privately."

Olivia smiled. "You mean, after Noel and Nancy have gone."

"It might be better to wait till then."

"Won't that make you rather late getting home?"

"Perhaps I could phone my wife."

"Of course. I want Danus to know as soon as possible because he'll probably be around tomorrow, and it might make things a little constrained between us, if I know and he doesn't."

"I perfectly understand."

Noel returned, carrying the ice bucket. He said, "Olivia, there's a message for you on the kitchen table. Danus and Antonia have gone to have a drink at the Sudeley Arms. They'll be back at half past six."

He came out with this quite naturally, saying their names, for the first time, without resentment or venom. Which was, under the circumstances, reassuring. Olivia turned to Mr. Enderby. "Can you wait till then?"

"Of course."

"I am grateful. You've been endlessly patient with us."

"Part of my job, Miss Keeling. Just part of my job."

Having spent some time upstairs, combing her hair, powdering her nose, and generally pulling herself together, Nancy rejoined them in the dining room and announced that she was on her way home.

Olivia was surprised. "Aren't you going to stay for a drink with us?"

"No. Better not. I've a long way to go. Don't want any accidents. Goodbye, Mr. Enderby, and thank you for your help. Please don't get up. Goodbye, Noel. Safe journey back to London. You stay where you are, Olivia, I'll see

myself out."

But Olivia put down her glass and went with her sister. Out of doors, they found the flawless spring day sinking into cool and scented evening. The sky was high and clear, stained pink towards the west. A breeze rustled the topmost branches of trees, and from the hill behind the village came, clearly, the voices of sheep and their lambs.

Nancy looked about her. "How lucky we were with the weather. It just made everything possible. It went well, Olivia. You arranged everything perfectly."

She was, it was apparent, doing her very best to be agreeable.

Olivia said, "Thank you."

"A lot of work. I realize that."

"Yes. It took some organizing. And there are still one or two details to be seen to. A headstone for Mumma's grave. But we can talk about that some other time."

Nancy got into her car. "When do you go back to London?"

"Tomorrow evening. I have to be in the office on Monday morning."

"I'll be in touch then."

"Do." Olivia hesitated, and then remembered her good resolutions of the afternoon. Mumma had never let any of her children go without a goodbye kiss. She leaned through the open window of the car and kissed Nancy on the cheek. "Drive safely," she told her sister, and then, feeling reckless (in for a penny, in for a pound), added, "My love to George and the children."

Going back indoors, she found that the two men had left the dining room and returned to the comfort of the sitting room. Noel had drawn the curtains and made up the fire, but once he had finished his whisky and soda, he looked at his watch, got to his feet, and said that it was time he took his leave. Mr.

Enderby suggested that this might be a good moment to telephone his wife, so Olivia left him doing this and accompanied Noel to the front door.

She said, "I feel as though I've done nothing but see people off all day."

"You'll be tired. Better have an early night."

"I think probably we're all tired. It's been a long day." It was getting cooler. She folded her arms against a shiver of chill. "I'm sorry about the way things worked out, Noel. It would have been nice for you to have the sketches. God knows you worked hard enough looking for them. But as it is, there's not a mortal thing you can do about it. And, admit it, we've none of us done so badly. This house will go for a bomb. So don't brood on imagined injustices. Otherwise you'll end up with the worst sort of spiritual indigestion, all twisted and bitter."

He smiled. Without much joy, but still a smile.

"It's a hell of a pill to have to swallow, but it seems I have no alternative. And yet I should like to know why she never told us about those sketches, never mentioned their existence. And why did she leave them to that young man?"

Olivia shrugged. "She was fond of him? Sorry for him? Wanted to help him?"

"There's something more to it than that."

"Maybe," she admitted. She gave him his goodbye kiss. "But I don't suppose we'll ever find out."

He got into the Jaguar and drove away, and Olivia stayed where she stood, listening to the receding din of his car, waiting until the roar of the faulty exhaust died away into the still of the evening and could be heard no longer. Country sounds once more took over—the sheep from the sloping fields across the road, the rising wind, stirring high branches, a dog barking. She heard brisk footsteps approaching from the village, and young voices. Danus and Antonia, returning from the Sudeley Arms. Their heads appeared over the top of the wall, and as they came through the open gateway, she saw that

Danus had his arm around Antonia's shoulders, and Antonia had wound a scarlet muffler around her neck, and her cheeks were pink. She looked up and saw Olivia waiting for them.

"Olivia. What are you doing, standing out here on your own?"

"Noel's just left. I heard you coming. Have you had a good time?"

"We just went for a drink. I hope you didn't mind. I've never been inside the pub before. It's lovely. Really old-fashioned, and Danus played darts with the postman."

"Did you win?" Olivia asked him.

"No. I was hopeless. I had to stand him a pint of Guinness."

Together they made their way back into the house. In the warm kitchen, Antonia unwound her muffler. "Is the family meeting over?"

"Yes. And Nancy's gone too. But Mr. Enderby's still here." She turned to Danus. "He wants a word with you."

Danus appeared to find this hard to believe. "*With me?*"

"Yes. He's in the sitting room. Perhaps you'd better not keep him waiting because the poor man wants to get home to his wife."

"But what's he got to say to me?"

"I've no idea," Olivia fibbed. "Why don't you go and find out?"

Looking bemused, he went. The door closed behind him.

"Why on earth does he want to talk to Danus?" Antonia's expression was one of deep apprehension. "You don't suppose it's something dreadful?"

Olivia leaned against the edge of the kitchen table. "No, I don't suppose so for

a moment." Antonia, however, did not look convinced. Not wishing to continue the conversation, Olivia firmly changed the subject. "Now, what are we going to eat for supper? Is Danus staying?"

"If you don't mind."

"Of course I don't mind. He'd better stay the night as well. We'll find a bed for him somewhere."

"That would make everything much easier. He hasn't lived in his cottage for two weeks, and it'll be all damp and cheerless."

"Tell me what happened in Edinburgh. Did he get a clean bill of health?"

"Yes, he did. He's all right, Olivia. He's well. He's not an epileptic and he never was one."

"That's wonderful news."

"Yes. Like a miracle."

"He means a lot to you, doesn't he?"

"Yes."

"And you, I think, to him."

Antonia, radiant, nodded.

"So what plans have you made?"

"He wants to start a nursery garden ... go into business on his own. And I'm going to help him. We're going to do it together."

"How about his job with Autogarden?"

"He's going back to work on Monday, and giving them a month's notice."

They've been so good to him, about all this time he's had to take off, he feels that working out his notice is the very least he can do."

"And after that?"

"We'll take off and go and look for some place we can afford to rent or buy. Somerset, maybe. Or Devon. But I meant what I said about staying here, and we won't go until Podmore's Thatch has been sold and the furniture taken away. Like I said, I can show people round, and Danus can take care of the garden."

"What a frightfully good idea. But he mustn't go back to his cottage, he must stay here with you. I'll be much happier knowing that he's around and you aren't on your own. And he can have the use of Mumma's car, and you can keep me in touch as to how many prospective clients come rolling in. And I'll keep Mrs. Plackett on, if she's willing, until such time as the house is sold. She can give the place a good spring-clean, and she'll be company for you while Danus is rotovating other people's gardens." She smiled as though she had planned it all herself. "How neatly it's all worked out."

"There's just one thing. I shan't be coming back to Lon-don."

"I gathered that."

"You were so sweet to say you'd help me, and I was really grateful, but I wouldn't have been any good as a model. I'm far too self-conscious."

"You're probably right. You'll be much happier in a pair of wellies with your fingernails full of mud." They laughed. "You are happy, aren't you, Antonia?"

"Yes. Happier than I ever thought I'd be again. It's been a funny sort of day. Tremendously happy and dreadfully sad all at the same time. But somehow I think Penelope would have under-stood. I dreaded the funeral. Cosmo's was the only other I'd ever been to, and that was so shatteringly awful that I dreaded going to another. But this afternoon was quite different. More of a celebration, really."

"That's the way I wanted it to be. That's the way I planned it. And now . . ."
Olivia yawned. ". . . it's all safely over. Fin-ished."

"You look tired."

"You're the second person who's told me that this evening. It usually means I'm looking old."

"You don't look old. Go upstairs and have a bath. Don't worry about supper. I'll cook supper. There's some soup in the larder and lamb chops in the refrigerator. If you like, I'll bring up a little tray and you can have it in bed."

"I'm not as old and tired as that." Olivia pushed herself away from the table and arched her aching back. "But I will go and get into a bath. If Mr. Enderby leaves before I appear again, will you give him my apologies?"

"Of course."

"And say goodbye to him for me. Tell him I'll be in touch."

Five minutes later, when Danus and Mr. Enderby, their business over, came into the kitchen, Antonia was at the sink scraping carrots. She turned from the sink to smile at them, waiting for something to be said; for one of them to explain what it was they had been talking about. But neither did, and in the face of such masculine solidarity she hadn't the nerve to ask. Instead she gave Mr. Enderby Olivia's message.

"She's rather tired, and went up to have a bath. But she told me to say goodbye to you, and to apologize, and she hopes you'll understand."

"But of course."

"She says she'll be in touch."

"Thank you for telling me. And now I must be on my way. My wife is expecting me home for dinner." He shifted his brief-case to his left hand. "Goodbye, Antonia."

"Oh . . ." Caught unawares, Antonia hastily wiped her hand on her apron.
"Goodbye, Mr. Enderby."

"And the best of luck."

"Thank you."

He took himself off, striding out through the door, with Danus behind him. Antonia, left on her own, returned to her carrot scraping, but her mind was not on her work. Why had he wished her the best of luck, and what on earth was happening? Danus had not appeared particularly crestfallen, so perhaps it was something nice. Perhaps—happy thought—Mr. Enderby had taken a liking to Danus, as they chatted over the teacups, and was offering to help them raise a bit of cash to help buy their nursery garden. It seemed unlikely, but for what other reason had he wished to speak to him . . . ?

She heard Mr. Enderby's car drive away. She stopped scraping and leaned against the sink, waiting, with the knife in one hand and the carrot in the other, for Danus to return.

"What did he say to you?" she asked, before he had even got through the door. "Why did he want to talk to you?"

Danus removed the knife and the carrot, set them on the draining board, and took her in his arms.

"I have something to tell you."

"What?"

"You're not going to have to sell Aunt Ethel's earrings."

"Yoo-hoo!"

"Mrs. Plackett?"

"Where are you?"

"Up here, in Mumma's bedroom."

Mrs. Plackett climbed the stairs.

"Made a start, have you?"

"Not really. I'm just trying to decide how we're going to do it. I don't think there's going to be anything worth keeping. All Mumma's clothes were so old and so unconventional I can't imagine anyone would want them. I've got these trash-bags. We'll just fill them and leave them all out for the dustbin men."

"Mrs. Tillingham's having a jumble sale next month. In aid of the Organ Fund."

"Well. We'll see. I'll let you decide. Now, perhaps you could empty the wardrobe, and I'll start in on the chest of drawers."

Mrs. Plackett set to work, flinging wide the doors of the wardrobe, and commencing to unload armfuls of shabby and dearly familiar garments. As she laid them across the bed . . . some so well-worn as to be threadbare, Olivia averted her eyes. It seemed indecent even to look. She had dreaded this sad task, and it seemed that it was going to be even more heart-rending than she had anticipated. Encouraged by Mrs. Plackett's down-to-earth presence, she went on her knees and opened the bottom drawer. Sweaters and cardigans, much darned at the elbow. A white Shetland baby shawl; a navy-blue guernsey which Mumma used to wear for gardening.

As they laboured, "What's going to happen to the house then?" Mrs. Plackett inquired.

"It's going to be put on the market and sold. It's what Mumma wished, and none of us would want to live here anyway. But Antonia and Danus are going to live here, and show people round, and generally keep things going until such time as it is sold. When that happens, we'll get rid of the furniture."

"Antonia and Danus?" Mrs. Plackett, nodding sagely to herself, considered the implications of this. "That's" very nice."

"And afterwards, they're going to go off and look for some bit of land they can rent or buy. They want to start a nursery garden together."

"Sounds to me," said Mrs. Plackett, "as though they're gathering twigs. Where are they, by the way? Didn't see either of them when I came into the house."

"They went to church."

"They did?"

"You sound approving, Mrs. Plackett."

"It's nice when young people go to church. Doesn't often happen these days. And I'm pleased that they're going to be together. Do lovely for each other, I've always thought. Mind, they're young enough. But for all that, they seem to have their heads screwed on. What about this?"

Olivia looked. Mumma's old boat cape. She had a sudden flash of piercing memory. Mumma and the young Antonia arriving at Ibiza Airport; Mumma wearing the cape, and Antonia running to throw herself into Cosmo's arms. It all seemed dreadfully long ago.

She said, "That's too good to throw away. Put it by for the church jumble."

But Mrs. Plackett appeared reluctant to do this. "Thick and warm as anything it is. Years of wear in it yet."

"Then you have it. It'll keep you cosy on your bicycle."

"That's very kind of you, Miss Keeling. I'd be grateful." She laid it over a chair. "I'll think of your mother every time I wear it."

Another drawer. Underclothes, night-dresses, woollen tights, belts, scarves; a Chinese silk shawl, lavishly fringed and embroidered with scarlet peonies. A black lace mantilla.

The wardrobe was nearly empty. Mrs. Plackett reached into its depths. "Just look at this!" She held it out, still on its padded hanger. A dress, youthful and skimpy, made of some cheap material that hung limply. A red dress, patterned with white daisies, with a square neckline and bulky pads in the shoulders. "I've never seen this before."

"Neither have I. I wonder why Mumma kept *that*. Looks like something she might have worn during the war. Throw it out, Mrs. Plackett."

The top drawer. Creams and lotions, emery boards, old scent bottles, a box of powder, a swansdown puff. A string of glass beads the colour of amber. Earrings. Worthless scraps of junk jewellery.

And then the shoes. All her shoes. Shoes were the worst of all, more intensely personal than anything else. Olivia became increasingly ruthless. The trash-bags bulged.

Finally, painfully, all was done. Mrs. Plackett knotted tight the plastic bags, and between them they thumped them down the stairs and out of doors to where the dustbins stood.

"They'll be collected tomorrow morning. And that'll be the end of it for you."

Back in the kitchen, Mrs. Plackett put on her coat.

"I can't thank you enough, Mrs. Plackett." Olivia watched as Mrs. Plackett carefully folded her boat cape, packed it into a carrier-bag. "I couldn't have faced it on my own."

"Very pleased to be able to help, I'm sure. Well, I must be off. See to Mr. Plackett's dinner. Have a safe journey back to London, Miss Keeling, and you take care of yourself. Try and have a bit of a rest. It's been a busy weekend."

"I'll keep in touch, Mrs. Plackett."

"That's right. And come back and see us. I wouldn't like to think I wasn't going to see you again."

She mounted her bicycle and rode away, a sturdy upright figure, with the carrier-bag dangling from her handlebars.

Olivia went back upstairs into Mumma's room. Stripped of all personal possessions, it stood unbelievably empty. Before long, Podmore's Thatch would be sold, and this room would belong to another person. There would be other furniture, other clothes, other scents, other voices, other laughter. She sat on the bed, and saw, beyond the window, the fresh green leaves of the flowering chestnut. Hidden somewhere in its branches, the thrush was singing.

She looked about her. Saw the bedside table, with its white china lamp and pleated parchment shade. The table had a little drawer. They had overlooked this drawer and never got around to clearing it. She opened it now and found a bottle of aspirins, a single button, the stub of a pencil, an out-of-date diary. And, at the back, a book.

She reached into the drawer and took it out. A thin book, bound in blue. *Autumn Journal* by Louis MacNeice. It bulged with some bulky marker, and, where this had been inserted, fell open of its own accord. There she found the wad of thin yellow paper, tightly folded ... a letter perhaps? And a photograph. The photograph was of a man. She glanced at it and then laid it aside, and started to unfold the letter, but was diverted by a passage of poetry that leaped to her eye from the pages of the book, much as a remembered name will leap from a sheet of newsprint. . . .

*September has come, it is hers
Whose vitality leaps in the autumn,
Whose nature prefers
Trees without leaves and a fire in the fireplace.
So I gave her this month and the next
Though the whole of my year should be hers who has rendered already*

*So many of its days intolerable or perplexed But so many more so happy.
Who has left a scent on my life, and left my walls Dancing over and over with
her shadow Whose hair is twined in all my waterfalls And all of London
littered with remembered kisses.*

The words were not new to her. As a student at Oxford, Olivia had discovered MacNeice, become hooked, and voraciously devoured everything that he had ever written. And yet now, after the passage of many years, she found herself as freshly touched and moved as at her first encounter with the poem. She read it again, and then set the book down. What had been its significance to Mumma? She took up the photograph once more.

A man. In some sort of uniform but bareheaded. He turned, smiling at the photographer, as though caught unawares, and a coil of climbing rope was looped across his shoulder. His hair was ruffled, and in the far distance lay the long line of the sea's horizon. A man. Unknown to Olivia, and yet, in some odd way, familiar. She frowned. A resemblance? Not so much a resemblance as a reminder. But of whom? Someone . . . ?

But of course. And once recognized, obvious. Danus Muirfield. Not his features, nor his eyes, but other, more subtle likenesses. The shape of his head, the lift of his chin. The unexpected warmth of his smile.

Was this man, then, the answer to the question to which neither Mr. Enderby, nor Noel, nor Olivia had been able to find an answer?

By now deeply intrigued, she took up the letter and unfolded the fragile pages. The paper was lined, and the writing scholarly, with letters neatly formed by a broad-nibbed pen.

*Somewhere in England
May 20th, 1944*

My darling Penelope,

Over the last few weeks I have settled down a dozen times to write to you. On each occasion I have got no further than the first four lines, only to be

interrupted by some telephone call, loud hailer, knock on the door, or urgent summons of one sort or another.

But at last has come a moment in this benighted place when I can be fairly certain of an hour of quiet. Your letters have all safely come and are a source of joy. I carry them around like a lovesick schoolboy and read and reread them, time without number. If I cannot be with you, then I can listen to your voice. . . .

She was very aware of being alone. The house, around her, lay empty and silent. Mumma's room was silent, the quiet disturbed only by the whisper of pages, read and then set aside. The world, the present were forgotten. This was the past Olivia uncovered, and it was Mumma's past, unsuspected until now, and unimagined.

There is always the possibility that Ambrose will be gentlemanly and allow you to divorce him. . . . All that matters is that we should be together, and eventu-ally—hopefully sooner than later—married. The war will, one day, be over. . . . But thousand-mile journeys begin with the first step, and no expedition is the worse for a little thought.

She laid the page aside, and went on to the next one.

. . . For some reason, I have no fears that I will not survive the war. Death, the last enemy, still seems a long way off, beyond old age and infirmity. And I cannot bring myself to believe that fate, having brought us together, did not mean us to stay that way.

*But he had been killed. Only death could have ended such a love. He had been killed and he had never come back to Mumma, and all his hopes and plans for the future had come to nothing, ended for eternity by some bullet or shell. He had been killed and she had simply carried on. Gone back to Ambrose, and battled through the rest of her life without remorse or bitterness, or a trace of self-pity. And her children had never known. Nor guessed. Nobody had ever known. Somehow, this seemed saddest of all. **You should have talked about him, Mumma. Told me.** I would have understood. I would have wanted to listen. She discovered, to her surprise,*

that her eyes had filled with tears. These now spilled over and ran down her cheeks, and the sensation was strange and unfamiliar, as though it were happening to another person and not herself. And yet she wept for her mother. **I want you to be here. Now. I want to talk to you. I need you.**

Perhaps it was good to cry. She had not cried for Mumma when she died but she wept now. Privately, with no person to jeer at her weakness, she allowed the tears to fall unchecked. The tough and intimidating Miss Keeling, Editor-in-Chief of *Venus*, might never have existed. She was a schoolgirl again, bursting in through the door of that huge basement room in Oakley Street, calling "Mumma!" and knowing that, from somewhere, Mumma would answer. And as she wept, that armour which she had gathered about herself—that hard shell of self-control—broke up and disintegrated. Without that armour she could not have got through the first few days of living in a cold world where Mumma no longer existed. Now, released by grief, she was human again and once more herself.

After a little, more or less recovered, she took up the final page of the letter, and read to its conclusion.

... I wish I were with you, sharing the laughter and domestic doings of what I have come to think of as my second home. All of it was good, in every sense of the word. And in this life, nothing good is ever lost. It stays part of a person, becomes part of their character. So part of you goes everywhere with me. And part of me is yours forever. My love, my darling,

Richard.

Richard. She said the name aloud. *Part of me is yours forever.* She folded the letter and put it back, with the photograph, between the pages of *Autumn Journal*. She closed the book, and lay back on the pillows, and gazed at the ceiling, and thought, now I know it all. But knew that she did no such thing; just knew that she needed above all to learn every tiny detail of what had happened. How they had met; how he had come into her life; how they had fallen so inevitably and deeply in love; how he had been killed.

But who knew? Only one person. Doris Penberth. Doris and Mumma had

lived all through the war together. There would have been no secrets between them. Excitedly, Olivia laid plans. Sometime . . . maybe in September when things at the office were usually quiet . . . Olivia would take a few days off from work and drive to Cornwall. First, she would write to Doris and suggest a visit. In all likelihood, Doris would invite Olivia to stay. And Doris would talk, and remember Penelope, and little by little she would bring Richard's name into the conversation, and eventually Olivia would know it all. But they wouldn't just talk. Doris would show Olivia Porthkerris, and all the places that had been so much part of Mumma's life, and which Olivia had never known. And she would take her to see the house where Mumma had once lived, and they would visit the little Art Gallery which Lawrence Stern had helped to start, and Olivia would see *The Shell Seekers* once more.

She thought of the fourteen sketches, executed by Lawrence Stern at the turn of the century and now the property of Danus. She remembered Noel, yesterday evening, saying goodbye.

Why did she leave them to that young man?

She was fond of him? Sorry for him? Wanted to help him?

There's something more to it than that.

Maybe. But I don't suppose we'll ever find out.

She had supposed wrong. Mumma had left the sketches to Danus for a number of reasons. Noel, with his endless needling, had driven her beyond the limits of patience, but in Danus she had found a person worth helping. While they were at Porthker-ris, she had watched his love for Antonia grow and flower, guessed that, in the fulness of time, he would probably marry the girl. They were special to her, and she was anxious to give them some sort of start in life. But, most important reason of all, Danus had reminded her of Richard. She must have noticed—the first time she laid eyes on him—the strong physical resemblance, and so felt an immediate and close affinity with the young man. Perhaps, through Danus and Antonia, she had felt she was being offered some sort of a second chance of happiness ... a vicarious identification with them. Whatever—they had rendered her last few weeks of

life extremely happy, and for this she had thanked them, in her usual spectacular fashion.

Now, Olivia looked at her watch. It was nearly midday. In moments, Danus and Antonia would return from church. She got off the bed and went to close and latch the window for the last time. At the mirror she paused to check on her reflection and make certain that her face betrayed no trace of tears. Then she picked up the book, the letter and the photograph safe within its pages, and went out of the room, closing the door behind her. Downstairs in the deserted kitchen, she took up the heavy iron poker and used it to lift the lid from the boiler. A furnace heat flowed up, scorching her cheeks, and she dropped Mumma's secret into the heart of the glowing red coals and watched it burn.

It took only seconds, and then was gone forever.

HISS KEELING

The middle of June, and the summer was at its height. The warm and early spring had kept its promise, and the whole country basked in a heat wave. Olivia revelled in this. She relished the warmth and the sun-baked streets of London; the sight of crowds of tourists strolling, lightly clad; of striped umbrellas set up on the pavements outside pubs; of lovers lying supine, entwined, beneath the shade of the trees in the park. All conspired to create the sensation of living perpetually abroad, and where others wilted, her own vitality leaped. She was Miss Keeling once more, at her most dynamic, and *Venus* claimed all her attention.

She was grateful for the therapy of absorbing, satisfying work, and content, for the time being, to put the family, and all that had happened, out of her mind. Since Penelope's funeral, she had seen neither Nancy or Noel, although, from time to time, she had spoken to them on the telephone. Podmore's Thatch, put on the market, had been snapped up almost immediately, and for an inflated sum far beyond even Noel's wildest dreams. With this business concluded, and the contents of the house sold at auction, Danus and Antonia had departed. Danus had bought Mumma's old Volvo, and into this, they had packed their few possessions and taken off in the direction of the West Country to look for some place to set up a little nursery garden that they could call their own. They had telephoned Olivia to say goodbye, but that had been a month ago, and since then she had had no word of them.

Now, a Tuesday morning, and she sat at her desk. A new young Fashion Editor had joined her staff, and Olivia was reading the proofs of her first attempt at editorial copy. *Your Best Accessory Is You*. That was good. Instantly intriguing. *Forget about scarves, earrings, hats. Concentrate on eyes, glowing skin, the shine of sparkling health. . . .*

The intercom buzzed. Without raising her eyes Olivia flipped the switch. "Yes?"

"Miss Keeling," her secretary said, "I have an outside call for you. Antonia's on the line. Will you speak to her?"

Antonia. Olivia hesitated, taking this in. Antonia was gone from her life, incarcerated somewhere in the West Country. Why should she telephone, out of the blue? What did she want to talk about? Olivia resented interruption. And what a time to ring. She sighed, removed her spectacles, and sat back in her chair. "All right, you'd better put her through." She reached for the telephone.

"Olivia?" The youthful, familiar voice.

"Where are you?"

"In London. Olivia, I know you're dreadfully busy, but you wouldn't be able to have lunch today, would you?"

"Today?" Olivia could not keep the dismay from her voice. Today, she knew, was packed with appointments, and she had planned a working lunch-hour, with a sandwich at her desk. "It's rather short notice."

"I know and I'm sorry but it's *really* important. Please say you will, if you possibly can."

Her voice rang with urgency. What on earth had happened now? Reluctantly, Olivia reached for her appointment diary. A session with the Chairman at half past eleven, and then a meeting with the Advertising Manager at two. She did a few swift calculations. The Chairman would probably not claim more than an hour of her time, but that did not leave . . .

"Oh, Olivia, please."

Reluctantly, she gave in. "All right. But it will have to be a fairly speedy lunch. I must be back here at two."

"You're a saint."

"Where shall we meet?"

"You say."

"L'Escargot, then."

"I'll book a table."

"No, I'll take care of that." Olivia had no intention of sitting at some undistinguished table next to the kitchen door. "I'll get my secretary to do it. One o'clock, and don't be late."

"I won't be. . . ."

"Antonia. Where is Danus?"

But Antonia had already rung off.

The taxi jerked its stow way through the midday traffic and the crowded, summery streets. In it Olivia sat, vaguely apprehensive. Antonia's voice over the telephone had betrayed a state of some agitation, and Olivia was not perfectly certain of what sort of reception she was about to receive. She imagined their reunion. Saw herself walking into L'Escargot and finding Antonia waiting for her. Antonia would be wearing her usual worn jeans and cotton shirt, and would look, in that costly venue of expense-account business men, totally out of place. *It's really important.* What could be so important that she had claimed an hour of Olivia's precious day, and would not take No for an answer? It was hard to believe that anything could possibly have gone wrong for Danus and Antonia, but it was always better to prepare oneself for the worst. Various eventualities presented themselves. They had been unable to find any suitable plot in which to raise their cabbages, and Antonia now wanted to discuss some alternative plan. They had found a plot but felt unenthusiastic about the house that went with it, and wished Olivia to travel to Devon, view it, and give her opinion. Antonia had started a baby. Or perhaps they had discovered that after all they had little in common, and so no future to share, and had decided to part.

Quailing from the prospect, Olivia prayed that this was not the case.

The taxi drew up outside the restaurant. She got out, paid off the driver, crossed the pavement, and went in through the door. Inside, as always, it was crowded and warm, bustling with activity. As always, it smelled of mouth-watering food, fresh coffee, and expensive cigars. The prosperous business men were there, lining the bar, and there, too, sitting at a small table, was Antonia. But she was not alone because Danus was at her side, and Olivia scarcely recognized them. For they were not wearing their usual casual, comfortable gear, but were dressed up to the nines. Antonia's shining hair was coiled up at the back of her head, and she wore Aunt Ethel's earrings and a delectable dress of Wedgwood blue, splashed with huge white flowers. And Danus was sleek and groomed as a racehorse, in a dark grey suit so smoothly cut as to fill Noel Keeling's heart with envy. They looked sensational; young, rich, and happy. They looked beautiful.

They spied Olivia at once, rose to their feet, and came to greet her.

"Oh, Olivia . . ."

Olivia, gawping, pulled herself together. She kissed Antonia, turned to Danus. "This is unexpected. For some reason I didn't think you were going to be here."

Antonia laughed. "That's what I wanted you to think. I wanted it to be a surprise."

"Wanted what to be a surprise?"

"This is our wedding lunch. That's why it was so important that you came. We got married this morning."

The party was on Danus. He had ordered champagne, and the bottle waited in a bucket of ice by their table. For once, Olivia, made reckless by celebration, broke her rule about not drinking at lunch-time, and it was she who raised her glass and toasted their happiness.

They talked. There was much to be told and much to hear. "When did you come to London?"

"Yesterday morning. We stayed last night at The Mayfair, and it's almost as grand as The Sands. And when we get back this afternoon, we're going to get into the car and drive to Edinburgh and have a couple of days with Danus' mother and father."

"How about the sketches?" Olivia asked Danus.

"We spent yesterday afternoon with Mr. Brookner at Booth-by's. It was the first time we'd actually seen them."

"Are you selling them?"

"Yes. They're going to be shipped to New York next month and auctioned there at the beginning of August. At least, thirteen of them are going. We're keeping one. *The Terrazzo Garden*. We felt we had to keep just one."

"Of course. And what about the nursery garden? Did you have any luck?"

They told her. After much searching, they had found, in Devon, what they were looking for. Three acres of land, once the walled garden of a large old house. The property included a small garden and sizeable glasshouses in good repair, and Danus had put in an offer, which had been accepted.

"That's wonderful! But where are you going to live?"

Oh, there was a cottage as well, not very large and very dilapidated. "But because of it being so grotty, well, that brought the price down and we were able to afford it."

"So what are you using for money until such time as the sketches are sold?"

"We got a bridging loan from the bank. And to save money, we'll do as much of the renovation work on the cottage as we can."

"Where will you live meantime?"

"We've hired a caravan." Antonia could scarcely contain her excitement.

"And Danus has bought a cultivator, and we're go-ing to plant an enormous crop of potatoes, just to clean the ground. And after that we'll really be able to start. And I'm going to keep hens and ducks, and sell the eggs. . . ."

"How far are you from civilization?"

"Only three miles to a little market town . . . that's where we'll sell our produce. And flowers and plants too. The green-house will be crammed with early blooms. And pot plants, and ... oh, Olivia, I can't wait to show it to you. When the house is finished, will you come and stay?"

Olivia considered the invitation. She had already drunk three glasses of champagne and had no intention of making rash commitments that she might later regret.

"Will your cottage be warm?"

"We're going to put in central heating."

"And it will have plumbing? I won't have to go down to the garden every time I need the loo?"

"No, we promise you won't have to do that."

"And there will be boiling-hot bath-water at all hours of the day?"

"Boiling."

"And you will have a guest-room? Which I will not have to share with human being, cat, dog, or hen?"

"You shall have it all to yourself."

"And the guest-room will have a wardrobe filled, not with some other

person's fusty evening dresses and moth-eaten fur coats, but with twenty-four brand-new coat-hangers?"

"All padded."

"In that case"—Olivia sat back in her chair— "you'd better get busy. Because I shall come."

Later, on the pavement, they stood in the warm sunshine, waiting for the taxi that would take Olivia back to her office.

"What fun it's been. Goodbye, Antonia." They hugged enormously and kissed with much affection.

"Oh, Olivia . . . thank you for everything. But mostly, thank you for coming today."

"It's I who should thank you both for inviting me. I haven't had such a lovely surprise, nor such a delicious boozy lunch, in years. After all that champagne, I doubt if I shall be able to make any sense for the rest of the afternoon."

The taxi trundled up. Olivia turned to Danus. "Goodbye, dear boy." He kissed her on both cheeks. "Take care of Antonia. And lots of luck."

He opened the taxi door for her, and she got in and he slammed the door shut behind her. "*Venus*," she told the driver briskly, and as the taxi moved forward, she waved furiously out of the back window. Antonia and Danus waved back and Antonia blew kisses, and then they turned and began to walk in the opposite direction, away from Olivia, and hand in hand.

She settled back in her seat with a sigh of satisfaction. All, for Antonia and Danus, had ended well. And Mumma had been right in her judgement, because they were the sort of young people who deserved encouragement, and to be given, if necessary, a helping hand. Which she had done. Now, it was up to them, with their tumbledown cottage and their cultivator and their hens and plans for the future, and their marvellous, unshakeable optimism.

And what of Penelope's children? How would they handle their good fortune, and how would they fare? Nancy, she decided, would indulge herself in some way. Perhaps buy a Range Rover, hire which to lord it over her cronies at the local point-to-points, but that would be all. All else would go on funding the status symbol of the most expensive private education for Melanie and Rupert. At the end of which they would emerge ungrateful and probably unimproved.

She thought of Noel. Noel, as yet, still worked at the same job, but as soon as he was able to lay hands on his inheritance, Olivia had a fairly shrewd idea that he would chuck advertising and cook up some brilliant scheme for going it alone. Commodity broking, or perhaps some sky-high property dealings. As likely as not, he would run through his capital, and at the end of the day end up married to some rich, well-connected, and hideous girl, who would worship and adore him, and to whom he would be consistently unfaithful. Olivia found herself smiling. He was an impossible man but, after all, her brother, and in her heart she wished him well.

Which left only herself, and there were no question marks there. Olivia would invest Mumma's money prudently, with old age and retirement in mind. She imagined herself in twenty years' time—alone, unmarried, and still living in the little house on Ranfurly Road. But independent, even quite comfortably off. Able to afford the small pleasures and luxuries she had always enjoyed. Going to the theatre and concerts, entertaining her friends, taking holidays abroad. Perhaps, for company, she would have a little dog. And she would go to Devon and stay with Danus and Antonia Muirfield. And when they came to London, bringing with them the brood of children which they would doubtless have, they would visit Olivia, and she would show those children her favourite museums and galleries, and take them to the ballet and the pantomime at Christmas. She would be like a nice aunt. No, not an aunt, a nice grandmother. It would be like having grandchildren. And it occurred to her then, that these grandchildren would be Cosmo's grandchildren too. Which was strange. Like watching a tangle of loose threads unravel and plait themselves into a single braided cord, stretching ahead into the future.

The taxi halted. She looked, and saw, in some surprise, that they had arrived,

were parked alongside the prestigious building that housed the offices of *Venus*. Cream stone and plate glass glittered with reflected sunlight, and the topmost floors pierced the starch-blue sky.

She got out and paid the driver. "Keep the change."

"Oh. Thanks very much, love."

She went up the broad white steps that led to the massive entrance, and as she did so, the commissionaire stepped forward to hold open the door for her..

"It's a lovely day, Miss Keeling."

She paused, to turn upon him a smile the brilliance of which he had never seen before.

"Yes," she said. "It's a particularly lovely day."

She went through the door. Into her kingdom, her world.

Also by Rosamunde Pilcher

Novels

As Jane Fraser

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The Brown Fields (1951)
Dangerous Intruder (1951)
Young Bar (1952)
A Day Like Spring (1953)
Dear Tom (1954)
Bridge of Corvie (1956)
A Family Affair (1958)
The Keeper's House (1963)
A Long Way from Home (1963)

As Rosamunde Pilcher

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The Empty House (1973)
The Day of the Storm (1975)
Under Gemini (1976)
Wild Mountain Thyme (1978)
The Carousel (1982)
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September (1990)
Coming Home (1995)
The Key (1996)
Shadows (1999)
Winter Solstice (2000)

Omnibus

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Rosamunde Pilcher: Flowers in the Rain: And Other Stories (1991) Sequel to Blue Bedroom (above) – NEL (New English Library – UK)

The Blackberry Day: And Other Stories (1992)

World of Rosamunde Pilcher (1995)

Christmas with Rosamunde Pilcher (1998)

About The Author



Rosamunde Pilcher OBE (born 22 September 1924) is a British author of romance novels and mainstream women's fiction. Early in her career she was also published under the pen name Jane Fraser. Pilcher retired from writing in 2000.

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