

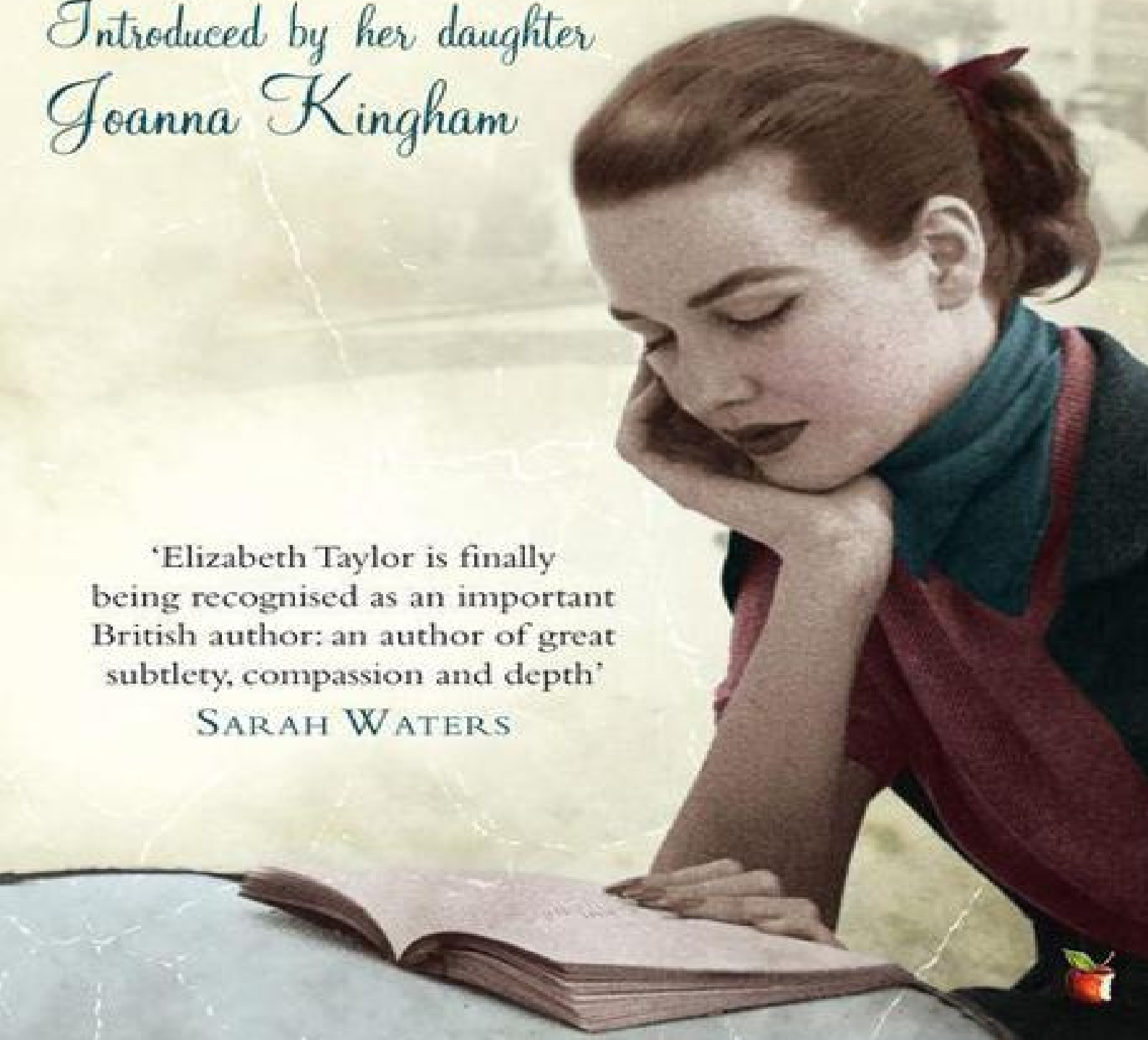
Elizabeth TAYLOR

Complete Short Stories

*Introduced by her daughter
Joanna Kingham*

'Elizabeth Taylor is finally
being recognised as an important
British author: an author of great
subtlety, compassion and depth'

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Elizabeth Taylor

Elizabeth Taylor (1912–1975) is increasingly being recognised as one of the best writers of the twentieth century. She wrote her first book, *At Mrs Lippincote's*, during the war while her husband was in the Royal Air Force, and this was followed by eleven further novels and a children's book, *Mossy Trotter*. Her highly acclaimed short stories appeared in publications including *Vogue*, the *New Yorker* and *Harper's Bazaar*, and here for the first time are collected in one volume. Rosamond Lehmann considered her writing 'sophisticated, sensitive and brilliantly amusing, with a kind of stripped, piercing feminine wit', and Kingsley Amis regarded her as 'one of the best English novelists born in this century'.

At Mrs Lippincote's
Palladian
A View of the Harbour
A Wreath of Roses
A Game of Hide and Seek
The Sleeping Beauty
Angel
In a Summer Season
The Soul of Kindness
The Wedding Group
Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont
Blaming

Short Story Collections

Hester Lilly and Other Stories
The Blush and Other Stories
A Dedicated Man and Other Stories
The Devastating Boys
Dangerous Calm

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Most of the stories in this book were originally published in four volumes – *Hester Lily* (1954); *The Blush* (1958); *The Dedicated Man* (1965); and *The Devastating Boys* (1972) – but this edition included several that have previously appeared only in magazines. Much of my mother's work was printed in *The New Yorker*, and I can remember the copies, with a deep crease down the centre, regularly arriving at our house. The crease was so that the parcel would qualify for printed-paper-rate postage, and it was only when I went to America in my teens that I saw for the first time flat copies on the bookstalls; they seemed strangely unfamiliar. My brother and I enjoyed the cartoons and later the articles and short stories, including our mother's own. We also enjoyed the *New Yorker's* generous gifts of a large ham at Christmas-time, a great treat when such things were scarce here. The literary editors Catherine White and William Maxwell became my mother's good friends, and she dedicated *The Blush* to Maxwell.

Before writing this introduction I had been reading the collections, smiling at forgotten memories and wishing I could ask my mother about several of the details and incidents and what had prompted her to include them. Many of the stories have an autobiographical streak, though sometimes no more than a thread; but throughout there are phrases and characters recognisable to those of us lucky enough to have known her. Two such tales are 'Plenty Good Fiesta' and 'The Devastating Boys'. The little Spanish boy she wrote about in 'Plenty Good Fiesta' eventually returned to his family in Spain, while 'Sep' and 'Benny' of 'The Devastating Boys' were frequent visitors at my parents' house. It is nearly fifty years since they first came, but they kept in touch with my father until his death a few years ago. My mother's fears about how she would manage to look after the children she reflected on as she wrote about Laura's doubts, but in fact my mother had an intuitive understanding of children and invariably elicited their love and respect. It has always struck me how shrewdly they are portrayed in her fiction. Once, in a letter to her agent, she reported that she was having difficulty in finding new ideas for her work, but had been delighted when my small daughter had told her not to worry as they would 'soon come down from your head' – a sage counsel which much cheered her grandmother.

Readers frequently ask about a writer's technique – how they develop their characters, use dialogue and so on. In an article, my mother once described how she set the scenes for her stories: 'The thing that I do, I have found, is to fasten to some detail, and then let the mind wander down any corridor it fancies, opening doors or ignoring them. There was once a blind man I saw on a bus. From that, watching him, wondering about him, I built up a whole story.' This was the 'Spry Old Character'. The man she described lived in a home for the blind on the edge of our village, and each afternoon was picked up by the same bus that I caught home from prep school. While the bus waited at the terminus on the common he would chat cheerily to the driver and conductor before being delivered safely back to his usual stop. Meanwhile, I would make my way to our house and, tucking into my tea, would listen to my mother read aloud to me – usually from E. Nesbitt or Noel Streatfeild. She was a good reader, and listening to her encouraged me to follow the practice with my own children – and grandchildren.

The title 'You'll Enjoy It when You Get There' came from a much-used family expression and an assurance frequently delivered to me when, after dressing for a party or the Pony Club dance (which naturally recalls another story, 'The Rose, the Mauve and the White'), I would start to say that I couldn't face it. My parents were wrong in their assertion, as I rarely did enjoy those occasions. What inspired the story, though, was what happened to my mother at a rather stiff trade function with my father. Like me, she didn't enjoy it when she got there, and then humiliated herself by making the mistake of telling one poor bored man all about the adventures of her Burmese cat ... twice. Such was

her ennui that she had never noticed his face, only the glittering chain of office resplendent on his chest. This little social gaffe distressed her, but I am ashamed to say that we, unsympathetically delighted in the story.

There was a lot of laughter and leg-pulling in the family and my parents were very funny. I will always remember our joy at my father's indignant reaction when the publishers had advised my mother to change the name of Muriel in 'Hester Lily'. 'You can tell them from me that before I met you I very nearly married a girl called Muriel,' he said, and after a pause added: 'and I'll have you know that she was a very good swimmer.'

On one occasion when we were making the beds and listening to the morning story on the radio my mother stopped what she was doing and said, 'This is strange, I know this story.' She then realised that it was one of her own. We heard later that a man had been submitting stories from the *New Yorker* to the BBC as his work, never imagining anyone in Britain would recognise them. That was not the only unwelcome surprise my mother was to have from the morning story programme. In 1959, 'Swallowing' was scheduled to be broadcast, and when it was over, she wrote to a friend: 'After about a minute of rather stilted reading and slurred words, he suddenly stopped and began to mutter to himself about cuts he should have made – a silence – almost endless to me – and then he asked someone if he should start again. Another pause, and then an announcer said there seemed to be some trouble with the cuts that should have been made, and then played some gramophone records instead. Perhaps the poor man was taken ill. A woman on the bus wondered if I had written something rude, and, coming upon it for the first time, he had thought it better not to read it.'

The collection *The Dedicated Man* was inscribed to the writer Robert Liddell, with whom my mother maintained a friendship that began with a long correspondence. As he lived and worked in Athens, it was some time before they actually met. We had visited Greece in the 1950s, but it was not until later when my mother was in Athens alone that she finally met him. And although she was certainly nervous, their first meeting was unlike the one between Edmund and Emily that she portrays in 'The Letter-writers'. Robert, however, makes reference to it in his book *Elizabeth and Ivy*, which is about their shared friendship with Ivy Compton Burnett. After the colonels took over the government my mother declined to go to Greece again; instead, she and my father would visit the area on cruise and Robert would come aboard at various ports to see them.

Some reviewers criticised my mother for writing about only those places and people she knew. This was, I think, a misplaced judgement, as several stories were set well outside of her comfort zone and she was not wedded to the familiar. Writing to her agent Patience Ross, she alluded to a current project as being 'rather horrible', adding, 'and I dare say no one will like it'. This was 'The Flamingo paper', and indeed the *New Yorker* didn't like it; William Maxwell asked her to consider altering the ending. However, I wonder whether readers of the tale will agree with me that without that ending there is no story. It later became a very chilling television film.

One of the many things that I recall about my mother was her deep love for art and the great pleasure she took in visiting galleries and exhibitions. This pleasure is captured in another of her letters, written in 1965: 'I nipped up to London yesterday, and bought the most beautiful picture at the Leicester Galleries. It is by Elinor Bellingham Smith – a dead still, frozen world. I long for the exhibition to be over so that I can have it home to stare at. I was frightened at spending so much money, but didn't take a taxi afterwards. Then this morning the cheque came for "Tall Boy", and I thought, "This is marvellous, I am turning stories into pictures."'

As I write this, I pause and look up at the painting, which now hangs on my study wall, and I think to myself, her stories *are* pictures.

Joanna Kingham

Muriel's first sensation was one of derisive relief. The name – Hester Lilly – had suggested to her goitrous, pre-Raphaelite frailty. That, allied with youth, can in its touchingness mean danger to a wife, demanding protectiveness and chivalry, those least combatable adversaries, against which admiration simply is nothing. 'For if she is to fling herself on his compassion,' she had thought, 'that age, and orphaned, then any remonstrance from me will seem doubly callous.'

As soon as she saw the girl an injudicious confidence stilled her doubts. Her husband's letters from and to this young cousin seemed now fairly guiltless and untormenting; avuncular, but not in any threatening way.

Hester, in clothes which astonished by their improvisation – the wedding of out-grown school uniform with the adult, gloomy wardrobe of her dead mother – looked jaunty, defiant and absurd. Every garment was grown out of or not grown into.

I will take her under my wing, Muriel promised herself. The idea of an unformed personality to be moulded and high-lighted invigorated her, and the desire to tamper with – as in those fashion magazines in which ugly duckling is so disastrously changed to swan before our wistful eyes – made her impulsive and welcoming. She came quickly across the hall and laid her cheek against the girl's, murmuring affectionately. Deception enveloped them.

Robert was not deceived. He understood his wife's relief, and, understanding that, could realise the wary distress she must for some time have suffered. Now she was in command again and her misgivings were gone. He also sensed that if, at this point, she was ceasing to suspect him, perhaps his own guilt was only just beginning. He hated the transparency of Muriel's sudden relaxation and forbearance. Until now she had contested his decision to bring Hester into their home, incredulous that she could not have her own way. She had laid about him with every weapon she could find – cold scorn, sweet reasonableness, little girl tears.

'You are making a bugbear of her,' he had said.

'You have made *her* that, to *me*. For months, all these letters going to and fro, sometimes three weeks from her. And I always excluded.'

She had tried not to watch him reading them, had poured out more coffee, re-examined her own letters. He opened Hester's last of all and as if he would rather have read them privately. Then he would fold them and slip them back inside the envelope, to protect them from her eyes. All round the plate, on the floor, were other screwed up envelopes which had contained his less secret letters. Once to break a silence – he had lied, said, 'Hester sends love to you.' In fact, Hester had never written or spoken Muriel's name. They had not been family letters, to be passed from one to the other, nor cousinly letters, with banal enquiries and remembrances. The envelopes had been stuffed with adolescent despair, cries of true loneliness, the letters were repellent with egotism and affected bitterness, appealing with naivety. Hester had been making, in this year since her father's death, a great hollow nest in preparation for love, and Robert had watched her going round and round brooding over it, covering it. Now it was ready and was empty.

Unknowingly, but with so many phrases in her letters, she had acquainted him with the preparation, which must be hidden from her mother and from Muriel. She had not imagined the letters being read by anyone but Robert, and he would not betray her.

'You are old enough to be her father,' Muriel had once said; but those scornful, recriminating wife's words never sear and wither as they are meant to. They presented him instead with his first surprised elation. After that he looked forward to the letters and was disappointed on mornings when

there was none.

~~If there were any guilty love, he was the only guilty one. Hester proceeded in innocence; wrote the letters blindly as if to herself or as in a diary and loved only men in books, or older women. She felt melancholy yearnings in cinemas and, at the time of leaving home, had become obsessed by a young pianist who played tea-time music in a café.~~

Now, at last, at the end of her journey, she felt terror, and as the first ingratiating smile faded from her face she looked sulky and wary. Following Muriel upstairs and followed by Robert carrying some of her luggage, she was overcome by the reality of the house, which she had imagined wrong. It was her first visit, and she had from Robert's letters constructed a completely different setting. Stairs led up from the side of the hall instead of from the end facing the door. 'I must finish this letter and go up to bed,' Robert had sometimes written. So he had gone up *these* stairs, she thought in bewilderment as she climbed them now.

The building might not have been a school. The mullioned windows had views of shaved lawns deserted – and cedar trees.

'I thought there would be goal-posts everywhere,' she said, stopping at a landing window.

'In summer-time?' Muriel asked in a voice of sweet amusement.

They turned into a corridor and Robert showed Hester from another window the scene she had imagined. Below a terrace, a cinder-track encircled a cricket field where boys were playing. A white painted pavilion and sight-screens completed the setting. The drowsy afternoon quiet was broken abruptly by a bell ringing, and at once voices were raised all over the building and doors were slammed.

When Muriel had left her – with many kind reminders and assurances – Hester was glad to be still for a moment and let the school sounds become familiar. She was pleased to hear them; for it was because of the school that she had come. She was not to share Muriel's life, whatever that may be, but Robert's. The social-family existence the three of them must lead would have appalled her, if she had not known that after most meal-times, however tricky, she and Robert would leave Muriel. They would go to his study, where she would prove – *must* prove – her efficiency, had indeed knelt down for nights to pray that her shorthand would keep up with his dictation.

From the secretarial school where, aged eighteen, she had vaguely gone, she had often played truant. She had sat in the public gardens, rather than face those fifteen-year-olds with their sharp way of their suspicion of her, that she might, from reasons of age or education, think herself their superior. Her aloofness had been humble and painful, which they were not to know.

When Robert's offer had arrived, she had regretted her time wasted. At her mother's death she was seen clearly to be the kind of girl whom relatives must help, take under their roof as governess or companion, or to do, as in Hester's case, some kind of secretarial work.

In spite of resentment, Muriel had given her a pleasant room – nicely anonymous, ready to receive the imprint of a long stay – no books, one picture and a goblet of moss-roses.

Outside, a gardener was mowing the lawn. There, at the back of the house, the lawns sloped up to the foot of a tree-covered hillside, scarred by ravines. Foliage was dense and lush, banking up so that no sky was seen. Leaves were large enough to seem sinister, and all of this landscape with its tortured looking ash trees, its too-prolific vegetation, had a brooding, an evil aspect; might have been a Victorian engraving – the end-piece to an idyllic chapter, hitting inadvertently, because of medium, quite the wrong note.

At the foot of the hillside, with lawns up to its porch, was a little church, which Hester knew from Robert's letters to be Saxon. Since the eighteenth century it had been used as a private chapel by the successive owners of the house – the last of these now impoverished and departed. The family graveyard lay under the wall. Once, Robert had written that he had discovered an adder's nest there. His letter

often – too often for Hester – consisted of nature notes, meticulously detailed.

Hester found this view from her window much more pre-envisaged than the rest. It had a strength and interest which her cousin's letters had managed to impart.

From the church – now used as school chapel – a wheezy, elephantine voluntary began and a procession of choir-boys, their royal-blue skirts trailing the grass or hitched up unevenly above the boots, came out of the house and paced, with a pace so slow they rocked and swayed, towards the church door. The chaplain followed, head bent, sleeves flung back on his folded arms. He was, Hester already knew, a thorn in Robert's flesh.

In the drawing-room, Muriel was pouring out tea. Robert always stood up to drink his. It was a woman's hour, he felt, and his dropping in on it was fleeting and accidental. Hugh Baseden stood up as well – though wondering why – until Muriel said: 'Won't you sit down, Mr Baseden?'

At once, he searched for reproof in her tone, and thought that perhaps he had been imitating a piece of headmasterliness – not for him. Holding his cup unsteadily in one hand, he jerked up the knees of his trousers with the other and lowered himself on to the too-deep sofa, perched there on the edge staring at the tea in his saucer.

Muriel had little patience with gaucherie, though inspiring it. She pushed aside Hester's clean cup and clasped her hands in her lap.

'What can she be doing?' she asked.

'Perhaps afraid to come down,' Robert said.

Hugh looked with embarrassment at the half-open door where Hester hesitated, peering in, clearly wondering if this were the right room and the right people in it. To give warning to the others, he stood up quickly and slopped some more tea into his saucer. Robert and Muriel turned their heads.

'We were thinking you must be lost,' Muriel said, unsure of how much Hester might have heard.

Robert went forward and led her into the room. 'This is Hugh Baseden. My cousin, Hester Lilliput. Hugh. You are newcomers together, Hester, for this is Hugh's first term with us.'

Hester sank down on the sofa, her knees an inelegant angle. When asked if she would have suggested sweet tea throughout it, for she would never find the courage to explain.

'Mr Baseden is one of those ghoulish schoolmasters who cuts up dead frogs and puts pieces of bacon meat under glass to watch what happens,' Muriel said. 'I am sure it teaches the boys something enormously important, although it sounds so unenticing.'

'Do girls not learn biology then?' Hugh asked, looking from one to the other.

Muriel said 'no' and Hester said 'yes': and they spoke together.

'Then that is how much it has all changed,' Muriel added lightly. 'That marks the great difference in our ages' – she smiled at Hester – 'as so much else does, alas! But I am glad I was spared that experience. The smell!' She put her hand delicately to her face and closed her eyes. Hester felt that the lessons she had learnt had made her repulsive herself. 'Oh, do you remember, Robert,' Muriel went on, 'last Parents' Day? The rabbit? I walked into the Science Room with Mrs Carmichael and there it was, opened out, pinned to a board and all its inside labelled. How we scurried off. All the mammalists looking at their sons with awe and anxiety and fanning themselves with their handkerchiefs, wondering if their darlings would not pick up some plague. We must not have that this year, Mr Baseden. You must promise me not. A thundery day ... oh, by four o'clock! Could we have things in jars instead, sealed up? Or skeletons? I like it best when the little ones just collect fossils or flint arrow-heads.'

'Flint arrow-heads are not in Hugh's department,' Robert said, although Muriel knew that as well as he, was merely going through her scatter-brain performance – the all-feminine, inaccurate

negligent act by which she dissociated herself from the school.

~~‘They are out of chapel,’ Hugh said. The noise outside was his signal to go. ‘No rabbits, then,’~~ he promised Muriel and turning to Hester, said: ‘Don’t be too bewildered. I haven’t had much start of you, but I begin to feel at home.’ Then, sensing some rudeness to Muriel in what he had said, he added: ‘So many boys must be a great strain to you at first. You will get used to them in time.’

‘I never have,’ Muriel murmured, when he had gone. ‘Such dull young men we get here always. I am sorry, Hester, there is no brighter company for you. Of course, there is Rex Wigmore, ex-RAI with moustache, slang, silk mufflers, undimmed gaiety; but I should be wary of him, if I were you. You think I am being indiscreet, Robert; but I am sure Hester will know without being told how important it is in a school for us to be able to speak frankly – even scandalously – when we are of *famille*. It would be impossible to laugh if, outside, our lips were not sealed tight ...’

‘If everything is to be said for me,’ Hester thought, ‘and understood for me, how am I ever to take part in a conversation again?’

From that time, Muriel spoke on her behalf, interpreted for her, as if she were a savage or a mutant until the moment not many days later, when she said in an amused, but matter-of-fact voice: ‘Of course, you are in love with Robert.’

Muriel saved Hester the pains of groping towards this fact. She presented it promptly, fresh, illicit and out-of-the-question; faced and decided once for all. The girl’s heart swerved in horrified recognition. From her sensations of love for and dependence upon this older man, her cousin, she had separated the trembling ardour of her youth and unconsciously had directed it towards the less forbidden – the pianist in the café for instance. Now, she saw that her feelings about that young man were just the measure of her guilt about Robert.

Muriel insinuated the idea into the girl’s head, thinking that such an idea would come sooner or later and came better from her, inseparable from the very beginning with shame and confusion. She was struck, with that stunning remark, at the right time. For the first week or so Hester was tense with desire to please, anxiety that she might not earn her keep. Robert would often find her bowed in misery over indecipherable shorthand, or would hear her rip pages out of the typewriter and beg her to start again. The waste-paper basket was usually crammed full of spoilt stationery. Once, he discovered her in tears and, half-way across the room to comfort her, wariness overtook him. He walked instead to the window and spoke with his back to her, which seemed to him the only alternative to embracing her.

Twice before he had taken her in his arms, on two of the three times they had been together. He had met her when she came home from Singapore where her father had died, and she had begun to cry in the station refreshment-room while they were having a cup of tea. His earlier meeting was at her christening when he had dutifully, as godfather, nursed her for a moment. The third encounter she had inveigled him into. He had met her in London secretly to discuss an important matter. They had had a luncheon at his Club and the important matter turned out to be the story of her misery at living with her mother – the moods, scenes, words, tears. He could see that she found telling him more difficult than she had planned, found it in fact almost impossible. Rehearsing her speeches alone, she had reckoned without his presence, his looks of embarrassment, the sound of her own voice complaining of her fear of his impatience. She had spoken in a high, affected, hurried voice, smiling too much and at the wrong moments, with a mixture of defiance and ingratiating he found irritating, but pathetic. He had had so little solace to offer, except that he was sure the trouble would pass, that perhaps his mother suffered, too, at the crisis of middle-age. At that, Hester had been overcome by a great glowing blush, as if he had said something unforgivable. He did not know if it were some adolescent

prudery in her, or the outrage of having excuses made for her enemy-mother. (For whom excuses might have been made, for she died not long after, of cancer.)

Now, as he stood at the window listening to her tears, he knew that she was collapsed, abandoned in readiness for his embrace of consolation, and he would not turn round, although his instinct was to go to her.

He said, absurdly: 'I hope you are happy here,' and received of course only tears in answer.

Without physical contact he could not see how to bring the scene to an end. Bored, he surveyed the garden and thought that the box-hedge needed trimming. Beyond this hedge, hanging from the branches of fruit trees were old potatoes stuck with goose-feathers. He watched them twirling gaily above the currant bushes, not frightening the birds, but exciting or bemusing them.

She realised that he would not come to her, and her weeping sank into muffled apologies, over which Robert could feel more authoritative, with something reassuring to say in return and something to do. (He fetched a decanter of sherry.) His reassurances were grave, not brusque. He put the reason for her distress sensibly back upon legitimate causes, where perhaps they belonged – the death of her mother, shock, strain, fatigue.

He sat by his desk and put on his half-moon reading-glasses, peered over them, swung about in his swivel-chair, protecting himself by his best old-fogey act.

'Muriel and I only want to make you happy.'

Hester flinched.

'You must never let this work worry you, you know.' He almost offered to get someone else to do it for her, his sense of pity was so great.

His reading-glasses were wasted on her. She would not look at him with her swollen eyes, but pointed her hands together over her forehead, making an eave to hide her face.

'But does Muriel *want* me here?' she cried at last.

'Could you be here, if she did not?'

'But do you?'

In her desperation, she felt that she could ask any questions. The only advice he ever wanted to give young people was not to press desperation too far, uncreative as it is; *not* to admit recklessness. Muriel had once made similar mistakes. It seemed to him a great fault in women.

'I shall only mind having you here if you cry any more. Or grow any thinner.'

He glanced down at his feet. She was not really any thinner, but Muriel had begun her work on her clothes, which now fitted her and showed her small waist and long narrow back.

'You are bound to feel awkward at first with one another,' Robert said. 'It is a strange situation for you both, and Muriel is rather shy.'

Hester thought that she was uncouth and sarcastic; but not shy, not for one moment shy.

'I think she is trying so hard to be kind and sympathetic,' he continued, 'but she must make her own place in your life. She would not be so impertinent as to try to be a mother to you, as many less sensitive women might. There is no precedent to help her – having no children herself, being much older. She has her own friends, her own life, and she would like to make a place for you, too. I think she would have loved to have had a daughter ... I can imagine that from the interest she takes in your clothes, for instance.' This was true, had puzzled Hester and now was made to shame her.

Muriel opened the door suddenly upon this scene of tears and sherry. Hester, to hide her face, turned aside and put up her hand to smooth her hair.

'Miss Graveney's address,' Muriel said. She stood stiffly in front of Robert's desk while he searched through a file. She did not glance at Hester and held her hand out to take the address from Robert before he could bring it from the drawer.

'Thank you, dear!' She spoke in her delicately amused voice, nodded slightly and left the room.

Outside, she began to tremble violently. Misery split her in two – one Muriel going upstairs in fear and anger, and another Muriel going beside her, whispering: ‘Quiet! Be calm. Think later.’

Hester, with her new trimness, was less touching. She lost part of the appeal of youth – the advantage Muriel could not challenge – and won instead an uncertain sophistication – an unstable elegance which only underlined how much cleverer Muriel was at the same game.

Muriel’s cleverness, however, could not overcome the pain she felt. She held the reins, but could barely keep her hands from trembling. Her patience was formidable. Robert had always remarked upon it since the day he had watched her at work upon her own wedding cake. There were many things in her life which no one could do as well as she, and her wedding cake was one of them. She had spent hours at the icing – at hair-fine lattice-work, at roses and rosettes, swags and garlands, conch-shells and cornucopias. She had made of it a great work of art, and with a similar industry, which Robert only half-discerned and Hester did not discern at all, she now worked at what seemed to her the battle for her marriage.

Conceived at the moment of meeting Hester, the strategy was based on implanting in the girl her own – Muriel’s – standards, so that every success that Hester had would seem one in the image of the older woman, and every action bring Muriel herself to mind. Patience, tolerance, coolness, amusement were parts of the plan, and when she had suddenly said: ‘Of course you are in love with Robert,’ she had waited to say it for days. It was no abrupt cry of exasperation, but a piece of the design she had worked out.

Before Hester could reply, Muriel stressed the triviality of such a love by going on at once to other things. ‘If I were a young girl again I should have a dark dress made, like a Bluecoat Boy’s – a high neck and buttoned front, leather belt, huge, boyish pockets hidden somewhere in the skirt. How nice one could wear yellow stockings too!’

She rested her hand on her tapestry-frame and forced herself to meet Hester’s eyes, her own eyes veiled and narrowed, as if she were considering how the girl would look in such a dress.

Hester’s glance, as so often in the innocent party, wavered first. She had no occupation to help her and stared down at her clasped hands.

Muriel began once more to pass the needle through the canvas. Diligently, week by week, the tapestry roses blossomed in grey and white and blood-colour.

‘Don’t you think?’ she asked.

She swung the frame round and examined the back of the canvas. It was perfectly neat. She sat sideways in her chair, with the frame-stand drawn up at one angle. Her full skirt touched the carpet pink on crimson.

‘Why do you say that?’ Hester asked. ‘What makes you say it?’ She sounded as if she might faint.

‘Say what?’

‘About Robert.’ Her lips moved clumsily over the name as if they were stung by it, and swollen.

‘Robert? Oh, yes! Don’t fuss, dear girl. At your age one has to be in love with someone, and Robert does very well for the time being. Perhaps at every age one has to be in love with someone, but when one is young it is difficult to decide whom. Later one becomes more stable. I fell in love with all sorts of unsuitable people – very worrying for one’s mother. But by the time I met Robert I was old enough to be sure that *that* would last. As it has,’ she added quietly; and she chose a strand of white silk and began to work on the high-lights of a rose petal.

‘I once fell in love with a young man who drank like a fish,’ she continued, for Hester seemed stunned into silence. ‘He was really an evil influence. Very flashy. You remember how I warned you about Rex Wigmore your first day here?’ She began to shake with mirth. ‘Trying to be my own

anxious mamma all over again. And all the time it was Robert! How lucky! For Robert is so gentle, so kind. He would never harm you. Nothing but good could come of a girl loving *him*. Yes, I can see Robert doing very well indeed, until the real one comes along. How furious he would be to hear me discussing him like this – men take themselves so seriously.'

'I am not discussing him,' Hester said, an ugly stubbornness in her manner. She snatched a handkerchief from her pocket and began to fidget with it, crushing it and smoothing it and staring at Muriel in a bewildered defiance.

Muriel's white hand smoothed a woollen rose. 'I always leave the background till last.' She sighed. 'So dull, going on and on with the same colour.'

'It isn't true. He's my cousin, much older ... your husband ... I ... does he know?'

'Well, I haven't asked him. Men are too vain. I dare say he knows all right, though. It's very good for them, at his age ... makes them feel young.'

So Hester saw herself thrust into the service of nature, a coarse instrument, as good as anonymous. Muriel, spared such humiliation, could well smile, and congratulate herself. 'Don't fuss,' she said again in her most laughing voice. 'If I had known you *would*, I wouldn't have said it.'

'I wish I could go away.' Hester wrung her hands and looked towards the windows as if she might escape through them. 'You hate me being here. And now ...'

'Now?'

'Now you believe this about me, how can you bear me to be here? No wife could.'

At this, a stern, fastidious look came upon Muriel's face. She was silent for a moment, then said in a quiet and serious voice: 'I ... as a wife; Robert ... as a husband; our private life together I must leave out of this. It is between us only, and I never discuss my marriage.'

'There is no need to be rude to me,' Hester shouted, so great her frustration, so helplessly she flung herself up against Muriel's smooth contempt. She was forced into childishness.

At her outburst – for all of today was working for Muriel, she thought – the door opened.

'But surely there is nothing sinister in that?' Beatrice Carpenter asked. She was Muriel's close friend and they were walking in the park before dinner. 'Young girls often cry. You rather surprise me, Muriel. You sound hysterical yourself.'

'It was the atmosphere of the room. It trembled with apprehension, and when I opened the door Robert looked at me with a dumbfounded expression, his eyes opened wide over those awful half-moon glasses he *will* wear, they – his eyes – looked so *blue* – a little boy's look, little boy in mischief. "Don't spank me, Nanny." I hated him for a moment. Oh, I felt murderous. No, but I truly itched to hurt him physically, by some violent and abusive act, to hit him across the mouth, to ...' She broke off in astonishment and looked about her, as if fearful of being overheard.

'You *are* in a bad way,' Beatrice said. 'The girl will have to go.'

'I know. But how? I have to be clever, not insistent. I can't be put into the position of getting my own way, for it would never be forgotten. It would last all our lives, such a capitulation, you know.'

Other married women *always* know; so Beatrice only murmured cosily.

Muriel said: 'The self-consciousness is so deadly. When I go back, he will look at me to see how I am likely to behave. Every time I go into a room, he glances at my face, so that I can no longer meet his eyes.'

'I never think embarrassment is a trivial emotion,' Beatrice said.

'It has altered everything, having her here; for we were just at an age of being able, perhaps, to relax, to take one another for granted, to let ourselves slip a little. It is a compensation for growing old, and one must find a compensation for that, if one can.'

‘I cannot,’ Beatrice said.

‘~~For a day or two I tried to compete, but I will not be forced into the sort of competition I am bound to lose.~~’ Muriel frowned and with a weary gesture unclipped her gold ear-rings as if she suddenly found their weight intolerable. She walked on with them clutched, warm and heavy, in her hand. Beatrice could not bear the sight of her fiery ear-lobes. She was upset, as when people who always wear glasses take them off for polishing and expose their wounded-looking and naked eyes. Muriel was never without ear-rings and might have caused only slightly less concern by suddenly unpinning her hair.

Beatrice said: ‘An experienced woman is always held to be a match for a young girl, but I shouldn’t like to have to try it. Not that I *am* very experienced.’

They sat down on a seat under a rhododendron bush, for now they were in the avenue leading to the house and their conversation had not neared its end, as their walk had.

By ‘experience’ both meant love affairs. Beatrice thought of the engagement she had broken in her girlhood, and Muriel thought of Hugh Baseden’s predecessor and his admiration for her, which she had rather too easily kept within bounds. It was, as Beatrice had said, very little experience and had served no useful purpose and taught them nothing.

‘And then,’ Muriel said, ‘there is the question of the marriage-bed.’ She was dropping the ear-rings from one hand to the other in her agitation. Far from never discussing her marriage, as she had assured Hester, she was not averse to going over it in every detail, and Beatrice was already initiated into its secrets to an extent which would have dismayed Robert had he known. ‘There were always so many wonderful excuses, or if none came to mind one could fall inextricably into a deep sleep. He had really been fairly mild and undemanding.’

‘Unlike Bertie,’ Beatrice said, and her sigh was genuinely regretful.

‘Now I am afraid to make excuses or fall asleep. I scent danger, and give in. That may seem obvious, too. It is very humiliating. And certainly a bore.’

‘I sometimes pretend it is someone else,’ Beatrice said. ‘That makes it more amusing.’ She covered her face with her hands, bowed down, rocking with laughter at some incongruous recollection. ‘The most improbable men ... if they could know!’

‘But you might laugh at the time,’ Muriel said, in an interested voice.

‘I do ... oh, I do.’

‘Robert would be angry.’

‘Perhaps husbands sometimes do the same.’

Muriel clipped her ear-rings back on. She was herself again. ‘Oh, no!’ she said briskly. ‘It would be outrageous.’

‘Marriage-bed’ was only one of her many formal phrases. She also thought and talked of ‘bestowing favours’ and ‘renewed ardours’. ‘To no one else,’ she told herself firmly. ‘To no one else.’ They walked on up the avenue in silence, Beatrice still trembling, dishevelled with laughter. ‘To no one else?’ Muriel thought, in another of those waves of nausea she had felt of late.

As they went upstairs before dinner, she felt an appalling heaviness. She clung to the banisters and Beatrice’s voice came to her from afar. Clouded, remote and very cold, she sat down at her dressing-table. Beatrice took up the glass paper-weight, as she always did, and said, as she always said: ‘They will forever fascinate me.’ She tipped it upside-down and snow began to drift, then whirl, about the little central figure. Muriel watched, the comb too heavy to lift. She watched the figure – a skating lady with raised muff and Regency bonnet – solitary, like herself, blurred, frozen, imprisoned.

‘Will she be at dinner?’ Beatrice was asking. She flopped down on the marriage-bed itself, still playing with the paper-weight.

Hester, at dinner, did not appear to Beatrice to be a worthy adversary to a woman of Muriel's elegance. She said nothing, except when coaxed by Muriel herself into brief replies; for Muriel had acquired courage and was fluent and vivacious, making such a social occasion of the conversation that they seemed to be characters in a play. 'This is how experienced people behave,' she seemed to imply. 'We never embarrass by breaking down. In society, we are impervious.'

Robert patronised their conversation in the way of husbands towards wives' women-friends – rather elaborate but absent-minded show of courtesy. When Hester spilt some wine, he dipped his napkin into the water-jug and sponged the table-cloth without allowing an interruption of what he was saying. He covered her confusion by a rather long speech, and, at its end, Hugh Baseden was ready to take over with an even longer speech of his own. This protectiveness on their part only exposed Hester the more, for Beatrice took the opportunity of not having to listen to observe the girl more closely. She also observed that clumsiness can have a kind of appeal she had never suspected.

She observed technically at first – the fair thick hair which needed drastic shaping: it was bunched up with combs which looked more entangled than controlling. The face was set in an expression which was sulky yet capable of breaking into swift alarm – even terror – as when her hand had knocked against the wine-glass. The hands themselves were huge and helpless, rough, reddened, the nails cropped down. A piece of dirty sticking-plaster covered one knuckle. A thin silver bracelet hung over each wrist.

Then Beatrice next observed that Hugh Baseden's protectiveness was ignored, but that Robert had brought forth a flush and tremor. While he was sponging the table-cloth, the girl watched his hands intently, as if it had a miraculous or terrifying power of its own. Not once did she look at his face.

Beatrice thought that an ominous chivalry hung in the air, and she could see that every victory Muriel had, contributed subtly to her defeat. 'She should try less,' she decided. She was the only one who enjoyed her dinner.

The boys were all in from the fields and gardens before Robert and Muriel dined, but throughout the meal those in the dining-room were conscious of the school-life continuing behind the baize-covered doors. The sounds of footsteps in the tiled passages and voices calling went on for a long time, and while coffee was being served the first few bars of '*Marche Militaire*' could be heard again and again – the same brisk beginning, and always the same tripping into chaos. Start afresh. Robert beat time with his foot. Muriel sighed. Soon she accompanied Beatrice out to her car, and at once Hester, rather than stay in the room with Robert (for Hugh Baseden had gone off to some duty), went up to her room.

Now, a curious stillness had fallen over the school, a silence drawn down almost by force. The '*Marche Militaire*' was given up and other sounds could be heard – Muriel saying good-bye to Beatrice out on the drive, and an owl crying; for the light was going.

Hester knelt by her window with her elbows on the sill. Evening after evening she thought thunder threatened, and because it did not come she had begun to wonder if the strange atmosphere was a permanent feature of this landscape, and intensified by her own sense of foreboding. The black hillside trees, the grape-coloured light over the church and the bilious green lawns were the after-dinner scene, and she longed for darkness to cover it.

Beatrice's car went down the long drive. A door banged. So Muriel had come in, had returned to the drawing-room to be surprised at Hester's absence. That averted look, which she assumed when she entered rooms where Robert and Hester were alone, would have been wasted.

Hester leant far out of the window. Only the poplars made any sound – a deep sigh and then a shivering and clattering of their leaves. The other trees held out their branches mutely, and she imagined them crowded with sleeping birds, and bright-eyed creatures around their holes, arching

their backs, baring their teeth, and swaying their noses to and fro for the first scents of the night hunting. Her suburban background with its tennis-courts, laburnum trees, golden privet had not taught her how to be brave about the country; she saw only its vice and frightfulness, and remembered the adders in the churchyard and the lizards and grass-snakes which the boys collected. Fear met her every turn – in her dealings with people, her terror of Muriel, her shrinking from nature, her anxiety about her future – (‘You are scrupulously untidy,’ Robert had said. Only a relative would employ her and she had none but him.)

She made spasmodic efforts to come to terms with these fears; but in trying to face Muriel she fell, she knew, into sullenness. Nature she had not yet braved, had not penetrated the dense woods or the lush meadows by the lake where the frogs were. This evening – as a beginning and because nature was the least of her new terrors, and from loneliness, panic, despair – she moved away from the window, stumbling on her cramped legs, and then went as quietly as she could downstairs and out the doors.

In the garden, at each rustle in the undergrowth, her ankles weakened, but she walked on, treading carefully on the dew-soaked grass. A hedgehog zig-zagged swiftly across her path and checked her. She persisted, hoping thus to restore a little of her self-respect. She was conscious that each pace was taking her from her safe room, where nothing made her recoil but that phrase of Muriel’s that she carried everywhere – ‘Of course you are in love with Robert.’ ‘It was better when we wrote the letters,’ she thought. ‘I was happy then. I believe.’

As the severest test, she set herself the task of walking through the churchyard where a mist hung over gravestones and nettles. The sound of metal striking flint checked her, and more normal fears than fears of nature came to her almost as a relief; as even burglars might be welcomed in an excessively haunted house. The dusk made it difficult for her to discern what kind of figure it was kneeling beside a headstone under the church walls; but as she stepped softly forwards across the turf she could see it was an old lady, in black flowing clothes and a straw garden-hat swathed with black ribbon. She wore gardening gloves and was planting out salvias and marguerites.

Hester tripped and grazed her arm against some granite. At her cry of pain, the old lady looked up. ‘Oh, mercy!’ she exclaimed, holding the trowel to her heart. ‘For pity’s sake, girl, what are you doing?’

Her white face was violin-shaped, narrowing under her cheek-bones and then widening again, but less, on the level of her wide, thin, lavender-coloured lips. The sagging cords of her throat were drawn in by a black velvet ribbon.

‘I was only going for a walk,’ said Hester.

‘I should call it prowling about. Have you an assignation here? With one of those schoolmasters from the house?’

‘No.’

The old lady drove the trowel into the earth, threw out stones, then, shaking another plant from a pot, wedged it into the hole. The grave resembled a bed in a Public Garden, with a neat pattern of annuals. The salvias bled hideously over a border of lobelias and alyssum. Their red was especially menacing in the dusky light.

‘I think a grave should have *formality*,’ the old lady said, as if she knew Hester’s thoughts and was correcting them. “‘Keep it neat, and leave it at that,” I warned myself when my father died. I longed to express myself in rather unusual ways; my imagination ran riot with azaleas. A grave is no place for self-expression, though; no place for the indulgence of one’s own likings. These flowers are not to my taste at all; they are in *no* taste.’

‘Is this your father’s grave, then?’ Hester asked.

‘Yes.’ The old lady pointed with her trowel. ‘The one you are lolling against is Grandfather’s.’

Mother chained off over there with my sister, Linda. She did not want to go in with Father. I can never remember them sharing a bed, even.'

Hester, removing her elbow from the headstone, peered at the name. 'Then you lived in the house?' she asked. 'This name is carved over the stables.'

'Our home since the Dark Ages. Three houses, at least, on this site and brasses in the church going back to the Crusades. Now there are only the graves left. The name going too. For there were once Linda and I. Families decline more suddenly than they can rise. Extraordinarily interesting. The collapse of a family is most dramatic ... I saw it all happen ... the money goes, no sons are born – just daughters and sometimes they are not quite the thing ... my sister Linda was weak in the head. We do have to pinch and scrape, and aunts fastened to us, like barnacles on a wreck. Some of them drank and the servants followed their example. Then trades-people become insolent, although the *nouveaux riches* still fawn.' She turned up a green penny with her trowel, rubbed dirt from it and put it in her pocket. 'Our disintegration was fairly rapid,' she said. 'I can remember a time before it all overtook us – the scandals and gossip, threadbare carpets, dented silver, *sold* silver, darned linen. Oh, it usually goes the same way for everyone, once it begins. And very fascinating it can be. Dry rot, wood-worm, the walls subsiding. Cracks in plaster and in character. Even the stone-work in the house has some sort of insect in it.' She nodded proudly at the school. 'Unless they have done something about it.'

'Do you come here often?'

'Yes. Yes, I do. I tend the graves. It makes an outing. I once went to the school to have tea with Mrs Thingummy. A nice little woman.' This, Hester supposed, was Muriel. 'Interesting to see what they made of it. I liked the school part very much. I went all over, opened every door. I thought the chance might not come again. Into the servants' wing where I had never been before – very nice dormitories and bathrooms. The bathrooms were splendid ... little pink, naked boys splashing under showers ... a very gay and charming sight ... I could hardly drag myself away. They scuttled off as shy as crabs. I expect the look of me startled them. What I did *not* admire was the way she had managed the private part of the house where we had tea ... loose-covers, which I abhor ... I thought all showed a cool disregard for the painted ceiling. Never mind, I satisfied my curiosity and no need to be bothered with her again.'

Hester, though feeling that Muriel might in fairness be allowed to furnish her drawing-room as she pleased, was none the less delighted to hear this censure, especially over matters of taste. She longed to talk more of Muriel, for she had no other confidante, and this old lady, though strange, was vigorous in her scorn and might, if she were encouraged, say very much more.

'I live there now,' she began.

In the darkness, which she had hardly noticed, the old lady had begun to stack up her empty flower-pots.

'Then you will be able to do me a small favour,' she said. 'In connection with the graves. If it fails to rain tonight I should be obliged if you would water these plants for me in the morning. A good sousing. Before the sun gets strong.'

She pulled herself to a standing position with one hand on the gravestone. Her joints snapped with a frail and brittle sound as she moved. Hester faced her across the grave and faced, too, the wine-camphorous smell of her breath and her clothes.

'Only Father's grave. I shall plant Mother's and Linda's tomorrow evening.'

She swayed, steadying herself against the stone, and then, with a swinging movement, as if on a deck in wild weather, made off through the churchyard, lurching from one gravestone to another, her hands out to balance her, her basket hanging from her arm. She was soon lost to Hester's sight, but the sound of her unsteady progress, as she brushed through branches of yew and scuffled the gravel, continued longer. When she could hear no more, the girl walked back to the house. She had forgotten

the snakes and the bats and all the terrors of nature; and she found that for a little while she had forgotten Robert, and Muriel, too; and the sorrows and shame of love.

As she crossed the lawn, Hugh Baseden and Rex Wigmore came round the house from the garage. Stepping out of the darkness into the light shed from upstairs windows, she looked pale-skinned and mysterious, and both men were arrested by a change in her. The breeze blew strands of hair forward across her face and she turned her head impatiently, so that the hair was whipped back again, lifting up from her ears, around which it hung so untidily by day.

‘I thought you were a ghost coming from the churchyard,’ Hugh said. ‘Weren’t you nervous out there by yourself?’

‘No.’

But her teeth began to chatter and she drew her elbows tight to her waist to stop herself shivering.

‘What *have* you been up to?’ Rex asked.

‘I went for a walk.’

‘Alone? How absurd! How wasteful! How unsafe! You never know what might happen to you. If you want to go for a walk, you could always ask me. I like being out with young girls in the dark. It makes it even safer. And, at least, you could be quite sure what would happen to you then.’

‘You are cold,’ Hugh said. He opened the door and, as she stepped past him into the hall, brushed his hand down her bare arm. ‘You *are* cold.’

Rex’s remarks, which he deplored, had excited him. He imagined himself – not Rex – walking in the dark with her. He had had so few encounters with women, so few confidings, explorings, and longed to take on some hazards and excitements.

Rex, whose life was full enough of all those things, was bored and wandered off. He found her less attractive – hardly attractive at all – indoors and in the bright light of the hall.

*

Hester rarely spoke at meal-times, but next morning at breakfast she mentioned the old lady.

‘Miss Despenser.’ Muriel put her hand to her face as she had when speaking of the dead rabbit in the laboratory. She breathed as if she felt faint. ‘She came to tea once. Once only. I wondered if I should pour whisky in her tea. She is the village drunk. I believe her sister was the village idiot. But she is now dead.’

‘You shouldn’t go out late at night on your own,’ Robert said. ‘You might catch cold,’ he added, for he could really think of no reason why she should not go – only the vague unease we feel when people venture out late, alone – a guilty sense of having driven them out, or of having proved inadequate to keep them, or still their restlessness, or win their confidence.

‘It is a wonder she could spare time from the Hand and Flowers,’ Muriel said. ‘I am surprised to hear of her tidying the graves in licensed hours.’

‘And shall you water the plants?’ Robert asked in amusement.

‘I have done. She said, before the sun got too strong.’

‘What impertinence!’ Muriel said, and every lash at Miss Despenser was really one at Hester. She felt even more agitated and confused this morning, for Rex’s words with their innuendo and suggestion had been spoken beneath her bedroom window the previous night and she, lying in bed half-reading, had heard him.

Until that moment, she had seen the threat in Hester’s youth, defencelessness and pathos; but she had not thought of her as being desirable in any more obvious way. Rex’s words – automatic as they were, almost meaningless as they must be from him – proved that the girl might also be desirable in the most obvious way of all. Muriel’s distaste and hostility were strengthened by what she had

overheard. Still more, a confusion in herself, which she was honest enough to ponder, disquieted her. To be jealous of Hester where Robert was concerned was legitimate and fitting, she thought; but to be jealous of the girl's least success with other men revealed a harshness from which she turned sick away. There was nothing now which she could allow Hester, no generosity or praise: grudging words of courtesy which convention forced her to speak seemed to wither on her lips with the enormity of the untruthfulness.

Her jealousy had grown from a fitful nagging to a chronic indisposition, an unreasonableness beyond her control.

She went, after breakfast, to her bedroom without waiting to see Hester follow Robert to his study. The days had often seemed too long for her and now pain had its own way of spinning them out. To go to her kitchen and begin some healing job like baking bread would have appeared to her cook as a derangement and a nuisance. She was childless, kitchenless; without remedy or relief.

Robert, she thought, had not so much become a stranger as revealed himself as the stranger he had for a long time been. The manifestation of this both alarmed her and stirred her conscience. Impossible longings, which had sometimes unsettled her – especially in the half-seasons and at the hour when the light beginning to fade invests garden or darkening room with a romantic languor – had seemed a part of her femininity. The idea that men – or men like Robert – should be beset by the same dangerous sensations would have astonished her by its vulgarity. Their marriage had continued in a discreet way. Now, she could see how it had changed its course from those first years, with the anniversaries, secrets, discussions; his hidden disappointment over her abortive pregnancies; the consolation and the bitter tears – all embarrassing now in her memory, but shouldering their way up through layers of discretion to wound and worry her. She had allowed herself to change; but she could tolerate no change in Robert, except for the decline in his ardour, which she had felt herself reasonable in expecting.

In rather the same spirit as Hester's when she had faced the terrors of the churchyard the night before, Muriel now went into Robert's dressing-room and shut the door. She knelt down before a chest, and, pulling out the bottom drawer, found, where she knew she would find them, among his school photographs, the bundle of letters she had written to him when they were betrothed.

She felt nausea, but a morbid impatience, as if she were about to read letters from his mistress. The first of the pile began: 'Dear Mr Evans ...' It was a cool, but artful, invitation. She remembered writing it after their first meeting, thinking he had gone for ever and wanting to draw him back to her. 'I am writing for my mother, as she is busy.' Not only had he been drawn back, but he had kept the letter. Perhaps he had had his own plans for their meeting again. She might well have let things be as they sat at home and waited – so difficult a thing for a young girl to do.

That first letter was the only time he was 'Mr Evans'. After that, he progressed from 'Dear Robert', through 'My Dear Robert', 'Dearest Robert', 'Robert Dearest', to 'Darling'. In the middle period of the letters – for he had preserved them chronologically – the style was comradely, witty, undemanding. ('Intolerably affected,' Muriel now thought, her neck reddening with indignation. 'Arch! Oh, yes!' Did Hester write so to him and could he, at his age, feel no distaste?) The letter, so patently snobbish, shallow, worked up, had taken hours to write, she remembered. Everything that happened during the day was embroidered for Robert at night – the books she read were only used as a bridge between their two minds. The style was parenthetical, for she could not take leave even of a sentence. So many brackets scattered about gave the look of her eyelashes having been shed upon the pages. When she had written 'Yours, Muriel' or, later, 'Your Muriel', there was always more to come. Many postscripts to stave off saying good-night. Loneliness, longing broke through again and again despite the overlying insincerity. She had – writing in her room at night – so wanted Robert. Like a miracle, or as a result of intense concentration, she had got what she wanted. Kneeling before the

drawer, with the letters in her hand, she was caught up once more in amazement at this fact. 'I got what I wanted,' she thought over and over again.

His letters to her had often disappointed, especially in the later phase when possessiveness and passion coloured her own. Writing so late at night, she had sometimes given relief to her loneliness. Those were momentary sensations, but his mistake had lain in taking them as such; in writing, in his reply, of quite other things. 'But did you get my letter?' Muriel now read – the beginning of a long complaint, which she was never to finish reading; for the door opened and Robert was staring at her with an expression of aloof non-comprehension, as if he had suddenly been forced to close his mind to this intimation of her character.

Muriel said shakily: 'I came across our old letters to one another – or rather mine to you ... I could not resist them.'

He still stared, but she would not look at him. Then he blinked, seemed to cast away some unpleasant thoughts, and said coldly, holding up a letter which she still would not glance at: 'Lady Bewick is running this dance after the garden party. I came up to ask how many tickets we shall want.'

'I thought you were taking Latin,' Muriel said naively.

'They are having Break now.' And, indeed, if she had had ears to hear it, she would have known by the shouting outside.

'I should let her know today,' Robert said. 'Whom shall we take?'

Muriel was very still. Warily, she envisaged the prospects – Hester going along, too. Hester in brown, smooth shoulders dramatised by her chalk-white frock. Robert's glance at them. Muriel's pale veined arms incompletely hidden by her lace stole. Perhaps Hester was a good dancer. Muriel herself was too stiff and rather inclined, from panic, to lead her partner.

'Why could we not go alone?' she asked.

'We could; but I thought we should be expected to take a party.'

'Whom do you think?'

'I had no thoughts. I came to ask you.'

'I see.' 'He wants it every way,' she thought. 'For her to go, and for me to suggest it.' She tied up the letters and put them away.

'You should take Hester,' she said suddenly. She began to tremble with anger and unhappiness. 'I can stay at home.'

'I had no intention of taking Hester.'

'I suppose you are angry with me for reading those letters. I know it was wrong of me to open your drawer. I have never done such a thing in my life before.' She still sat on the floor and seemed exhausted, keeping her head bent as she spoke.

'I can believe that. Why did you now?' he asked.

For a moment, gentleness, the possibility of understanding, enveloped them; but she let it go. She could think only of her suspicions, her wounded pride.

The tears almost fell, but she breathed steadily and they receded. 'I was bored. Not easy not to be bored. I remembered something ... I was talking to Beatrice about it yesterday ... I knew I should have written it somewhere in my letters to you. I was sure you wouldn't mind my looking.' Her excuse broke off and at last she dared to look at him. She smiled defiantly. 'I wrote them, you know. You seem as cross as if they were written by another woman.'

'They were,' he said.

She was stunned. She slammed the drawer shut and stood up. She thought: 'Those are the worst words he ever spoke to me.'

'I shall have to go,' he said. 'I suppose I can leave this till this afternoon.' He held up the letter in his hand. 'I didn't want to discuss it at lunch, that was all. The point is that Lady Bewick hoped v

could take a partner for her niece who is staying there – she thought we could ask one of the staff. wonder if Hugh ...’

‘But he’s so boring.’

‘We need not stay together.’

‘Take Rex.’

‘Rex?’

‘Why not? He dances well.’

‘But he’s so impossible. You have never disguised your scorn for him.’

‘He would be better than Hugh – not so achingly tedious.’ Irritability, the wish to sting, underlined her words. ‘You are achingly tedious, too,’ she seemed to imply. Her voice was higher pitched than usual, her cheeks flushed. He looked at her in concern, then said: ‘All right. Three tickets, then.’ He put the letter in his pocket and turned away.

As soon as he had gone, but too late, she broke into weeping.

They dined at home before the dance. Muriel was intimidating, but uncertain, in too many diamonds. When she brought out her mother’s jewels, Robert always felt put in his place, though never before had they all come out at once. Her careless entrance into the drawing-room had astonished him. She was shrugged up in a pink woollen shawl, through which came a frosty glitter. Rex’s look of startled admiration confirmed her fear that she was overdressed. ‘She has never erred in that way before,’ Robert thought: but she had shown several new faults of late; flaws had appeared which once he could not have suspected. There was, too, something slyly affected about the cosy shawl and the stir and flash of diamonds beneath it.

‘It is only a countrified sort of dance,’ Robert told Rex. His words were chiefly for Muriel, who should have known. ‘Nothing very exciting. Good of you to turn out.’

He hoped that Hester would now feel that she would miss nothing by staying at home, that he could not have gone himself, except as a duty; or asked anyone else to go, except as a favour. He had lost his stone, which should have killed two birds, missed both.

Hester, wearing a day-frock and trying to look unconcerned, managed only a stubborn sullenness. Her Cinderella performance Muriel thought wrongly, underlined by Rex’s greeting to her – ‘But you are coming with us, surely?’ – when her clothes made it quite obvious that she was not.

Robert’s shame, Muriel’s guilt, Hester’s embarrassment, seemed not to reach Rex, although for the other three the air shivered, the wine-glasses trembled, at his tactlessness.

‘Too bad,’ he said easily. ‘Well, there is no doubt that you are coming.’ He turned to Muriel, his eyes resting once more upon all her shimmering glitter. (‘Ice’, he called it, and – later, to Hugh Baseden – ‘rocks the size of conkers. Crown jewels. The family coffers scraped to the bottom.’)

The glances, which he had meant to appear gallant and flattering, looked so predatory that Muriel put her hand to her necklace in a gesture of protection, and a bracelet fell into the soup. She laughed. Rex leant forward and fished it out with a spoon and fork and dropped it into the napkin she held out. Her laughter was that simulated kind which is difficult to end naturally and her eyes added to all the tremulous glint and shimmer of her. Hester, coldly regarding her, thought that she would cry. Muriel in tears was a novel, horrifying idea.

The bracelet lay on the stained napkin. ‘The catch must be loose. I shan’t wear it,’ Muriel said, and pushed it aside.

‘That will be one less,’ Robert thought.

After dinner he had a moment alone with Hester.

‘All rather awkward about this dance. I hope you don’t mind, my dear. Don’t like leaving you like Cinderella.’

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