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DAUGHTER TO PHILIP

ALSO BY BEATRICE KEAN SEYMOUR

★

MAIDS AND MISTRESSES
BUT NOT FOR LOVE
FALSE SPRING
YOUTH RIDES OUT
THRILL WIVES
THE LAST DAY
THE ROMANTIC TRADITION
THE HOPEFUL JOURNEY
INTRUSION
INVISIBLE TIDES

BEATRICE KEAN SEYMOUR

DAUGHTER TO PHILIP

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To my friends

EDITH AND BERTRAM OLIVER

BOOK ONE

WEEK-END

Need we say it was not love
Now that love is perished?

—EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY

CHAPTER ONE

PHILIP STRATTON stood at the window looking out upon a scene of sodden fields, furiously waving trees and a downpour of rain and thinking once again how he loathed the country—especially this flat monotonous expanse of it of which, during the last nine years, he had seen far too much. He stood there now thrusting his long sullen look of hatred like a spear across it, aware that this evening there was a sharper edge than usual upon it because of the low sound of sobbing that went on in the room behind him, and because he was in the devil of a mess and was going to get a good deal further into it, unless Alex was going to be sensible, which looked at the moment extremely unlikely.

For the last hour he had striven steadfastly to make her "see sense," and she had as steadfastly refused even to glance in its direction. On the contrary, she had fallen back upon tears, upon this legend of bad health which had bored him for so many years, had, indeed, done her best to make him feel that he was the cad most people, he supposed, would agree with her he was. Well, he didn't *feel* a cad, anyway. He'd been a fool, of course, and he'd had bad luck. But he and Alex hadn't been happy together for years. A thousand, thousand times he wondered what he'd ever seen in her, what it was that had awakened in him that brief urge to possession. Why, in the name of all that was holy, had he ever married her? Because, he told himself gloomily, he wanted her—and he'd have got her no other way. Alexandra Selwyn had been strictly brought up. The favours he'd met with (before and since) in other directions were not to be had from Alex. She was shy, ignorant, timid—and she wrote

poetry. She'd written it as a child, because of it had been regarded as something of a prodigy, and at twenty, when he first met her, had not yet grown out of the habit. It had been precisely the kind of poetry he most disliked, but that hadn't mattered because Alex herself had been everything he thought lovely and desirable. Those qualities of reticence, timidity, that wondering wide-eyed ignorance of life and the world to which he belonged, how attractive they had seemed to him then! For the life of him he could not now see why. The attraction, whatever and why ever it was, had been so brief—he could not be expected to remember much about it, even if at the moment it didn't happen to be true that his mind was so occupied with other things, partly, but by no means wholly, with the desire to take another woman to wife.

He told himself as he stood there at the window that if Alex had been different, if she had not turned suddenly into a semi-invalid, for ever bleating about her headaches and weak heart, he would never have wanted to do this thing he had planked down before her this evening. It wasn't true—he even knew it wasn't true—but it afforded him some kind of consolation even as it acted as a spur to his anger. It helped him to believe what he wanted to believe—that in this matter of his marriage he had had no luck!

God! He wished she'd stop making that row! Didn't she know by now that it wouldn't do anything for her? He hated her capacity for tears—and that wretched woman who "did" for them on these beastly week-end occasions, hadn't yet gone and might take it into her head to come in. Why hadn't Alex more pride? Wearing her heart on her sleeve, announcing to the whole world that she was miserable, that he *made* her miserable! No sense. No dignity. He detested her. He'd be damned if he'd spend the rest of his life with her. If Alex wouldn't release him he'd go just the same, even if he couldn't go to Fanny. At the thought of Fanny his

blood grew warm and a pulse began to beat somewhere deep down inside him. The memory of her merry laughing face (even at that last meeting, when most women in her position would have been hanging round a man's neck in tears and reproaches) moved him to passionate desire and passionate determination. For he knew that unless he could get a divorce nothing was more unlikely than that Fanny would throw in her lot with his. She had been his mistress for two years without once ever suggesting that he should obtain a divorce from his wife, and now that Fate had taken a hand in the game and Fanny was going to have a child, she still made no such request. She was a believer in marriage, she said surprisingly, and no breaker up of homes. Her people, of course, would make a fuss, and a fuss was just exactly what Philip, for reasons of his own, could not afford to face, even if he had not been aware that Fanny had no intention of facing it. Certainly she herself was making no fuss. She'd marry that old admirer of hers (who wouldn't mind very much, she thought, about the child) and be done with it. When she said that, Philip knew that Alex *had* to divorce him. And on his terms. He'd come down this week-end with the stony determination of making her consent. And he'd failed. She'd simply refused to discuss it. He had come up against a blank wall. He had always considered Alex weak, so that this fixed determination had astonished him. But he meant to have his own way. He'd had enough of scene and argument, however, for this evening. . . He swung round from the window and moved back into the room.

His wife sat back in her chair by the handful of fire. Her eyes were shut, the tears ran down and down her face. She looked ill and stricken, but no pity moved in Stratton's heart as he looked at her. Quite suddenly he saw her not

only as a tiresome ailing woman but as somebody definitely in his way. He wished with sudden cold passion that she were dead.

He turned on his heel and without a word went out of the room and out of the house.

CHAPTER TWO

ALEX STRATTON went up to bed before her husband came back. To bed, but not to sleep. She lay for a long time listening to the rain and the wind in the trees and once she sat suddenly upright because she thought she heard her little daughter call out. But if so the call was not repeated. The vision of Sharlie's face came to her as she lay there in the dark—pale, terribly expressionless—with solemn eyes and a mouth that smiled but seldom. A strange child—an unhappy child, perhaps (she never could be sure) slightly critical of her mother and father alike (as how, thought Alex, should she not be?), a child who at seven seemed already to know that her parents between them had slain her childhood.

A dreadful suffocating pain came upon Alex Stratton as the thought of the child she loved—but how far less than her husband, who no longer loved her!—filled her mind. If she did what he wanted she could keep Sharlie—could, perhaps, make her happy, more like other children. But she knew she couldn't do it, and she wasn't even sure that Sharlie would be any happier if she did. For the child was fond of her father, fonder, Alex thought, than of her. For he was never ill and did not cry or carry his heart on his sleeve, and Alex knew that illness and tears bored her little daughter almost as much as they bored Philip, who had a rough rude health of his own and a fund of vitality that never flagged. Alex was aware that her own poor health would sooner or later have lost her her husband's love, because it wasn't in him to love what was poor and ailing. She knew now that he should not have married her, for on this subject of sex and marriage they did not speak the same

language. From the first she had disappointed him, and from the first he had shocked and disturbed her, and it was inevitable that when he had taken from her the innocence and bloom which, as she saw now, were the things in her which had really attracted him, he had already begun to be bored. Sharlie had been born just a year after their marriage, and her management of that, too, must have been a disappointment to him, for she was ill for months and recovered only to be told that she must have no more children. A dangerous miscarriage a year later had completed the ruin of her health and given Philip an excuse for looking in other directions. That Philip was habitually unfaithful to her she did not doubt, and though her conscience disapproved, her mind excused him. For if she did not know men, at least she knew Philip, and believing that she was unfitted for that side of marriage, was not disposed to blame him for seeking what he wanted elsewhere, so long as he would continue to love her and show her those kindnesses and considerations she had been brought up to expect from a husband, and without which she could not live happily. For although she had ceased to be Philip's wife in fact, she had not ceased to love him, and her sorrow at her own shortcomings was genuine enough.

Yet it never moved her—not once, not even fleetingly—to a consideration of a dissolution of their marriage. There was Sharlie—and besides, she loved Philip. Though he made her unhappy she could not imagine life without him. Moreover, marriage was for all time. She had been brought up to believe that and as a girl had grown up with the spectacle of what she thought of still as the perfect marriage before her eyes. How much, she sometimes wondered, did her father or mother guess of the imperfection of her own? Neither of them liked Philip. She knew that. They had not liked him very much before her marriage, and nothing that

had happened afterwards had been likely to improve their opinion of him. That business of the miscarriage, after the doctor's decree, had angered them, she knew; and that her mother had taken Philip to task over it she knew, too. But all the good that had done was to make Philip leave her alone entirely—and go elsewhere for his pleasures. She knew that he blamed her for that and that he hadn't believed her when she said she had not complained to her parents, that she had, indeed, accepted all the responsibility. It had never occurred to her to deny Philip. Was she not his wife? And did she not love him—even though she did not like in the very least what love and marriage connoted? But nobody had believed her on this subject—certainly not her mother, who thought Philip had behaved abominably, and not Philip, who merely continued to believe that she didn't observe what he called "the common decencies of married existence," and contemned her for it.

Other women, she knew, came and went in his life: served their purpose and passed on. Beneath the knowledge her heart broke slowly even though her mind continued to find excuses, but that the outward form of their marriage would ever be broken she had never for one moment believed. Philip cared for appearances, was, indeed, unduly sensitive to what people thought of him; and even his belief that he had a right to do what he liked where his emotions were concerned, did not help him to grow a pachyderm against the upholders of conventional morality. He cared for their good opinion. Divorce was the least of his desires. Divorce, Alex had sometimes thought, not without a little pang, did not go very well with his public attitude, with the clean but sentimental fiction for which he was so well known, and at which he earned so satisfactory an income.

And now, it seemed, all that was changed. He did want a divorce—and he wanted it at once and in order to marry a

girl who had been his mistress, he said, for two years. He'd brought it out like that, just as coffee was on the table and Sharlie safely in bed—just as if he were asking her to send a suit to be cleaned. When she had refused, he had got very angry, stormed, raved, attacked their marriage, stripped it of every illusion she still harboured about it, and then given it back to her as a thing utterly lacking in beauty, charm or even common sense. A shell, a husk, something you couldn't pretend any longer was not empty.

She felt very ill as she lay in bed and went over in her mind those harsh things he had said of their marriage. He had never been happy, and when she said: "*I* have been happy, Philip," he said that was only because she didn't know what happiness was. He'd never loved her—never. *In love* with her—oh yes, but that was a different matter. And how long had it lasted? She knew for herself that she oughtn't to have got married. She didn't like being married—and he hated women who merely obeyed St. Paul and grumbled about it afterwards to outsiders. Well, her father and mother *were* outsiders, as far as he was concerned. He supposed he'd been attracted to her because she was pretty—and because there had been another man in the offing—and oh, because, he supposed, her flattery had been very pleasant. *Of course* she'd flattered him! She'd admired the two novels with which he had firmly established his position as a writer, whilst she had been still endeavouring to find a publisher for her first and (as it had turned out) her last book of poems. One couldn't explain things at this time of day. *He* couldn't, anyway, but he wanted to get out; that was all he knew about it.

Suddenly, feeling her world rocking about her, and ill into the bargain, Alex had burst into tears, and after that she had had but the very faintest recollection of anything he said. But the impression of it remained on her mind like a dark

stain, as if it had cut into it at some point and drawn blood. She remembered telling herself that it would pass—that if she could only get over this crisis he would grow tired of this girl as of the others. And yet at the back of her mind had moved the thought that he must care this time more than he had cared before because he seemed to be considering the girl—and she was aware that even in love Philip Stratton's concern was less with the object of his affections than with Philip Stratton.

She did not know that Philip was aware of that silent piece of judgment going on in her mind, did not guess that it completed the final rout of his good temper, for although he quite erroneously considered his wife a stupid woman, there were occasions when she evinced a shrewder knowledge of the workings of his mind than his vanity could accept—and Alex, not clever enough to suppose that he could read thoughts sitting in her mind, never failed to wonder what she had said to exasperate him.

Lying there in her bed she really did feel very ill. The pain in her breast was worse than ever before. She supposed she ought to get out of bed and find the tablets the doctor had given her, but it didn't seem to matter. Perhaps when Philip returned he would come in and she would ask him to give them to her, though he'd be sure to think she was playing for sympathy. He hadn't believed her when she'd said that the doctor had told her that her heart was in a weak state. Come to that, she hadn't believed it very much herself until, after coming to the cottage a month ago, these attacks of pain had become so frequent that her mother had taken her to the doctor who had known her from childhood, and who had prescribed the tablets. She wished her mother had not told Philip about this at lunch to-day, when in all the rain they had driven over to keep the engagement he had tried hard to evade. She remembered what he had said:

"She'd be all right if she didn't worry. Perhaps while she's down here you'll be able to break her of the habit. *I've* never been able to. If there's nothing to worry about Alex invents it."

Mrs. Selwyn, Alex's mother, had said icily that she thought his attitude very extraordinary and had given him one of what he called her "I-hope-it-kills-you" looks and ignored him for the rest of the meal, whilst Alex had exerted herself to be bright and happy, because she did not like Philip to be disapproved of so openly and because she was sorry her mother had mentioned the visit to the doctor. She knew how ill-health bored Philip, and that he'd never believed what he called the "legend" about her weak heart.

She wondered if she'd always be fond of Phil, if, supposing he left her, she would one day quite forget him, cease to find empty a personal world in which he was not and contrive to make a life for herself in which neither he nor thought of him should have any part. Would she ever again fall in love? After all, she was only twenty-seven, and even the doctor had said there was no reason why she should not live to be a hundred if only she would rest now and take care of herself. But to live to be old—and never again to see Philip, never again to write a line of poetry—it didn't seem a very exciting prospect!

It was years since she had written any poetry—and only that one thin volume to show for all her efforts. Not very good poetry either. But surely not very bad? The critics had acclaimed her feeling for beauty, her delight in colour—had recognised her as one "for whom the visible world exists." But though what they said had once delighted her, it did not seem any longer to matter. Her poetry had never been an escape from life, but some kind of expression of its moods, and for the last five years there had been nothing that would translate itself into poetry—not, at least, into the

poetry that she could write. The events of her life had outstripped her talents. She acknowledged defeat here as elsewhere, with no more than a bowing of her once beautiful head.

She became aware, presently, that the rain had ceased. Through her uncurtained window she saw a tangle of cloud and a young moon climbing down the sky. Or was it up? She never could remember, but she held her breath as she looked. It was so lovely—so cold and remote from everything in her life, from everything ugly, painful and unsatisfactory. She paused in the contemplation of her personal woes to remember Sir Philip Sidney's poem from another century:

With how sad steps, O Moon, thou climbst the skies,
How silently, and with how wan a face. . . .

Like a sweet thread of melody it slid through her mind, leaving it for a moment empty of woe. Looking and remembering, she held her breath, released it on a little sobbing catch and found the tears sliding down her face. Must she always be crying? But to cry for beauty? Wasn't that, perhaps, more commendable than for one's personal unhappinesses? A spring morning, a lovely night, sun, moon and stars —flowers, the faces of the very young, a phrase of music: these things were lovely still. They remained when the personal equation was solved to its last fraction and could interest nobody any more. Weren't they enough? Strange that now she could think of nothing regarding that night of stormy moonlight beyond her window save that somewhere Philip walked angrily about in it. And presently would come angrily in, to bang the door and walk upstairs and stamp off to his own room—and wouldn't think about the moonlight at all nor how lovely it made the world (too lovely a place, surely, for humans to be so unlovely in?) and only notice with a growl of relief that at last that damned rain had stopped!

She did not know when she stopped thinking of Philip, and To-day slipped back into the Yesterday that held thoughts of another—of that "man in the offing" to whom Philip that evening had so scornfully referred. He was an actor, spending a brief holiday in her village—this same village in which she had lived as a girl with her parents and in which of late years she and Philip had had this week-end cottage. Her parents had not encouraged her friendship with Drury Pym, for they did not want her to marry an actor. Stage people were notoriously unstable in their affections; their mode of life was different—they had different standards. She supposed it was because they had loved her and were so anxious about her future that they had planted the seeds of doubt and distrust in her young breast—so ripe and eager for love and romance—so that she had sent Pym off to fulfil an American engagement with nothing more to take away with him than an expression of her regard and friendship, a promise to write. She remembered that he hadn't tried to rush her into an engagement or to sweep her off her feet, that he had been so kind and gentle, so considerate, and that when he had gone she had felt that she loved him terribly. But he had never known, never guessed that behind that shy, tremulous manner, stood back a young romantic creature wanting to be rushed off her feet, carried off across the sea and plunged into life. She had cried a little when he had gone because he had not known—and when he came back six months later she was not only married but expecting a child. Away in her new London home she did not see him. Her parents sent her the messages he left, but he did not write. She wondered why she should think of him now, and whether, if he had never stood about on the fringe of her life, Philip would ever have come plunging into it.

For that was what he did—less than a month after Drury Pym had slipped so easily out of it. Philip was neither gentle

nor considerate, and what Drury had not cared to do Philip did with an impulsive gesture that entirely conquered her romantic heart. He had fallen violently in love with the gentle girl with the lovely face and soft bright hair and eyes, who wrote such pretty verses and showed so becoming a modesty concerning them in the face of his own more definite literary achievement. He had sent her thin volume of poems to a likely publisher he knew and had eventually persuaded him to accept it. She rewarded him by dedicating the volume to him—and by falling into his by no means unwilling arms. Told of the suitor to whom she had bidden farewell with faint fair promises, he had laughed and pressed kisses upon her. Drury Pym? *That* stick? Had she ever seen him act? Well, he had! It was ridiculous that she—a girl like her!—could be in love with Drury Pym! It had amused him, she supposed, to push the image of Drury Pym out of her mind and to set up his own in his place. Had he stayed to consider that it was by way of being a very easy pastime, or had he stayed, perhaps, to consider nothing save that he wanted this young creature who gazed at him so adoringly and was so evidently ready to consider him the sun and moon of her existence?

She had known that he found her parents a much more difficult proposition, knew that they thought him no more the man for their beloved daughter than the man who had gone to America. She saw that they looked at him with much the same dismay, seeing that he was younger, better-looking, that he exercised a very definite charm upon their daughter and had already embarked upon a career by writing successful novels of a kind for which they did not care, but which had made it impossible for them to urge against him the objection which had obtained with Drury Pym.

As she lay there now in the moonlight Alex wondered what marriage to Drury Pym would have been like. She knew, by

the papers, that he was married long ago. She had seen him in one or two plays, had observed that he made love on the stage with more assurance than he had made it off—at least to her—and that he had grown much stouter. But still he looked kind—and his voice was kind, too, as she remembered it. She felt now, what she had certainly not felt in her green youth, that kindness as a human virtue outweighed all those others which had so steadily all her life been recommended to her. A little wistful smile played about her pale mouth as she rested upon that thought, as a weary child against a soft breast.

She felt very tired, too tired to harbour sorrow. Already the painful evening was a little unreal. To-morrow would be better. It must be. If she lay quite still she would sleep . . .

Suddenly she put her hand to her breast with a little gasp of surprise. That awful pain was sweeping back upon her. She felt deplorable. A strange fear held her motionless. She felt as if she were going to die—up there, all alone, in that cold remote world of moonlight. Aeons of time seemed to pass. Mistily she heard the opening and shutting of the front door, then another. . . Philip had come in. Had gone into the dining-room, to drink too much whisky, she was afraid. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered now but this pain that was suffocating her. She closed her eyes and gave herself up to it. There was no Phil, no calamitous marriage, no uncertain to-morrow, no young adventurous moon, nothing lovely or familiar. The world had narrowed to this tiny cage of pain into which, helpless, she had been thrust, alone.

CHAPTER THREE

PHILIP STRATTON came in from his striding across the flat wet country he loathed, having forgotten, as Alex knew he would, to notice the young moon and cursing the rain because it had stopped only when he was already wet through. He went straight into the tiny dining-room, threw off his dripping mackintosh and poured himself out a stiff whisky and soda.

Thank heaven, Alex had had the sense to go to bed. He could not have borne the sight of her misery again that evening. What a fool he'd been to come down and make his announcement here, when Alex could quite well have come back to town for the week-end. He'd been a fool ever to fall in with this silly week-end cottage scheme, for even though Alex's sudden decision to spend the remainder of the summer there had, in the circumstances, fallen out very conveniently for him, the necessity to present himself at Bede Cottage every week-end almost outweighed the other aspect of the arrangement. This part of England left him cold. He'd disliked it from the first, when he'd taken a house there nine years ago in order to finish a novel and had met Alex for the first time. For over seven years he'd kept her away from it, except when she went to make occasional family visits; then, because of his affair with Fanny Cornford, he had given in to her sudden desire to take this cottage less than a mile away from her parents' house. He detested the Selwyns as he detested their country. Ever since that wretched affair of that second baby, they'd worn an everlasting air of protecting their daughter from something—from *him*. Treated him like an ogre. . . Well, in this business they'd

probably serve him a good turn, for they'd certainly urge Alex to leave him—do their utmost to get her to consent to a divorce. But Alex, of course, would not tell them anything about it. Her pride, her sense of wifely dignity (how sick he got of that phrase!) would make her keep a silent tongue in her head. What a pity he hadn't sprung his mine *before* they went to the Selwyns to lunch. Then they'd have seen she was upset about something and have got it out of her. As it was, he was no better off. It was all to do again to-morrow. He'd got to go back with definite news of the right kind for Fanny, for he knew she meant what she said, and that she wouldn't waste any time. There was, in fact, no time to waste. Something had to be done, and Fanny was weeping on no man's shoulder. She'd do what she thought best for herself, and failing his news of a divorce he knew what that would be.

His pulse quickened at the thought of Fanny, of her radiant robust health, her dark, merry good looks, her happy good nature and high infectious spirits. Life would be good with Fanny. Sitting there wet and just a little already the worse for drink, life with Fanny was what he urgently desired. He remembered how he'd felt when she'd said that if she couldn't marry him she must certainly marry somebody —and indicated who that somebody would be. When she had said all this again yesterday, he had taken a sudden furious decision: "You'll marry nobody but me," he had said, and Fanny had laughed at the sudden dark fury which rode up in his face.

"But, Phil, you know your wife won't divorce you," she had said, "so what's the use?"

"She will—I'll make her!" he had declared, and Fanny had laughed again.

"Well, you'll have to hurry up. I'm two months gone already—and I'm no sylph—it will soon be noticeable.

I must go to church *looking* respectable, anyway." Then she had stopped laughing. "But seriously, Phil, I'd much rather you didn't try. *Much* rather. It's I who've had the fun and I who ought to pay for it."

"Fun!" Philip had said. "Is *that* what you call it?"

"Well . . . it *has* been fun, hasn't it? It has been for me!"

"Fun!" Philip had said again, suddenly convinced that this was the one serious love of his life—and, faced with losing it, so perhaps it was. But he knew that what he specially appreciated about Fanny was this same light-hearted approach to love, and "fun," though he would not now admit it, did certainly seem to describe their relationship from its beginnings. For Fanny, just eighteen, had certainly shown no scruples, and Philip had immediately recognised a kinship with her attitude to this side of life which most people, he considered (certainly most women), took far too seriously. But—*fun?*

"Nothing of the sort," Philip had said, kissing the white column of her neck, and tortured by the sudden image of some other man kissing her so before long. "You belong to me! I'll show you!" And as that seemed hugely to amuse her he had shaken her a little savagely in his arms. "Alex will divorce me. She'll go to Scotland for it and then the decree can be made absolute at once."

He frowned as he remembered Fanny's reply.

"But, Phil, she won't. I'm quite sure she won't. She isn't that sort—from all you've ever told me about her, I know that much at least. And after all, why should she? It's my funeral, not hers. I'd so much rather leave her out of it. . . I almost wish I'd never told you about this business. It was so nice before! I could have gone off and got married without your knowing anything about it—and have done with it!"

"*Funeral!*" Philip had said. "*Nice! Fun!* What silly

words you women use. Alex *will* divorce me! I'll see she gives me her promise this week-end!"

Unexpectedly, Fanny had said: "Poor Alex!"

Philip had wondered why. He wondered why now, as he poured himself out another whisky and soda and went to bed.

CHAPTER FOUR

FANNY CORNFORD had gone to bed a good deal earlier and had lain awake for some time wondering what was happening down there in the country at Philip's week-end cottage. A pity it was wet again. Phil hated the rain—Fanny could never see why. She thought most people made far too much fuss about the weather. English people ought to be used, anyway, to theirs. The weather did not depress Fanny, but then, few things did—even this business of having a baby before she had secured a husband. Fanny was frankly sensual. She liked men, and it certainly wasn't her fault that none of the men she had liked most was in a position to marry her. When she met Philip (who wasn't either) they had understood each other from the first, and the complication Nature was now forcing upon them was neither what they had desired nor intended. Philip, whose initial feeling was that he ought to be able to blame somebody (not himself) for the *contretemps*, had been reassured by Fanny's common-sense attitude upon the subject. She didn't expect *him* to do anything about it, thank heaven! She had, indeed, expected Phil to feel that way—men, she thought, were "like that," and she was not, for all her liking for men, at all inclined to harbour illusions about them. She hadn't expected Phil to break up his home for her: she hadn't expected their affair to last indefinitely, and she didn't feel any particular leaning towards marriage, certainly not marriage with Philip, whose mistresses, she was sure, would have a better time than his wife. She had been out for some "fun," had found Phil very satisfactory as a lover, and had thought herself too clever, too modern, to be caught in this fashion. However, there it was, and Phil's

dismay at her news hadn't surprised or upset her in the least. She thought that it would be rather fun to have a child, but rather a nuisance all the same, because she was the modern daughter of parents not modern at all, who most certainly would not think her entitled to her "fun" and would as certainly make a great deal of fuss—especially with Phil, who was one of her father's favourite contributors. He would certainly have something to say about what he would regard as the seduction of his daughter. She didn't in the least blame Phil for feeling as he did, but she hated fuss above all things, and had promptly come to the conclusion that she had better marry the man who'd been bothering her to do it for the past six months. She hadn't quite made up her mind whether she'd tell him about the child or not—that he had guessed about Phil, she felt sure. Anyway, she *could* marry him, whether or no—had only to get out of bed now and ring him up. The thought of Phil down there in the country bullying that poor woman into granting him a divorce and the recollection of something in Phil's face last night when he'd sworn to come back with Alex's consent, worried her a good deal more than the thought of this marriage of convenience. She had felt cold as she had said "Poor Alex!" and a shadow had crept over her gay spirit. But not for long. After all, she and Philip weren't in love with each other. They were mutually attracted—that was all. Fanny, if she had no illusions about men, had none either about women—certainly none about women of her kind. Phil would not, she supposed, be the last man in her life, as he was not the first, and, in the circumstances, to bother with marriage seemed a little superfluous, though in nineteen hundred and nine a baby made it look a little less so—especially in view of her father's certain attitude and Phil's professional connections with him. She had never contemplated that Phil would want to marry her or would go to the bother of a divorce, especially as he would have, somehow,

to keep her name out of it, if he wanted to safeguard his position with her father. Naming her as his partner in guilt in a divorce action would be no more popular, in that quarter, than what he would call her seduction.

Fanny sighed and turned over in bed. She didn't see how it could be done, with something less than seven months at their disposal. Much simpler, surely, to leave Alex Stratton her peace of mind and let her, Fanny, marry her middle-aged admirer. Much better let her settle it her own way and chance what happened afterwards. Fanny was a young woman of strong sexual feeling and very little emotion, the sort of female her father meant when he called a woman a bitch. A silly expression, in Fanny's view, who was fond of dogs—especially of dogs who were feminine gender. Well, whatever she was, Fanny did not believe anything in the world was worth so much fuss and bother. It wasted so much time; and life was short. . .

She hoped it would be finer to-morrow, because she was going on the river in the afternoon, and in the evening her father had one of his parties which were usually amusing, and at which Philip ought to be present. She hoped her new frock would be a success (and discreet) and that she wouldn't be sick in the morning. That, really, was a bore. . . Could one possibly be sick with any sort of dignity on one's honeymoon? One couldn't, Fanny told herself, be sick anywhere upon any occasion with dignity. It was a pity. Fanny laughed into her pillows, turned over upon them again and fell asleep.

CHAPTER FIVE

OVER at Carr House, a mile away from Bede Cottage, Ann Selwyn found it much more difficult to sleep and, as usual, was making it impossible for her husband to sleep either. She had had her daughter very much on her mind for some time, and the day's luncheon party had done nothing to ease her anxieties.

She said presently to her husband, who knew she would: "I feel very worried about that child, Henry."

Henry Selwyn, who wanted very much to go to sleep, said: "Alex? Did you think she seemed worse?"

"Yes—and so *unhappy*, Henry."

"But, my dear, we *know* she's unhappy. We've agreed we can't do anything to help her there, since she won't leave Philip."

"Why did we ever let her marry him? We *could* have stopped her. She wasn't of age."

"I daresay—but should we ever have found the man we thought good enough of her? We should have sniffed at the Archangel Gabriel. We certainly didn't think that actor chap good enough, did we?"

"But we both liked him. . . . It was only that Alex had been so differently brought up. And his income was so precarious. But we *never* liked Philip Stratton."

That, Henry did not dispute. He had never cared for Philip Stratton even in the moment of recognising that his beloved Alex was lost to him. They had put the best face they could upon it, and had presently gone to the very public wedding which had taken her definitely from them.

"Philip's a sentimentalist," Ann said now, "and

sentimentalists are always cruel."

Henry sighed. "You think Philip is cruel to Alex?"

"Of course I do. It's cruelty, isn't it, to show how plainly her ill-health bores him, and positive brutality to forget how much his fault it is? And then, these other women . . ."

Henry Selwyn, who was young in the late 'sixties, when the women wore hooped skirts, the men plaid trousers, and as a young man about town had known Evans's in Covent Garden (not in its hey-day, it is true) and those famous courtesans, "Skittles" and Lola de Montez, could never admit that this side of Philip Stratton's life was one he could discuss with his wife. Not that he had any doubts about it, but only that he would as soon have discussed with Ann his own pre-marital affairs as the post-marital ones of his son-in-law. He was aware, also, that Philip had some kind of excuse for them—but of this, too, he could not talk to Ann, who would never have agreed with him, anyhow. So he said, pacifically:

"I expect Alex imagines those, doesn't she, my dear?"

"Alex? She's never said a word about them. But you can't deceive me. He's the sort that must have a woman—if not his wife, then somebody else."

"Really, my dear!"

"I'm sorry if I shock you, Henry. But it's no use pretending or mincing words. After all, we're nearly at the end of nineteen hundred and nine and can call a spade a spade, I hope. Why Alex puts up with it I can't imagine. If you'd behaved like that I'd have left you at once. Alex gets her strict ideas on marriage from you, not from me. It's no good *my* telling her to get a separation from Philip. She merely thinks I've grown loose-minded in my old age."

"But, my dear, she wouldn't be happy if she did leave him!"

"Well, she'd be less *un*happy. I'm sure of that."

"Are you, my dear?"

"Oh, Henry, how tiresome you are! I'd call *you* a sentimentalist, too, if the word didn't always remind me of Philip."

"But, my dear Ann, you never will remember that, although *we* don't like Philip, Alex happens still to be in love with him."

"I *don't* see how she can be!"

"That doesn't alter the fact, my dear."

"*In love!* Henry! What a phrase! After seven years of marriage you either *love* your husband—and he you—or nothing. And I can't see what there is about Philip Stratton that any woman should care two straws about him."

Henry Selwyn laughed.

"Nobody ever can see what anybody sees in anybody else," he said.

He wanted, more than ever, to go to sleep. Alex was less particularly on his mind than she was on Ann's, and discussing your worries in bed was a bad habit of which in nearly forty years of married life he had never been able to break her. In the hope of ending the present conversation he said:

"If you're really so worried about Alex, my dear, why not drive over to-morrow afternoon and persuade her to come over here with us when Philip goes back? I quite agree she ought not to be there until he has made better domestic arrangements. I'm glad you took up that point with her to-day."

"I can't imagine why she decided to stay there alone for the rest of the summer. A thoroughly stupid idea, when she could quite easily have come here. It's always been so difficult to get her to leave Philip even for the shortest stay here. I've always felt she thought she had to keep an eye on him!"

Henry sighed and said nothing to this, seeing sleep as far

off as ever. He, too, he told himself, was worried about Alex, but more because of her health than because of Philip. After all, if *she* liked him! He was old-fashioned, he supposed. Divorce was an ugly word. If Alex were really as unhappy as Ann suggested, let her get a separation and come back home. They'd be glad enough to have her—and the child too. But of course she'd never do that. Alex was single-minded and gentle-hearted. And she was ill and delicate now, not the sort to run away or stand up for her "rights." To do that you had to be a hale and hearty type, perhaps. Somebody more like Ann, who had never been ill in her life, who possessed but one weakness, her nervous anxious care for her daughter. Henry thought it probable they both worried about her too much, as people with an only child were apt to do. It was absurd and incongruous, the only really surprising thing about Ann, that she had produced but this one delicate child (and that after twelve years of marriage) instead of the family of robust boys and girls for which Nature had so obviously designed her. People said it was because they were first cousins, but when they were married nobody had bothered very much about a thing like that. People bothered themselves to-day about so many things and were none the happier for it, either. All this talk of "glands" that was going on—endocrine, wasn't that the word? Everything, it seemed now, depended upon these. If the doctors knew all about glands, they'd know all about health. *Would* they? All the physiological books he'd ever read told you so much without leaving you any the wiser, for what they left out was human nature—and that was what did the mischief. Nothing in any physiological book he'd ever read explained why Alex, delicate, imaginative and fastidious, should have fallen in love with Philip Stratton, who was none of these things, or why he, if it came to that, should have fallen in love with her. And nothing either which explained why she wanted him

still, when he was so obviously sick of her, bored by her ill-health and inability to do the things other women did without fuss or effort. She had given her heart away, years ago, and like an amputated leg it was painful still. The human heart! When they'd told you that the heart is a muscular organ and explained the mechanics of circulation, what, still, did you know of it? If you could make people reasonable and sensible over this business of mating you could probably produce a race that would live for ever. But you *couldn't* make people reasonable and sensible. People, on this subject, behaved as Nature intended them to behave. They were attracted by faces and forms—and looked no further, making no enquiries about heredity or health-charts. Few of them (certainly in the year of grace nineteen hundred, when Alex had married her handsome young man) were moved to pay visits to the doctor before embarking upon marriage. They were young and in love and all the rest would be added unto them. Eugenics had no place in their thoughts. So, when Philip Stratton had first set eyes upon Alex, then a few months short of her nineteenth birthday, he saw only that she had a slim and lovely shape, a pair of violet-blue eyes set far back beneath a broad low brow and framed in curling lashes tipped with the gold of her fine-spun hair and a skin that looked as though it were made of alabaster behind which somebody held a lighted candle. As a child they had feared lung trouble; but nobody ever knew why—probably because of that lovely complexion. She looked "a chest type." Yet, having got over the usual childish ailments, she was never ill, though fatigue overtook her a trifle too easily. She lived, the doctors said, on her nervous energy and ordered her "plenty of sleep." She was a rational enough girl, gay and dreamy by turns, gentle-hearted, loathing the sight of pain, liking the country better than the town, and, in short, exhibiting no unusual traits save a passion for poetry, a

burning desire to write poetry herself. God only knew where she'd got *that* from! Henry had always thought it harmless enough—had felt personally flattered, somehow, when her first poem appeared in the local paper, and others, later, in *Temple Bar*.

He told himself now that if she had never married she would be much the same now, at twenty-seven, as she had been in those early years. It was falling in love that did it—getting married and producing that child! Perhaps if she'd consulted a doctor she could have discovered, without this disastrous experiment and that other which followed two years later, that she was not built for this business of reproduction, that she could do only with danger and difficulty what other women did normally. What then? She would still have wanted Philip and he her. People in love are not reasonable. Nature knows a trick or two worth a dozen of that. Probably from the point of view of human happiness Nature was a dunder-headed old fool with but one idea. But that, if you thought about it, was not an inapt description also of a person in love. Certainly when he and Ann first met in eighteen-seventy he had been one-idea'd—to get married to her with the minimum of delay. He had had *affaires* enough, but luckily they did not live in an age when the woman was inquisitive on this point, and some of the ladies had been beauties and some had possessed other attributes he appreciated at least as warmly, but Ann was the first woman he'd ever seen with whom he felt he wanted to go to bed every night for the rest of his life, the first woman he'd ever wanted children by. Tall, well-made (a fine figure of a woman even in that age of crinoline and whale-bone!), he had taken it for granted that he would have by her a family large and healthy—and lo! eleven years went by before there was a sign of even the beginnings of one, by which time Ann had passed her thirtieth birthday. Alex appeared in due time and

without undue fuss, but she was the beginning and end of Henry Selwyn's family, as much an accident, he reflected now, as any unintended child of these birth-controlling moderns. Henry had wanted children passionately, but if he could have been told, with certainty, before his marriage that Ann would do no more for him than this, it would have made no difference. It wouldn't have prevented him from marrying her or have cured him of the passion which had possessed him—from which he'd never escaped, and which had eternally kept him even from the thought of attempting to secure children elsewhere.

That was why he always felt he knew so much more about Alex than her mother, who had never been driven by passion but had given herself in marriage with a warm affection that, unstinting though it was, never behaved like a river in flood. She had always thought Alex a romantic fool about Philip, and had urged her frequently enough, of late years, to leave him. This had frankly shocked Henry, who, believing that Alex had married for love, believed also that love endured to the end—at which Ann laughed, which shocked him again. He knew that if she could succeed in getting Alex away from her husband she'd be happy, and nothing would ever persuade her that Alex was not happy, too. Henry did not believe that there was anything either of them could do for Alex but ignore her unhappiness and be civil to Philip. And because he could do this and Ann could not, he knew which of them Alex would be most glad to see to-morrow. A warm trickle of pleasure ran through him at the thought, and he wished with all his heart that Alex was a child again, showing him the wild flowers she had gathered, the first poem she had written. A gay and lovely thing she had been in those days, before love found her out! He fell asleep with that shining memory fixed, like a picture on a wall, firmly in the forefront of his mind.

CHAPTER SIX

PHILIP awoke in the morning with a throbbing headache and the sounds of birds in his ears. What the hell did Alex mean when she said that August was a silent month for birds? The only one that was silent was that idiotic creature, the cuckoo, because it had taken itself off—the rest of them were making as much row as ever, and Philip found it another of the disadvantages of the country he detested. For a while he lay there, staring out upon the new day with a heavy frown of disapproval, as though he had even failed to notice that it had ceased to rain. He was trying to put off the moment when, as his thoughts expressed it, he would have to "begin all over again." And this time he must add that tiresome detail about the baby. He had kept it back, seeing that it might be a useful card to play at the last moment if the romantic plea he was putting up for love and happiness failed of its effect.

God, what a nuisance it was! Perhaps, after all, it would be simpler to let Fanny go off and marry that fellow. No, he'd be damned if he'd do that! He couldn't be sure that that wouldn't, for him, be the end of it. And he wasn't tired of Fanny. Far from it. He really did, now that he had begun to think of it, desire her as his wife—it wasn't only that he didn't want to see her the wife of somebody else. Fanny was his sort. She was amusing and good-natured: not over-emotional or highfalutin—and not so good herself that she must be for ever marking up the other chap. Fanny *wasn't* "good"—not what Alex meant by a good woman. She was "free," if she liked you—and made no bones about it. Astonishing thing, that, when you thought of old Cornford and his prim

wife—couldn't imagine how, with their ideas, they'd ever produced another human being at all, much less a girl like Fanny. She wanted taming, to be made to toe the line. He wasn't going to have any monkeying about when she was his wife. *When.* . . . She'd be amiable and easy to live with, and a kid to look after would tie her up a bit—Nature knew her job. He wasn't really afraid, and Fanny was worth the risk. When he thought about her now she was worth any number of risks. He hadn't imagined he could feel like this about a woman. Probably wouldn't last, but while it did it was worth having. Pity marriage was the only way, for though he wrote prettily about marriage he considered it an over-rated institution. He'd rather have gone on as they'd been going, until this happened. His luck had certainly been out. Well, that was over and done with. No use repining. Fanny was lost to him if he couldn't bring Alex to reason. And the thought of Fanny lost to him was too painful to be endured—Fanny in the arms, in the bed, of another. Well, she'd been there before. For all her youth, she was no chaste virgin when he'd taken her; but she hadn't been there since. She'd been faithful to him—that he'd swear. It would be his child all right. It had never occurred to him to doubt it. She'd not been near another man for the two years he'd had her. He knew that, yet he could not help feeling a thrill of nobility because he'd not chosen that way out—not disowned his paternity by casting back to Fanny's earlier amours. Many men would have done so, he thought, and forgot that if he had that would have been the end of it—and he was by no means willing for that yet. He wondered what she was doing, if she was up yet—and whether she'd 'phone through to him. But, of course, she'd not do that. In the whole of the two years of their intimacy she'd never embarrassed him by doing that kind of thing. She wasn't that sort. She didn't ask a lot of a man, which was why he felt disposed to do more for

her than for any other woman he'd ever met. All the same, she ought not to have let this happen. Things would have been better as they were. As it was, he'd only just save his bacon, even with luck. He thought of it like that. For a man who was repeatedly told that his English was graceful and charming he was surprisingly colloquial in his mental expressions.

But even if Alex consented it was still not an easy business. A divorce was the devil. He'd got to be the guilty party (bah, what a phrase!) and he'd got to find somebody else to cite as his partner. If he brought Fanny into it he'd be dished with the old man, who, though he mightn't be able to stop his marrying Fanny, could dispense—and would—with a contributor highly paid to spot offensive novels and to keep the wells of fiction undefiled. Useless to point out that it was fiction, not life, *your own* life, with which he, in the old man's paper, was concerned. The old man wanted 'em both clean—and if you couldn't manage it you must be very clever with the whitewash. To bring Fanny into it would be to bring the scandal to his own doorstep—which was unthinkable. Another woman was bad enough. Damn bad. So bad that all he could hope for was that he could make the old man believe it was an arranged thing—because he, a natural healthy man, found life with an invalid wife more than he could endure. But going to Scotland to avoid the usual six months' wait, marrying Fanny so soon afterwards—and then the too prompt appearance upon the scene of the youngster. No, it wasn't going to be easy. It was, in fact, going to be damned difficult. Philip wished he could put the year forward. He wished it was all over—the separation from Alex, this beastly divorce business, and, most of all, perhaps, the birth of Fanny's child. Not that Fanny was likely to make the fuss that Alex had made—or the bad business of it. But children were a lottery. You never

knew. Besides, it might be another girl. . .

He'd have sworn he'd have preferred girls to boys, but after seven years of Sharlie he was by no means so sure. That child got him down. The most unchildlike child he'd ever encountered. That calm, unyielding gaze, the way her eyes hardened and her mouth twisted down when you were sharp with her, the quiet way she removed herself when he and Alex got wordy with each other. Wiped them clean out—removed herself utterly to some world of her own—every line in her little body announced it—to some more acceptable sphere in which fathers and mothers knew how to behave! Her mother's daughter. Not his, he'd swear. Alex must have been just like that when she was a kid. Superior, detached, highfalutin. Sharlie did everything her mother must have done as a child save write poetry. Sharlie didn't do that—yet—thank God. But she was a most unlovable child. No, he definitely didn't want another girl. He hoped Fanny would manage to produce a boy. It was the least she could do after having got him into this fix.

What was she doing, he wondered, now? He looked at his watch. Seven-thirty. No, she'd not be up as early as that, if *he* knew Fanny, who considered that to have her bath before nine o'clock was an insult to a comfortable bed. He thought for a minute of Fanny in her bath and a faint smile came upon his face. Nothing of the prude about Fanny, she looked well without her clothes—and knew it. A beauty of a girl, Fanny, with a skin like milk and the curves of Titian's Venus—which was the type he really admired, though if you were one of his readers you'd never have guessed it. But then, you'd never have guessed Fanny, either, or any of the difficult situations that now urged this gifted writer to rise and tackle it, and at the same time kept him to his bed.

Philip Stratton was not really a hypocrite. He knew a good deal, if not all there was to know, about himself and saw in

the picture nothing to be ashamed of: but his writing talent, as so often happens, did not belong to his personality. It was something extraneous, unexplainable—a light, pretty and tractable thing which at regular intervals produced books that earned for him an income not to be despised and bore no relation to life—certainly not to his own, though why should it? His attacks on the autobiographical novel (so largely, as he averred, the work of women who, as everybody knew, "had no real creative ability") were well known.

He wanted Fanny, by this time, so badly that even the special difficulties of his situation could not persuade him to yield to her way out. He couldn't be sure that her marriage might not convert her into a very respectable English matron. He had seen it happen before, and had he been tired of Fanny would have seen it happen now with withers quite unwrung. The more he contemplated the position the more hopeless it appeared, and the more he thought of a future life with Fanny the more barren and dreary seemed his existence with Alex. He told himself that something—anything—had to be done to put an end to the one and to bring about the other. But he still did not know what, as he got out of bed and into his dressing-gown, it could possibly be. He saw ahead of him what his masculinity thought of as "just another scene." Better get it over before he went and shaved, and before Sharlie, that awkward child, got up and about. He hoped Alex wouldn't start crying again—she probably would, though: been doing it all night, most likely. And she'd have a headache and talk about her heart and ask him in that martyr voice of hers for her tablets. Ever since her mother had taken her to see old Fanshawe he'd had that also to put up with. He'd refused to be impressed. She'd called "wolf!" too often. She was definitely one of the women who enjoyed bad health. But supposing it was true, after all? Supposing her life did hang on as frail a thread as that confounded

woman, her mother, had suggested? It didn't, of course. . . . Even Alex had laughed at the suggestion and said: "Oh, mother, don't frighten poor Phil. It's not as desperate as all that. I've just got to rest more—that's all!" Everybody knew the heart was a tough affair. People with weak and diseased hearts lived as long as ordinary people—they took such damned good care of themselves. Alex would outlive him most likely. He scowled at himself in the glass, observed with disgust the sight of his unshaved morning face, and ran a brush over his untidy head. It annoyed him that Nature had decreed that the masculine visage should be so untempting in the morning. Women came off better there. He thought of Fanny slipping out of bed, running a powder-puff over her sleep-flushed face *en route* for the bathroom. But Fanny had the pleasing gift of morning loveliness. Across the image of her that sat in his mind there came, as he gazed in the mirror, the memory of Alex—who, even now, was lying there waiting for him to go in and say he was sorry, that he hadn't meant what he'd said, that he'd come to retract. And when she saw that he didn't intend to do any of these things. . . . Oh, Lord, what a mess!

He put down his brush and stood still for a moment, staring at his reflection in the glass. Into his mind had come striding the thought that had come to him last night. He wished again, with all his heart, that Alex were dead. He stood there for a few seconds staring at his own face in the glass, as if he could see that ugly thought written upon it, then, with a shrug of his shoulders he turned, went out of the room and along to that of his wife.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE birds had wakened Sharlie Stratton, too, as she lay upstairs in the tiny room with the low sloping ceiling at the top of the little house which her mother said was meant for a maid. But because mummy and daddy (unlike grandpapa and grandmamma) must each have a room of their own, she had to sleep in the little room at the top, so there was no maid but only Mrs. Green, who slept at her own home in the village, and came in at eight and stayed more or less all day, to look after them.

The worst of this was that nothing ever happened in the morning until Mrs. Green arrived to get fires (when the weather was bad) and to prepare breakfast, for mummy could never do anything in the morning. Sharlie herself was not supposed to get up until mummy was ready to help her bath and dress, but sometimes she got tired of waiting and began all by herself. She thought it rather a silly arrangement and wished they could bring Flora, who was her nurse, and believed in early rising for little girls. Grandmamma Selwyn, too, thought they should have Flora. She had heard her talking to mother about it only yesterday when they had all gone over to Carr House to lunch. "Then Flora must sleep *out*," grandmamma had said firmly. "You must speak to Philip about it at once. I *never* heard such nonsense!"

Sharlie had a peculiarly quick ear for conversations and tricks of speech, and her grandmother's, "I *never* heard such nonsense," was a phrase very familiar to her and one she frequently reproduced in her own conversation. This time, however, Grandmother Selwyn had sounded very angry and had lifted a stern finger in her direction when she had

mimicked softly: "I *never* heard such nonsense." But though, thereafter, Sharlie preserved silence, and that little air of detachment which sat so oddly upon her, she remembered other phrases in this after-lunch conversation: "Flora eating her head off up there, doing nothing—and you down here doing all sorts of things you've no business to be doing. . . . Well, she can't *have* a holiday just now, that's all. . . . Call her back!"

Sharlie lay in bed and wondered if that was what was the matter last night—if that was why daddy had been so cross when they had reached home, and sent her up to bed ten minutes before Mrs. Green was ready for her. Daddy, she knew, didn't like to be "spoken to" about things—but he was never so nice in the country, and never nice at all after going to see Grandmamma and Grandpapa Selwyn. Sharlie adored alike her grandparents (even when they shook stern fingers at her) and the country.

Even lying in bed, when one was longing to be up and running about outside, was not so bad in the country, for from her little bed she could see right through the many-paned window which was on a level with it. She could see quite a big piece of the sky and the grey clouds scudding across it as if chased by something—something she couldn't see, but must always be imagining, for all daddy told her it was the wind. She could hear it rushing through the garden down below, and see the tall summer trees waving their green heads gaily about in it. Sharlie loved the wind and never thought of it as something you couldn't see. Neither did mummy, who would say: "Look at the wind, darling, running along the meadow"—and there indeed it was, turning back the grass as it went, so that it looked grey and not green. All night long the wind had been moving about the world—noisily, as though it were a little angry or had too much to do before the night should be gone. Stirring in her

sleep, she had heard it sighing, pausing and rushing off again, chasing the rain as it chased the clouds before it. Sharlie did not mind the wet and windy weather, and never could understand why it made so many people—but particularly daddy—so very cross. She hoped it would be fine for him to-day. He had been so miserable yesterday when he had arrived, and all the way to Grandmamma Selwyn's and all the way back. If it was wet to-day he wouldn't, Sharlie knew, go out of the house until it was time to climb into the car and go back home to Chelsea by himself—and Sharlie simply couldn't see the sense in being in the country if you stayed indoors all the time. All the same, she loved Bede Cottage. She loved the long low rooms, gay with her father's brightly-bound books and her mother's old and shining furniture, with their huge fireplaces, their low small-paned windows that looked out on to the smooth front lawn upon which a shining copper-beech disported itself. Sharlie knew she had to be proud of the copper-beech, for there was not another for miles around—elms and sycamores were the trees of fenland—and she had heard her mother say that she had always wanted to live in that cottage because of the copper-beech. Grandmother Selwyn, she knew, did not think much of the little garden at the back, but she always said she envied them the tall dark tree which she called "the macrocarpa," and her mother "the Monterey cypress" (which Sharlie liked much better). The Monterey cypress didn't grow very well, her grandmother said; it wasn't a good shape, but it did grow, which was more than she had been able to get it to do at Carr House. And even old Beridge, when he came up from the Carr House garden to wrestle with the little group of neglected fruit trees that was mummy's "orchard," would smile affectionately upon the Monterey cypress. Only daddy remained impervious to the marvel and wonder of it—but then daddy, most strangely, didn't care about trees

or gardens or, even, about the country.

Wet or fine Sharlie found the country exciting. There was so much more to do than in London, and so much more to see when one went walking—all the wild flowers that grew by the wayside with their lovely names that grandmamma knew, and mummy, but not daddy, though he smiled at some of them and agreed that they were certainly very pretty. Cowslip, coltsfoot, oxlip, harebell, bluebell, cuckoo-flower, lady's smock, none-so-pretty, pimpernel, buttercup, foxglove, forget-me-not, speedwell, yellow-rattle, John-go-to-bed-at-noon—the melody of these names was spring and summer to Sharlie before she had seen come and go more than half a dozen of either. To her, as to Andrew Marvell, the "sweet and wholesome hours" could "be reckon'd but with herbs and flowers."

Moreover, there was Carr House, and Grandmother and Grandfather Selwyn, who lived there and all the people they knew upon whom, driving in the tall springy dog-cart, they sometimes called, to be given cups of tea or glasses of the sweet home-made wine at which Sharlie was allowed to sip but not to drink. Sharlie liked all these simple, hard-working folk in their clean cottages and farms—especially Joe and Mrs. Blunsdon at Cross Farm, and Clive, their youngest son, who had told her all the things she knew about birds, so that she recognised quite easily now the note of the missel-thrush who sang below in the wet and windy garden. It was "fun" knowing Clive, and though she had once heard her father ask scornfully what his daughter was doing "with this farm-boy," neither her mother nor her grandmother ever interfered with her friendship with him. It was Clive, too, who had taught her to distinguish between the song of the thrush, the chaffinch and the redbreast, to listen on mild January evenings for the blackbird practising his notes: Clive who had told her that the sweet liquid whistle that woke her in the windy April

dawn belonged to that same blackbird who had learnt in the interval a good part of his song, and Clive who had promised, when she was bigger, to show her the copse where the nightingale sang to the night. She had been glad when her mother had told her father that the Blunsdons were "quite superior folk," although they didn't "belong to Lincolnshire at all," and had glowed with pride when her grandmother had supplemented this by her "*Mrs.* Blunsdon comes from a *very* good family," for although this seemed to leave out Joe, whom Sharlie adored, it certainly put an end to her father's objections to one of the pleasantest bits of life in the country.

She raised herself in bed and leaning a little out of the window looked down upon the dripping garden. As she did so the clock downstairs struck seven. Oh bother!—a whole hour before Mrs. Green could possibly come! She never came earlier because "there was Green, who wanted waiting on hand and foot." So Sharlie went on kneeling at the window, her thoughts flying here and there, up and down in the garden as blithe and gay as the free wild birds of the air. Clive said birds were better than "her old wild flowers"—the loveliest things in the world—and that their names were as lovely, too. Blackbird was lovely, and thrush and robin and ouzel. And what about skylark, swallow and kingfisher? Sharlie said them off now very softly to herself and wished she could as easily remember which was which when she saw them as when she heard their voices. Clive was very patient when she got them mixed up and when she couldn't remember which were the happy birds for whom it was always summer and who just flew off to whatever part of the world summer happened to be in at the moment. These were the birds, Clive said, who didn't know what it felt like to be hungry—so perhaps this was why they were nearly all singing-birds. It was easier to remember which were "the Residents"—the birds who stayed with us all the year through, rearing their

young in our uncertain spring—and which were those who liked cold and came to us only in winter. Birds, thought Sharlie, leaning down and calling to the thrush, who took no notice but just went on singing, perched upon the honeysuckle bush, were rather like people. They were fussy about the weather—only they did, rather, seem to like the rain! If you were a bird how could you *not* like the rain which cooled your feathers, made little baths for you, and drinking-vessels, too? A mistake, said Clive, to think that birds liked the hot sun; it made them ill, and he would ask the village people *please* to cover the tops of the bird-cages they hung out in the heat of the day. If the bird was a linnet or blackbird or, sometimes, even a lark, he would tell them that it was wicked to keep it in a cage, but usually they laughed at him as if they found what he said amusing and Clive, with a black scowl on his face, would walk on for a long time without speaking a word.

Sharlie sighed and gazed up at the sky. Oh dear, there were a lot of clouds about—all hurrying along so fast, too, which never meant very good quiet weather, the sort that daddy liked. But, too, there was a bit of blue in the sky—enough, as Joe Blunsdon said, to make a farmer's boy a pair of trousers—so, perhaps, after all, it might, it just *might*, be fine. But it would never, never dry up enough for them to have tea in the garden, which daddy wasn't too fond of, even when the sun shone brightly. And daddy would say it wasn't dry enough under foot to go walking—not even if they did keep to the roads. Sharlie sighed again, and looked about and around. It was summer and all the wayside was gay with traveller's joy and bryony, dog-roses and sweetbriar (oh, how lovely it smelt in the rain!), all the ground blue with speedwell, the fields scarlet with the poppy. Sharlie longed to go out—but mummy never walked these days, and walking with daddy was dull, for he had no liking for stopping by the

wayside to examine an unexpected or unknown wild flower or to gaze, in hushed motionless silence, at a bird upon a twig. Her parents, Sharlie reflected, were not much good in the country, though her mother was born there—less than a mile away at Carr House—and always said she liked being in it. And daddy, as Clive Blunsdon said of others, didn't know how to use his eyes. Sharlie thought how lovely it was to be in the country where there was always so much more to do than in London—visits to farms and cottages, drives in the high-swinging dog-cart into Stamford, things being dug in, dug out of the garden, and where there was always Grandpapa Selwyn to tell you queer stories of things that happened in the 'fifties and 'sixties when he was young and had lived in London.

Sharlie drew in her head from the window, sat back on her heels on her bed and listened intently for any sound in the house. None. Not the slightest possible sound. It was very disappointing and very hard to have to sit there waiting. . . . By the time they were all ready and finished with breakfast it would be raining again. Oh, hurry, hurry! she said to herself, jigging lightly up and down upon her heels, her eyes fixed upon the scurrying white clouds beyond the window. How difficult it was to get grown-ups to do anything *really* quickly!

To amuse herself she began to say over to herself some of the poems she had learnt by heart from her mother's readings, only she didn't read many, these days, and was always saying that poetry made her feel sad.

O Year, grow slowly. Exquisite, holy,
The days go on
With almonds showing the pink stars blowing,
And birds in the dawn.

The roses make the world so sweet,
The bees, the birds, have such a tune,
There's such a light and such a heat
And such a joy this June.

But this wasn't the spring and it wasn't June. It was August, and a rainy day, and she could bear waiting no longer. It was whole ages since she had woken up with the fragmentary summer song of the birds in her ears. She would go down to her mother's room and see if she might not, for once, have her bath all by herself—or, perhaps, just for once, go without one. But standing in her nightdress on the cold oaken floor, in the very act of reaching for her dressing-gown, the sound of an opening and shutting door below arrested her. She stood quite still until there came a repetition of the sound. Daddy. Mummy never shut doors. Had he gone back into his own room, into mummy's or into the bathroom? Sharlie sat down on the edge of her bed, holding herself very tightly together and beetling her brows in the effort to obtain information on these points. Suddenly, from the room below, which she knew was her mother's, she heard the sound of voices, soft at first, then fast and loud. And soon the sharp shrill note in her mother's voice, that she knew meant only one thing, came up through the floor and pierced her heart. She sat there as if it had robbed her of life until a long time afterwards there came the sound of doors being noisily opened and shut, and then she began to tremble very violently. The house had fallen into silence. The thrush's fragmentary song, down there in the garden, was the only sound left in the world.

Sharlie crept into bed, dressing-gown and all, and lay here, with her eyes shut, quite motionless, the sheet pulled up to her chin.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ALEX was awake when Philip tapped upon her door, and as he came in she moved her head and turned upon him the dark, slow gaze he always found so hard to bear. Neither spoke. He sat down upon the edge of the bed and something in his face made Alex say quickly, defensively: "Phil, please don't say anything more. Not this morning. I've had such a bad night."

"So've I," said Philip, "and I've a head like nothing on earth this morning."

He didn't look at her, so that her white face and pain-shadowed eyes did nothing for her.

"Please, Phil," she said again.

Philip moved impatiently.

"My dear girl, we've got to get it over. I wasn't quite frank with you yesterday. I didn't want to hurt you—more than I had to. But I can see you'll have to know. Fanny Cornford, the girl I've told you about, is going to have a baby."

* * *

It was Alex's "Oh, no, no!" that had gone like a spear-point through her little daughter's heart. Even Phil shut his eyes as he heard it. God! it was a lot worse than he had ever imagined. Curse everything! Women were the devil!—those who clung, like Alex, and those who refused to cling, who turned and tried to walk away from you, as Fanny threatened to do. Never, by any chance, did they do what you wanted 'em to do.

"I'm sorry, Alex—I am really. I suppose it was inevitable. I'd have spared you this if I could."

Alex said faintly: "Are you in love with this woman?"

"Yes."

"More than you used to be in love with me?"

"I'm sorry, Alex, but I'm afraid the answer is 'yes.'"

"Oh," said Alex again, in shocked hurt tones. "Oh . . ." and then, "Oh, aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

"No. Why should I be? These things happen."

Alex put her hands before her eyes and cried out: "Oh, I think you're horrible, horrible . . ."

"Sorry!" said Phil, uncomfortably. "Look here, Alex, I'm no use to you. I can't do anything for you. We're the most ill-suited pair on God's earth. Much better put an end to it."

"Because you want another woman?"

"Well, if you put it that way. It's difficult to make a move to end a marriage unless there's some driving force. I know that. If I hadn't fallen in love with Fanny I'd probably never have brought myself to the attempt. I admit that."

"But you've been in love before."

"Not much—and not for long. This is different."

"How?"

"Well, it's lasted two years—and there's this baby."

"Did you do that deliberately?"

"One doesn't fall in love deliberately."

"I meant the baby."

"No. I tell you, these things happen."

"Then did *she?*"

"Fanny? Of course she didn't."

"She must be a horrible creature."

"She isn't."

"Is she in love with you?"

"Obviously." Phil was getting irritable. He always hated answering questions. "A girl doesn't let herself in for this kind of thing if she isn't." Having doubts about it he spoke with a crisp decision his mind refused when silently applied to the problem. *Did* Fanny love him? Fun, she had called it.

Never a word about love. Never once. He doubted whether Fanny "loved" anybody. Certainly she took the passion lightly, which was why, he supposed, his relationship with her had been so satisfactory. For he took love lightly, too—hated it to intrude upon his work, upon all the rest of life. Fanny let you forget her and with her all the things they enjoyed together. At least, that used to be true. This baby-business had complicated everything. He'd got Fanny now, most inconveniently, on his mind. So long as she was there when he wanted her it had been all right. The fear that now perhaps she wouldn't be was a constant thorn in the flesh.

He said, irritably: "Need we go on with this discussion? It doesn't get us anywhere. There's nothing in this for either of us. Be generous, Alex."

"You want me to divorce you?"

"Yes. It'll be quite automatic. I'll do all the necessary things and send you the hotel bill—all the evidence you'll need."

Alex stared at him a minute.

"I don't understand," she said.

"Well, it's quite simple. Of course I can't bring Fanny into this. . . . We've got to cover our tracks. If old Cornford finds out I'm dished. It'll be bad enough as it is—the old man's a Puritan and he'll jib even at an arranged divorce."

Alex's expression of horror arrested him.

"*An arranged divorce?*" she said. "You mean you'll find somebody else—somebody to go away with for a common week-end?"

"Oh, why *not?* You can't get a divorce under our silly laws unless you appear to have made a beast of yourself."

"*Appear!*" said Alex, on a low shocked note.

"My dear girl! Don't be so ridiculous. Our marriage is broken, finished. What do the ethics of escape matter? *I* didn't make the divorce laws of England."

"You seem to have complied with them pretty thoroughly. But I don't want to divorce you. If I did, I could, I imagine, have done so years ago. I didn't think you ever wanted that. I certainly didn't, though I knew you'd been unfaithful to me. . . . You see, I don't believe in divorce, except by mutual consent."

"Well, we haven't got it. Probably never shall have—because you hardly ever get the mutual consent. That's human nature, which was what Milton, who talked so much about it, didn't know. But you can't want to keep a man who wants to go."

Alex was quiet for a moment, as if the thought of Milton away there in his bleak century preaching a thing the world hadn't yet conceded, and introduced now so incongruously into the conversation, had emptied her of all others.

"Yes, I'm afraid I do, Phil," she said at last. "Does the divorce matter so very much to you?"

"In the circumstances, yes."

"But you've managed without before—you've managed without for two years, even here. Can't you go on?"

"How can I? With old Cornford's ideas—and this baby coming?"

"You mean you'll lose your job on the *Sentinel*?"

"Of course I shall lose it. But that isn't all. Cornford's a powerful noise. He can do me a lot of harm. He can make me look a prize fool, too. And he'd rather see Fanny 'disgraced,' as he'll call it, than let me have her if the facts come out."

"And you can't live without her?"

"Oh, of course I can live without her. We don't have to be melodramatic. For God's sake, let us talk like reasonable human beings."

"You think you will be happy with this girl?"

"Yes, I do. She's my sort. She's coarser clay than you are, my dear—more like me. I disgust you and I get on your

nerves. I don't disgust Fanny and she hasn't any nerves."

"And no morals," said Alex, bitterly.

"She has her standards, doubtless—less troublesome ones than yours, my dear, perhaps."

"Very strange ones, certainly," said Alex.

She leaned back against her pillows and closed her eyes. It wasn't even a *grande passion.* It didn't really matter very much. If it weren't for his professional connections he wouldn't have gone as far as this. Fanny Cornford! She'd never met her, but she'd heard about her. People had said, "Our Fanny!—fancy old Cornford having a daughter like that!" in the meaningful way people did say things like that of a certain kind of woman. Loose. They'd all known she was that. What excuse had she? She knew Philip had a wife. What kind of a girl was it who entered into this relationship with a married man? And then to expect to be shielded, to cover it all up, with lies and deceptions which you expected other people to tell and practise for you! She asked too much—or Phil too much *for* her, perhaps. Was that it? Fanny, Fanny, Fanny. . . . What consideration he had over and above what he had for himself was all for her, this cheap, easy creature men smiled and shrugged their shoulders about. Alex hated her—hated her all the more because she would bear Philip's child—the son, maybe, she had ruined her health in the effort to give him. He'd forgotten that. He'd forgotten everything. It was all Fanny, Fanny, Fanny. . . . Why should she do anything for her? At least she'd tell no lies, practise no deceptions. To let her have her husband was sufficient, surely. She'd divorce Philip, since she must, but on her terms, not his.

She opened her eyes and said so.

The cold fury in Philip's face terrified her.

"Can't you be generous?" he said. "What do you gain by this?"

"Nothing, but I keep my self-respect."

"Your self-respect! You make me sick."

Alex put her hand upon her heart. This awful pain was stealing upon her again. She felt very ill and as if she might die. But she wanted to die in peace.

"Please go away," she said faintly.

Philip leaned over her. Her white and drawn face aroused no pity in him and no shock. Perhaps he didn't even see it. He saw, in that moment, nothing but the destruction of his comfortable position—and Fanny in another man's arms. These two things only, and perhaps in that order.

"Is that your last word?"

Beyond words of any sort, and dumb with pain, Alex moved her head.

"Then damn you, damn you!" Philip cried out. "You've made me detest you. I warn you, Alex. Whatever happens now is your responsibility. You drive me to suicide!"

By a mighty effort Alex opened her eyes and looked into his blazingly angry ones.

"Phil!" she said, half-raising herself, and putting out a hand towards him: "Phil!"

"For God's sake!" he snapped, and turning from her went out of the room, banging the door behind him.

Alex fell back upon her pillows and lay still. Her eyes were shut. She looked as if, never again, in this world, would she open them.

The sound of running water told Sharlie that her father had gone to the bathroom and that, temporarily, at least, he and her mother had stopped quarrelling. She sighed a little and turning her head stared out upon the morning sky. Her little face had gone very white: there was a frown between her eyes. Her mouth was set in hard unchildish lines and underneath the bedclothes her limbs still trembled

violently. She meant to wait, now, quite a while before going downstairs to see if her mother would come and help her to get dressed. Perhaps, now, she wouldn't be so particular about the bath. Sharlie shrugged her shoulders as one who had learned to extract benefits from the most unlikely sources.

CHAPTER NINE

In the bathroom, trembling with anger and despair, Philip stood for a second or two watching the water running into the bath. Half-cold, as usual. Why was it that woman couldn't learn how to make up the boiler fire overnight? He flung open the rickety cupboard on the wall and took out his shaving things. Damn everything and everybody! What a mess! What a hell of a mess! Oh, God, how sick he was of it all! What was he going to say to Fanny to-morrow? Heaven alone knew—and that would probably be the last time he'd have a chance to say anything to her, for Fanny knew her own mind, and there was no time to spare. He wished he had the pluck to take what Alex had offered—a straightforward divorce, with Fanny and he playing their allotted parts. . . . There'd be no difficulty about it but for old Cornford, and he despised himself because he hadn't the courage to let him do what he liked and be damned. Fanny wasn't of age, but he wouldn't, surely, be such a fool as to stop his marrying her, if Alex filed her petition and cited her. A quiet marriage that would make Fanny into a "respectable woman" was the only thing—surely even a pompous old ass like Cornford would see that? They could go abroad for a time, couldn't they?—live there for ever if they liked. Oh, hang it all, he *couldn't* live out of England for ever—the only place on the earth worth living in. Probably couldn't write a word anywhere else, either—and he'd hate to be out of everything. Besides, the things people would say!—that he, Philip Stratton who wrote so beautifully about love and marriage and waged such sturdy warfare against the "fleshly school" of fiction, should all the time have been conducting

an *affaire* with a young girl—old Cornford's daughter, too! When Cornford had finished spreading the tale he'd look hell's own fool. Why couldn't Alex do what he wanted? Bent on being vindictive, he supposed. The real dog-in-the-manger spirit. His hands in his dressing-gown pocket, he glowered down at the slowly running water, his mind noticing mechanically that the bath was in need of a coat of paint. Well, he'd probably not come here again—and thank heaven for it! The whole place depressed him beyond words.

No good standing there—better get shaved first. It would take hours before there'd be enough water in that bath. His hands weren't very steady, though. His temper still worked in him like yeast. Hatred of Alex, of Cornford, detestation of the whole business, all mixed up with his flaming passion to keep Fanny, flowed over him like a dark river in flood. How he'd always despised people who let sex mess up their lives—and now to have had no better sense himself! Oh, a hell of a mess! He'd go up to town immediately he was bathed, shaved and ready—he'd got to get away from here and he'd got to see Fanny. The sooner the better.

He soaped his face, tried the edge of the razor and began to shave. Lord, his hand was unsteady; he'd make a mess of this job, too, if he wasn't pretty careful. But he forgot to be careful, for his thoughts went on and on to the same monotonous tune—how to get out of this mess and get, at the same time, what he wanted. How to make Alex yield. How to save his face. There must be something he could say or do which would bring her to reason. She must consent, she must, she must. It was the only way out. The more he thought of her the more he hated her, the more he wanted never to see her again; wished he had never set eyes upon her. She'd never been his sort. He wanted a woman to be healthy and jolly; to be fired with passion and desire as he was (*when* he

was, he meant—and he'd forgotten that he hadn't given a thought to these things when he'd married Alexandra Selwyn). This atmosphere of invalidism was more than he could stand—and that old cat, her mother, everlastingly hinting that he was responsible for it! He had to get away—if it hadn't been Fanny it would have been somebody else. And he had to get away soon. He couldn't, this morning, sit at the same breakfast table with his wife. He'd get breakfast on the way up somewhere and 'phone Fanny, who'd not be expecting him and would go off out to enjoy herself if he wasn't quick. He felt chained and thwarted, ill-used, too, and his anger against Alex was beyond his control. Even now he wanted to hurl insults at her, threaten her (God knew with what) until she let him have his way. Damn! he'd better be careful—this wasn't a safety razor. This idiotic week-end cottage business, where you never had anything you wanted! Oh damn, now he really *had* cut himself! Hell, what a mess! Anybody'd think he'd cut his throat. Bled like a pig—always did. Perfectly disgusting object he looked. The razor suspended above his head, his eyes peered into the glass to discover the extent of the cut, but the blood poured out of it too fast, running down into the basin below the glass and on to his lavender-coloured pyjamas. Really, it was ridiculous. It couldn't be much and yet it looked exactly as if he'd cut his throat. He'd give anybody a fright who came upon him suddenly now—if he opened the door just as Mrs. Green came up the stairs. The idea filled him with sardonic amusement. As he stood there staring at himself in the glass suddenly something happened. A door somewhere in his mind had opened, and an idea looked in upon him, an idea with an ugly twisted face he didn't care to look at. As he stood there, however, he found that the idea had sat down in his mind and that it had a voice. "Here's your chance of Freedom," it said. "It mayn't work—but why not try it? If she

sees you like that she'll think you've cut your throat, and wish, too late, you hadn't! And then, if this weak heart story is true . . ."

Suddenly Philip laughed. A grim joke. Whatever put it into his head? God, it was horrible! Besides, he'd never believed in the weak heart story! No, but suppose it *was* true? Suppose. . . . Suppose. . . . An end to all his problems. Nobody would ever suspect. The weak heart was no secret. She'd been attending a doctor for weeks. There were the tablets he'd given her. . .

God, but he couldn't. Not a thing like that. . . . It was too horrible. But he'd wished her dead. He'd wished her dead twice in the last twenty-four hours. He'd committed murder in his heart already. . . . But only because he was angry and she was so stubborn—only because he was in such a dickens of a hole. He hadn't meant it. . . . Yes, but supposing . . . supposing. . . . He'd be out of the hole for ever. . . .

He leaned forward, put out a finger and began deliberately to smear the blood across and along the circle of his throat. He looked quite dreadful. Horror, alike of his reflection and of his intention, looked out at him from the glass. No, no . . . it's too awful. You can't, you can't. . . . Still telling himself this, he tore himself away, pulled open the door, ran along to his wife's room and flung open the door.

Alex died without cry or sound.

She turned her head and Philip saw an expression of the utmost horror come into her eyes. She made an effort to rise, tried to put out her hand to him but caught it on the instant against her breast, gave a little sob and fell back upon her pillows. Horrified, Philip stood staring. It *had* worked—or had she merely fainted? He hadn't the courage to find out. He sat down on the edge of the bed and felt a little sick. This was terrible—he'd never forget that look in her eyes. He hoped they were shut. . . . Why didn't he get up and see

what had happened to her? Perhaps she wasn't dead. If she wasn't, there were things he could do. . . . He couldn't go on sitting there. If she was dead, he'd killed her. Why didn't he do something? Why did he go on sitting there in that heartless fashion? Because he wanted her dead—because he hoped that even if she wasn't dead she would die if he went on sitting there and did nothing to prevent it.

He sat there until he heard the clock in the tower of the village church strike the quarter. Then at last he rose, snatched up a towel from the rack near at hand, wrapped it round his neck and went round to the other side of the bed. Alex lay quite still, her head drooped sideways, her eyes (thank heaven) closed. She didn't look frightened—she merely looked *dead.* But *was* she? He picked up her wrist. There was no pulse that he could detect, but he couldn't be sure. Well, he couldn't stand there dripping blood all down himself in this disgusting fashion—the place would soon look like a shambles. Besides, Mrs. Green would be here on the stroke of eight. He picked up the telephone which stood at the side of the bed and asked the operator to put him through immediately to Doctor Fanshawe. When the doctor came on, he said: "Can you come at once to Bede Cottage? Yes, very, I'm afraid. It's my wife—she's had a heart attack."

As he put back the telephone he turned and saw the blue and white figure of his little daughter in the open doorway.

"Is mummy ill?" she asked, her eyes shifting for a second from his face to that frighteningly still figure on the bed.

"Yes—the doctor will be here soon. And Mrs. Green. Run upstairs and try to get dressed."

"But I haven't had my bath."

"You'll have to go without it this morning, I'm afraid."

Sharlie regarded him with wide serious eyes.

"You look awful," she said. "You've got a lot of blood all over you."

"I know. I cut myself shaving. Run away now, there's a good child, so that I can get dressed before the doctor comes."

Sharlie hesitated, gave him another look out of her wide serious eyes and said: "I heard you and mummy talking for ages and ages."

"Run away, Sharlie . . ."

"Can't I speak to mummy?"

"She's too ill at the moment. Presently."

For a long second the child looked at him, then without another word she turned and went out of the room. When she'd gone, Philip went across to the dressing-table, took out a little blue bottle, removed the cork and took out two white pellets. These he put down upon the table at the bedside, with the bottle and cork. Lifting the water-bottle, he poured out some water into the glass and put that down, too, upon the table. On second thoughts he carefully swept one of the tablets to the floor and spilled a little of the water.

Then he looked again at Alex. He was quite sure she was dead. She had died in a second—just like that. Her heart must just have stopped. She couldn't have suffered at all. He'd really done it very well. And he was glad she was dead.

He went out of the room, shutting the door after him. Better go down and get himself some brandy. He felt pretty awful. In the passage he met Mrs. Green, who gave a little scream.

"Lor', sir, you did give me a fright!"

"I'm sorry. My wife has had a heart attack."

Mrs. Green made a familiar clicking noise with her tongue against her teeth, meant to denote concern.

"How is she now, sir?"

"Pretty bad, I'm afraid. I've just sent for the doctor. No, best leave her quiet, I think. . . . Will you go and

help Miss Charlotte? She's been awake a long time, I'm afraid."

He became aware of Mrs. Green's eyes taking in the towel about his neck, the bloodstains upon his pyjamas. He pulled his dressing-gown across his chest and said: "I'm afraid I look pretty awful. I was shaving when my wife called out, and I think I must have cut myself rather badly."

"I should go and bathe it if I was you, sir. Must have given your poor lady quite a turn, seeing you like that. I'm sure you gave me one!"

"I hadn't time to think . . . but she was too bad, anyway, to notice."

"What a good thing, sir, to be sure. . . . Well, if there's nothing I can do down here, I'd best go up to the child."

"It would be a kindness if you would get her dressed. She can go without her bath this morning."

Mrs. Green went on up the stairs. Philip turned away, meaning to go down to find the brandy, but instead he went hurriedly into the bathroom, and sitting limply on the edge of the bath was suddenly and violently sick.

BOOK TWO

SECOND MARRIAGE

Their love begun and ended both in one;
Phillis was loved, and she liked Corydon.

—ROBERT GREENE.

CHAPTER ONE

FANNY and Philip were married at the end of September, nineteen-nine, and went immediately to Italy, to a little place at the far end of Lake Como, where there was a decent small hotel, climbing (for those who wanted it), fishing, bathing, rowing, and a fine old church with an ancient wooden crucifix that Philip told Fanny was obviously the genesis of much of the "new" art, for which he did not care. Fanny certainly did not care for the wooden Christ. Representations of the Crucifixion she found unbearable, and was relieved that Philip did not expect her to rave about this one or to trouble to look at it more than once. She was still, upon their arrival, a little worried about Philip and attributed his nerves, his inability to settle down to work, to the shock of his wife's death and to distaste of the situation which followed upon it, in which he and Fanny had got secretly married, and then, in a painful interview with her father, allowed him to believe that for years they had cherished for each other a passion as hopeless as it was chaste. "We had waited so long and now, as Philip is going abroad . . ." It was Fanny who made the running, who paved the way for Philip and for her father's acquiescence in a thing he had hastily and angrily stigmatised as "scandalous, frankly scandalous." In the end the old man took away from the interview exactly the impression Fanny had intended he should take—that she and Philip had exercised a long and most commendable self-restraint and were entitled to enter without waste of time upon their belated happiness. He had ultimately dismissed them with his blessing and improved upon this romantic version of the situation for the benefit of the curious

when, after the departure for Italy, the fact of the marriage leaked out.

He never saw either of them again. He died suddenly in his office at the end of the following April, and without knowing that he had become a grandfather. That distinction, he had been allowed to think, would fall upon him in the June, and though, in fact, Fanny's child had been born in the March, her supposed continuing pregnancy was an excellent reason why she could not go home for the funeral. A couple of weeks later word of the child's birth was sent to old Mrs. Cornford, who was allowed to believe that the shock of her father's death was responsible for Fanny's premature delivery at the end of the second week in May. This, too, was Fanny's idea. What was the use in worrying people? And what difference could it make to anybody whether the child was born in March or May? It would be years before she would need to produce a birth certificate, and so discover that she was nearly two months older than she had supposed. Fanny laughed. Queer, the mistakes people made! These white lies! What did they matter? Fanny cared not a snap of the fingers for them. She cared about nothing just then save rousing Philip from his gloom. So, while she nursed her child, she kept a watchful but merry eye upon Philip, showed him that her motherhood by no means absorbed her, and that she thought it was time he began once again to make love to her. Their troubles were at an end. Gradually, because after her easy fashion she was fond of him and thought the fates had been unexpectedly kind, so that life was once more a thing of joy and delight to her, she drew him to her again, possessed him again as lover, watched his thinness and nerves drop from him and told herself that he was "getting over it."

So, most amazingly, he was.

From the first violent sick revulsion from his own act he

had flung away in self-defence. There had been so much to do, and in a way even Ann Selwyn's condemnation had braced him to the requisite effort. Riding over that Sunday morning with her husband to find her daughter dead and to be confronted by a haggard and nerve-racked Philip with a badly-plastered cut on his throat, she had at once fitted him with an unsavoury conscience. It was as she had suspected. He and Alex had been quarrelling—about some other woman, of course—and the excitement and worry had been too much for her in her weak condition. Not mincing words, she had said as much to Philip, who was not overemphatic or very angry in his denials. In contrast with the truth her charges seemed so trivial as to be almost a relief. He hoped that, in time, he would come to believe that the thing had indeed happened that way. In the very moment in which he had confronted the angry old woman, his mind, that had been stunned, had begun to work again, was divided between relief at the end of his personal predicament and horror at the way in which he had encompassed it. He did not fancy himself in the rôle of murderer, and when Ann Selwyn said: "I hold you as much her murderer as if you had cut her throat!" he found it a relief to be regarded as no more than morally a murderer, a miserable creature so wedded to his lusts and desires that he could not control himself sufficiently even to remember that his wife's health was too precarious to support the shock of knowledge of a state of affairs he had forced upon her.

It was Henry Selwyn who took pity upon him, who realised that whatever had happened between them Philip had it badly upon his conscience, and at the moment, at least, was entitled to consideration.

Ann, of course, found all the confirmation she needed in what Mrs. Green had subsequently to say on the subject. It was quite true that the poor lady and her husband had

had words overnight and that the poor lady had been upset. It was a small place, Bede Cottage, one couldn't but hear . . . And that same night Mr. Stratton had evidently been out in all that rain, for she had found his mackintosh soaking wet when she came in on the Sunday morning—just thrown down upon a chair, it was. All the same, this was a strange unheppen thing to have happened to the poor g'man . . .

"*Very* awkward," Ann Selwyn agreed, translating the local idiom, and indicated in the definite way that belonged to her that the interview was at an end. But not the gossip. That wouldn't end for months to come, she thought, and was speedily acquainted with the fact that Philip had put a call through to London in the early evening—"as soon," said Ann to Henry, "as he had the house to himself." But there was nothing to be done. Alex was dead and no amount of harsh judgment of Philip would give her back to them. Let them be thankful, said Henry, that Ann had taken her to the doctor earlier—it had saved them all the publicity and added misery of an inquest. And they had the child.

"The poor mite!" said Ann, a little bothered by the memory of all that juvenile composure. "Not a tear! It's unnatural, Henry!"

"I don't think Sharlie's the crying sort, my dear!" Henry said; "she gets that from you!"

Ann sensed a compliment, though she considered it no time for it. She knew that Henry had always been glad he had not married a woman who cried easily, and that poor Alex's latter-day capacity for tears had often distressed him quite as much as his knowledge of her ill-health and unhappiness.

When the news of Philip's marriage followed upon the announcement of his imminent departure to Italy, all Ann's suspicions were definitely confirmed. When the birth of Fanny's child reached them, she was, perhaps, the only

person who did not accept the comfortable assumption of everybody else. For Ann the death of Fanny's father had nothing to do with it. It was clear that she had been Philip's mistress, and pregnant during Alex's lifetime—which was why Philip was trying that week-end to dragoon her into consenting to a divorce. But for Sharlie she would never have spoken to him again. She didn't care what happened to him and his new wife. She wished her joy of him—and he of her, for a man who married his mistress was not, in her view, a man to be envied. She despised them both from the bottom of her heart, but she hoped they would let her keep Alex's child. He had never cared for her, anyway, and Ann Selwyn had all the ancient prejudices against step-mothers. Besides, they'd have other children—this young woman was evidently the fecund sort. They'd not be likely to want Sharlie.

That and the reflection that Fanny's child was a girl were the only bright spots in the situation as Ann Selwyn saw it in April, nineteen-ten. For Philip had always wanted a son, had been willing to allow Alex to kill herself in the attempt to give him one. Well, the longer he stayed with his new wife in Italy the better Ann would be pleased. She never wanted to see him again.

Out there at the far end of the blue lake, Philip, however, had not been as disappointed as he had expected to be over the sex of Fanny's child. He had been relieved at the normality of Fanny's confinement and the quickness of her recovery, and the child was extremely attractive almost from birth. By the time she was four months old he had sufficiently recovered his balance to think of Fanny once more in the rôle of prospective mother. And Fanny, who had taken her pregnancy lightly and easily, as surely Nature intended (thought Philip), would not have denied him, caring just then for nothing save his return to normality. But when

Penelope was a year old there was still no sign of another child, and Fanny was secretly glad of it. Her maternity was not an imperative necessity of her life and her pride in Pen, who was already giving promise of beauty, was a queerly detached emotion which had singularly little to do, it seemed, with that side of life to which the child owed her existence. Fanny, in short, was the lover and not the maternal type. Her good temper and care for Pen were unfailing, but she could bear the child out of her sight all day without worry or alarm. Pen was bright and healthy, she had a good and competent nurse, and was far less a responsibility to Fanny at this time than her husband.

Certainly Philip owed much of his recovery to Fanny and her ministrations. She never fussed or fumed, even in those early months when he seemed to have for her no more than a brotherly regard. When, after Penelope's arrival, desire awoke again in him, as if the very birth of the child somehow closed a painful chapter in his life and turned an inviolate page to him, she gave herself unstintingly. Even to his succeeding moods of reaction and disgust she remained impervious, always cheerful, companionable, matter-of-fact, never feeling neglected or aggrieved. She had only to wait. Phil would recover.

His recovery surprised him considerably, for he did not know how easy it is to deceive yourself when self-deception is the only stone upon which you can build any future earthly existence. Day by day he was able to tell himself with a little more assurance that Alex would have died in any case, if not that morning then before very long. The doctor, that morning of her death, had been quite emphatic that her heart was in a very bad state—he hadn't seemed surprised at all. She would never have survived the emotional scenes which Philip knew would have lain between her and the complete annulment of their marriage and the specified terms

upon which he had been set. Already he found it difficult to believe he had seriously meant to frighten her to death. He *couldn't* have done: he must just have gone quite mad for the moment. She had been so infuriating, so stubborn, so self-righteous. Her tears and her voice had so exacerbated him that he hadn't known what he was doing. He couldn't have believed his appearance would have killed her—in an instant, so easily, it seemed!—for he'd never taken seriously that tale about her heart. Everybody knew that. Besides, if he had meant to do it, he'd be full of remorse, wouldn't he?—and he wasn't. He never had been. Horrified, of course—it had been a shock the way she had fallen back like that upon her pillows, because he'd not expected it to happen. It was absurd. He didn't believe in murderers who went about the world for the rest of their lives without regret or remorse. It wasn't possible. If he'd really meant to kill Alex—planned cold-bloodedly to do it—he'd never have got over it. Never. But he *was* getting over it. Every day the memory of that look in Alex's eyes in the last moment of life grew a little fainter; he was no longer haunted by the memory of that blue and white figure in the doorway. Every day it seemed to him he grew more and more to believe that he had rushed into Alex's room in that mess with no other desire than to continue his argument, which, in view of the doctor's decree, might have proved just as fatal, anyway. Each day the thought which at first had haunted him, of an Alex somewhere apart, pale, miserable, condemning, grew fainter and fainter. Gradually he found that the thought came to him only on very rare occasions. He could think of her at last as comfortably, irrevocably dead. In time he almost stopped believing that he had any conscious part whatever in encompassing her death, because gradually he had come to be so nearly certain he had not.

In time, too, the sick reaction which had followed upon

his enjoyment of Fanny's white yielded body, ceased to trouble him, ceasing to appear as something he had bought at an extortionate price, bankrupting his soul for ever in the process. Fanny became once again a handsome, desirable young woman whose favours he could lawfully enjoy. He was surprised also to find how much he liked Fanny in ordinary ways when love-making was in the thoughts of neither of them. She was a cheerful, jolly companion: she did not worry about things, did not work herself into fits all day about the child (as Alex had done over Sharlie). She took life as she found it, thought it still a joke and enjoyed what already he had begun to think of as their exile abroad. But he would not go home yet. He would finish his book first and, perhaps, beget upon Fanny a son. When he told Fanny that she laughed good-naturedly. She didn't mind. She'd have as many children as Fate intended, she supposed. She'd like to have a son, though. Fanny was never intense. She saved her passions for the night and they were not wordy. Philip was unendingly grateful to her for these things.

All the same there was no sign of any son by the end of the summer of nineteen-eleven. Philip's book was finished and would be out in a week or two. Penelope was eighteen months old and very beautiful to behold. Suddenly her father decided to go home. Fanny acquiesced, and wrote to her mother asking her to find them a house near the Park, because of Pen (and Sharlie, of course, who would be with them), and to furnish it for them at Waring's. Neither Philip nor Fanny cared to be bothered with schemes of interior decoration, and Philip had sold most of the things which had formed part of the home he shared with Alex. So, "plain papers and no white paint, except in the nursery," Fanny wrote to her mother, and anything they didn't like could be changed or altered when they arrived.

She wanted three servants and a nurse—a good one.

"It'll be funny having a house to run," she said to Philip, who said in reply, "Nice. We shall be able to see people and do a little entertaining."

"Why, yes," said Fanny. "I suppose that *will* be nice, now that I come to think of it. Fun to entertain!"

Philip looked at her approvingly. Delicious, sensible creature. Many women would have been offended if he'd said that about it being nice to see people again.

"It's going to be a lovely night. We'll go out on the lake, shall we, after dinner?"

"Lovely," said Fanny.

They had the lake to themselves—and all the Italian night, deep and blue. And the full round moon that did something to Fanny's face, which made Philip as he looked at her catch his breath. He was filled with a new sort of feeling for her—a feeling for which he had not reckoned, which he had never really believed people felt for each other, and which had only the faintest relationship to the possessive passion which had descended upon him nearly two years ago, when he'd thought of her in the arms of another man. And only the faintest relationship to the feeling he'd had for her this last year. He was in love with Fanny in a way he'd never looked to be, never really wanted to be, with any woman. She had him. Whatever she did or became. He'd love her if she were unfaithful, ill or ugly. He couldn't imagine life without her. He was suddenly appalled.

He stopped rowing, resting his hands, blanched by the moon, on the sculls and looking across at her as if he had never seen her before. She was momentarily alarmed by his pallor—real or moon-induced.

"Phil! What's the matter?" she asked. "Do you feel ill?"

"No . . . You look so *lovely*, Fanny!"

Fanny laughed.

"It's the moon," she said. "It's a marvellous night."

"Let's go in out of it," said Phil suddenly.

"Oh, *why?* It's not very late."

"I'm afraid you'll be spirited away if we stay out here!"

"Idiot!"

But without protest she saw him prepare to turn the boat. She knew the thought in his mind and acquiesced in it. Their last night in Italy. She wished, all the same, they mightn't go in yet. . . . There was a lot of time—and the night was really lovely. She laughed a little gentle laugh that went running away across the lake. It was a pity a boat was such an unsatisfactory place in which to make love—especially when neither could swim. . .

CHAPTER TWO

ANN SELWYN heard of the return of the Strattons to England with something nearer dismay than she cared to recognise. Philip's note was of the briefest and obviously wouldn't have been written at all if it had not been necessary to acquaint her with his intention to take Sharlie into his custody directly they were settled in their new home.

For two years now Ann had had charge of Sharlie, and the thought of parting with her was exceedingly painful, apart altogether from the fact that she had the same legendary ideas about stepmothers as Philip had about mothers-in-law. Sharlie was not an easy subject. A grave serious child, she had the composure of a self-possessed adult, which most people found an unlovable trait in a child and one that was considerably disconcerting. Moreover, it was already mid-September; the season of mists would be with them before long and Ann could not believe that London in the winter was any place for a child. Neither did she find over-much consolation in the fact which Henry pointed out—that Sharlie was not in the least a delicate child and that Philip's new house was not in Chelsea this time, but only a stone's throw from Hyde Park, a healthy tree-y spot. The fact was that she did not want to part with Sharlie and had long ago persuaded herself that Philip would not require her to do so. He had never shown any great affection for the child: he had another by the new wife and doubtless there would be others. He might have spared her Sharlie—all she had left of the daughter she had adored, and whom, as she held, he had killed.

"Well, it can't be helped, my dear," said Henry soothingly.

"I suppose we're lucky to have had her so long. Have patience. I daresay they'll be pleased enough before long to let us have her here as much as we like."

"I don't *feel* patient," said Ann. "I hate to think of Sharlie with that woman. Neither she nor Philip has any right to her. They're not fit to have children in their care!"

This conversation took place in bed, as, Henry reflected, most of their more important conversations always did; and because he was tired and wanted to go to sleep rather than discuss the ethics of parenthood with Ann, he did not dispute the point. He had never seen the woman Philip had been in such indecent haste to put in Alex's place, but if what Ann alleged about their earlier relationship was really true, there would seem to be reason enough for his precipitancy. Useless to tell Ann they had fallen in love and behaved as inconsiderately, as immorally, if she liked, as most people did in such circumstances. She was never likely to see anything there, save the harm and wrong they had done poor Alex. All the same, the woman might not be the horrible creature Ann imagined. If the child was neglected or unhappy in her care, they could doubtless do something about it, always supposing she did not, as he thought probable, wish of her own accord to get rid of her.

Sharlie received the news of her imminent return to her father's house as she received most pieces of news, with that strange little air of unchildlike detachment that made it so difficult to tell whether she felt anything or not.

"You'll like London, I expect," said her grandfather encouragingly.

"I've been there before," said Sharlie, with a fine air of indifference. "Only I don't remember much of it. There was a garden. And a river. You could see it shining from the windows."

"Yes, a big one. The Thames."

"Bigger than the Welland?"

"Oh, dear me, yes."

"How long is it?"

"Oh—very long. Over two hundred miles."

"Will there be a garden?"

"To the new house? Oh yes, a little one, I expect—but you won't see the river from the windows. It stands in a little street off Knightsbridge, which is just by Hyde Park. The Park, now, you're sure to like."

"Shall I? Why is it called Hyde Park?"

"I'm afraid I don't know."

"Then why is it called Knights*bridge* if there isn't a river?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you that either."

"Oh," said Sharlie, and looked disappointed. Grandfather Selwyn could usually answer questions like that. He knew why they called it "Stamford" and "Deeping," and why they had spelt Bourne for the last twenty years or so with an 'e' at the end, and many other things about places in their part of Lincolnshire. Well, perhaps daddy would know about Knightsbridge and Hyde Park. She must remember to ask him.

"When do I have to go?" she asked her grandfather.

"Not just yet. When your father comes for you. He hasn't started back yet from Italy."

"Will that take long?"

"Oh no—not quite two days if they come straight through. They'll come by a very quick train through the Simplon or St. Gotthard. . . . They're tunnels through the Alps," he added quickly, never quite sure where Sharlie's passion for knowledge would land him. But Sharlie merely said "Oh!" and appeared to lose interest in the subject.

But she talked about it with some eagerness the next day to Clive Blunsdon when her grandmother called at the farm for butter and sat down to have a cup of tea with Mrs.

Blunsdon. Clive and she climbed up into the hay-loft and sat there staring out over the quiet autumnal country, both a little subdued at the thought of Sharlie's imminent departure. Clive, it seemed, knew London—at least, he knew Hyde Park or Kensington Gardens. He never could remember, he said, which was which, they were so close together—and nobody had ever told him why they were called that. Clive had relatives in the neighbourhood at a place called Bayswater—an aunt and uncle and three cousins with whom he sometimes went to stay, and who came too, sometimes, to Cross Farm. But Sharlie only knew the cousins—Mark, who was quite grown up, though still at school; Mona, rather grown up, too, who always went off by herself to paint things, and Judy, rather more than a year older than Sharlie, whom she had only seen once and with whom she had felt very shy. Their father was a dentist, and Clive, like his own children, seemed to adore him. Of his aunt she knew nothing, except that once she had heard Mrs. Blunsdon and her grandmother agreeing that she was a marvellous and most interesting woman. Sharlie wondered if her father knew this nice family and if they would all meet in London. This was the brightest thought that came to her in the whole of this business of going home.

"I wish I didn't have to go," she said presently. "I'd like to stay here for ever and ever. I love Lincolnshire. Don't you?"

"Yes. Frightfully. So does my cousin Mark. He'd like to be a farmer, but they'd never let him. At least Aunt Eve wouldn't. Harry *hates* Lincolnshire, though, and wants to go farming in Canada. He says Tom is old enough now to take his place here."

Harry Blunsdon was Clive's eldest brother and quite, quite grown up, two years older than Tom, who was nearly twenty.

"Does Tom want to go too?" she asked.

"No. Cousin Mark does, though."

"Mark? Does he? . . . Why, he hasn't left school yet! Will *you* ever want to go to Canada, do you think?"

"Rather not. I shall stay here and farm all my life, I expect."

Clive, however, Sharlie reflected, was only twelve and a half, and couldn't know properly what he wanted to do when he was as grown up as his two brothers Harry and Tom.

She was very quiet as she walked home, her conversation limited to polite replies to what her grandmother was saying, which was not very important and included nothing whatever about Canada and Harry—so perhaps Mrs. Blunsdon hadn't said anything to her about that at tea-time.

For several days Sharlie hoped in silence that her father would change his mind and leave her in the country where for two whole years she had been so happy. She cried a little (at night, so that nobody should see) and remembered a thing she thought she had forgotten, but which had been very hard to bear at the time—that her father had never come to say good-bye to her before going away to Italy. So he couldn't possibly care for her very much and it couldn't make any difference to him really *where* she lived. She didn't think at all about her stepmother and small stepsister, taking them entirely for granted, and of the events which had immediately preceded these two years in the country she remembered nothing very definitely save the sight of her father standing at her mother's bedside, the telephone in his hand, a towel with a lot of blood on it round his neck and his face very white—a queer sort of whiteness that she had remembered because she had seen it once on Clive's face one day just before he had been sick.

She had been glad that Sunday morning when her grandparents had arrived, and when her grandfather, telling her

that her mother was very ill and that her father had a great deal to do, had taken her back to Carr House. When later her grandmother came home and told her that her mother was dead, and had cried, Sharlie hadn't cried, but she felt a little frightened, remembering how her father had stood at her mother's bedside with the blood on his neck and that funny-coloured face.

But Carr House was a pleasant place to live in, and what with the governess who came every morning to teach her to read and write and tell her many exciting things about the county she lived in and all the other counties in England, the walks she took with Clive, the visits she paid with her grandmother, the jaunts into Stamford and Bourne with her grandfather, there was so much to do that she had no time to delve into that dark backward and abysm of time which had been her life before her eighth birthday. She had slipped into her new life very easily, because it accorded with her temperament and because her many visits to the country had long ago made her aware how much she loved it.

And now she had to leave it.

Remembering this one morning as she drove with her grandfather into Stamford, she gazed out upon the familiar landscape with eyes that were suddenly hot with unshed tears. There was a lump in her throat and all the pleasant scene went by like something in a dream too lovely to be real. The harvesters in the fields, the bright-red farm wagons, the ripe corn they were garnering into queer shapes, with odd, funny expressions, the golden stubble, the gentle-faced horses, the pink of the willow herb, the purple of the loose-strife by the wayside, the cottage gardens gay with asters and early chrysanthemums—all these things, steeped in the golden light of a perfect September day, filled her with an emotion too sharp to be borne, and in spite of herself the tears began to slide down her little face, splashing mourn-

fully on to the hands clenched in her lap, and running salt into her mouth.

After one hasty look at her Henry Selwyn was careful not to look again. Resting the reins upon old Bess's back, he lighted himself a pipe, whistling snatches of a tune the while, talking of small unimportant everyday things as if he hadn't seen the desolation in the little puckered face or guessed at the childish heartbreak that lay behind it. He remembered suddenly his own bleak wretchedness when first he had gone to school—that had been in September, too, and more than fifty-six years ago. He had taken away with him memories of the same early autumnal scene that Sharlie was now finding so inimical to her pride and dignity. But one grew a pachyderm —grew up, grew used to the changes of life. As a young man about town he had certainly not missed the Lincolnshire scene. Brought back to it by his father's death, he had even at first pined after the delights and follies of the gay scene that was London in the "'sixties." Sharlie would get used to living in London, grow, as he had done, to believe she couldn't live without it. No use in being too sorry for the child, taking Ann's view that she was going to be neglected and unhappy. It was more than possible she would be neither, and there would be the holidays—quite a number of them—for just as long as she cared to come back to them. But presently there would be school and new friendships, and as she grew up the crowds of people with whom Philip Stratton had always loved to fill his house, even when poor Alex was too ill to be bothered with them. Sharlie wouldn't be lonely. Far from it. Far from it, indeed. Puffing away at his pipe, Henry Selwyn was aware that he feared something Ann did not fear at all—not that Sharlie would be unhappy in London, but that she would grow so fond of it her visits to the country would become few and far between.

So gradually, ordinariness closed in upon her again. Time

and the present enfolded her: the future fell away like a cloak from unregarding shoulders. She furtively dried her eyes, hid her handkerchief and in her grave grown-up fashion asked sensible questions about the harvest, about somebody called Burgess who had recently swum the Channel, about the railway strike, of which everybody had of late been talking, and about Clive Blunsdon's news regarding his brother Harry and Canada.

And presently she said: "You won't *tell*, will you, gran'pa?"

"What about, my lamb?"

"About my having cried."

"Good gracious me! *Have* you been crying?"

"I'm afraid I have, just a little. I don't know why. I wouldn't like gran'ma to know. She doesn't like people to cry."

"Oh, she doesn't mind little girls crying—now and then."

"Yes, but I'm not *very* little any longer. I'm nearly ten. That's quite old!"

A long time afterwards, as they drove back through the maze-like streets of Stamford in which it was still so easy to get lost, she said: "Is there anything to *see* in London?"—very anxiously, as one whose mind had filled up slowly with the five old churches that clung to this gateway to the fens and all the ancient history that belonged to them.

"Oh yes," said Grandfather Selwyn. "Heaps and heaps. The Tower, Westminster Abbey, Hampton Court—only that's not quite *in* London, of course." It wasn't so easy, he found—his London memories were not the sort of thing that could be included in a list of attractions for the very young. "Oh—and St. Paul's, of course. That's a *really* fine place, with a crypt," he said abruptly, and told her a rhyme about it:

Sir Christopher Wren
Was going to dine with some men.
He said, 'If anyone calls,
Say I'm designing St. Paul's.'

Sharlie laughed, not because she thought it so very amusing but because her grandfather so obviously did and because she knew he wanted to amuse her. But as they clattered down St. Paul's Street, into Red Lion Square and out on to the Bourne Road, where, after a mile, a shady lane would take them down to Carr, her little face was very still and watchful, as if every corner and stone of the town she loved had, somehow, to be imprinted upon her mind once and for all.

She uttered no word until the moment when Bess having, with her famous stable-bound flourish, deposited them at their own front door, Henry Selwyn lifted her down in his arms and set her feet upon the gravel with a flourish as fine as Bess's own. Standing there before him, she lifted her face and asked in the anxious, very private voice of one guarding a not very respectable secret, "Does it show?"

"No, not a bit. Not a bit, lambkin, that I can see. And now, you just show us all how nicely you can smile at lunch-time."

Even Henry was a little staggered to find how very nicely she contrived to comply with his request. It came, with the passing of the years, to be labelled in his mind as a full-dress rehearsal for the oft-repeated spectacle of Charlotte Stratton defying the more tiresome of the human emotions.

CHAPTER THREE

OCTOBER's flag waved over the fens before Philip Stratton announced his arrival at Carr for the business of "collecting" his daughter. "Collecting" was the word he used—and, "*Collecting*, if you please!" said Ann Selwyn. Who but Philip Stratton would use such a word in connection with his own child?

Philip, to be frank, had put off "the collection" as long as possible because he wanted, in this world, nothing quite so little as to see his mother-in-law. He would have given much to have had the nerve to suggest that Sharlie was put in the train at Stamford and met by him at King's Cross. Alternatively, he could have asked Henry Selwyn to bring her to Edward Street, but he never summoned quite sufficient nerve to do that, either. Besides, it wouldn't have been Henry who would have come, but Ann. And Ann being rude—or chillily polite—to Fanny was yet another of the things at which his nerve jibbed. When he had said this (rather differently) to Fanny, however, Fanny had laughed. She wasn't afraid of Ann, and she didn't mind that kind of rudeness. At the moment, Fanny minded nothing whatever in the world. She was delighted with her new home, with her reception by all her friends and Philip's, and with the fact that it was now quite certain that in the following June she would have another child.

Philip therefore, having delayed as long as he could find excuses, set off one evening after dinner from Edward Street in his car. Apart from the fact that at the end of some eighty-odd miles he must face Ann Selwyn, he was feeling well pleased with life. His book had been out a month, and been

well received—which is to say, the critics in Philip's opinion had been no more than usually obtuse and unintelligent about his intentions and achievement. He had been called sentimental less than the usual number of times, "wholesome" rather more than usual, and his book described as variously "charming," "engrossing," "pretty," "delightfully human," and "rather disappointing." But the libraries were buying it and his sales looked like being substantially increased. Driving along the Great North Road on this evening in early October, he promised himself a new car before Christmas. "Buying Fanny a car," he called this, though Fanny couldn't be persuaded to learn to drive. Just as well, too, he thought, for Fanny, at the moment, had other things to think about. He'd be worried to death if he thought she was out on some high road or other in her present condition. He glowed with pride and satisfaction at the thought of Fanny's second pregnancy, feeling that this begetting of a son (he had no doubt it would be a son) just when he wanted it most was somehow the most successful thing he had accomplished. But as though it occurred to him that Fanny, too, had had something to do with it, he had spent twenty guineas on buying her a new evening frock and had taken her off to dine at Prince's. Fanny had neither chided him for his extravagance nor pointed out that the frock, so far as she was concerned, would soon be unwearable. A new frock was a new frock, and this one, besides, was a vastly becoming garment. Moreover, she was fond of good food, and had no objection while she was eating it to being stared at and admired. Also, she was as pleased as Phil about the baby (chiefly *because* he was pleased), but it didn't move her to any unwonted gravity of bearing. Why should it? Having another baby wouldn't kill her, and even if it were a girl and not a boy—well, there was plenty of time. Fanny was not yet twenty-two. Such a lot of time stretched out before

her—she sunned herself in the mere thought of it, like a plump, purring cat. She was still unable to feel intense about things—even about men or love, and the things that belonged to love. She liked the whole incredible business of being alive, enjoyed making love and being made love to, but she took that lightly, as she took all else.

Driving much too fast and not over-carefully along the Great North Road, Philip was aware that *he* did not—that these days he took nothing quite as lightly as he used. He couldn't think why, or perhaps he could but would not. Much nicer to remember that Fanny was adorable, good to love and easy to live with. A normal, healthy woman, able and willing to give a man children and not the sort to cold-shoulder him afterwards. Fanny, somehow, always came up to the scratch, had neither headaches nor nerves, had at no time thwarted such a mood as had made him turn the boat that last night on Como. He thought of those two years in Italy with complete satisfaction—or a satisfaction which would have been complete but for that gnawing belief that he cared for Fanny in a deeper way than she cared for him, or ever would. He had never meant to find himself in that position, had been a little shocked at the swirl of emotion which had overwhelmed him, when six weeks after they reached England Fanny had lightly informed him that she suspected herself to be again pregnant. That was how Fanny expressed herself. She dealt in no poetic, sentimental euphemisms, and he could not imagine why, this time, he had wished that she had!

He went a mile and a half off his road at Eaton Socon to St. Neots, where he sought a meal and bed at the 'Cross Keys.' There was, however, the usual interval between the one and the other, and restraining a desire to sit down and write a love-letter to Fanny (which he never had done and did not want to do now) he sat down with the novel he had brought

with him. It was a woman's book, and it dismayed him a little, its brutal frankness seeming to him both unnecessary and unfeminine. But a good deal of feminine fiction moved him to the use of these adjectives. He regarded fiction as a safety-valve in the hands of women and had been used to brief but sharp verbal encounters with Alex upon the subject. Women were a damned sight too clever. Men must look to their laurels. . . . These thoughts came between him and his enjoyment of the book and at ten he put it down and went into the lounge.

Three other men were there, two of them with their womenfolk (rather dowdy, thought Philip), and over their whiskies the men talked of the war recently declared between Italy and Turkey, of industrial strikes and in particular what should be done with all strikers, the decision to pay Members of Parliament (all three strongly disapproved of this), the crimes of the Liberal Government, and other topics of the day. Half-way through the impassioned remarks of the gentleman who was most certain of the short way to deal with recalcitrant miners and railwaymen, the two ladies yawned, rose and went off to bed. Philip, having agreed that the Liberal Government had been in power long enough, and listened to what they thought of the recent Suffragette outrages, was feeling a little withered because none of the three seemed to have heard of him or his books, and soon took himself off there, too; but not to sleep. The fact of the thirty-odd miles which still lay between him and his meeting with Ann Selwyn was, on the whole, the only really satisfactory thing about his evening, but this wasn't sufficient to ensure him a peaceful night. Throughout its sleepless watches, he worked out wild plans for evading that meeting which he yet knew to be inevitable. He could send a telegram saying he was ill, prevented; or, staging a break-down a little farther along the road—say at Wansford, or Norman Cross—could

suggest that somebody (Henry, for preference) drove Sharlie out to meet him at the hotel there. If he made it Norman Cross, it was only a matter of some sixteen miles—and Selwyn needn't arrive until after lunch, so that the ordeal of sitting through a meal with his father-in-law need not bother him. An excellent plan, it seemed to him—only he knew he wouldn't undertake it. Staging break-downs was somehow not in his line: he didn't, for one thing, know enough about the internal combustion engine. It would all be too troublesome and, after all, might not avert the thing it was designed to avert. Ten to one it would be Ann who would come driving the high-trap into Norman Cross. She'd smell a rat at once.

But even when he had abandoned all his schemes and decided to go through with the unavoidable (cursing himself for ever having embarked upon it), he could not go to sleep. They had given him a double bed, and it was so long since he had slept in the middle of one he felt cold and lonely. He thought of Fanny's softly-curving body, longed for the soft cushion of her breast and wondered if she were asleep, or if she too lay awake, missing his accustomed nearness. But he didn't wonder about this for long, for he was quite sure she had been asleep for hours. However, slumber overtook him eventually and he awoke to find his morning tea at his side and the October sun shining into the room.

As he drank his tea he began to feel considerably better. He needn't hurry. The thirty-three miles would not take him long, and he thought it wiser to time things so that he should arrive when lunch was well over—he'd have his own somewhere *en route*—so that there should be no excuse for staying more than an hour at Carr House. He could get back that night as far as Baldock, with luck, even allowing for the kid's tea and that she ought to be in bed by eight at the latest. If he'd stuck to the wheel a bit longer last night, so

that he could have arrived at Carr soon after breakfast, he could have got back in the evening. As it was, another night at an hotel—and no Fanny. Funny he hadn't thought of that last night. He'd merely thought of bed and a meal. . . . He never was any good at planning things—then, how possibly? . . .

He decapitated his thoughts with a horrid instinctive celerity. He had no idea why, suddenly, that old line of argument and persuasion should have come again into his mind. A good job when this visit to the place so strongly associated with Alex was over and done with. But it would do him good, wouldn't it, to go through with it? A hair-of-the-dog idea . . .

He got out of bed, went in search of a bath, found, as one always does find in hotels, that other people are wanting baths too, and that someone had been quicker than himself, so he came back and began to shave. He had never quite got over his new distaste for shaving and always hurried over the operation, so that when he was finished and went along again to the bathroom, the bath was still in occupation. Cursing, he went back to his room, stripped, stood on a towel, and "bathed" with as much water as he could contrive to splash over himself. Couldn't stay here for ever. Too much suspense and inaction. It was making him jumpy. He'd get off as soon as he could.

Breakfast was good and his appetite better than he would have believed possible. He saw the three men of the evening before come in, the two married men together, the other, much later, alone. Only one of the wives appeared. Very unattractive, Philip thought her—a pity she didn't breakfast in bed, like her friend. But she smiled in a friendly fashion as he passed their table with a farewell salute, and Philip would have felt his *amour-propre* restored if he had known that she had heard overnight from her husband that he was

"a writer of books, novels, he says," and had at once correctly assumed that he was "the" Philip Stratton, whose novels she asked for at Mudie's. She wanted to tell him how, so far, she had found it impossible to get his new one, only she had forgotten the title, which was a little awkward, of course—and she had hoped, so much, that he would come over and speak to them. Poor lady!—how was she to know that Philip Stratton, who wrote so beautifully of women, required them to be reasonably attractive and at least ten years younger than she before he went one step out of his way to converse with them? She ate her finnan-haddock with a feeling of poignant regret that the need of men always to talk politics had prevented her from making the acquaintance of the only writer she had ever encountered, and was quite short with her husband (whose demands upon women were so much less unreasonable than Philip Stratton's) when he suggested that she'd find the bacon and kidneys first-rate.

Philip, meanwhile, had paid his bill, tipped the head-waiter handsomely, given a shilling with a princely gesture to the boy who had brought down his bag, and was now driving away as fast as he could along the flat open country he detested, not stopping to gaze at the view from Alconbury Hill, for although the morning was glorious and Philip felt automatically exhilarated by it, he had even less eye than usual for the beauties through which he drove a little recklessly.

At Wansford, on the edge of the Fen Country, he got lunch at the 'Haycock'—he was not, at this stage, very hungry and could have gone on to Stamford, but did not want particularly to eat there, where he flattered himself he was remembered; many a meal he had eaten in Alex's company at the 'George' and not a few at the 'Stamford.' To-day he preferred the anonymity of the 'Haycock' at Wansford.

With his lunch he drank a couple of double whiskies, and

at Norman Cross, sixteen miles this side of Carr, had another two. After that nothing mattered very much, except that he should get safely through Stamford, a damn tiresome town for any motorist. Running down St. Martin's Hill he had to brake suddenly to avoid an old man who had crossed the road in ignorance of the son of Jehu who was coming down it lit with four good doubles, and his mind anywhere but upon old men of country towns. Crossing Red Lion Square he suddenly caught sight of the post office, and pulling up sharply jumped out and sent a telegram to Fanny, reading which the young woman behind the counter never batted an eyelid. Doubtless she was used to people making that particular kind of fool of themselves.

"One and a penny, if you please, sir," she said.

Still feeling happy, Philip went out and climbed into the car. A few hours later he tried in vain to remember what exactly he had telegraphed, and began to wish he'd done nothing of the kind. Anyway, he hoped it would please Fanny. . . . Silly thing to do, though; it might only frighten her. Getting a telegram at all, he meant. Couldn't have Fanny upset now.

He need not have worried. The sight of a telegram did not scare Fanny. She opened it, smiled, said "No answer!" to the boy, and coming into her bright new drawing-room, read it again. Nice Phil, she thought, he really is rather an angel; but she laughed a little and wondered, as she dropped it into the fire, if the girl in the post office had smiled as she read it.

Well, he'd got there as she'd expected, quite safely, and he wouldn't be home until lunch-time next day, so she might as well go out to dinner that evening, after all. It was a bit dull in the house alone. She might as well go out all she could while she looked respectable. Besides, she hadn't been out with anybody but Phil for ages and ages. . . .

Meantime Philip rode through the last four miles of quiet country lanes to Carr House, not noticing the gold and amber of the afternoon, nor the soft clouds moving in slow procession across the sky, nor the long shining freshly ploughed fields, and staring determinedly ahead as he drove past the narrow lane that led down to Bede Cottage and, a little farther on, averting his gaze from the high-banked churchyard in which Alex lay beneath the quiet Lincolnshire sky.

CHAPTER FOUR

BUT to Sharlie, standing at the window awaiting her father's arrival, the beauty of the day and of the country upon which so soon she must turn her back, was like a sharp pain in her heart. She was watching Beridge sweeping up the leaves on the lawn and the swallows flying low in the sky—"the first birds to come and the last to go," as Clive had told her. They wouldn't be in a hurry to leave in all this sunny weather. Oh, why did it all look so lovely—so hard to leave? Go away, thrush, don't come singing to me to-day! "There are thrushes in Hyde Park, maybe," Grandfather Selwyn had said. And trees, perhaps, just turning to gold, and men sweeping up the coloured leaves . . . But no broad endlessly-stretching fens, only houses and shops, rows and rows of them, and the noisy, smelly traffic that used to give mummy a headache. And no Clive to go walking with, to take her to see some nest he'd discovered. . . . Only people she didn't know at all, like daddy's new wife and a new governess, perhaps—unless she went to school, which she thought she would prefer. Anyway, it would all be very different. She felt a little cold as she thought of it.

By three o'clock Beridge had swept all the leaves he could find into little heaps and was collecting them in his wheelbarrow. Soon he would be lifting begonias and dahlias, dividing up the roots in the wide flower-borders, making cuttings of pinks and planting the first bulbs. (Grandmother Selwyn believed in planting her bulbs really early.) And she would not be there to see! But perhaps there would be a garden at Edward Street, and a man to do these same exciting things.

At quarter past three her grandmother, a stately figure in grey silk, came in and found some small jobs for her to do. She was grieved, despite the brisk way she spoke, at the sight of that little figure by the open window. Had she known her father meant to be so late she would have let her go out after lunch to watch Beridge—but they had expected him to the meal, and when that had finished without him had gone on expecting him every minute. So like Philip Stratton to think of nobody but himself! Well, if he hadn't come when these few odd things were done she'd take the child into the garden while she talked to Beridge about those new lilies. They didn't grow anything like enough lilies at Carr and hardly any late-flowering. True, there weren't very many, but she thought they ought to have what there were. She made a note on a piece of paper Sharlie brought her from her desk:

"Order *Lilium candidum* (Memo to Beridge: ought to have been planted in August!) *Auratum, Henryi* (Memo to Beridge: likes a little shade and shelter from high winds). Also, more *Regale*, which likes us; and some *Sulphureum* (which doesn't, but can be tried in cold greenhouse). Also *Tigrinum* and *Tigrinum splendens*. (*Note to Beridge:* Tiger lilies produce bulbils. See me about this at the proper time.)"

She had just finished this when the sound of a car being swiftly driven up the drive shattered the silence. Ann Selwyn glanced at Sharlie and saw that she had grown very white.

"Finish what you are doing, child!" she said, "and put this for me on my desk over there—right in the middle with the paper-weight on it, so that I can't help seeing it when I do my letters presently. There's a good child."

"Mr. Stratton!" said the maid in the doorway.

Sharlie and her grandmother looked up—the old woman briskly, with a fine assumption of careless indifference,

Sharlie with a little anxious frown. Ann Selwyn advanced, but did not offer to shake hands.

"How do you do?" she said. "We expected you to lunch."

"Sorry," said Philip. "I had it at Wansford. Well, Sharlie, how are you after all this time?"

"Quite well, thank you," said the child, and suffered herself to be kissed, but looked as though she did not like it very much. Her heart was beating very fast, her face had grown hot.

"Pleased to see me?" her father asked.

Sharlie looked at him, tall, bronzed, in his lovely clothes, with his wavy dark hair and smiling eyes, and forgot that when he kissed her his breath had stunk of whisky ("stunk" was the word her mind employed, for she had been cured of her tendency to the politer "smelled" by her governess's tale of Dr. Johnson's reply to the child who had said he didn't "smell nice"—"*You* smell. *I* stink!"). Her father was handsome and gay, and he smiled at her as if, far from having forgotten her, he had never thought about anybody else for the whole two years of his absence. In that moment she fell a victim to his charm in the same helpless fashion her mother had done ten years before.

"Well?" he said. "*Are* you pleased to see me?"

"Oh *yes*," said Sharlie, "very."

"That's all right, then. . . . Did you think I had forgotten you?"

"No," said Sharlie, wilfully and readily forgetting the two miserable post cards he had sent her in the great space of two whole years from Italy, one of them meant for her birthday, and arriving two days late, like his present. He was busy and must have had a lot of things to think about, of course—and a baby, which must be an exciting possession. She said suddenly:

"When we get to London shall I see my baby sister?"

"Rather."

"Is she very pretty?"

Philip laughed.

"Well, she's got a lot of fair hair and a pair of dark eyes—if you call that pretty. I don't know. We'll have to wait and see. But I'll tell you a secret if you like."

"Yes, please," said Sharlie.

"Before very long you're going to have a baby brother."

Sharlie's face fell a little at this as if the idea of being one of three (four if you counted her new mother, as she supposed you had to) was a little difficult to manage all at once. It was Ann Selwyn who said coldly:

"What do you mean by 'before long'?"

"Oh, in the spring, I think. May—something like that."

"You haven't wasted much time!"

"Don't you think so?" Philip smiled. "We thought we'd been rather leisurely."

Ann Selwyn's face was very red as if the mental picture of Philip and Fanny as man and wife had somehow risen up and disgusted her. Philip went on smiling. But he thought: The old bitch! The disgusting old bitch! He said: "Fanny's a normal person, you know . . . has children easily—no fuss about it at all." He meant to hurt and was glad to see the red run swiftly out of her face, leaving it blanched. But he still looked gay and unconcerned and the remnants of his attractive smile still lingered in his eyes and about his mouth.

"Run upstairs, Sharlie, and get your hat and coat on," Ann Selwyn said, and as the door closed after her, she spoke again to Philip in a hard tight voice as if speech were an effort almost beyond her. "I imagine you will let Sharlie come to us sometimes?"

Philip looked at her and took out his cigarette-case. "May I?" he said and waited for Ann's impatient gesture

of assent before he lighted it. "Thanks. Why, of course, the kid can come—if she wants to. But she's going to school, you know."

"Boarding school?"

"No. Ordinary day variety."

"There will be holidays, I imagine."

"Well, if she wants to come I shan't stop her."

"But you hope she won't want to?"

"Well, what if I do? If the kid likes it here, it's nothing to me. Never did like the place. And you don't like me and I don't like you—much. There's no reason that I can see why, now, we have to pretend we do."

"Is Sharlie no reason?"

"I don't see that she's an overwhelming one, anyway. She's getting a big girl. She'll soon be old enough to do without any of us."

"She's not ten until December."

"Well, they grow up quickly enough. Specially girls. No holding 'em these days."

He thought, surprisingly: Fanny wasn't eighteen when I first saw her—when I had her. And I wasn't the first. His face darkened. No, but he'd be the last—by God! he would. What made him think of that now? Years since he had. Must be that damn whisky going back on him. Why, Fanny was *his*. Getting caught that way, with Pen, had put a curb upon her experiments. She was tamed all right, never fear. Once was enough.

He heard Ann say icily: "Sharlie has breeding. She won't need 'holding in,' as you so elegantly express it. Properly handled, she'll become a decent self-respecting woman. I want nothing more for her."

"Don't you, by Jove? I reckon she'll want a little more for herself before long—if I know anything about women."

"You don't," said Ann Selwyn.

"Think not?" Philip laughed. "You wait and see. Pity she's not more of a beauty."

"She has brains."

"And you think they make up?"

Philip laughed again and knocked off his ash into the large bowl of asters which stood on the table, quite aware that this would annoy Ann.

She went to the door, moved to end this incredible interview. It opened to admit Henry Selwyn. Ann averted her face. The two men shook hands. Ann escaped.

He's insufferable—insufferable, she told herself. He always was. What Alex ever *saw* in him! And he's been drinking! The whole room *smelled* of whisky!

Ann had not heard the Dr. Johnson story—and if she had would still have used the pleasanter word. She went upstairs to see if Sharlie was ready or needed any help. She was quite ready and her little face was bright with colour. She looked excited. Didn't she mind, after all?

Children liked change, variety. She'd soon get over her feeling for the country. Better that she should, of course. She couldn't keep her. She knew that. She could do nothing more for her. She fell on her knees, put her arms around her and hugged her good-bye. As she felt Sharlie's arms slip round her neck, her soft little face against hers, a wave of bitterest anguish swept over Ann Selwyn. She had steeled herself to the inevitable, but the thought of handing Sharlie over to "that man" was intolerable, more intolerable now that they had met again. His cheap philosophy—of life, of women! His impudent trading upon what he thought his "charm," his good looks! And the child was taken by them too—was proud of him and excited at his coming. Well, children liked the most incredible people—children and dogs. Would he spoil her—he and that woman who'd been his paramour? She used the old-fashioned word. It was how

she thought of her. That *she* should have Alex's child—that Philip should have given her the legal right! She couldn't want her—she had her own child—was soon to have another. She was "normal," Philip had said, meaning to hurt her, and had children easily. What did Philip want with children—save as an extension of his own ego? Or that kind of woman? Light, easy, without standards. Ann would neither meet her nor recognise her. Ever.

She got up from her knees, looked at Sharlie, straightened the hat she had pushed on one side, tucked the dark hair a little farther beneath it and gave her another kiss—light, inconsequential. One had no right to pour one's emotions, like syrup, over a child.

"Run along down, darling. You ought to be starting. London's such a long way off."

But she knew that she meant to keep Philip there, much as she hated him, if possible, for tea. She considered that he had been drinking too much to be allowed to drive Sharlie back to London until she had sobered him down a little. So she went down and offered him tea—a beverage Philip did not care much about, and which he refused. He thought he ought to be getting on. Nothing he wanted so much as to be gone.

Ann said: "I hope you won't take that child *all* the way home to-day. I've packed all she wants for to-night separately."

Driving back along the London Road the effect of the whisky began to wear off, and Philip wondered what, just exactly, he had said to the old lady. He supposed he'd been very vulgar—that was always the effect whisky had upon him. Good for her, anyway—she was always so high and mighty, so damned *ethical.* Pleased with the word, he lingered over it. Ethical humbug! What right had she to disapprove of Fanny the way she did, just because she suspected there'd

been something between them before they were married? Fanny was worth a dozen of her, anyway. She was kind, affable—and she could do her job. That sneering "You haven't wasted much time" had riled him. What had it got to do with her, anyhow? Did she expect him for ever to live like a monk just because . . . Oh, hell, a pity he hadn't had a whisky the less—he'd meant to be cold and dignified and was beginning to be afraid that it was the old lady who'd been that.

He became aware that he had driven for six miles without addressing a single word to Sharlie. He turned to her and said: "Well? Sorry to be leaving all this marsh country?"

Sharlie said: "I like it here—but this isn't marsh country, you know—it's fen."

"Oh, fen, is it? Well, what's the difference?"

"The marsh was made by the sea—it's all on the east. This is fen—which was made by the river floods and water that came down from the hills. And this is the South, you know."

"Oh, so that's the difference, is it? What a very learned little person you are!"

Sharlie said: "No . . . only I know about Lincolnshire."

"Do you, now? What else do you know?"

"Well, I know about Richard du Rulos!"

"Richard du who?"

"Du Rulos. He is called the father of all Lincolnshire farmers, because he drained the land and stopped the Welland from overflowing."

"And who was Mr. du Rulos when he was at home?"

"He was what they called the King's Chamberlain—William the Conqueror, the king was."

"I see. What else do you know, Sharlie?"

But Sharlie, who suspected that he was laughing at her and not really interested, felt suddenly shy and fell silent.

She sat very still, thrilled to think that this was the Great North Road along which she was travelling so fast, and thinking of all the kings who had also travelled upon it, only much, much slower, years and years ago, all moving up and down their realm with their lords and ladies, riding into Stamford, where there were good beds and food. Thinking, too, of the queen who had died and been taken all the way from Lincoln to Westminster and had passed the self-same way. The procession of these past glories defiled past and past her mental gaze and she gave a little start when presently her father said, "Well, say good-bye to your beloved Lincolnshire, my child—we shall be in Huntingdonshire in two-two's."

At Norman Cross he suggested tea, but Sharlie shook her head and he was glad enough to get on. It would be lighting-up time before they'd finished, in all probability, and he'd not be able to get beyond Biggleswade, with Sharlie to get to bed at decent time. He wondered if after all she could, perhaps, sleep in the car, if he made her comfortable with the extra cushions at the back which Fanny had insisted upon putting in before he started, in case she got tired on the way. (Why hadn't he told that old woman, Sharlie's grandmother, that?) Half-past four. He could get home by nine easy, if he went straight on. He'd a mind to try. It would mean cutting out dinner, too, but the kid wouldn't want another meal—he could get sandwiches or something somewhere. He'd have a try for it, anyway. He didn't know why he was so anxious to get home that evening. His dislike, he supposed, of the roadside hotel.

He urged the car to its best, but it was old and not in very good condition. He drove, all out, with his mind on these things, without a word, and glad though he was that the child at his side didn't prattle, he was moved at last to say:

"You're very quiet, Sharlie. What are you thinking about?"

"I was thinking about the Blunsdons," she said; "but you don't know them, do you?"

"Are they the people who keep Cross Farm?"

"Yes. Do we live anywhere near Bayswater?"

"Near enough. What's that got to do with your friends the Blunsdons?"

"Mrs. Blunsdon's sister lives there—Clive's Aunt Eve. And an uncle, who's a dentist—and a lot of cousins. I thought perhaps you might know them."

"Sorry, my child. I'm afraid we don't."

"Oh, what a pity! I thought perhaps Mr. Norman was your dentist."

Philip laughed.

"Well, as it happens, I haven't been to a dentist for years."

"Grandmother used to take me every three months."

"Aren't your teeth good?"

"Oh yes, thank you. Only grandmother believes in it."

"I see. Well, I daresay we shall be able to find a very nice man when you need to go again."

"Gran'ma has written to Clive's uncle, Mr. Norman. She was going to ask you to let me go to him every three months now I'm to live in town."

"Well, she didn't."

"I expect she forgot. Perhaps she'll write."

"Perhaps she will," said Philip grimly.

These Blunsdons! What was there about them, he wondered, which had made the high and mighty Ann Selwyn sanction her little granddaughter's friendship with them, a lot of Lincolnshire farmers? Her own tenants, too! Preposterous!

"Did you see much of this family?" he asked Sharlie.

"I went there rather a lot—because of Clive."

"Who's Clive?"

"He's my friend—he's thirteen. He's the youngest. Then there's Harry and Tom. But they're both quite old. Twenty something, Harry is."

"A regular Methuselah! Are they Lincolnshire people?"

"Oh no. Gran'ma says *Mrs.* Blunsdon's a lady. Her father was a gentleman farmer a long way off somewhere, only I never can remember where. Mr. Blunsdon had one of her father's farms and they only came to live at Carr after they were married."

"Oh," said Philip, and thought: So that's the secret of it! '*Mrs.* Blunsdon's a lady!' She's a snob, is old Ann Selwyn! But a lady who married one of her father's tenants! The old boy *must* have been pleased! No wonder they flitted to another county!

"*Mrs.* Blunsdon," said Sharlie, "is Mr. Blunsdon's second wife."

"Oh, did the first Mrs. Blunsdon die?"

"I suppose so. A man can't have *two* wives, can he?"

"Not in this country," said Philip. "Perhaps it's just as well."

Sharlie sat still, seduced by a memory of a day when she had said that to Clive: "Did the first Mrs. Blunsdon die?" and Clive had said what she said now to her father: "I suppose so. A man can't have two wives, can he?" The memory went further, too, than that, ran back to a day when Clive, in his elder brother's presence, had made some innocent and laughing allusion to this theme of the first Mrs. Blunsdon, and Harry had surprisingly reached out his hand and boxed his ears. Later, when she sought information of her grandmother, that lady had said: "Hush, dear, it's no business of ours, and little girls should never ask questions about other people."

So Sharlie had decided that perhaps the lady wasn't dead,

but hadn't got on with her husband and was what they called divorced, and Joe had married this Mrs. Blunsdon. But that was not a thought Sharlie felt moved to pass on to her father. She pondered the fact that while everybody said "Joe Blunsdon," nobody ever said "Beth Blunsdon," though Sharlie knew that was her name. Everybody everywhere called her *Mrs.* Blunsdon, and she spoke just as her grandmother did, using none of the queer words the other farmers' wives did, and though Joe Blunsdon made mistakes in grammar and sometimes, though not often, put an "h" where there wasn't one and left one out when it ought to have been in, he, too, used none of the local words. He didn't need them, Grandmother Selwyn said once; he'd brought quite a lot with him from another county.

Sharlie sat still, thinking of these people who had been so near to her, as familiar as her grandmother and grandfather, who remembered her mother as a girl and whom Sharlie knew so much better than her father. She would miss them all—Joe, of the kind smile, few words and quiet ways, Tom and Harry and Clive—and Mrs. Blunsdon whom Sharlie liked so much to look at, with her dark strong-growing hair unstreaked with grey, her fine eyes and cheeks like rosy apples. She was the kindest person Sharlie had ever met, besides gran'ma and gran'pa, and she made, said Sharlie's grandmother, the most delicious butter she had ever tasted.

When she said that once to Mrs. Blunsdon Beth had smiled, and then suddenly looked as if somebody had stuck a pin into her, or as if she had suddenly thought of something. But the next minute she was smiling again as if, whatever it was, she found it amusing.

It was beginning to get dark and Philip perceived that Sharlie was nodding. He stopped the car and suggested she let him make her comfortable in the back of the car upon Fanny's extra cushions.

"I'd rather be here, thank you," said Sharlie, "by the side of you," so Philip reached for the cushions, made his little daughter as comfortable as he could with their assistance and proceeded to drive on. Tiresome kid! Perhaps later she'd be more amenable. Anyway, he'd see what the position was when they got to Biggleswade. If she had a nap, ten to one she'd wake up fresh and he could go on.

They were still some miles from that town, however, when a familiar sound informed him that he had acquired a puncture. The chug, chug of the flapping tyre was unmistakable and, cursing, he got down to inspect. The tyre was hopeless, and goodness alone knew how far was the nearest garage. He got in again and began to crawl along the gutter, it never once occurring to him to stop and attempt to put on the spare wheel. Always the Complete Motorist, Philip had in the car, beside Fanny's extra cushions and rugs, a box of cigarettes, two pipes, several maps, a small handbook on Freewill, a dead torch and no jack. However, what were garages for? Luckily he encountered one in a quarter of a mile, and jumping out gave brisk instructions for the wheel to be changed. The torn tyre was beyond mending that night unless he was to be delayed for a much longer time than he desired, for the inner tube was very badly cut, and in a voice sharp with exasperation Philip gave orders that it should be bundled in the back of the car, and breathed a pious prayer that with the spare wheel in action no further tyre trouble might overtake them. When the wheel was in position, however, and the mechanic began pumping it up, it soon appeared that Philip's troubles were not yet at an end. Either there was a defective valve, said the mechanic, or a slow puncture, and in either case the spare was useless. The damaged tyre, it seemed, would have, after all, to be repaired, and Philip, bidding the man haul it out again, decided, with an unaccountable passion of disappointment, that he would,

after all, have to spend the night somewhere on the road. He looked at his watch, saw that it was already six o'clock, calculated that it would be seven, at least, before they were off again, and decided that they might just as well stay where they were and be done with it.

"My young daughter's tired," he said to the mechanic. "Is there an inn handy? I think we'd better make up our minds to spend the night here."

There was an inn, the young man said, but of the commercial variety and generally rather full up. Moreover, as it was Thursday and early closing, it would that evening be rather noisy. Still, if the little lady was tired, perhaps that wouldn't matter. Sharlie bent upon him her serious smile and shook her head.

So, leaving her still curled up in the car, Philip walked on to the inn, only to learn that they had but a single room to spare and seemed not too anxious, for some inscrutable reason, to let it. After one look at the frowsty dining-room, he thought better of asking permission to dine there, and went back to the garage no better pleased than when he left it.

"No luck, sir?" said the young man. "I daresay Mrs. Miller at 'Ethelcot' could do for you. She's a nice tidy body and not likely to be full up at this time of year."

"Where," said Philip patiently, "is 'Ethelcot'?"

"First on the right, sir. Nice quiet little road it is."

"I suppose I'd better go and see," said Philip, and waited in his usual hopeful fashion for the young man to suggest sending a messenger across, first of all, to make enquiries. But the young man did nothing of the sort, for the very good reason that he had nobody to send, the garage being run on the widespread English principle that on the evenings of early-closing day, as on Sundays, one attendant was sufficient. So, seeing no help for it, Philip lifted Sharlie out

of the car, crossed the road and walked down a short, very dark turning in search of "Ethelcot" and Mrs. Miller.

"Why is it called 'Ethelcot'?" Sharlie woke up sufficiently to inquire, as they walked up to the front gate and saw the name staring at them from above the fanlight.

"Because the lady's name is Ethel, I expect," said her father, "and this is her idea of a cot!"

Philip laughed and rang the bell. Sharlie laughed too.

A large woman answered his ring and smiled upon him. Yes, she had two bedrooms free and seemed more anxious to let them for a night than the landlady at the inn had been to let hers. Would the gentleman come to see them?

Philip followed her up a steep and rather narrow staircase and put his head inside a couple of rooms next door to each other, both clean, both equipped with the ubiquitous double-bed of the English lodging-house tradition, both with the top part of the window down about two inches, and both ugly. Philip looked, nodded, reflected that the beds would probably be hard (or feather, which was worse), and withdrew his head from the second doorway. As well here as anywhere else, he supposed, as he walked back to the car and collected Sharlie's and his own belongings.

Mrs. Miller, he noticed, on his return, seemed a little disconcerted by Sharlie's self-possession, and this amused him, as it always did when he saw it in action upon another. When at last Mrs. Miller had departed, defeated but still courageously smiling, and Sharlie was left alone with her father, her boiled egg and hot milk, he took a good look at her while she was eating and drinking.

Her table manners were excellent—her manner of dealing with that awkward business of removing the top from a softly-boiled egg quite admirable. She stirred her milk continually and so avoided the usual horrid business with the skin.

Well, he could trust Ann Selwyn to have seen to that. But he thought the child plain. All that straight dark hair, that thin face, browned by the Lincolnshire air and sun (he did not think tan becoming and it had not yet become fashionable), and those violet-blue eyes, so like her mother's, only so much more unyielding, so grave, that had made rather a mess of Mrs. Miller a while ago. They were, he supposed, beautiful eyes, set very wide apart, the markings of the irises very dark, and the lashes, dark as her hair, like it again, were straight and very thick. The brows were set unusually high above it, giving to her face a queerly inquisitive air which contrasted so oddly with the calm gaze beneath them and the large and well-shaped mouth that looked as if it had never asked a question in its life. Philip thought her colouring drab —the brown types in womanhood did not appeal to him— and wondered how he and Alex had come to produce such an owl of a child. As he sat there watching her, he thought suddenly of the lovely thing her mother had been when first he had set eyes upon her—the violet-blue of her eyes, the flying buttresses of her brows, the exquisite delicate complexion. She had reminded him of a lily in the sun. With an effort he switched his mind away from this mental image and stared again at Sharlie. No colour about her at all—just all that brown, the violet-blue-grey of her eyes and the glint of small white teeth as they bit into Mrs. Miller's slices of bread and butter.

No beauty there that her father could see. But there was something to which he could not give a name. Already, three months short of her tenth birthday, there was character and quality in Sharlie's face: people looked at her, looked again. (He had seen that woman do it only a few minutes ago and that boy at the garage.) The very immobility of the little face fascinated you and the sweep of those long thick dark perfectly straight lashes that lay upon the gold-brown

of her cheeks like a bruise. As he looked at her, going soberly on with her meal, he was glad for the first time that he had not allowed the Selwyns to keep her. For the first time he wanted her to be fond of him, for the first time acknowledged that he had never really cared for her. Unlovable, he had called her, a detached, superior kind of infant, but now, for the first time, he caught some sign of the wistful questioning lonely child she really was. Perhaps the only children of people who did not get on too well all had something of this air which Sharlie wore. It hadn't, he supposed, been easy for the kid. She'd always hated their quarrels, withdrawing herself from them with that fastidious outraged air of one who lifted her skirts from the gutter, which had always so deeply irritated him.

She wouldn't need to do that any longer. Fanny and he didn't quarrel. In this new atmosphere of married compatibility she would grow, he hoped, more like other children, affectionate, natural, unquestioning.

"Nearly finished?" he asked her.

"Yes, thank you."

"Then what about bed?"

She got down obediently (thank God she didn't argue!), and when he rose to open the door and made to follow her out she said sedately: "It's all right, thank you; I can find my way."

"Let us see if you can," he said, following her up the staircase.

The gas was lit in her room and the bed turned down. Philip pulled up the blind and dragged open the window another foot, whilst Sharlie sat down and began to pull off her shoes. She got out of her clothes with speed and agility and the small slim body for one moment stood there stark before his gaze, milk-white against the tan of neck and face. small-boned, with the minimum of flesh. She regarded him

so little he might not have been there. If she was shy before him or wished him gone, there was no sign of it. Robed in her white night-gown she got into her dressing-gown, collected her tooth-brush and towel and announced that she was going to the bathroom. He was still her father. He was no stranger. After two years! He was strangely touched.

"Along there," he said, "at the top of the stairs."

"Oh yes," she said, and softly shut the door behind her.

Left to himself Philip looked thoughtful, whistled, and with his hands in his pockets strode round the room looking at the framed texts which adorned its walls. He found them amusing. To a quiet country scene, vilely lithographed, was appended:

Jesu, lover of my soul,
Let me to Thy bosom fly,
While the tempest nearer rolls,
While the billows still are high.

and to a wild scene of rock and sea:

Fair waved the golden corn
In Canaan's pleasant land,
When full of joy, some shining morn,
Went forth the reaper band.

Sharlie came back, slipped out of her dressing-gown and got into bed. Philip covered her up and kissed her good night. She put her arms up quickly round his neck and kissed him back.

"Would you like me to stay with you until you go to sleep?" he asked.

"No, thank you," she said politely.

In two years she had grown used to going to sleep without company or the consolations of verse, and Philip remembered suddenly that it was always her mother who had sat and

read poetry to her and he who had grumbled at the ritual.

"Sure?"

She nodded.

"Quite sure, thank you."

Curiously disappointed, though relieved, Philip tucked in the bed-clothes and stood for a moment looking down upon her.

"Don't forget—I shall be next door all night if you feel frightened or can't go to sleep."

"I won't be frightened," she said.

"*Nor* unable to sleep?"

"I feel *dreadfully* sleepy."

"Good. I'm going out to see how the car's getting on and to get some dinner. Shall I ask Mrs. Miller to come up presently and see if you're all right?"

"Oh no, thank you," she said. "But could I have the blind up?"

"Right up?"

"Yes, please."

"But won't that keep you awake?"

"No. It never does. I always had it up at Carr. I like to see the sky."

"There's no moon."

"There ought to be a nearly full one. The Hunter's moon. It's October."

"I'm afraid it's just grey sky to-night."

"I like the sky better than the blind."

Philip drew it up.

"Will that do?"

"Yes, thank you."

He came back to the bedside.

"Well, then, good night again . . ."

Again the child reached up her arms, put them round his neck and pulled his face down to hers, but she said nothing.

Philip, strangely moved, said only: "You must stay covered up."

A new strange little daughter—a delightful, desirable little daughter. A little daughter neither so cold nor so detached as he had remembered her. As he went down Ethel Miller's rickety staircase he felt that this unwanted, much-resented interruption in his homeward journey had done something for him—something unexpected and worth while.

At half-past ten he let himself again into the house and opening Sharlie's door stepped, very softly, inside. The room was flooded with light, for the moon had conquered the clouds and was high in the heavens, looking, through the unguarded window, like a huge orange ball stuck on a canvas sky. Sharlie slept, the bed-clothes partly thrown off and one arm flung above her head. Her small face looked startlingly white in the moonlight, like something cut out of marble, the dark lashes more than ever like a bruise upon the skin. For a moment Philip held his breath as he looked at her, before, obeying an impulse, he presently walked to the window and very softly let down the blind.

She did not move.

He came back and, gently, as he had let down the blind, moved her arm from above her head and pulled up the bed-clothes. Dead asleep, she neither stirred nor sighed. With a faint smile upon her mouth she lay enchanted in some serene world from which she would not return for hours. Looking at her, Philip remembered that old legend of the Greeks that when you slept your soul left your body. He never saw Sharlie asleep without remembering it, without the feeling that he gazed upon somebody not only at peace but *released.*

He thought again: A new strange delightful little daughter. A lovely little daughter. . .

For years it never failed to puzzle him that Sharlie should look so beautiful asleep when, awake, her face was never to him anything more than merely interesting—except when it was so exasperating he could scarcely keep from smacking it!

CHAPTER FIVE

A WEEK after her arrival Sharlie wrote to her grandmother.

"42, Edward Street,
"Knightsbridge.
"October 28th, 1911.

"DEAR GRANDMOTHER,—

"This is a tall *thin* house with a long thin garden to match. I rather like it—I mean the house. At least, I mean the house *most*. My bedroom things came from a place called Heals, and you and grandpa wouldn't like it very much. It looks as though somebody forgot to finish it, and it's got no paint on it *at all* except just round the edge and that's green. And the curtains are green, too, and the paint on the doors and all the fireplace. I think it is pretty. It looks on to the garden, because mother said she thought I would like that best. So I do.

"Penelope's nursery is the same except about looking on to the garden. She is very pretty with curley hair and blue eyes. I have a nice governess called Miss Prinks isn't it a funny name? Daddy's new wife is nice, too. She has dark curly hair, a lovely complecshun and a figger like Veenus's. I heard daddy and another g'man say this to her, but am not quite sure what it means. She is very kind and is always laughing, speshully at the bit about Veenus. She never gets cross with me or with daddy. Daddy says she has the temper of an angel. And she never has a headache. *I* had one when I got home on Friday, but she was very kind to me and put o-d-Kolone on my forread. I am sorry I do not know how to spell it. Said it was all the noise and traffick.

"Grandma Cornford came the other day and I went down to have tea in the drawing-room. She is awfully *fat* and wears a lot of beads so that you can always hear her coming. I couldn't think of anything to say to her except about the beads and being so fat which I didn't think would be polite. She told mummy she thought I had lost my tongue. Mummy said Sharlie doesn't talk a lot, which is rather a blessing, becos *we* do. I don't think *you* would like Grandma Cornford very much. I don't think daddy does much, either. Daddy is nice and laughs a lot more than he used to do.

"I don't think very much of the garden yet. I keep thinking of Carr and the micklemus daisies and red-hot pokers and the autumn crocuses. We have a funny gardener who seems very deprest—rather like Beridge when you told him about the lillies—about there not being enough of them, I mean. He is called Heather which I think a nice name for a gardener to have, dont you? I asked him if we could grow lillies—and he said no, he didn't think so. Then I said perhaps we could grow delfiniums and floxes and loopins and micclemus daisies and red-hot pokers. And he shook his head and said he wouldn't *think* so, only grounsel and daisy, by the look of it. And then I said what about bulbs?—they were *easy*. But he kept on shaking his head. When I told daddy he said it was all becos he was so deprest—that all paid gardeners were pezzimists. But I told him all the bulbs at Carr went in early, so he bought a lot of daffys and narsissy for Heather who has been putting them in all day and says his back aches fit to split, and he expects his siatika to take him any moment.

"How is Beridge and Mrs. Blunsdon? Tell Clive to write to me—he did promise. Tell him that I haven't found Bayswater yet, where his aunt and uncle and cousins live.

"I think this is all I can think of now, except that I wish you were here.

"Yours loving grandchild,

"SHARLIE.

"P.S.—Daddy *doesn't* know why it is called Hyde Park and Knightsbridge—neither does Miss Prinks or anybody else. I think Londoners seem very ignorant."

Sharlie, no doubt about it, was very favourably impressed by her new surroundings, by the tall thin house, so near the Park, in which she went with Miss Prinks each morning, and by the kind merry ways of her stepmother. She had already decided that her father was different . . . by which she meant improved, and sometimes when she looked at him she found herself wondering what it was that made him so much nicer than before. But presently she began, childlike, to take these things for granted. It was heaven to find that the old life she remembered, which had come to an end that morning she had found her father in her mother's room putting down the telephone, was gone for ever. Even now she wrinkled her brows and grew thoughtful when that mental image rose in front of her. But from that day things had certainly been nicer—had gone on being nice even now, when she had had to leave Carr and come up to London. She had got used to doing without the poetry her mother had read or recited to her and Miss Prinks, if less enthusiastic, gave her poems to learn and commended her enthusiasm for this branch of her studies, although she never failed to exhort her to transfer just a little of it to her arithmetic. But arithmetic was dull and the beauty of words and phrases was not in it.

She took it for granted that nobody at Edward Street required her to go to church. She had gone sometimes with Ann Selwyn at Carr, but Ann was a member of no church,

though she liked occasionally to sing hymns to God. The Church, she had explained to Sharlie, had very little to do with Christ but a great deal to do with St. Paul, who had altered Christianity to suit human nature and "the system we live under," which seemed, as far as Sharlie could make out, to be the reason why she had so little to do with it. Far more than her occasional attendances at church, Sharlie missed her walks abroad with Clive and felt lost with nobody to continue her education upon the birds and wild flowers. Miss Prinks knew *nothing*. She actually thought that all birds, save sparrows and redbreasts, left our shores in winter, and was politely sceptical when Sharlie told her that we had over a hundred different kinds of birds who never deserted us, though as usual Sharlie could not think of many names with which to substantiate her statement. The thrush, the robin, the blackbird, the wren, the tits, the skylark, exhausted her list and she would vow to learn a longer one by heart that very week with which to confound the unbeliever. The only other things Miss Prinks knew about birds was that the cuckoo was too lazy to build a nest, that one swallow didn't make a summer, and that only nightingales sang at night. She expressed polite surprise when Sharlie said: "Oh, *no*, Prinky, *lots* of other birds sing at night. *Truly*. The skylark, for one, and the thrush. And you *can* hear the cuckoo at night, too, only you have to be *very* lucky for that!"

Sharlie never felt, however, that Miss Prinks was very interested in the subject and did not find it profitable to pursue it for long.

London streets, too, were no fair exchange for the country lanes and never-ending shining vista of the autumn-ploughed fens, but the beds in the Park were still gay with dahlias and chrysanthemums, untouched as yet by the early frosts. The trees were lovely, too, and the wet sunny grass. But she missed the sound of the wings of migrating birds, the strong

flight of wild duck across the autumn sky. London, when you had said your best for it, was very dull—to a child who remembered the country.

"Well, what do you think of her?" Philip asked Fanny, somewhere about the time Sharlie was writing these first impressions of Edward Street to her grandmother.

"Sharlie? Oh, she's quite a nice child," Fanny said. "A little old-fashioned, perhaps. Her manners are certainly nice, when you get used to them. I found them a little quaint at first—sort of stiff."

"She's—sedate," said Philip.

"I daresay," said Fanny, who was used to Philip's unusual adjectives. "Who's she like, Phil? Not you."

"No one, as far as I can see."

"Not like her mother?"

Philip frowned.

"No," he said shortly, "but her eyes are the same colour."

"I know she was fair," said Fanny, "but likenesses aren't just a matter of colouring."

Fanny did not encourage this strange dislike Philip had to any sort of reference to the first Mrs. Stratton.

"Facially, she's like nobody," said Philip shortly.

"But in her *ways* she's like her mother?"

"I used to think so. Do you think she's pretty?"

"Not exactly. But I think one day she may be very good-looking."

"I doubt it—except when she's asleep!"

Fanny laughed, thinking Philip meant this humorously.

"Miss Pranks thinks she's clever."

Fanny said: "I know. But her name's Prinks, not Pranks, dear."

"People *aren't* called Prinks," said Philip. "They're called Smith, or de Crespigny, or de la Pasture. What is she clever at?"

"I don't know, particularly. Just clever, I suppose—generally."

"She doesn't spell very well. I find her a bit disconcerting myself. That straight unflinching look she gives you. I never saw such eyes on a kid!"

"I know," said Fanny, "but I'm getting used to it now."

"She seems to like you. I suppose she's puzzled. Can't make us out. All this peace! Not used to it in the old days . . . What did the old lady think of her?"

"Mother?" Fanny laughed. "Oh, a little old-fashioned, I think. Sharlie stared so hard I began to think I'd have to find some excuse to send her out of the room. Mother is rather a bazaar stall, I know, but she wouldn't thank anybody to tell her so as frankly as that child's eyes. However, as if she'd seen everything that was of any interest and had taken it in once for all, she suddenly stopped staring and never looked in mother's direction again. She ended up by thinking her shy, I think."

"She isn't," said Philip. "She's interested, curious. Grown-ups puzzle her. Puzzle me, for that matter. I used to think her the most exasperating kid. I expected, after these two years at Carr, to find her a lot worse. I mean, I thought they'd stuff her up with a lot of their highfalutin ideas—and teach her to dislike me for a start."

"I don't see why, Phil."

"Well, I'm no favourite there. It would have been just like Ann Selwyn to teach the kid to dislike me, too. After all, Sharlie knew Alex and I didn't get on. When we came to words she used to look as though she despised us."

"Well, it *is* rotten for youngsters whose parents don't get on, you'll admit. And I expect you imagine the rest."

In Fanny's opinion most of the troubles of the world were brought about by the things people imagined.

Philip said: "I heard her talking to Heather the other

morning like a Dutch uncle."

"Did you? I think that was one of the subjects Miss Prinks said she was specially good at. Botany. Or isn't that the same as gardening?"

"Don't ask me," said Philip.

"Well, I hope she'll be happy here, anyway," said Fanny, "even if she does make Heather's life a misery to him."

"Oh, it's that already. Have you ever seen him smile?"

Fanny shook her head.

"Of all the miserable people in the world, commend me," said Philip, "to the professional gardener. I suppose the tussle with Nature makes 'em that way. I daresay gardening in London's a depressing enough job. Sharlie's been used to a country garden. Very different."

"Is the Carr garden very lovely?"

"I suppose so, though the old woman's always grumbling. It seems the thing to do if you have a garden. I imagine it's difficult. A man who'll look after your potatoes doesn't care two hoots about your herbaceous border—and vice versa. Ah well, that's not our problem, anyway."

"We haven't any problems," said Fanny, smiling.

Philip said nothing to that.

"Unless," said Fanny, "the new book is being tiresome?"

"There isn't any new book—yet," said Philip, who could never write (but would never dream of saying so) while his reviews were still coming in. "You know, Fanny, I'm awfully glad you like the kid."

"Sharlie? Did you think I wouldn't?"

"Oh, perhaps."

"Why?"

"I don't know. She isn't an easy kid, and I didn't know what they'd be saying about us at Carr."

"You seem to have a very poor opinion of your wife's family, you know, Phil. Were they horrid to you when you

went to fetch Sharlie?"

Philip had told her nothing about that. He told her nothing about it now. He said: "Oh, *that!*" then came over and sitting down by her side put an arm round her waist.

"Feeling all right?" he asked her.

"Fine."

"Then what about a theatre after dinner to-night? Like to?"

"If you would."

It was Fanny's supreme virtue that she was always able to "feel like" anything Philip suggested at any given moment. Just as her husband smiled his appreciation of this amiable trait the door opened and Sharlie came in.

"I've come, please," she said, hesitating on the threshold, "to say good night."

"Oh, by all means. Come in," said Philip.

Any other woman but Fanny would have noticed that he had withdrawn his arm.

Towards the end of May, Miss Prinks went off to be married, and Sharlie found that she was not to go to a new school at once, but was to go to stay at Carr for a month. Philip had not made up his mind on the question of school versus another governess, and with Fanny's business of producing his second child becoming imminent, decided that it was a question for which he had no time. Fanny was well and in good spirits. There was nothing whatever to be worried about, but he could not prevent himself from doing it. He knew he was nervy and irritable, and that Sharlie's steady gaze disturbed him unduly. Much better get her out of the way for a bit. So to Carr Sharlie went, quite alive to the fact that her father was anxious to get rid of her.

Philip did not take her to Carr by road. He drove her to King's Cross, put her into a first-class carriage and directed the guard's attention to her. Sharlie thought this a quite un-

necessary proceeding, and so did the guard before Stamford was reached, though the half-crown Henry Selwyn pressed into his palm at that station helped him to modify his opinion upon the point. Sharlie was quite torn between delight at the thought of Carr and a dull misery produced by the knowledge that her father would be glad to have her there.

As for Philip, he said good-bye to his daughter with a strange regret that presently seemed curiously divorced from the sense of relief with which he lived for those weeks of her absence.

But Sharlie rode at her grandfather's side through the winding streets of the town she loved with the sense of one who has come home.

Spring, a visible presence, walked in the lanes beyond. It was a lovely day. Colour and melody bordered and arched the world. The yellow of coltsfoot and celandine had not entirely faded; the daisies and buttercups were already out and from the freshly-leafed trees the yellow-hammer chanted his rapid song—"little bit of bread and *no* cheese!" The chaffinch called his "twink" and "pink" from the hedges as they passed and the skylark's unbroken chain of melody dropped from the blue sky. Sharlie sighed with content, remembering that in the early morning the blackbirds would wake her with their clear unearthly whistling and Beridge would be up betimes chasing the chaffinches and young blackbirds out of the kitchen garden, and annoying them by wiring over his young green-pea plants. More trusting of man and his activities than any other of their companions, the robins would come and watch him as he turned over the sweet earth—last year's robins looking for worms for their mates and their young, watching all he did with their bright glancing eyes, following every movement of his spade or fork, missing no sign or chance of a worm. Grandmother Selwyn's late tulips would be out—her May-flowering rainbow

mixture ones that Sharlie loved best. The primulas would not be quite gone, perhaps, and there would be some at least of the gaily-coloured brooms. She thought of Heather and the already dirty and faded blossoms over which only that very morning she had left him shaking his head. Already, London seemed a long way off—and no part of her life. She felt warm with happiness and content as they jogged along.

Much later in the day the thought of her father pulled her up sharply. It hurt and amazed her to find she missed him, and to feel again that sinking motion somewhere inside her which had assailed her when the moving train that morning had borne her so quickly away from him. Moved by a sudden impulse, she improved upon her scheme of sending him the post card of the Packhorse Arch which she had bought that morning in Stamford and by means of which she intended to apprise him of her safe arrival. Borrowing a piece of her grandmother's note-paper she sat down at the big desk and wrote to him instead. It was a long and chatty letter, full of country sounds and sights, but at the end she wrote:

"I wish you were here—and mamma and baby Pen but you specially. I wish we could live in the country instead of in London—at least I would if I didn't keep remembering that you like London best. That seems awfully queer to me. Grandmother says my spelling has got better but not my complecshun. She says I look a little *pastey* and must go out a lot and eat a lot of cream. This I shall like. With lots and lots of love, your loving child.—SHARLIE.

"P.S.—Whenever I think about my spelling it goes wrong. Grandmother has just looked over my shoulder and told me there are two 'l's' in spelling and that complecshun and pastey are all wrong and that I must think again.

"P.P.S.—I have thought again. Complexion I understand, but I think she *must* be wrong about 'pasty,' don't you?"

Philip did not answer this letter, though it had delighted him when it arrived. It was Fanny who wrote to Sharlie, who told her that when she came home again there would be a little brother for her to see (at least they expected him to be a little brother), and that Miss Prinks, now Mrs. Lacey, had sent them a very large piece of wedding-cake indeed, and had gone to a place called Bournemouth for her honeymoon. They had had a post card from her on which she said they had heard the nightingale and would they please tell Sharlie.

"I expect it was only the nightjar," said Sharlie to this. "People who don't know always say they've heard the nightingale when it's only the old nightjar."

She thought Mrs. Lacey's letter very dull indeed, and wanted very much to know what a honeymoon was.

"What people call the first holiday they have after they are married," Ann Selwyn said, which did not seem to Sharlie to tell her anything at all, just left her with a silly-sounding word. But she answered Fanny's letter politely, and hoped that the baby brother would not be a sister.

There were no more letters from London until early in June, when Philip wrote to say that the baby-brother had arrived and had been called David, that her mother and he were going away as soon as possible into Devon for part of the summer, and that they had decided she had better remain in Lincolnshire until they were home again.

The only person who was pleased about this communication was Ann Selwyn. Henry, glad though he was to have Sharlie, was annoyed at Philip's letter and its casual tone. It seemed to him to put a slight upon Alex's child, as if already those of Fanny were pushing her outside. Sharlie hated the letter too, for it seemed to her to make it quite clear that her father could very easily do without her. He didn't even trouble to answer her letter. She supposed it would always be the same. He would always be going away, and

forgetting all about her, and while it was nice to be left at Carr it was not nice to be forgotten. Perhaps he would send her a post card from Devon. He did not, but Fanny sent several, and then, just when she had given up all hope, a long amusing letter came from her father—a letter which began to be amusing even on the envelope, for instead of Carr House he had drawn a big motor-car, and a very small house at which Sharlie had gazed delightedly. But Ann said: "So silly to give the Post Office extra trouble!" Henry laughed, however, said she quite underrated the intelligence of the Post Office, and agreed with Sharlie that it was a quite exceptionally good car her father had drawn and a real duck of a house. Inside the letter were other drawings, too, of a fat chubby little girl with waders, a spade and pail and enormous eyes, a much fatter baby with a huge comforter in his mouth, and an absurd one of himself bathing in the sea and of Fanny asleep in a deck-chair, and others of long strings of fat children with pails and waders and spades and enormous eyes, and of gentlemen bathing in the sea and ladies asleep in deck-chairs. Sharlie appreciated it all a good deal and spent a lot of time taking it out of its envelope, studying the sketches and putting it back again, until her grandmother said sharply to her one day: "Sharlie, *please* don't fidget with that letter. If you must keep looking at it, then don't for goodness' sake keep putting it back in the envelope."

"Can I prop it up here on your desk, please, gran'ma?"

"No, of course you can't. That's not the way to treat your correspondence—leaving it about for everybody to see. Take it down at once. I never heard such nonsense!"

So Sharlie put away her letter and never brought it to daylight again in her grandmother's presence. Looking back it seemed from that date that she began to be quite sure Grandmother Selwyn did not like her father. She always associated this thought with the sight of the first lilies in

the garden—the ones they called the Yellow Turk's cap, for as if to atone for the unusual sharpness of tone in which she had reproved Sharlie over the letter, Ann Selwyn had told her the next moment to find a shady hat and come out and look at the garden. And Sharlie had looked, without enthusiasm, at the hanging blooms of yellow-shaded green, speckled with black, and with scarlet anthers.

"It looks funny!" she said; "not like a flower, do you think? I don't like it much."

"Not like a flower? I *never* heard such nonsense!" said Grandmother Selwyn. But this time she laughed as she said it and patted Sharlie's shoulder. Already, she was wishing she had not snubbed the child so fiercely about her father's letter. It must have seemed very clever to her—and probably, reflected the old lady, it really *was* clever, only she was too prejudiced to admit it. And, anyway, it indicated *pains*, which Philip Stratton, in Ann's estimation, so seldom took over Alex's child that it ought, perhaps, to have counted to him for righteousness. But she did not know that what she really hated was the very fact that at last he *had* taken pains, that just when nobody any longer expected it of him he had remembered the child's existence and made an effort to atone. That was what she could not forgive—that he did not wholly forget; that sometimes, lightly, casually, he remembered. If he had only been wholly forgetful, completely indifferent, Ann Selwyn might have found it in her heart not to hate him so utterly. For then Sharlie might have forgotten him too, might even in those early days have turned him out of her young affections.

And that was what Ann Selwyn wanted most in life. She could not bear that he should have any place at all in Sharlie's life, that she should like him even ever so little.

But that as yet Sharlie did not understand.

CHAPTER SIX

ONE morning in the middle of July, Sharlie sat in the hay-loft at Cross Farm watching Clive Blunsdon making what looked like a bird's nest—a small, neat, exquisite affair, rather like the nest made by the chaffinch that you might find in the fork of a tree, or against the bole, or, even, among the twigs of an apple tree, with five tiny eggs in it. At his side lay a very small, brownish bird—a young robin, Clive said—dead, as Sharlie knew, but found it very difficult to believe, with the warmth from its little body caressing her hand as she touched it.

Clive was in a silent mood, for he was sad about the robin having died after all his efforts to keep it alive. He had found it with a wound beneath its wing, fluttering about on the grass edge by the roadside unable to fly or stand, and had brought it home and for a day and a half had done his best to persuade it to live. Up there on its comfortable bed in the hay-loft it had eaten a couple of lobworms and, not frightened, not struggling, had let the boy bathe its wound, just watching him with his bright wide-open eyes, and turning its head to follow him with a wistful wondering look when he climbed down the ladder and went away—"Just as if," said Clive, "it was a *person*." And then the next day—that very morning—it had died. The nest with which Clive was so busy was to be its coffin, but they wouldn't bury it until it was quite cold. Neither of them would believe the robin was really dead until then.

"Was it *really* a robin?" Sharlie asked him presently, moving her fingers up and down the brown, yellowish-tipped feather. "It's not red *anywhere*."

"It was too young. Robins don't become red-breasts

until the end of August."

"It *looks* like a thrush."

"Well, they do at first. At least they would if it weren't for their beaks. You never saw a thrush with a beak like that."

He picked the bird up and held it out for her inspection. Sharlie couldn't speak. The sight of those closed eyes, the whole little pitiful body prevented her from hearing the note of annoyance in Clive's voice at what he considered her obstinacy. "You're awfully silly, you know, Shar, at telling birds. You *never* know one from the other."

Still Sharlie said nothing, still held in such silent grief for the bird, dead so early, that Clive's anger with her stupidity made no impression at all upon her. She forgot her usual defence: "But they never stand still long enough for me to see them properly."

A long while afterwards she said:

"What do you think happened to it?"

"Some dog, I suppose. It couldn't fly very strongly yet. I expect dogs and cats get lots of them."

"But *you* keep dogs and cats."

"Yes," said Clive, closing his mind against a hopeless problem. Helping him, Sharlie said:

"Birds build their nests in such silly places. They don't *learn* anything. Fancy robins *going on* building in low hedges and holes in banks." (She could always remember things like this.) "You'd think the grown-up robins didn't *know* there were dogs and cats in the world. But I suppose even robins aren't as silly as larks. They don't build *in the grass*."

"I know," said Clive. "The infant mortality among larks must be terrible."

He was pleased with this phrase, which he had gleaned in other connections from his elders' conversation. He saw that Sharlie was impressed by it—and was pleased by that too.

"You're wrong," he said. "Robins don't always build in

hedges. There was a robin's nest in the church here one spring and mother says at her old home they'd come in at an open window and build in the corner of the book-shelves. Only a robin would do that, though! Robins aren't afraid of us."

"Why aren't they?"

"Oh, because people have left them alone more, I suppose . . . something to do with the Crucifixion. It's a legend. I can't remember it properly. My Uncle Frank told me about it. They've been sort of sacred ever since."

"Oh," said Sharlie, watching him put the bird gently back in the hay, and waiting for him to go on.

"Father told me of a blue tit that chose an old pump to make a nest in, and once when I was in London my Uncle Frank took me to the Museum at South Kensington where there's a great tit's nest in a country letter-box."

"What a lot your Uncle Frank knows," said Sharlie. "Perhaps he knows why they call it Knightsbridge and Hyde Park."

"Shouldn't wonder," said Clive, not very interested in these unsolved mysteries. "But if he didn't know he'd tell you so. My Aunt Eve wouldn't. She'd put you off somehow and go away and look it up. At least that's what Mona says she does. Oh, I forgot. Mona's coming here next week to stay—and Mark, too, perhaps."

"Oh, what fun!" said Sharlie. "Is Judy coming, too?"

"No. She's got to go to Fiveways with my Uncle to see my Grandfather Bentley."

"Where's Fiveways?"

"That's the name of his house. In Surrey somewhere."

"Haven't you been?"

"No. I've never even seen Gran'pa Bentley."

"Hasn't Harry or Tom?"

"No. He quarrelled with my mother when she married

my father. He's never seen her since—and he's never seen any of us, either."

Sharlie gazed at him in amazement. The things grown-ups did! The funny way they hated each other! If children behaved like that they would be smacked and put to bed. She thought of her grandmother and her own father and fell upon silence.

Clive went on. "I don't understand much about it, but I've heard Tom and Harry talking about it. Gran'pa Bentley was a gentleman farmer and father was one of his tenants—and my grandfather was wild about it. So mother ran away, and got married and Grandfather Bentley never spoke to her again."

Still concerned with the idiocy of grown-ups, Sharlie entirely missed the romance of this. She said presently, with the wistfulness of an only child born of parents that were only children:

"You've got a lot of relations, though, without your Grandfather Bentley. I do think you're lucky."

"I don't see what difference it makes."

"Don't you? I'd like to have lots and lots of brothers and sisters and heaps and heaps of cousins, and aunts and uncles. How many aunts and uncles have you got, Clive?"

"Oh, only one uncle, the Bayswater one—Uncle Frank, the dentist. I ought to have had an Uncle Clive, but he died. He was a soldier, and was killed when mother was a girl, in Burma. I was named after him."

"But you've a lot more *aunts*."

"Oh yes. There was Aunt Rose, father's sister, but she died years ago—I don't remember her. Then there's my Aunt Eve, of course, Mrs. Norman, Uncle Frank's wife, and Aunt Mary—only we never see her—she's not married and lives with Gran'pa Bentley, and he doesn't let her come. And then there's Aunt Maud, Uncle Frank's sister—only I suppose

she isn't *our* aunt really. She's a doctor. She never comes here, but I've seen her in London."

"It sounds lovely," said Sharlie forlornly. "I haven't a single aunt anywhere. My own mother hadn't any sisters—and no brothers. And daddy hasn't any, either. And neither has my new mamma."

"Well, p'raps it's you who're lucky," said Clive; "relations can be awfully interfering. And even if you haven't any aunts I daresay you pick up a lot. There's always lots of people wanting to be aunts."

"Of course I've got Pen—and this new brother I haven't seen yet. But they're much too small."

"Well, and my cousins are much too big. 'Cept Judy. Why, Mark's left school now, and is in an office somewhere—something to do with ships. And Mona's sixteen. That's grown-up, too. Of course there's Judy—but Ju's too young. Not much older than you."

"A year and three months," said Sharlie, very properly reduced by this.

"And you're nearly four years younger than I am."

"Yes," said Sharlie again, and then seemed struck by a brighter thought. "But it doesn't seem to matter much, does it?"

Clive looked at her and laughed.

"You don't seem only ten," he said. "Why is it?"

Sharlie shook her head.

"Perhaps it's because we like each other," she said solemnly. "If you like people their age doesn't count, does it?"

But Clive did not reply. He was busy putting the finishing touches to his nest. Sharlie sat quite still, watching. There was something enormously satisfying to her in the sight of people doing something neat and clever with their fingers, She sat absorbed, not moving, not speaking.

Two days later, when Sharlie went up to tea at Cross Farm with her grandmother, the sounds of music greeted them, and did not stop when Matty, Beth Blunsdon's plump maid, showed them into the sitting-room. Two people sat at the piano—one of them immediately recognisable to Sharlie, even from the back, by the very soft fair hair that hung upon her shoulders. The other was a young man she had never seen before. They sat there playing something Sharlie did not know was a sonata of Mozart's. She only knew they were doing something quite marvellous with their hands. Still as a mouse she stood there watching them, her face alive with admiration.

The two players laughed when they came to the end of their duet and Sharlie saw Mona Norman put her hands for one moment over those of her companion.

"Not so bad!" she said, and then turning she spoke to Ann Selwyn.

"Please forgive us. We dared not stop. We've never got it right before. . . . Oh, you haven't met, have you? This is Shane Mostyn. Shane—Mrs. Selwyn. And this is Sharlie Stratton."

Sharlie looked at the stranger, tall, lean, with a brown face and kind smiling eyes, and saw with a dawning regret that he was quite, quite grown-up.

"Good afternoon," she said gravely, holding out her hand, and then: "Thank you for the *lovely* music."

Shane laughed.

"Oh, you have to thank her, not me," he said, nodding in Mona's direction. "I only played the bass, you know."

Mona said: "Don't tease her, Shane. Would you like us to play something else, Sharlie?"

"Oh, *please*," said Sharlie, who found it hard to take her eyes off Mona's lovely face.

"Come on, then," said Mona and dragged Shane back to

the piano, where they stayed until Mrs. Blunsdon came in and greeted her guests.

"We were expecting to see Mark, weren't we, Sharlie?" Ann Selwyn said. "I hope he's not unwell, Beth."

"Oh no," said Mrs. Blunsdon. "He couldn't get away from the office, after all, just now. So Shane came instead. Surely you remember him coming here years ago? As a little boy?"

"No," said Ann Selwyn, smiling upon Shane; "I think I must have missed you, Mr. Mostyn."

Shane busied himself carrying cups, offering bread-and-butter and making himself generally useful and then whilst having his own tea, sitting by Sharlie's side, he took an envelope out of his pocket and began to draw funny faces on it for her delectation. He drew them so quickly and altered them so skilfully—from grave to gay, from serious to grotesque—that the child was soon in fits of delighted laughter and her little face dropped several inches when he put the envelope into her hands and got up.

"Here, you'd better have some tea, my child. I've got to take Mona out to a place she wants to sketch. Come and see us again while we're here, will you?"

"Yes, please," said Sharlie, "if Mrs. Blunsdon will let me."

"Oh, I expect she'll let you. But we go away on Friday."

"But that's *ever* so soon. Can't you stay longer?"

"Not this time, I'm afraid. You see, I'm going away next week to a place called Leipzig. . . . Know where Leipzig is?"

Sharlie nodded. "Germany," she said.

"Good," laughed Shane. "So they *do* teach you geography at school?"

"Oh yes," said Sharlie gravely. "Are you going to stay there?"

"In Germany? Not for ever. Not unless I like it terribly, or unless I find a nice German girl to marry."

"Oh," said Sharlie, a little puzzled.

Mona, fiddling with her sketching things, said suddenly:

"Shane, we ought to go. The light will be all wrong else. Good-bye for now, Sharlie. Good-bye, Mrs. Selwyn. Good-bye, Aunt Beth." She smiled sweetly upon them all and went out.

Shane shook hands with Sharlie, said gravely to her, "I hope we shall meet when I come back," made his *adieux* to her grandmother and Mrs. Blunsdon and went out too. From the window Sharlie watched him striding after Mona, already out of sight, and had no eyes for Clive, who came hurrying into the room wearing that ingratiating air of the small boy who knows he is late and hopes nobody will notice it. If she did, his mother made no comment. She watched his greeting of Mrs. Selwyn and Sharlie with a little smile upon her lips.

"Did you forget we were to have visitors, Clive?"

"No, mother. I'm awfully sorry, Mrs. Selwyn. I went over to Beechwood to see a late nest."

Mrs. Blunsdon said: "Lateness is no excuse for dirtiness. Go and wash, sonny."

Clive looked at his hands, blushed, grinned and went out.

Sharlie came away from the window, and redirected her attention to her tea.

Ann Selwyn said to Mrs. Blunsdon: "What a lovely girl she is!"

"Mona? Yes. She seems to get lovelier each time I see her. Joe idolises her. Poor Joe! He did want a girl so much when Clive arrived!"

"Is that young man in love with her?"

"Shane? Oh, I don't expect so. They've known each other from childhood. My sister and her husband adopted him

when his father died. They're like brother and sister, and they like the same things. Music, painting, books."

"He plays extremely well. I suppose he's going to Leipzig to study music?"

"I think so. I rather fancy Eve will be pleased to see him go. She thinks he has an unsettling influence upon Mona."

"And what is *she* going to do?"

"She wants to study art, and I believe is going to the Slade School next year when she leaves school. My sister wanted her to take up medicine, but of course that's out of the question." Beth Blunsdon laughed. "Eve, as you know, always wanted to be a doctor, and she seems to think that her children ought to have inherited the desire."

"Medicine didn't appeal to Mark, either?"

"Not a bit. He always said he wanted to farm, but nobody takes that seriously. I think they're wrong. It's a pity parents try to drive their children into moulds. Eve and I had so much of it as youngsters ourselves we ought to know better."

Just then Clive came in with a very shiny face and beaming smile. Washing always made him feel self-righteous. Under cover of his arrival Ann Selwyn said: "There's no news, I suppose, of . . ."

"None," Sharlie heard Mrs. Blunsdon say. "And I don't suppose there ever will be—of the sort that will make any difference to us. Not that it matters at this time of day." She laughed, showing her white strong teeth. "We've been here twenty-four years come September. It can't matter to anybody at this time of day. I shall be fifty-six in October, and Joe's sixty." And again she laughed.

To Clive, Sharlie was displaying her envelope with the drawings upon it, and again as she looked at them there surged up within her, unrecognised as yet for what it was, that passion for the skill people had with their hands. Her

own were so useless. She was not an apt music pupil, though music ravished her senses; she could not draw or paint, and could not even sew a hem without pricking her finger. She heard her grandmother say indignantly: "The law on the subject is outrageous," but glancing at Beth Blunsdon she saw that her face was quite calm, as if whatever it was that was making her grandmother so indignant it had nothing whatever to do with her. She said quietly: "Well, I suppose they'll alter it some day. Clive, bring Sharlie's cup . . ."

Sharlie went across to the farm to tea twice again before Mona and Shane went home. On each occasion they played duets at the piano for her delight, and Shane sustained with her those grave conversations that always amused Mona and in which she took part cheerfully enough, until one or the other of them mentioned Leipzig or Germany. Then she fell sharply into silence and when dragged out of it answered in a queer indifferent voice as if something had suddenly offended her. But Sharlie never minded whether she talked or not. It was sufficiently satisfying to look at her. Sharlie thought her the most beautiful young person she had ever seen, and Grandmother Selwyn, not given to easy enthusiasms about young women, agreed that she was most charming to look at, but so pale she thought she must be delicate, although her aunt said she had grown out of it long ago. "*You* must go home with more colour in your face, my child, if we can manage it," she told Sharlie, who never saw that Mona looked delicate—only that she looked beautiful, that she had a sweet adorable smile (which Sharlie had yet to learn could be unreal and mean nothing), and that she had a most disconcerting trick of seeming suddenly to be not in the very least interested in the things you were saying, as if, almost, she had forgotten entirely that you were there. Sharlie was not aware that this trick was also her own—that ever since she

had been quite a tiny child, her father had found it a most exasperating and offensive trait in her character.

When Mona and Shane had gone away Cross Farm seemed strangely quiet without their music and voices, but upon the walls of Mrs. Blunsdon's sitting-room hung a little water-colour of a cornfield stuck with red poppies that atoned, in some sort, at least, for the loss of Mona's bright head against Beth Blunsdon's old oak.

One day soon after the departure of Mona and Shane, Ann Selwyn came to call upon Lucy Caxton, the daughter of Beridge her gardener, who had been in her service until a year ago, when she had married a young tradesman of Stamford. Lucy had recently had a baby, and Ann, knowing Sharlie's liking for the young of her own species, suggested that she should accompany her. The Caxtons had come to live at Bede Cottage, which, after Philip Stratton's week-ending sub-tenants had given it up, Henry Selwyn had bought and had let to the young Caxtons, who, anxious to have a family, wanted to get away from the rooms over the shop and live in a house with a garden.

Sharlie had not been back to Bede Cottage since that day, three years ago, when her grandmother had taken her away from it; and with memories of the long, low, many-windowed rooms she had loved, and of the one in which she had lain in bed and stared out at the summer tree-tops, she was full of delight at the thought of seeing them again. Shorn, however, of Philip's brightly-coloured books and Alex's lovely old furniture and rugs, the downstairs rooms looked completely unfamiliar. They were stuffy, too, harbouring that peculiar atmosphere which denotes firmly closed windows. Sharlie stood in the middle of the sitting-room, so pleasantly designed with its long low windows, to look out on to the little garden at one end and at the other on to the leafy lane that ran beyond the wicket gate, on to the open fields and

the neat green lawn still adorned with the copper-beech tree, burnished and lovely in the afternoon light. Sharlie sighed with relief as if she had expected to find it cut down, or all lopped out of shape, as happened to the poor London trees, and crossed the room to see what had happened to the garden. The windows that looked on to it were buttressed against anybody's efforts to open them by a phalanx of potted geraniums and ferns that blocked the view. Sharlie saw at a glance, however, that the Monterey cypress had disappeared, and a sharp little pang of dismay ran through her. Oh, why had Grandmother Selwyn let them do that? Didn't they like it, or had it died?

Its absence made the garden seem quite different, though it *was* different, anyway, of course. There were hardly any flower-beds now, only patches of cabbages and potatoes upon which, she knew, Tom Caxton prided himself and about which she had often heard him disputing vaingloriously with Beridge, his father-in-law. He had whitened the trunks of the fruit-trees, too, and built an ugly shed in one corner. Sharlie looked at him standing in the middle of the room talking in his respectful way to her grandmother, and remembered that it was Thursday and therefore early closing in the town, which accounted for his presence there. She disliked him suddenly and very much for having cut down the cypresses and wondered why Lucy, who had lived with so much air for so many years at Carr House, should let him keep all the windows shut. But perhaps she didn't know. . . . When after a while Tom escorted her grandmother up the steep staircase that faced the front door, Sharlie ran over to the unbuttressed windows, tried the latch of one and found that she could open it if she pushed it hard. It flew wide, and with a sigh of relief she thrust her head out into the fresh air and sweet June sunshine, glancing eagerly this way and that in the hope of finding something familiar and reassuring to

make up for the loss of the Monterey cypress. After a while she saw that somebody had hung a large piece of fat meat upon a large bough of the copper-beech upon which all sorts of birds—robins, sparrows, tits—alighted, as Sharlie watched, to disport themselves. After a little, however, with one concerted movement they flew away, twittering with protest, to make room for another bird, rather larger than a sparrow and bluish in tint, that even Sharlie recognised as the nuthatch. She watched the new-comer standing squarely not upon the bough, but upon the meat, and hammering away at it until he had detached a large piece when he at once flew off with it and the dispossessed came racing back. Sharlie had seen this happen once before in the garden of Cross Farm, and had asked Clive why the other birds didn't dispute with the nuthatch. Clive, who never saw why anything or anybody should want to fight or dispute with anybody about anything, had only laughed. The nuthatch was unsociable, he said, his ways were his own. Fun enough to watch them. Sharlie thought so too, for the nuthatch was a favourite of hers, partly because he was so easily distinguished from his tribe by his original ways. Impossible to incur Clive's scorn by attaching the wrong label to a bird who crept up tree-trunks hunting in their crevices for insects as no other bird seemed to do. Once, in the autumn, she had seen him accidentally dislodge a nut he had hidden in the bark of an old oak-tree and catch it with one deft movement before it fell to the ground. She had learnt, when out walking, to listen for the sharp tap-tap of its beak against a tree-trunk and once Clive had induced it to perform in the Cross Farm garden by wedging a hazel-nut into the bark of a gnarled old oak-tree.

Just as the sparrows and robins scattered again, Ann Selwyn called her name from the staircase:

"Sharlie! Come up and see the baby."

She shut the window with a little sharp snap which it amused

her to see startled the nuthatch and sent him flying from the scene, and brought back the sparrows and robins once more. Reluctantly leaving the diverting spectacle, she turned and walked up the old oak-staircase, to come at the top upon a room the door of which stood wide, so that she saw Lucy lying in bed with her face turned towards her husband, who stood at the far side of her bed, holding the telephone in his hands, and speaking into it. The scene seemed to petrify Sharlie. She stood quite still on the threshold staring in upon it, wanting to turn and run quickly down the stairs again, but unable to move either backwards or forwards. Her knees shook, the room grew dark, disappeared. Before her eyes came a mist and out of it slowly, bit by bit, it emerged again—different, familiar. She saw again the gracious dark furniture she always associated with her mother; there were gay chintzes at the open windows flapping in the breeze; the long oval mirror, before which she had so liked to stand, caught the light and reflected the room and its occupants; a frighteningly still figure lay in the bed, a tall dark man was holding the telephone, speaking into it, putting it down, staring across at her as if she were a ghost, a man in a bright-coloured dressing-gown with something white stained dreadfully with blood around his neck. And as she looked she knew that the woman who lay in the bed was not ill, but dead. . . .

Her mind made a mighty effort, strove to learn more than that—to know what connection there was between her death and the man with the telephone. It was there—just beyond knowledge, beyond memory—if only she could push her mind far enough forward to discover it. She did not know that she was shutting her eyes, clenching her hands, that her face had gone very white. She wasn't there at all in the old familiar world of summer gardens and nuthatches; she was away in some dreadful world that had come up out of a sudden darkness, seeking some little piece of knowledge,

some core of truth. Then, suddenly, it had gone—the mist, the enveloping blackness, the effort to remember, to understand—what? She stood there, at the open doorway, her heart knocking madly in her breast, and feeling a little sick. The room had become ordinary again and friendly—the furniture nondescript, the curtains white and motionless before the discreetly-opened window, and there upon the bed Lucy was turning a smiling, happy face to her and Tom Caxton was putting down the telephone, sitting upon the edge of his wife's bed, and saying something that made her laugh. From the foot of the bed Ann Selwyn called: "Come along in, darling, and see Lucy's baby."

But when Sharlie had obeyed, and was stretching out her hand to take Lucy's, Ann Selwyn exclaimed: "Why, what's the matter? Aren't you well, Sharlie?"

"She looks kind of pale," said Tom, looking at her with concern in his merry dark eyes.

"I'm all right, gran'ma," said Sharlie.

"Well, come and sit down over here by the window, child, for a moment. You look like a ghost."

"I expect it's the heat, ma'am," said Lucy.

Sharlie sat down by the slightly open window and took a deep breath. She felt a little frightened, and wondered if this was because she still felt she might at any moment be sick upon Lucy's pink and white carpet. She was grateful to her grandmother for ignoring her, for talking to Lucy and Tom as if she were not there. She sat still looking at the room with grave intent gaze. Why, it was quite, *quite* different. How *could* she have imagined anything else? There was nothing, nothing whatever, that was familiar in it save the telephone beside the bed, and at that she stared and stared until her eyes closed and she fell asleep.

When she awoke, Tom Caxton was bringing in tea on a tray, and Ann Selwyn was standing with the telephone

in her hand, speaking into it.

"No, just the hot weather, I expect—but she ought not to walk back."

As she put down the instrument she said:

"Oh, you're awake." She came over and put a hand upon Sharlie's brow. "Does your head ache, my child?"

"Only a little, gran'ma."

"Feel sick?"

"No—not now."

"Not *now!* Well, have a cup of tea and stay where you are. I've just asked your grandfather to come along in half an hour with the trap."

"I haven't seen the baby yet, gran'ma."

"No, but he won't run away. Have your tea first. And then ask Lucy to be kind enough to excuse you for being such an unsatisfactory visitor."

"Oh, of course, ma'am," said Lucy. "I'm sorry you feel so poorly, Miss Sharlie. You must come again soon."

Sharlie said, in her grave grown-up fashion: "Thank you very much," and began to drink her tea.

"Well, well!" said Grandfather Selwyn, lifting her up into the trap as if she were still a very little girl, and an invalid to boot. "What is all this I hear? Feeling sick and having a headache at your age! Come, come, this will never do!"

Sharlie put her arms round her grandfather's neck, and rested her face against his for a moment, finding something strongly consoling and reassuring in his physical nearness, and then sat quiet by her grandmother's side. But her mind still revolved around the strange events of the afternoon and presently she said: "Why do they have the telephone, gran'ma?"

"Who? The Caxtons? Oh, because it was there—and because of the shop, I suppose. I heard Tom tell Lucy, though, that when she's better he's going to have the extension taken away from the bedroom. I suppose he thought

it would be nice to keep it there while Lucy's in bed."

"Oh, I see," said Sharlie; "in case he wanted to speak to her from the office."

"Yes, I suppose that was the idea. Did you remember the house?"

"Only a little. It seemed different, smaller. There's such a lot of furniture."

With undoubted satisfaction, Ann Selwyn replied: "Well, it's a *cottage* once more—what it was meant to be. Not a gentleman's house or a week-end bungalow. I think they've made it look very nice."

Sharlie left it at that, slipped her hand into her grandmother's, and sat silent for the rest of the short journey home, quite forgetting to ask about the Monterey cypress.

This little incident sat forlornly in Sharlie's mind for some days, keeping her awake at night, and coming back into her mind directly she awoke in the morning. Gradually, however, it became unreal and its memory faded. But she was glad all the same when Lucy came to Carr House with her baby and sat in the kitchen having tea with her father and the housekeeper; for she knew that she would not now be asked again to go to visit Lucy in her bedroom. Not, that is, unless she had another baby.

July waxed and waned. August came, and at Carr House Henry talked to Ann at breakfast of something he called "this tiresome Balkan business." No news came from Devon but only an occasional post card from Fanny with a brief, scrawled message, "Love from us all," or something similar. It didn't matter, and was certainly not "news." When these cards arrived, Sharlie's face took on its mask of pride and indifference. She was extremely polite about them, admiring the picture, passing it round, and nobody guessed, unless perhaps it was her grandfather, the anger and disappointment

that moved in her, the sense of something which though she thought it gone for ever, could come back, like this, to hurt her. It did not last—it had the ephemeral quality of most childish grief, though the impression it made on her mind was more lasting. It mattered then, briefly and sharply, and was forgotten, caught up in the loveliness of summer days, full of exciting important things that one could only do in the country.

Summer moved on. The ripening raspberries had long ago almost accounted for the deep sweet wild note of the black-cap. And one by one the feathered tribe had fallen upon silence. The skylark no longer ran up singing into the blue, nor made in it that lovely dipping downward movement which Clive found so entrancing, nor hovered in mid-air upon its wings as if it would never move again. No longer could Clive tease her by making her shut her eyes and tell him by the mere quality of its song what the bird was doing now—soaring, dipping or performing that lovely hovering motion, so like immobility, with its wings. The young robins had acquired their crimson breasts and sat watching Ann Selwyn as she cut back her violas and pansies, snipped off dead delphinium blooms, planted her long-contemplated madonna lilies and welcomed the first martagons. The fen was yellow with mile upon mile of ripening corn waving beneath the wide open sky; the wayside flamed with the pink of willow herb, the purple of loose-strife—and suddenly, when Sharlie no longer expected it, there was her father's handwriting staring up at her from her breakfast-plate.

By this time she had settled down again to her country existence, and had long ago ceased to reflect that its pleasures would be improved by the presence of her father and his new family, but all the same her heart beat a little quicker at the sight of that abominable script. The neat typewritten note inside said briefly that they were now back in town and that

they thought she should come back to make her new brother's acquaintance and begin to think about her new school. Her father was too busy after so long a holiday to come to fetch her, so he desired her to ask her grandmother when it would be convenient for her to start, to ask her grandfather to look up a good train and then to let him know the time of it. "Your grandfather," he wrote, "will put you in the train and I will be at King's Cross to meet you."

Sharlie passed the letter across to her grandmother, who said nothing, but handed it to her grandfather, and then, entirely unknown to either of them, Sharlie wrote asking her father to allow her to stay another week. And Grandmother Selwyn was blamed, of course, for this by Philip, who wrote peremptorily to that lady saying that Sharlie had been entered upon the books of her new school, whose term started in early September, and that if she was to be ready in time she ought to come home at once. This time he had himself looked out the train, and he asked her to be sure that Sharlie was put into it on a certain day, and stated once again that he would be there to meet her.

He did not, however, exactly achieve that, for he was ten minutes late—ten minutes which Sharlie spent standing by the side of her suitcase and in informing porters that she was "expecting to be met." They seemed amused by her dignity and assurance, and after the fashion of their kind went away and winked at each other. Her face grew a little warm, but she was not to be tempted away from the position she had taken up beside her belongings, and when her father arrived, a little flurried that she might have got worried and gone off alone or done something else as tiresome, was relieved (and curiously irritated) to see her standing there on the now almost empty platform as cool and calm, as he afterwards said to Fanny, as if she did it every day. He was hot and still feeling annoyed at his brief interchange of pleasantries with a

traffic policeman whose signal, as he alleged, had been given a second too late, and he wondered as he looked at Sharlie and kissed her brown cheek why he had allowed himself to get agitated and flustered, and careless about the traffic signals for no reason whatsoever. He might have known his failure to be on the spot when she arrived would arouse no corresponding state in Sharlie, that she would be standing there as unperturbed and unconcerned as in fact she proved to be. But even as he called to a porter to carry her suitcase to the car and turning back to her encountered that straight unabashed glance, a little streak of dislike ran through him. He felt as he used to feel in those old days when he and Alex had disagreed and Sharlie had sat there detached, aloof, as if they were invisible, as if they and their noisy emotions belonged to some remote world with which she had nothing to do and which she despised.

This, he thought, as he dived for a shilling for the porter, was the result of her sojourn at Carr House. He reflected that he'd have done better to have taken her with them to Devon after all, and forgetting with what a sense of relief he had said good-bye to her that May morning so short a time ago. Beyond all doubt she was a strange child, and her air of cold appraisement of the behaviour of her elders exasperated him. He had never seen her cry or fuss or lose her temper. If you were late she calmly waited for you, politely making no comment: if irritable she stopped bothering with you, applied herself to some other task until you calmed down, altered the tone of your voice or smoothed the frown from your face. This exhibition of tact ought to have had, but did not, a soothing effect upon the troubled adult, if Philip was any example. Reading into it a cold unnatural unfilial criticism, he burned with a seething dislike of what he thought of as her confounded superiority, her implicit disapproval—not knowing, as Sharlie's mother had known,

that her child's withdrawal from that world of affairs to which her elders belonged was no more than a pachyderm, a way of shutting out the horrid sounds of human voices grown ugly in dispute and heavy with grievance. All his life he continued to believe that her attitude upon these occasions towards himself was dictated by that engendered at Carr House. She took her cue, of course, from them. Before she'd gone back there, he reflected now, swinging the car out of the stream of Euston Road traffic into Woburn Place, she'd begun to be human and lovable. He had been a fool to let her go back or, at least, to have stayed there so long. He'd have, he could see, to take a line about this. He'd scotch that old woman's game before she'd played it much longer.

Confound the child! Was she going to sit there all the way home without as much as a word? Sulky, he supposed, because she had to come home, because he'd kept her waiting—silent and condemning as her mother before her. Alex. Why did she always make him think of Alex? Alex with her pale unhappy face, her tears, her swollen ankles. Alex who had died and been forgotten. Or would have been but for Sharlie, her daughter. Running down Piccadilly he had a sudden unexpected mental picture of that Sunday morning in Bede Cottage—of himself putting down a telephone beside a bed, of a blue and white figure in the doorway, and a pair of serious unflinching grey eyes fixed upon him inquiringly. And high above the traffic of Knightsbridge, he heard again a youthful voice exclaiming: "You look awful! You've got a lot of blood on you!"

The policeman on duty at Sloane Street lifted his hand and Philip put his brakes on just in time to avoid running into the back of a huge petrol conveyor. The car halted with a jerk that stopped the engine, and bounced them forward in their seats. As they stood there in the traffic block Philip leaned forward to re-start his engine and turned

his head to look at Sharlie. She had gripped the side of the car with her left hand, but her little face was untroubled, and as he turned his head she turned hers, too, and smiled at him—a sweet, proud, adorable smile that twisted his heart.

He put out his hand and touched hers.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DURING the winter of nineteen-twelve-thirteen, Sharlie settled down contentedly enough to her second winter in London. Her first experience of school pleased her—the more so because she found Judy Norman already a pupil there, and formed with her, despite the gap in their ages which had meant differing class forms, and in spite of the fundamental differences in their temperaments, a close and ardent friendship. Judy was hard and bright, like a little jewel, getting the heart out of every subject presented to her with a facility that never failed to arouse Sharlie's fervent admiration, walking through her term's work, through her exams, with an air of suggesting that they didn't matter in the least, but were just things one did for fun. She knew nothing about wild flowers, less than nothing about birds and could not see, she said, why Sharlie got so worked up about the country.

"Why do you, Shar?" she asked.

"I don't know," Sharlie said. "I just do, I suppose."

Judy laughed.

"You aren't much good at explaining yourself, are you?" she said. "If I liked it as much as you do, I'm sure I'd find a whole lot of perfectly good reasons if anybody asked me."

Sharlie did not doubt this.

"I expect," said Judy, "you'd do it all right on paper. I expect you're one of the people who can only express things that way. That comes of having a literary father. Perhaps you're going to be a writer."

This did not seem very likely to Sharlie. She said:

"Don't you like the country *at all*, Judy?"

"Oh yes—quite a lot. But I haven't your *pash* for it. I like it because it's clean and because you can breathe in it, and because my aunt lives there. That most of all. Next to father and Aunt Maud—that's the doctor one, you know—I like Aunt Beth best of *all* my relations."

Judy could not see, either, she said, what there was about poetry that Sharlie should like it so much. She was immensely scornful of the stories in Shakespeare, and irritated by Hamlet, whom she called "the neurotic bore," though she admitted she'd cribbed that phrase from the doctor aunt. Words, in Judy's opinion, were overrated. Her essays were competent, informed, and entirely unimaginative, though at times (and after consultation with Sharlie) were apt to contain such items of information as, "A horse can rest standing up, though if the plough-boy sits on his back this is not so." This occurred in an essay upon "Country Life," and earned for her a reputation for observation to which she was scarcely entitled.

Sharlie, on the other hand, did not brilliantly but averagely well in all subjects, disliking none, but also liking none more than the others, unless it was English, in so far as it involved poetry (which it didn't, much) and botany, which was a duller subject, she found, when studied from a text-book and a hard desk. Judy, who worshipped brains, did not think Sharlie's very good, but she liked Sharlie because she wasn't "soppy" about boys or other girls or the younger mistresses, and because she was quiet and reserved. She possessed, in abundance, those qualities which at twelve Judy Norman already admired most in the female creature—self-possession and calm. She never lost her temper or her presence of mind. She never got flurried or excited—and people stopped being these things, Judy noticed, in her presence. Moreover, she didn't talk much, and Judy, who talked too much—and knew it—admired her immensely for this. Sharlie adored

Judy, who was a vital-looking little person, with her dark, straight hair, cut with a fringe—an unusual fashion for a girl of Judy's age in nineteen-twelve. She had a clear, very distinct and carrying voice, a first-class brain and a logical mind—and Philip Stratton detested her.

"God, what a pair!" he said to Fanny after Judy had been to tea one day. "They make my blood run cold."

Fanny laughed, for she liked Judy as she liked most people —if not for one thing, then for another. Fanny really did like people. She recognised in Judy some quality she possessed in herself—a tremendous zest for life—and Judy's modernity did not annoy her. She had been called "modern" in her own generation too often for that. But she envied Judy the age in which she lived because it was so much more fun, these days, to be a young modern than it had been in Fanny's. And yet that old picture of herself as a modern girl!—how soft and toneless it seemed beside the bright and glittering Judy! She put it down to Judy's brains and smiled, thinking how fast the world moved, and wishing, just a little, that she were Judy's age again! She told Philip that she thought she was an excellent companion for Sharlie, and when Philip said, "In God's name, why?" she startled him still more by saying, "She'll harden Sharlie up a little."

"Harden her *up*?"

"Yes. She's not a bit hard, really, you know, Phil. It's all pretence."

"*Pretence?*"

"Yes. That funny little way she has sometimes of looking as though she's made of wood. Especially when you are sharp with her. She's hiding behind it."

"My dear Fanny!" said Philip, and went on believing Sharlie self-sufficient and Judy a wretched little modern like unto her.

Fanny, had she been the introspective worrying sort,

might, these days since Sharlie's return to London, have found considerable matter for disturbance. Her friends considered her a fortunate woman, married to a man famous, as they saw fame, charming, with two delightful children (they did not say much about Sharlie, for to strangers Sharlie was uncommunicative and difficult, a queer contrast to the lively and lovely Pen) and never caught a hint of the difficult moody Philip with whom for weeks on end Fanny had to live. A woman less easy-going than Fanny might have rebelled, have grown nervy or found her husband's moods infectious. But Fanny, treading still her light measure with life, was undismayed. She took her marriage and maternity easily, scarcely stopping to remember that once upon a time she had thought that Philip's mistress might have an easier time than his wife. For a long while she took his moods and fits of detached gloom as the natural concomitant of what she thought of as the literary temperament, until it occurred to her one day that they had less to do with his work than with his daughter. She began to realise that during those two months which had preceded David's birth and the months which had succeeded his arrival, when Sharlie had been in Lincolnshire, Philip was a different person altogether—that only since Sharlie had come home had Philip's moodiness returned. Since she did not share his opinion of Sharlie as a superior unlikable child she could not see why Sharlie should affect him in this way, but since it seemed the only explanation she readily accepted it, instead of worrying both herself and Philip by vague assumptions. Fanny, it is true, did not feel deeply enough to worry overmuch about anything. It was easier to accept things for what they seemed, and to leave it at that. When Philip was in "one of his moods" she left him just sufficiently alone to recover, but not so much alone that he should feel her attitude to be some reflection of, or upon his own, administering just sufficient of her own

optimistic philosophy as was healing without being irritating. She never sulked or thought herself neglected—for why make further trouble for yourself? Life was short and it did no good to imagine things or to dwell overmuch upon them. In these matters Fanny was cleverer than many women with brains, but she was helped, it must be admitted, by the fact that she was not in love with Philip—at least she was not in love with him to anything like the extent he was in love with her—and so was less vulnerable.

Nevertheless, she regretted what she believed to be Philip's attitude towards his daughter—and not by any means only because she believed him mistaken about the child, or because Sharlie so obviously made no bones about her approval of herself. She saw that Sharlie wanted to be very fond of her father, and that she was constantly being brought up sharply against his neglect, unfairnesses and small unkindnesses. Fanny, who believed that as far as possible people should be agreeable to each other, and seldom found it difficult because seldom troubled by any very passionate likes or dislikes, believed also that fathers and mothers should combine to give their children a good time. Philip and Alex had not so combined, and it was a little arbitrary of him, she sometimes thought, to refuse to combine with her for this purpose so far as Sharlie was concerned. Fanny's children were to find, as they grew older, that they had nothing to fear from her. Her discipline was not very strict, her kindness and good temper unfailing. Her house was not her god and life was the pleasant thing it can be, when you don't think, can afford well-trained servants and are not unreasonable enough to expect to have the freedom of your own kitchen. Philip's line with Sharlie, Fanny thought faintly ridiculous, but doing her best to make up to the child, she managed in the end not to think overmuch about it. She supposed, vaguely, that things would improve. She did not regret her marriage to Philip

and, still in love with life and in love with love, found his bouts of physical feeling for her no more inconvenient than his periods of neglect. It was all part of life—and there was a good deal of it when you were not concerned with love-making. Shops, theatres, meals with one's friends, bridge-parties, tennis—Fanny was never bored or looking for something to do. The delights which modern civilisation offered to the leisured middle-class woman were numerous, and Fanny had a bowing acquaintance with them all.

Philip's attitude to his daughter, however, was far from being the easy thing which Fanny so comfortably explained away, having its roots in something she neither knew nor suspected. Aware that he wanted Sharlie's good opinion and the affection that at times peeped shyly out at him, he was also aware that there was something which would for ever prevent him from finding life even bearable in her company. Her return after the birth of David had flung him back into that dark world out of which he had struggled three years ago in Italy. Everything about her—the delicate wistfulness of her sober little face, the violet-grey of her eyes, even the inflections of her softly-attractive voice—reminded him so persistently of her mother that there were times when he could not bear to be in the same room with her. Remarks he knew to be completely innocent stung him into a torment of anger and resentment, so that he found himself uttering the crushing unmerited rebuke, the sarcastic clever jibe, and saw that white mask slip down over the child's face, so like a tangible thing that he longed to tear it off. He believed that she despised him, whereas she thought only that she was so stupid she must always say things that annoyed him; that he disliked her because of it. And sometimes, when she turned upon him that unyielding gaze from eyes so like the young Alex's, he would remember that Sunday morning when he

had turned and encountered it from the open doorway and would wonder how much her childish mind understood of that scene, how much it retained—and think that if he had to encounter it often he would go mad. And at times he would be passionately sorry for himself that fate had given him for a daughter such a duplication of qualities remembered in another, instead of a modern hockey-playing miss, full of high spirits and utterly lacking in the imagination that gave Sharlie, as it had given her mother, that interest in poetry, and sent her out into the country to the adoration of birds and wild flowers—interests in which now, as then, he was quite unable to share.

A little daughter caring for the very things for which her mother had cared, to which to the very end she had clung so passionately, was too much for him. A hundred times a week he made up his mind to secure peace for himself by sending her back to Lincolnshire, to allow her grandparents their unspoken wish, and to keep her with them—a good deed they'd count to him for righteousness; but he could never bring himself to sending her away. Something in him yearned for the affection he could not command, at which he struck blindly every time it looked out at him. He could not bring himself to believe that it would not some day belong to him, that this mood would pass as surely as had that of those horrible early days at Gravedona. Meanwhile, he kept Sharlie with him but left her alone, took no interest in her pursuits or her friends, and even at times brought himself to believe that that withdrawn, almost sulky air she bore towards him (by which she protected herself against his sudden angers and sarcasms) justified his attitude —came almost near to believing that she was *like* that, a cold indifferent, self-sufficient type, that there was something inherently hard and cruel in her that he did well to hate and resent. Only in moments of quite unusual clarity

did he see Sharlie for what she really was—his conscience.

Of the three, Sharlie was perhaps the least perturbed by her father's chameleon-like changes of heart towards her. She assumed simply that he did not very much like her, that he never had, and only in rare moments like that one which had come when they had driven home from King's Cross, when he had had to brake hard to avoid the van in front, might she ever suppose that he did. It was a thought to which she had long been accustomed, and one to which she would have been resigned but for those odd exceptional moments, for her father's attitude was as long as her memory—and no more than one of the facts of life. She was too busy being grateful for the peaceful domestic scene which had taken the place of those eternal family wrangles and wordy disputes, to worry overmuch about her father's lack of affection for her—and his sudden tempers and gibes affected her only in so far as they seemed to be a return to the old bad ways and because it seemed to be she herself who was the cause of them. Gradually she even grew tired of wondering what it was she said or did that so annoyed him, and ultimately dismissed it as one of the problems that were unsolvable. There was nothing to do about it, and if, at times, she envied Judy her father—with his kind manner and gentle amused voice—she did not say so, any more than Judy put forward her own opinion of Philip. Between these two young things there were, at this time, many decent and instinctive reticences, and they both understood this to the full when Judy voiced her appreciation of Fanny.

"I like your stepmother. She's kind—and she doesn't mind how much noise you make."

At twelve Judy ran rather to noise. "When I'm quiet you'll know I'm dead," she often told her long-suffering family.

Sharlie grew to be very fond of Fanny. Grateful to her for the pleasant thing she made of life in the little Edward Street house, she admired her, too, for the way she contrived never to quarrel with her father, never to be roused to anger or resentment by his moods and tempers—and most of all, perhaps, because she did not relapse into silence or indifference as she did herself, but would behave as if she had neither heard the angry comment nor seen the look of gloom. Sharlie had for this accomplishment of her stepmother all the admiration of the person who knows it to be absolutely beyond her own achievement. But gradually, as the weeks passed, bringing her eleventh birthday, Christmas, the birth of nineteen-thirteen and the return of spring, the child began, as befitted her years, to take these things for granted. She did not think of happiness or unhappiness: she lived instinctively from hour to hour as children do, found life full to the brim of interesting, delightful things to do and did as many of them as she possibly could. If that poor shade from some other world hovered about the scene, she could scarcely have recognised the child who had so seldom smiled, whose solemn face and eyes had so often reproached her!

Sharlie found she much preferred day-school to her earlier lessons with governesses, for she walked to it each morning with her father (who sought a constitutional) across the Park, and who delivered her up to Judy's keeping at the Marble Arch. Sometimes something happened, and instead of her father standing in the hall at half-past eight, there was Fanny, who explained that daddy wasn't well or was too busy—at any rate couldn't come, and that Lottie, Penelope's and David's nurse, would come instead. But always, at the Marble Arch, there was Judy, as regular as the policeman upon his beat. The Park, too, was one of the daily joys of Sharlie's life, never stale, never commonplace—full of the change and colour and beauty of tree and bush and flower-

borders. She had got tired of asking why it was called Hyde Park, but she never got tired of walking in it or looking at the things the gardeners planted in it, and both Fanny and Philip had long ago grown used to hearing her congratulate them upon their effects. "Your dahlias are excellent," she would say in her soft enticing voice no gardener Philip ever met could resist, or: "How lovely the crocuses are this year!" and would agree, solemnly, that it was a pity the birds were so fond of the yellow ones. And sometimes, when he was very pleased indeed, Philip would give the man a shilling (to Sharlie's astonishment) and tell her she was an expensive daughter to have to escort about, and look pleased about it; but at others, he would insist upon walking on the wrong side as though he found her merely an embarrassment. But cross or not, Sharlie would always prefer to take her walk across the Park with him than with Lottie, even though she was so much more amenable to loitering and conversation with the men who looked after it.

Pen and David, her little half-sister and brother, were added excitements in Sharlie's present existence. They did not bore her as she knew they bored Judy, who called them "the kids," and said they were "all *right*, of course . . ." They imbued Sharlie, at eleven, with a sense of her own mature state, gave her a tender warm maternal glow she did not recognise for what it was.

More than all else, perhaps, there was the delight of her visits to Marne House, Judy's home in Bayswater, and which, occasional at first, grew more and more frequent as the months went by.* Judy's mother, busy with her committees, her public welfare interests and suffrage meetings, was not often to be encountered, but Sharlie soon acquired for her the same kind of affectionate respect that her children

*The history of the Normans is given in an earlier novel, *The Hopeful Journey*.

accorded her. They were used to a mother who "took an interest in things," would, indeed, have found it embarrassing to have had her undiluted attention, for "mother took some living up to!" ("You can only hope," said Judy, "that mother won't notice you too much!") Their father was a different matter, and Sharlie fell an instant victim to the charm Frank Norman exercised upon all his children, early expending upon him the same quality of adoration given to him by them. The day when Fanny suggested she should have her teeth overhauled by him was a red-letter day to her, only outshone by that in which she went to the surgery and sat in his big terrifying chair, felt his soft gentle hands upon her face and heard him say: "Open your mouth, Sharlie, will you, please?" Unfortunately he had found nothing wrong with her teeth, so the delirious joy hadn't lasted very long, but something he said as he stood watching her put on her hat remained with her for years.

Trying in her grave, grown-up fashion to make a little suitable conversation, she had said, "Daddy says he ought to have a tooth stopped—but he won't do anything about it. He says teeth are a nuisance."

Frank Norman laughed.

"They're a very useful dispensation of Providence," he said. "Especially when they want stopping. They keep your mind off other things, you know. But I'm afraid yours will do never much for you there."

She hadn't the faintest idea what he meant. But she smiled because he did and because his smile was so kind, and because as he opened the door for her he looked at her as though he really liked her.

"Good-bye, my child," he said; "that was only my little joke."

"I think your father's *divine!*" she confided to Judy the next day, and Judy, herself given to extravagant unmeaning

adjectives, said only: "So do I. So does Mona. So does everybody. He's a pet."

In the Easter of nineteen-thirteen Sharlie went down to Lincolnshire. Easter came early that year, and she was just in time to see Ann Selwyn's first daffodils waving in the breeze, the celandines like stars clustering by the wayside, the shining bright brown buds of the chestnuts against the windy March sky, and the opening of the first white flowers of the blackthorn. Also, there was Clive, who had grown, she thought, very tall, and who was going, he said, to leave school at midsummer and go away to an agricultural college.

"Oh, Clive!" she said, "to learn to be a farmer?"

"To learn to be an intelligent one," he told her. "The ones about here make me wild. Would you believe it, Shar, old Castleton told me only yesterday that the nightjars rob his cows of milk. He'd shot one and got it hanging up in his yard."

"But, Clive, they *don't!*"

" 'Course they don't. How *can* a bird *suck?* It can do that about as much as it can carry off young pheasants which those fools of keepers will always have it it does. The farmer sees the nightjar on the animals' backs and hasn't the sense to see he's after the insects there. Why, the animals love it. You can see a flock of birds following a herd of sheep all over a field sometimes. Farmers never learn."

Farmers and their stupidity! It took up all their time that first afternoon, and it was not until they met some days later that she heard that Harry, Clive's elder brother, was going out to Canada in the following year. "Father's promised him he shall go then if he's still set on it."

"Doesn't your mother mind?"

"She won't say. They were talking about it one day and she said she wished he'd give up the idea, and all of a sudden Henry got fearfully wild and said: "Oh, hang it all, mother—

you did what *you* jolly well liked—once, when you went off with father!" Mother went quite white and father rushed across the room and gave Harry a fearful whack on the head that knocked him over. He got up, looking awful, and father said 'Get out'—then mother began to cry and father ordered me to go up to bed and stay there."

"Oh, *Clive!*" Sharlie was shocked. She hadn't ever thought of the Blunsdons as people who "used words" or had scenes. "What *do* you think was the matter?"

"Nothing much. I suppose it made father wild to hear Harry say that to mother, and I suppose Harry was wild because he can't do what he wants—about going to Canada, I mean. Of course, we're all a bit fed up with him—about his wanting to go and about his keeping on about it. But I don't see why any of *that* should have made mother cry. She never does—not even when Tom fell on the scythe that time and the doctor wanted to take his arm off . . ."

There was a ring of pride in Clive's voice. He shared with Sharlie a nervous horror of human emotion displayed to the extent of tears.

"And then in the morning it was all right again. Mother all smiles, and Harry too. And father talking about buying some field or other."

Clive stretched his arms above his head and lay back in the loft.

"People are funny," he said.

"Yes," said Sharlie. "Grown-up people. Perhaps *we* shall be, when we grow up."

"I know. I wish I were a bird, don't you?"

"But birds quarrel, too. You *know* they do, Clive—but they don't use *words*. At least not *our* kind of words."

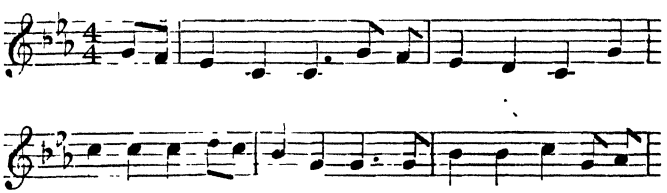
"Then I wish I was cattle. Just lying out in the pasture in the sun. Don't you?"

Sharlie laughed.

"Kittle-kattle," she said. It was a phrase she had heard upon her father's lips time and again. "Women are kittle-kattle." She didn't know what it meant and neither did Clive. But as she said it they both burst out laughing, repeating the phrase over and over, as if by that means they could arrive at its meaning. But neither of them cared.

Suddenly Clive stopped laughing, and leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek. Sharlie was silent for a second as if startled. Then she began laughing again.

"Kittle-kattle," she said. "Kittle-kattle!"

Their voices pealed out upon the spring air, were carried far away upon the breeze and lost. But Beth Blunsdon, busy at her butter-making, heard it and paused a moment, smiling as if the sound pleased her. She stood gazing out of the window, at the pale green of the trees, at the afternoon sky of barred gold and grey, at the bank of daffodils growing down by the gate, and at the lovely, lonely country that stretched beyond and beyond it. She sighed deeply as if these things utterly satisfied her, but as she returned to her butter-making she hummed a snatch of song,

very softly and a little out of tune. What did it matter? She hummed because she was happy and content and because spring had come again and because she loved the country, because it had folded itself so close against her heart it seemed she must die if she left it.

Sharlie felt like that all the way back in the train, but arrived in London there was school again and Judy, and

Penelope and the little baby brother and Fanny, kind and welcoming and asking interested-sounding things about the country into which she never went if she could help it—and her father, asking no questions about the country, but in a good mood, glad that the fine weather had come again, swinging along at her side through the Park and agreeing that it had done extremely well with its bulbs this year.

Also, there was Marne House. Astonishing how large a part in Sharlie's existence Marne House had come to play. In a sense the history of Judy Norman was for the next three years the history of Sharlie Stratton. From the first she managed to get on the right side of Martha Goss, the old woman who was at once the housekeeper at Marne House and the arbiter of the youthful Norman friendships, so that this was perhaps among the luckier of Sharlie's triumphs. Judy's elder sister, Monica, was for years Sharlie's ideal of feminine beauty, though she never knew her well. She saw her sometimes, on her way home from school, standing at the Marble Arch selling *The Vote*, and sometimes she would go to hear her play and sing at the Settlement for boys in the East End in which Frank Norman was interested, but she lived, for Sharlie, a life apart, hedged about with beauty and talent. All her life she had for her a limitless admiration which roused Judy to a mild and scornful amusement. Mark Norman she did not see very often, for the shipping office in which he worked seemed to swallow him up, and Sharlie was a little abashed by his taciturnity, his general air of being completely grown up and of not seeing her or anybody else, his eyes fixed upon something in life that had eluded him. Not that Sharlie recognised it for that, even when Judy said, "Mark hates his old office. He wants to grow wheat—only nobody takes him seriously." Sharlie remembered for a long while that first evening she had encountered him on the doorstep of Marne House, as she came out

with Judy after a visit for tea.

"Hallo, Ju," he said, and had smiled faintly at Sharlie, dimly recognising her as a friend of Judy's he ought to know.

"This is Sharlie Stratton, Mark. Don't you remember? You've met her at Aunt Beth's."

"Oh yes," Mark said. "Of course," and had smiled again and gone on into the house, leaving Sharlie with the feeling that to Mark Norman, from the height of his twenty completed years, she was just a very small girl of no particular interest. This, as it happened, was correct, but to it might have been added Mark's more flattering reflection that she looked quiet, and might even succeed in teaching Judy a few less boisterous manners.

The young Normans kept open house. You might meet anybody there in their shabby sitting-room long ago given over to them and their pleasure. Sometimes there would be Greta Anderson, Mona's school-friend, just engaged to be married—"nice, but a fool; no brains at all," according to Judy; sometimes her brother Miles, described by the same authority as "just another of Mona's admirers," though ostensibly Mark's friend, and sometimes the famous doctor-aunt, Maud Norman, with some amusing tales from her clinic, with her strong face and hair brushed straight back from her forehead, who would look at Sharlie with a searching eye and say: "I hope you're not letting that stupid school overwork you!" (Maud Norman thought most girls' schools stupid and said so often to her sister-in-law, who smiled and said: "They don't hurt Ju. Mona was a different matter, perhaps!") Not that Eve Norman was very often to be found there. Her life was a full and intricate affair in which wifehood and motherhood was no more than an excellently-managed *motif*. The red-letter moments for Sharlie, however, were those when Frank Norman put in an appearance, and that

day, in the spring of nineteen-thirteen, when she encountered Shane Mostyn, back from Germany, looking browner and leaner than ever, not needing to be reminded of Sharlie's identity and regarding her with an amused and friendly eye.

"Oh, here you are again," he said. "I never expected to see you here. I thought you were part of the countryside, like the trees and wild flowers—a kind of dryad, you know. Really, quite an unexpected pleasure," and he shook hands with Sharlie in that grave grown-up manner which made Judy laugh and tell him not to "rag," at which Shane lifted his eyebrows in mock surprise. "Rag? *I?* My dear Jul She *is* a dryad—you *know* you found her in a tree!"

"Have you got any drawings?" Sharlie wanted to know, her mind on the funny faces he had drawn for her the previous summer.

"Drawings? I don't draw," he said to her. "I leave that to Mona."

"But you *did* draw. I've still got the things you did for me last year at Cross Farm—all those funny faces."

"Oh yes, of course. But I don't do it any longer. I've learnt better."

"Shane," said Mona, to nobody in particular, looking up from something she was doing at the table, "has given up his youthful ambition to cut out Carruthers-Gould."

"Carruthers-Gould, my child," Shane told Sharlie, looking at her serious puzzled face, "is a cartoonist. You may see his drawings week by week in the *Saturday Westminster*."

"But I thought," said Sharlie, "that Shane was going to be a *musician*—that he'd gone to Germany to *learn*."

"Another of our harmless delusions," said Mona, this time, however, not looking up from whatever it was she was doing there at the table with pen and ink.

"All I learnt, my dear child," replied Shane, addressing Mona's bent head, "was that I can't play, never shall be able

to play. A conclusive but somewhat shattering piece of knowledge it was a pity I had to go all that way to acquire."

Sharlie went a little nearer the table and saw that Mona was writing down some music—copying it from something much rougher than her own neat pages which lay at her left hand. Sharlie stood there admiring what she was doing with that delight which always seized upon her when she saw people doing something successful with their hands. From the other side of the table Shane watched Mona, too, as if it amused him or struck him as so much waste of time.

"Much better come out and hear some *real* music!" he said to her, and Mona raised her head to say:

"Oh, Shane, shut *up!* I can't bear it!" and throwing down her pen she went quickly out of the room.

Judy whistled. Shane took out a cigarette, lighted it, and then he, too, drifted out of the room and presently out of the house. From the room in which they sat the two girls saw him go sauntering down the path to the gate, hesitate for a moment, looking back at the house, and then go on in the direction of the Bayswater Road.

"Mona's *gone* on Shane, you know," Judy said, as he disappeared. "Always has been—always will be, if you ask me. And she can't bear it because he's given up this idea of music and has spent all his time in Germany writing a novel."

"Doesn't she *want* him to write novels?"

"I don't know. She's just sick about his music, I suppose. And because he won't let her see the novel. And mother agrees with her. But people always do think other people should stick to things they don't want to stick to. All the same, it *does* seem a pity about the music. . . . Those songs Mona was copying out were by Shane. He wrote those in Germany—before he decided to write a novel, I suppose. An Elizabethan song-cycle, he calls it. You know—

Shakespeare, Lodge, Sidney and Anon., all set to music. I hate songs, as a rule. It's such *muck*—the words, I mean. But the Elizabethans are different, somehow."

"But it's *awful* to give it all up!" said Sharlie.

"Oh, I don't know. Perhaps. No good going on if you're sure you aren't going to be good enough, I suppose. Anyway, Shane's leaving us, so it won't matter to us very much *what* he does."

"Leaving? Do you mean he's not going to live with you any more?"

"Yes. Of course I do. He's going to live with some young man called Manistre (Garth Manistre, if you please) he's got to know in Germany, who's got a studio in Chelsea. He's an architect and has pots of money, and lots of rich relatives who'll want him to design houses for them, I suppose. Mother liked him, for some reason, when he came here the other evening. She talked to him nearly all the time, and said afterwards that architecture was a good sound profession and that he evidently agreed with her that music and painting were *excellent*—as hobbies. You ought to have heard Mona! Shane, too—but Shane likes mother and always lets her down lightly. Mother gets on Mona's nerves. But then, so do lots of things. Mona's queer. Anyway, she'll be queerer next year when she goes down to the Slade Art School. I daresay we shall get used to it."

"Why," said Sharlie, unexpectedly, "does your mother get on Mona's nerves?"

"Oh, because mother expects her to do things she doesn't want to do—just like *her* with Shane, of course, only mother does that with all of us. You see, she's so much cleverer than we are that we look stupider than we really are, beside her. D'you know, Shar, she passed matriculation when she was seventeen with everybody thinking it a perfectly idiotic thing for a girl to do! And Mark, with everybody encouraging

him, tried twice and couldn't pass. But afterwards old Gran'pa Bentley sat on mother all right. She wanted to be a doctor—mad about it—but he wouldn't let her. He didn't believe in women doctors; said that women ought to get married and all that. He's an awful pig, you know, a shocking tyrant. I can't *bear* him. Then mother got married—and since then she's done everything she wanted to do except be a doctor. Father lets people alone, you see. *He* wouldn't have minded her being a doctor, only there wasn't time. Besides, there was *Us!* She hoped Mona 'd be one instead—or Mark."

"*Couldn't* they be?"

Judy laughed.

"*Course* they can't. Mona 'd die first. So would Mark, shouldn't wonder. Mark's like Grandfather Bentley, who decided when he was at *school* he was going to be a farmer, not a parson, like his father. Only Mark isn't *really* like Grandfather Bentley. He lets people push him about instead of doing the pushing himself, the way grandfather always did . . ." Judy laughed. "Daddy says you really don't get on in this world unless you make yourself disagreeable. That's why he thinks the Suffragettes are right. He says the men had to take up the railings in Hyde Park before anybody would take any notice of them. After that they introduced the Reform Bill or something and gave them votes."

"But it does seem silly," said Sharlie soberly, "when you come to think of it."

"I don't, much," said Judy. "And daddy says that most things in this world are given for the wrong reason, anyway. Does *your* father think women ought to have votes?"

"I don't know. I don't suppose so."

"Mine does. He says the only people besides women who haven't a vote are children and idiots. But he says the Liberal Government won't give it to them."

"Why not?"

Judy wrinkled her brows.

"I don't really know. It's something to do with property. You see, *all* women won't have the vote, only those who have property. This means (though I can't see why) that they'll all vote Tory—you do if you own things, apparently—and father says this frightens the Liberals."

"Then why," said Sharlie, weighing these deep matters, "don't the Tories give women the vote?"

But this was too much for Judy, who made a mental note: "Ask father about this," and said abruptly: "What are *you* going to be when you grow up, Shar?"

"I don't know. Do *you* know what you're going to be?"

Judy shook her head.

"There are so many things to be. I don't see how people ever do decide. I daresay *you'll* get married."

"So might you."

"Might! Might not! Might *not*, I should say. Would you like to?"

"I don't know . . ." Sharlie wrinkled her brows, her mind flung back to those days of earliest memory and then flung away from them by thoughts of her grandparents, thoughts of Fanny and the little Knightsbridge house, and of Judy's own father and mother. "Perhaps," she said slowly.

"I think you *ought* to get married," Judy said. "You like children."

"I suppose one can't have children if one doesn't get married?" Sharlie ventured.

"Of course you can't, idiot."

"Well, there *was* Dorothy's servant . . ."

Dorothy was a girl in Sharlie's form who had electrified it one morning last term by the news that their servant-girl had had a baby in the night.

"Well, *she* wasn't married, Judy."

"She was, really. I mean, she *had* been . . ."

"Oh," said Sharlie. "I see . . ."

But she didn't. She supposed, vaguely, that Dorothy's servant had been "divorced or something."

Judy said calmly, "My Aunt Maud—the doctor one, with the clinic, you know—says she'll tell me. About babies, I mean, a little later on. When I'm thirteen. How old are you, Shar?"

"I'll be twelve in December."

"I'll be thirteen in September—that's not very long. I'm one year and three months older than you."

"Yes," said Sharlie, suitably depressed, and then, as if it atoned, "But you don't *look* it."

"Oh, that's only because you're such a serious-looking person. You *look* solemn, you know, Shar. It's the way your eyes are stuck in or something . . ."

Sharlie's embarrassment did not lessen.

During that autumn Sharlie went frequently to Marne House, but without encountering Shane Mostyn again. He had, she was told, collected his belongings and gone off to Chelsea with his new friend, but his songs, bound in stiff cloth and with "Shane Mostyn's Farewell to Music" inscribed in Mona's lovely script on the outside, stood on the piano, and she would play and sing them softly in the evening.

With how sad steps, O Moon, thou climbst the skies,
How silently, and with how wan a face . . .

or

Under the greenwood tree,
Who loves to lie with me,
And tune his merry note
Unto the sweet bird's throat,
Come hither, come hither, come hither . . .

And sometimes she would shut up the book and go out of the room and be seen no more that evening, and Judy would shrug her shoulders and say: "Oh, Lord, how perfectly sickening!" but she agreed with Sharlie that if you could write music like that it seemed quite silly to go away and write novels. Neither of them had as yet ever read a modern novel and the writing of novels seemed to them a quite superfluous occupation, Philip Stratton notwithstanding.

Other branches of English literature occupied, however, a disproportionate amount of Sharlie's time. She had recently discovered Stevenson the essayist, and *Virginibus* was rapidly becoming her bible. She had also discovered in their entirety those poems of Andrew Marvell's to which, in excerpts, her mother had introduced her years ago. A heady excitement took hold upon her when she came upon the poem which contained the lines she had so long known:

Annihilating all that's made
To a green thought in a green shade.

and that in which hid the equally familiar:

. . . how can such sweet and wholesome hours
Be reckoned but with herbs and flowers?

With some unfailing instinct she avoided all those which related nature to human emotion, and poems which poets wrote to their mistresses moved her to no more than a little *moue* of distaste. Neither, for many years, was she able to appreciate the neat conceits of Suckling or Carew, and even at this time Shakespeare's Sonnet written—who knows?—in some such mood of impatience as wracked this little admirer all these centuries later, moved her to warmest approval.

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red.

But when she spoke of this once to her father he said she was a superior little devil and didn't know what she was talking about. Obstinately, however, she went on believing that poetry should be impersonal and all her life was never able thoroughly to appreciate any other kind.

It was in the autumn of nineteen-thirteen that Philip Stratton, who had for long been having some trouble with his teeth, screwed up his courage and went to see Frank Norman. Judy had said to him cheerily: "Ring up daddy. He'll hike it out for you." But Frank Norman had not hiked it out. He had spent several hours, covering three or four visits, in stopping it, and upon one of these occasions Philip must have met Eve Norman, Judy's mother, for he referred to her one day soon afterwards in a tone which told Sharlie at once that he had not liked her.

"Had the cheek to tell me that she did not care for novels," he said to Fanny; "that there was too much love in them and not enough work."

"Is she right, dear?" asked Fanny.

"Right? Of course she's not right! What does she know about novels? Or love, either, for that matter? I always did detest red-haired women, anyway. And this one's a Suffragette!"

"Oh, father, she *isn't!*" said Sharlie, who was herself a little scared by Judy's mother, but would never have thought of disliking her for it.

"Don't contradict me. Her name's always in the papers. She's for ever making speeches on public platforms."

"But, daddy, she's quarrelled with Betty Faulkner *because* she won't be a Suffragette."

"Because she won't be a militant and burn churches and tie herself to railings, you mean? Well, you can be a Suffragette without being a militant, Miss Clever."

"Oh," said Sharlie, growing faintly pink, "isn't that what 'Suffragette' means?"

Philip laughed.

"It means, if it means anything, 'a little suffrage,' but our language is full of such idiocies. A Suffragette, actually, is a woman who wants a vote—and a militant Suffragette is one who thinks tying herself to railings and burning churches is going to help her to get one."

"Oh," said Sharlie, enlightened, but puzzled still and realising that this was no moment to pursue the subject.

"It's a queer household altogether, Fan. There's an ancient servant who wants putting in her place, for one thing."

"Martha," said Sharlie, who knew all about the Normans' housekeeper. "Oh, she's an old darling. She's been at Marne House all her life—ever since she was thirteen, and came up from Liverpool with Mr. Norman's father ages ago, when his wife died. She practically *runs* the house."

"Yes, so I observed," said Philip. "Then there's another girl about seventeen or eighteen—a really lovely creature, Fan. And that woman her mother lets her sell *The Vote*, if you please, in the public street! She ought to be ashamed of herself!"

"That's Mona. Mrs. Norman says selling *anything* in the street can't hurt a girl brought up like Mona!"

"*Does* she! Then there's a boy, the eldest. Norman told me he wants to go off farming in Canada."

"That's Mark," said Sharlie eagerly. "I used to see him sometimes at Cross Farm. He's quite grown up . . . I don't really know him—not like I know Judy."

"*As* I know Judy," corrected her father irritably. "*Why* can't you learn to speak correctly?"

Sharlie blushed and fell silent. She supposed her father's tooth was still troubling him, he was so cross. . .

It occurred to Sharlie sometimes that life at the little Edward Street house held none of the happy casual excitements that belonged to Judy's home. At Edward Street Philip was finishing a book with unaccountable difficulty and still having toothache at intervals, but never summing up sufficient courage to pay another visit to Frank Norman. Beneath her quiet exterior Fanny was a little concerned about him. He had been so long over this book, and shown for it none of the enthusiasm that she remembered in connection with its predecessor that came into existence in Italy and for whose launching they had come home. She would be glad when he had finished it, when he would come out of what she thought of as his writing-mood, and begin to take some interest in the ordinary things of life. Truth to tell, and for the first time in her life, Fanny was a little bored, for Philip, who did not want to go out himself, was apt to sulk because she did, and as she preferred an escort, when Philip definitely refused she would secure one for herself, only to find herself in trouble with Philip upon her return. It took her by surprise to discover that Phil was almost livid with jealousy after she had spent an evening at the theatre with an old acquaintance.

"But you wouldn't come," she said. "I had to use the tickets. You said you had to work."

"I did, but that's no reason why you should go off with another man. My work, as you call it, probably fitted in very conveniently with your own arrangements."

"Phil, darling, don't be absurd. I *hadn't* any arrangements."

"Well, if you had any affection for me you'd not want to go running off enjoying yourself with another man when you knew I was cooped up here with this beastly book to finish."

Fanny stared. She had known for a long time, she supposed, that Philip was a good deal more in love with her than she was with him, a good deal more than she wanted

him to be. Was it that which was responsible for the fact that the "fun" had quite gone out of their relationship? Philip was staid and moody. Jealous, too. He wanted to go nowhere and see nobody. Distinctly this was a bore, for Fanny was only twenty-four and as fond of life as ever. Phil, of course, was thirty-nine. She had laughed when her mother had once said it was a pity Philip was so much older, for she had not thought age "mattered in a man," but if he was going to turn into a sit-by-the-fire and get all worked-up like this whenever she wanted a little enjoyment, life was going to be a little trying. Thinking these thoughts, she yet said pacifically:

"But you don't mind! At least you *said* you didn't mind. I'd have stayed if I'd thought it would have helped you."

"It wouldn't have," said Philip.

"Well, then, darling, what did it matter?"

"I don't like to see my wife running round with other men. *You* wouldn't like it if *I* spent my evenings with some other woman and left you at home here to stew, would you?"

Fanny laughed.

"Phil, *you are* absurd. You are, really. I believe you've got the toothache again or you wouldn't be so silly!"

Philip didn't laugh, but when she put her arm round his neck he put his head on her bosom and let it stop there.

"You're tired, Phil—and that wretched book's been tiresome again. Let me get you a drink and then you can go straight to bed."

"I've had a drink—several—too many."

"Have another." But she thought as she fetched it: Is that it, I wonder? A drink too many? "Here you are," she said. "Drink it up and go to bed. You'll be all right in the morning."

"You have one, too."

"I don't like whisky."

"Go on. Be friendly."

"I'd rather not. At least, not whisky."

"Sherry, then."

To please him Fanny poured out a glass of sherry and sipped it as she talked: about the play, some of the people in it, in the stalls, in the funny little place she'd been taken to afterwards for coffee. Fanny had enjoyed her evening. The recital of her own pleasures, however, as she quickly perceived, did not unduly elate her husband, and after a little she rose, put down her glass, went over to his chair and, standing with her hand on his shoulder, kissed the top of his head.

"I'll be going up. I shouldn't be long if I were you. It's getting late."

She sighed a little as she undressed, brushed her hair, patted cold cream into her face and brushed her teeth. She had been married to Phil nearly four years: she had two children, a nice house, three very satisfactory servants, and a stepdaughter who was no bother at all. She had no money difficulties, plenty of nice clothes and a clever, personable husband. She supposed she ought to be very happy. She supposed she *was* very happy. She'd never thought about it before. Why did she think about it now? She looked at herself in the glass. She wasn't a beauty. She had no features—only a kind of sparkling look about her from which three and a half years of marriage had subtracted nothing, and a body she knew, from other men than Philip, was undeniably attractive. There was a little more of it, she fancied, to-day than there had been before the arrival of David. She ought, she supposed, to take more exercise. Tennis, as she played it, wasn't much good to her. She never ran about or fussed after balls. She could return any ball that came near her and place it neatly, but all the exercise she got out of it was limited to arms and chest—and she'd enough chest as it was, hadn't she? Fanny laughed,

pulled her dressing-gown around her and sat at her toilet table manicuring her nails. Why bother? Life slipped through your fingers while you fussed and fumed over trifles. Silly of her, too, to worry about Phil. He'd be all right when he'd cleared this book out of the way. She'd known he was moody and irritable—all writers were that, so her father used to say—even if she'd not expected him to develop quite like this. This jealousy—she hadn't expected that, either. He'd been so scornful in those early days, when he'd first been her lover, of the people who were possessive in love. Love, he told her, should be worn lightly—as an ornament, not as a shackle—a philosophy after Fanny's own heart. And now he sulked and was jealous because for the first time (no, not quite—but the first time so far as Philip knew) she had spent an evening in another man's company; quite discreetly too, in the middle of the stalls at a West-End theatre! Oh, well, thought Fanny, that's that!—it might be a lot worse. No use repining! She finished with her nails and bent forward to inspect her face again. Reaching for the cold-cream pot, she was just about to follow her first application with a second when she paused, screwed the lid on again, carefully wiped her face and powdered it as lightly and carefully as if she were going into the streets instead of to bed. Philip had not made love to her for weeks, had slept in his dressing-room, taken no more notice of her when he came in to say good night than if she had been an image carved in stone. He'd had a long bout of moodiness this time, but to-night she rather fancied he would come out of it. He'd want to make love to her just to assure himself (if for no other reason) that she wanted him to do it—thus proving to himself how absurd his jealousy had been. Fanny thought this rather silly of him—that such compliance on her part would prove just nothing at all, supposing there'd *been* any foundation for his jealous mood. But of course there hadn't. She'd no desire whatever

to be unfaithful to Phil with any man she knew—even if the opportunity presented itself, which assuredly it did not. She still liked Phil as a lover, though as a husband he had, like all other men, she supposed, a few trying ways. However, she had married him and must put up with them. But love? What had love to do with marriage? Anything or nothing? Not very much, Fanny rather thought, getting up from her dressing-table and getting into bed. And anyway, she doubted if she'd ever been in love. Probably never would be now. Was she missing something? Or merely avoiding complications? Oh, well, what did it matter? Life was very well. She was still pretty, still young, and she had two nice children, who were really rather "fun." Better count her blessings.

Phil came up while she was doing it. She found she was right. He did want to make love to her. Yielding herself to his passion willingly enough, Fanny added yet another to her list of counted blessings—an affectionate and satisfying husband. It was a lot more (especially as to the last), Fanny knew, than a good many wives could say.

CHAPTER EIGHT

In nineteen-fourteen Whitsuntide came at the end of May, and on the preceding Thursday afternoon Sharlie went to Marne House to have tea with Judy Norman, who was going away for the days of the holiday. The girls were inseparables and this rite of farewell was very necessary to them, which Fanny seemed very well to understand and nobody at Marne House would ever dream of questioning. So to Marne House Sharlie went, and there, waiting on the doorstep, was a young and pretty woman Sharlie had never seen before, who smiled at her in a way that people did smile these days at Sharlie, who was grown rather tall, and whose deep-set violet-blue eyes in her pale chiselled face beneath the straight brim of her school hat struck them as unexpected and incongruous. Sharlie smiled back, liking and admiring the red hair which showed beneath the green hat, and said "Good afternoon."

"One of Judy's friends, aren't you?" said the stranger.

"Yes," said Sharlie, adding in her sober fashion, "but of everybody's, too."

"I am sure you are," said the nice-looking stranger, who seemed on the best of terms with Martha Goss when she opened the door and scowled in her fierce fashion upon them as if she would willingly have kept them out if she dared.

"I've come to tea with Mr. Norman, please, Martha," the stranger said. "I hear he's got a bad cold."

"Yes, ma'am—as bad as bad. Ought to take better care of 'imself. But 'e comes of a family that never knew wot it was to take care of itself. Fair kills themselves every one of 'em. All the same, ma'am, if you could persuade 'im not to go down to that there Settlement to-morrow

it would be 'eaven's own blessing upon you."

"I'll do my best, Martha," said the stranger. "Can I go up?"

Martha nodded and turned to Sharlie.

"You've come to 'ave tea with Miss Judy, I s'pose," she said.

"Yes, please, Martha."

"Well, she ain't 'ere yet. She's out buyin' things with Mrs. Frank. Back soon, I expect."

Martha pushed open the door of a room on the right side of the little square hall and followed her in. The room was familiar enough to Sharlie. Given over for the past fifteen years to the Norman children and their friends, it was a serviceable place with a piano in the corner littered with music and with "Shane Mostyn's Farewell to Music" unopened on the stand; a large table in the centre upon which tea was set, a generous school tea with a plate of thickly-spread, thickly-cut bread and butter, jam, and a large cake, a little burnt on the top; on the walls, Mona's earlier pictorial efforts, a page of funny heads Sharlie knew were Shane's, and piles of books and papers everywhere. Though Mona and Mark were now grown up, they used this room almost as much as ever. To it Mona brought her new queerly-dressed friends and Mark his old and new disappointments. But at tea-time it was almost invariably Judy's. Sharlie loved the room and all the evidence of noisy youthful life it contained. She wished, whenever she was in it, that Pen and David were big enough to share some such room with her at Edward Street. Doing your lessons and bringing Judy to tea at the huge walnut dining-room table that must not be inked or scratched was nothing like the same fun.

Martha Goss lifted a pile of books from one chair to another, grumbling to herself as she did it.

"I never saw a family like this. They're all the same—

never put a thing in its proper place. Leastways, Mrs. Frank's the only one that does—and she ain't a Norman, 'cept by marriage. An army of servants is what they want be'ind 'em." Martha sighed heavily. "They're getting too much for me these days. I'm getting old!"

"Oh, Martha," said Sharlie, "you *know* you'd never leave them."

Sharlie knew she was devoted to the family—that she thought there was nobody on earth like Judy's father, that though she thought her mother queer she liked her, too, and that she would have let any one of their children walk upon her face. To her grumbling and abrupt manner they were all used ("resigned" was the word Judy's mother used), and to its worst manifestations they offered no more than a shrug of the shoulders, an amused casual smile. They all knew she would have died for any one of them!

"I daresay you're right, Miss Shar," she said now lugubriously, and took herself off, shutting the door firmly and a little noisily behind her.

Left alone, Sharlie sighed a little. She wished they had somebody at Edward Street like Martha, somebody who was part of the family, who was there, so to speak, before you were, and really cared for you, instead of the stiff-and-starchy servants who wore such a disapproving air and grumbled when you were late for meals and sulked if their evenings out had to be altered because somebody had been asked to dinner for the wrong day. I'm quite sure *our* servants all detest us, Sharlie thought, and found yet a new argument in favour of having been born a Norman.

To amuse herself she picked up a red-bound volume bearing Mudie's yellow label that Martha had put very unsafely upon the pile of books on the chair on her right.

It was a novel and about what Judy would call "the usual thing"—love. It was evidently Mona's—unless Mark read

novels, too, which Sharlie was unwilling to believe. For the daughter of a practising novelist, she was sadly lacking, at this stage in her career, in *esprit de corps!* Sharlie thought people in love a little ridiculous, and hoped, as she read on, her cheeks growing warm, that she would never fall in love. Here was the old difficulty—this immense mystery that lay just outside her understanding. These people were not married—at least not to each other, but they were going, it seemed, to have a baby. They were very worried about it, too—and not at all pleased. They called it a "nuisance" and an "accident," and appeared to blame each other. Sharlie wished she understood. She must ask Judy if *she* did yet. It was so silly, not knowing.

She was still revolving the dark subject in her mind when Mrs. Norman came in with her familiar air of having no time to waste and an apologetic parcel-loaded Judy. Mrs. Norman greeted Sharlie in her cool and pleasant fashion and explained why they were late.

"Judy seems to have grown out of all her last year's summer frocks. We had to go and buy some new ones, so that she won't disgrace us at Fiveways to-morrow. But Judy isn't good about choosing her clothes. She takes so long to make up her mind—and not only about clothes, I'm afraid."

"Well, it's because there's so much to choose *from*," said Judy, unabashed. "Everywhere—and about everything. Shar agrees with me, don't you, Shar? . . . We've got to have tea alone. Mona's out and father's got a visitor."

"I know. I met her on the doorstep."

"Oh, Jinny!" said Judy's mother. "I'd forgotten her."

"Jinny won't mind," said Judy, and winked at Sharlie.

Luckily for Judy, Eve Norman's eye fell not upon the wink but upon the red-bound book, which Sharlie still held, though closed, upon her knee.

"I hope you haven't been reading that, my child," she said.

A crimson wave suffused Sharlie's little face.

"I've been reading *in* it," she said, struggling for the exact phrase. "Looking at it," was obviously less than the truth.

Mrs. Norman laughed.

"Oh, well," she said. "You're much too young even to read *in* books like that. I wish Mona wouldn't leave her trash about."

Judy laughed.

"Mother, you *are* prejudiced. It isn't trash."

"Have you read it?"

"Oh, more or less. I just found it here. Mona got it to read in the train to-morrow. I don't like novels much myself—but I do know I'm prejudiced. You don't. It can't have hurt *Shar*, anyway, so don't worry."

And as her mother excused herself and went out, Judy said: "Funny mother doesn't see that books like that don't matter—in *her* sense. If you don't know the central fact you can read and read 'em without being a bit the wiser. And if you *do* know, what harm can they do you?"

The central fact! She'd got that from her Aunt Maud, Sharlie was quite sure. So that meant she *did* know. . . . Sharlie felt quite hopelessly inferior.

"Judy," she said. "Has your Aunt Maud told you?"

"Good Lord, yes—last September, when I was thirteen."

"Oh, Ju—and you never told me!"

"I couldn't. You weren't old enough. You aren't now."

"But I'll be thirteen at Christmas."

"That's ages."

"Will you tell me then?"

"I don't know. I shan't promise. I don't know that I can do it properly—and it would be simply horrid for you

if I messed it up. Besides, there's no sense in knowing before you have to. I can't say it seems a very pleasant arrangement, though my aunt says I may alter my mind some day, that most people do, it seems."

"Oh," said Sharlie, completely abashed by this perennial question of age, and after a little Judy began again somewhere else. "What did you think of Jinny?"

"Jinny? Oh, you mean the lady I met on the doorstep?"

"Yes—father's visitor. Mrs. Frome. Virginia Frome, Jinny. Aunt Maud calls her 'Honey-pot.'"

"She seems nice. Why does Miss Norman call her that?"

"Oh, because men like her, I think. . . . Or used to, years ago. . . . She doesn't often come to see us. She says it's because she's got three children—all *fearfully* young. She gives parties for them, jolly ones, just as if they were really big enough to enjoy them! They're just an excuse to get a lot of children in the house. You ought to come to one sometime."

"Yes," said Sharlie, "if she'd let me."

"Oh, she'll let you. Funny you've never met her—she goes down to the Settlement sometimes—to tell stories. She knows heaps and heaps—things nobody else *ever* tells. Father's known her ages, before she was married, when she used to be at Stephanie House."

Stephanie House, as Sharlie knew, was Maud Norman's clinic at Notting Hill Gate, named after her mother who'd died when she was born, and who had spent all her fortune on a similar one in Liverpool at the time of the cotton famine.

Judy went on:

"Her husband's a professor of English. Horrid for his children, isn't it? He's rather a tyrant, too!" Suddenly Judy laughed. "I'll tell you a secret, Shar. We always say she's got a 'pash' on father. But not to mother. She doesn't like

that kind of joke. I don't mean she's jealous or anything silly like that, but she'd think it just vulgar."

"So it is," said Sharlie, unexpectedly.

"Oh, Shar, don't be idiotic! We don't mean it *horridly*. We've all got a 'pash' on father, if it comes to that—including you. Can't help it. He's such a pet. I'd be a bit scared of a professor for a father, I think, or a novelist, come to that."

Sharlie laughed.

"Rubbish, you wouldn't be scared of anybody."

Just then Martha brought in the tea-pot and behind her came Eve Norman drawing on her gloves.

"Good-bye, children, I must go. And Ju, clear away for Martha when you finished—without breaking anything, if possible. And clear up here a bit too, there's a good child."

Martha said: "Clear up, indeed!" and snorting, went out.

Eve Norman smiled, but rather faintly, for though she knew that Martha was privileged she didn't really care for servants that way and preferred the sort Sharlie deplored—the sort you found at Edward Street.

Judy played hostess, pouring out the tea, and pushing the bread-and-butter plate a little nearer her guest.

"Why aren't you going to Lincolnshire," she inquired, "these hols?"

"Father says it's too far—or the hols too short. I wish I were, though—there won't be anything to do at Edward Street except go out for walks with Lottie when she takes Pen and Dave. And that's dull because she'll *never* let me push the pram."

"Queer ambitions you've got, I must say."

"It isn't an ambition. It's just something to do."

Judy laughed as though this amused her very much. She said, when she could: "Won't your father take you out anywhere in the car?"

"I don't know. I don't suppose so. Not Bank Holiday

week-end. He says there are too many people on the road." Too many fools, was the exact expression, but Sharlie had already learned the gentle art of editing Philip Stratton's more irritable remarks. "I expect he'll have people to lunch or dinner—or go to other people's lunches or dinners."

"Will your stepmother go too?"

"I expect so. Father won't go anywhere without her, you know—and I don't think he likes her to go anywhere without him."

"How nice! Being married must be an awful bore."

"Oh, it's all right when father feels like going out—and sometimes he goes out every evening, or has people in. 'Writing' people, mostly. He says when the autumn comes he's going to start his 'evenings' again, like he used to, (Oh, dear, I mean *as* he used to!) when my mother was alive."

"Well, you can't remember much about *those*."

"No—only the people arriving and all the noise, and mother going to bed early. Before they came, sometimes, because she wasn't feeling well, and crying because father was angry and said she was putting it on."

"Gosh! How lively! Did they quarrel?"

"Oh, I suppose they did. I can't remember much about it." Sharlie's face took on that queer closed-up expression Judy knew so well and which it would never have occurred to her was like a shut flower—but that was exactly what it was like, none the less. Judy was aware that Sharlie didn't *want* to remember, that she couldn't bear it when people raised their voices and glared at each other. When, sometimes, the girls quarrelled at school, about some boy (or more likely one of the younger mistresses), Sharlie's face would go quite white and she'd begin to tremble and pull Judy away. Judy, however, thought it rather a lark. Their red faces and ugly voices interested her enormously. Judy

was the best-tempered person in the world, and it never failed to amuse her that people could "lose their wool" so easily and about so little.

"Do you remember your mother, Shar?" she asked.

"Not very well. I remember she used to read poetry to me and I remember the morning she died. I remember that more than anything else."

"Why?"

"Well, we were staying in the country and father had come down for the week-end. It was wet and father was cross. Mother cried and the next morning I think they quarrelled. I could hear their voices in the room below. Presently when it was quiet I went down and pushed open the door. Mother was lying quite still on the bed and father was talking to somebody—the doctor, I suppose—on the telephone at the side. . . . It's father I remember most. He looked awful."

Sharlie stopped and took a long breath. It was the first time she had ever reassembled this scene in her own mind, and even now she did not want to do it. But the same instinct which made her discuss and share everything with Judy drove her now to tell her of this incident that had lain for over three years like a dark stain upon her memory. Looking at her, Judy saw her face had gone dead-white and that her hand was trembling as she stirred her tea—just as it did when the girls quarrelled or one of the mistresses lost her temper.

"How do you mean—*awful?*" said Judy, much interested.

"Well, his face looked awful to start with—kind of green, and he'd got a towel round his neck all stained with blood. He said he'd cut himself shaving, just as he heard mother call out, and he'd just put the towel round it and run in. She'd had a heart attack and had died before he could do anything. Of course she must have been dead *then*—when

I opened the door, I mean—and when father was telephoning. Only I didn't know that then. I don't know *when* I knew that for certain. Father said she was ill and sent me out of the room. And then my grandmother came and took me to Carr House. Afterwards they told me mother was dead. I knew she was often ill, and I suppose I wasn't surprised, *really*. But gran'ma told gran'pa that she'd always consider father had *murdered* mother—that he'd upset her and quarrelled with her although the doctor had said she mustn't be worried or excited. Gran'pa said she was being rather silly and that she mustn't use such words."

"Women always exaggerate so," said Judy. "I shouldn't let that worry you. I daresay she's forgotten all about it, too, by now, and meets him quite like anybody else."

"No," said Sharlie, "she doesn't. You see, father got married again so soon afterwards and went away to Italy. That made gran'ma angrier with him than ever. Pen was born in Italy. He's only been to Carr once since and that was when he came to fetch me home three years ago. And gran'ma has never seen my stepmother. She says she won't meet her, ever. And I suppose that annoys father, too, and *he* won't go to Carr either. When I go I have to go by train."

"Good Lord!" said Judy. "Quite a vendetta! *You* know, the thing where families wipe each other out. Idiotic. Like my Grandfather Bentley and Aunt Beth. He hasn't spoken to her since she ran away with my Uncle Joe, and that's more than twenty years ago. Grown-ups are so silly. . . . Your stepmother's nice, even though she hasn't got any brains. I daresay your gran'ma'd like her quite a lot if she did meet her."

"I know."

Sharlie went on with her tea. Martha's bread and butter was delicious, and one might have vendettas and sudden

deaths in one's family, but one went on being hungry all the same, it seemed.

Judy said: "I can't see how you've remembered it all, though! You must have been an awful kid at the time."

Sharlie did a little mental arithmetic—never her strong point.

"I was seven, I think. I didn't know I *had* remembered it, you know, Ju—that's the funny thing—until last summer when gran'ma took me to see Lucy Beridge. She'd been one of my gran'ma's maids, and had got married and gone to live in Bede Cottage, and had had a baby. She was in bed in the room mother used to have—and the telephone was still there. . . . Why do people always stay in bed, Ju, when they have babies?"

"To keep them warm, of course, silly. Go on."

"When I went upstairs Tom was standing by the bedside using the 'phone, and then, suddenly, it didn't look like Lucy's room in the least, and not like Lucy, either, in the bed. . . . It was all just like it was that morning mother died. So I suppose I *had* remembered all the time, without knowing. And it just all came back when I saw Lucy and Tom."

Judy stared at her as she poured out tea.

"Gosh!" she said, "what a thrill!" and then, as the tea went anywhere but into the cup, "Oh, blow, what a mess!" She laughed as she dealt with it, and invited Sharlie to sample the cake. "The burnt's only veneer," she said. "Do have a bit!"

Over the cake they got back to ordinary life—to Judy's trip to Fiveways to see Judy's grandfather, the redoubtable Jeremy Sacheverell Bentley (what a name!) and her Aunt Mary, who lived with him—an expedition only made bearable, according to Judy, because they were cycling and her father was coming with her. They'd be back for school on the Thursday ("might have given us the week"), but Mona was going away.

"To stay with her friend, Greta—you remember, the one who got married last summer, the one whose brother's always hanging round Mona. Greta Mardinor she is now. She lives in Essex, or somewhere . . ."

They were still talking hard when there was a tap at the door and Mrs. Frome put her head round into the room as Eve Norman had done, and said much the same thing.

"Good-bye, children, I must be going. Bring your little friend to see me sometime, Judy."

"Thank you," said Sharlie, politely, and politely, too, her mouth crammed full of cake, Judy got up to see the visitor safely off the premises. As she shut the door after the departing guest, she saw her father standing at the top of the stairs, and waving her hand called up to him:

"Come down, my pet, and talk to us."

So Frank Norman came down, moved a few more books and seated himself in the long chair by the open window.

"You oughtn't to sit in a draught if you've got a cold!" said Sharlie, gravely regarding him.

"Draughts? What are draughts, my child? They aren't recognised in this house," said Judy. "How do *you* feel about the window, darling?"

"I am quite happy with it, I think," said Frank Norman.

"Mother isn't here, my pet, so you can have it shut if you like, you know."

Her father laughed, but said he preferred it open.

"Colds are a disgrace in this house—like being too fat, or not washing," Judy explained. "The theory is that as a family we don't get them. In practice—behold!" She pointed a mischievous finger at her stricken parent and offered him an enormous slice of cake.

Frank Norman declined the cake. He had a theory about colds, he said. "Feed a cold" was all wrong. You should diet —and your diet shouldn't include large hunks of plum cake;

It was mostly oranges and water—a diet, however, of which one got singularly tired. He proposed, however, when he had refreshed his mind with their conversation, to eat three more oranges and betake himself to an early bed. Luckily, the problem of teeth (other people's!) would not this evening concern him after an appointment for seven. "I've got to get rid of this affliction before Saturday," he said. "I can't go sneezing all over the countryside on our first long cycling trip together, Ju."

"Oh, *I* don't mind," said that young woman. "I'm not mother. I *know* that people sometimes catch cold, despite fresh air and hygiene—mother only knows that they ought not."

Frank laughed.

"The last—and wisest—word's with your mother, I feel. Where's Mona?"

"She's gone to tea with Garth Manistre at the studio."

Garth Manistre was the young man, Sharlie was aware, with whom Shane Mostyn now lived in Chelsea. "Mona's latest," Judy called him. She said now: "I think mother rather wants Mona to marry him, you know, father."

Frank Norman said: "Nonsense!" rather sharply.

"I don't think it is," retorted Judy. "I don't mean just yet, of course. She thinks Mona's too clever to waste herself on marriage so early. (Sharlie saw a faint smile hover about Frank Norman's thin face.) Garth, you know, father, *is* rather mother's sort. Steady, no nonsense about him, good family, good looks, good remunerative profession. I suppose she thinks that if Mona married him she could make a nice little hobby of her painting."

"Your worldly wisdom is beyond me, my dear child!" said her father. "Can you find a map? When you've quite finished your tea will do. I thought I might show you our road to Fiveways."

Judy got up at once, turned over a pile of papers, knocked over another one of books and finally produced a road map, just as the door opened, and Mona, a vision of youthful loveliness, stepped inside.

"Hallo, kids!" she said, and (to her father) "Hallo, belovèd! How's the cold?" and then, generally, "I'm going to the theatre with Garth. What time did mother say dinner?"

"She didn't say. And *I* don't dine. I eat three oranges."

"Oh, poor darling, I *am* sorry. But didn't mother say what time she'd be back?"

"Not a word. Perhaps Martha knows."

"Oh, all right. I'll ask her. Silly of you to have a cold, beloved—or you could have come with me instead of Garth. He offered me the tickets without offering himself as an escort—he's seen the play. And when I said you wouldn't be able to go because of your cold, he said, 'Confound you!—I suppose I must come with you!'—just as if there was nobody else I could possibly get! So that's that, rather. Of course, I'd a thousand times rather go with you, belovèd!"

"Oh, of course, darling!" said a sceptical laughing young sister, but Frank Norman smiled as if he believed her.

At this moment Sharlie looked at the clock, exclaimed, and said she must be going. Frank rose up from his chair, announced that a breath of fresh air would be good for his cold, and that he would walk as far as the Màrble Arch with Sharlie and put her in her bus. So Sharlie made her *adieux*, and found herself walking down the Bayswater Road at Frank Norman's side in all the bright May-evening sunshine.

"Good-bye, my child!" he said, when her bus came up. "I hope you won't be too late. Put it on to us. Say we couldn't part with you earlier."

"Good-bye, good-bye," said Sharlie, and stood there on the platform of the bus, staring after that loose shabby figure on the pavement as if she never expected to see it again.

Neither did she.

Sharlie went back to school on the following Thursday, but there was no Judy. Nor was there on Friday. Nobody knew why she was away, but when Sharlie arrived home in the evening, her father was having another bout of toothache, which he was attempting to soothe by gramophone music. Presently, savagely, as though it were somebody's fault, he asked Fanny to ring up and make an appointment with Frank Norman for the morrow.

"And ask about Judy, please," said Sharlie.

Fanny went away. She seemed to be gone some time, and Philip grumbled at the delay, changing the gramophone record with a carelessness which he would, Sharlie thought, have chided in her. When Fanny came in she shut the door after her very carefully, and stood there just inside it, looking across at her stepdaughter.

"Sharlie," she said, "I've got some bad news, I'm afraid. Judy's father died this morning."

Sharlie looked at her, went very white and burst into tears.

It was the last thing Fanny had expected. Why, Sharlie never cried. She stepped forward and stopped the gramophone before going over to Sharlie and taking her in her arms. She let her cry, saying nothing, just patting her shoulder, and quite forgetting Philip, his irritation, and his toothache.

And presently, as if he were aware of it, Philip went a little noisily out of the room, to ring up another dentist.

CHAPTER NINE

FOR ever after Marne House seemed a different place to Sharlie. Something had gone from it which never came back. It was as if Frank Norman and the love his family had borne him had held it together, and now that it was dead it fell apart a little helplessly and pathetically. Frank Norman had died of pneumonia, but he need not have died of it, Judy said, if he hadn't insisted upon getting out of his bed on the Wednesday when he first began to get ill, to go and see a cousin who was dying of cancer, and had chosen that moment to ask for him.

"It wasn't even," said Judy, "as though she had ever had anything to do with us! Why, *we've* never seen her, and mother hasn't for years, except on anti-Suffragist platforms. She was far too grand to know *us*. We were only poor relations! But father had known her when they were young, and he *would* go! Mother says he would be alive now but for that woman, and I agree with her. But when we say that to Mona she gets angry. She will have it that it was *fine* of father to go. When I say 'Merely foolhardy,' she thinks I'm judging father, and starts crying. But we wanted father more than cousin Linda, anyway!" and the redoubtable Judy cried bitterly upon Sharlie's shoulder.

But to make up, when she had recovered, she said fiercely: "And she *wasn't* dying, after all! She isn't dead yet! People with cancer take longer to die than those with pneumonia! And she *had* to die, anyway. Father hadn't!"

Outwardly, the régime at Marne House went on as before. If there was less money, Eve Norman had no social ambitions, and Frank Norman had made ample provision for his young

family's careers. Judy's mother paused only very briefly upon her upward path of progress. The committees of all those societies to which she belonged for "improving" the world numbered her still among their most active members, but there was something a little harder, a little more remote about her than there had been before, as if she had drawn away the bridge that linked her with the past, so that she could never go back to it and was steeling herself to do without it. And sometimes Sharlie caught Mona looking at her as if she were sorry for her, and as if she knew the look upon her face was something more—and something less than —grief, as if she, like Judy, remembered only that Frank Norman had been foolhardy and had died of it. But her father's death seemed to have broken Mona's heart and frayed her nerves. She had nothing to say to anyone these days. She went nowhere. She greeted Sharlie with a pale ghost of her old-time smile, and went away when she came. Mark was grave, and terribly grown-up, and greeted Sharlie on the few occasions when they met as if he ought to know who she was, but never could remember. Mark, said Judy, had given up his idea of going out to Canada at the end of the summer with Harry Blunsdon. "I suppose he thinks he has to stay and look after mother!" and Judy laughed as if the idea of Mark looking after Eve Norman was somehow ridiculous.

Sharlie sighed for something that had been very bright and beautiful, that, somehow, had got a little spoiled and pushed out of shape, as things seemed always to do if you only gave them time.

Meanwhile, Philip Stratton had corrected the proofs of his new book, and was suggesting to Fanny that they might run across to Italy for a few weeks. They could be back by the end of July, in time to go and occupy the house they had taken by the Devonshire sea for the rest of the summer, and

during their absence in Italy Sharlie could go to her grandparents. Sharlie, who had been thrilled by the word Italy, had hoped for one impossible moment that the trip might include her, but evidently the idea had never so much as occurred to her father, and she wondered forlornly why it should have occurred to her. Surely by now she had learned that her father did not want her, that whatever paternal affection he had was centred upon pretty Pen and the solemn-eyed David?

Fanny had consented to the Italian trip without demur, though she told herself it would be hot in Italy—even in North Italy—and that she'd rather stop where she was. She did not think she was going to care so much nowadays for rushing about the Continent. She did not mind the thought of leaving her babies. They would be perfectly well looked after; and feeding Dave, though it had been pleasant, had also been rather a tie. It would be nice to get away from the more mundane side of life, to meet some men of her own age and forget for a while that she was married and a matron. It would be pleasant enough in the little hotel at the end of the lake, and it would certainly do Philip good.

But Philip did not mean to go to Gravedona this time. He was going, he said, to Cadenabbia, on Maggiore, and this Fanny welcomed, for at Cadenabbia there would be more English and more "life," people to meet and young men to dance with (Philip did not dance). She began, soon, to regret that they were not going to Deauville!

So, in the middle of June, to Italy they went. Away in Lincolnshire Sharlie traced their journeyings on the map, and sighed a little, but soon settled down to the quiet kind of holiday to which she was accustomed. She missed Clive, away at his Agricultural College, but hoped he would come home for his holidays while she was there. It was a long while since they had met, though they still wrote to each

other at intervals. Sharlie's friendship with Judy, however, had absorbed most of her capacity in this direction, and Judy was coming this summer to stay with her aunt. That, somehow, was a more exciting prospect than any reunion with Clive. Meantime, Judy had gone off to Folkestone with her mother and Mona up to the Lakes to stay with Garth Manistre's mother, chiefly to escape the Folkestone Leas, Judy said. Shane Mostyn, like her father, had corrected the proofs of his novel, and was preparing to betake himself abroad—to Switzerland, she thought, Judy said casually, as one not particularly interested in Shane and his plans. Judy did not encourage Sharlie's sentimental interest in Shane Mostyn. "He belongs to Mona," she said. "It's quite bad enough to have *one* of you soppy about that egregious young man." Egregious was a new word of Judy's. She applied it to lots of things, and to most young men.

At the end of June, Sharlie came down to breakfast one morning to hear her grandparents talking of something her grandfather called this "political murder," and which occupied their attention throughout the meal. She was told that the heir to the Austrian throne had been shot, with his Consort, at a place called Sarajevo, and Grandmother Selwyn was very contemptuous of what she called "these uncivilised Balkan States." But Gran'pa Selwyn seemed to take it very seriously. He had been reading, it seems, some pamphlet or other called *Where are we Drifting?* by somebody called Roscoe—Philip Roscoe—who had deduced the ugliest possible results from certain political moves of recent years.

"Roscoe? Roscoe?" said Ann Selwyn. "Don't like his Christian name, anyway. Who is he, and why should he know better than anybody else?"

"Probably, my dear, because he's taken the trouble to inquire. Most of us are so busy taking everything for

granted," said Henry Selwyn, and told her that Roscoe was on the *Signal*, at one time on the purely literary side, but lately he'd been going out after this diplomacy stunt—had written several articles on the question and had published this pamphlet.

"I hope to God he's wrong!" he said, presently.

"Wrong? Of course he's wrong," said Ann, who didn't like the *Signal*, and thought it subversive of the social law and order she liked and was used to, even though it was true it was sound on the Suffrage. . . .

Later in the morning, Sharlie came upon her grandfather deep in a re-reading of Mr. Roscoe's pamphlet. He returned absent-minded replies to her questions, and finally told her in a quite unusually irritable tone to keep quiet or to go away. So Sharlie went away, a little inclined to agree with her grandmother that he was making a fuss about nothing at all. Later, with the arrival of Clive, the subject lost interest for her. It was all part of that dull world of politics and affairs of which her elders liked to talk. It was to Sharlie an unreal uninteresting world in which, at twelve, she had neither interest nor place.

Clive, she found, like herself, had grown tall and a little awkward. He had also, she thought, grown more silent. He took her on several old familiar walks, and laughed, as of old, at her ornithological mistakes. Sharlie found it much more difficult to talk to him than formerly, especially about his uncle Frank's death. His face went very red when Sharlie repeated Judy's story about his going out with a temperature just because somebody he used to know had sent for him.

"Well, he was like that!" he said. "*Ju* can call it foolhardy if she likes. Ju's a little beast! I don't suppose *she'd* ever do *anything* she couldn't justify to herself!"

They tended to quarrel a little, Sharlie found, over Judy.

Clive's four years' seniority seemed now to mean a good deal more than it had meant when they were younger. It stood between them like a barrier, and Sharlie acknowledged it. She sighed a little without rebelling, resting in the thought of the friendship which had taken the place of that earlier one. After all, Clive was a boy. She didn't see (good pupil of Judy's that she was) how she could have gone on being friends with him for ever—or how it could ever have mattered as this friendship with Judy mattered. Everything about Judy urged her to flights of loyalty and admiration—even the letter (not at all admirable) in which Judy announced her return to London earlier than was intended, because her Aunt Mary ("the one we call Aunt Sachie, who lived at Fiveways with Gran'pa Bentley") had died suddenly of heart failure, and her mother thought she ought to go to the funeral. "I don't see why," wrote Judy, "but this family business is queer. I know she was mother's sister, but really, it doesn't seem to have mattered much. I don't see why we should have to *pretend.* It does seem feeble, anyway, of her to go and die of heart failure at fifty-six after doing absolutely nothing all her life. However, I suppose it was considerate of her to die now instead of a little later on when we should have had to buy new mourning."

"Ju's a little beast!" said Clive when Sharlie read to him this part of his cousin's letter. "She wants smacking!"

"She doesn't want anything of the sort," said Sharlie hotly.

"Oh yes, she does. You're a fool about her—think everything she does marvellous. She's just too beastly clever and know-all for words! Lucky for her *she* doesn't have to live Aunt Sachie's kind of life. No credit to her, anyway."

"But you didn't *know* your Aunt Mary!" said Sharlie, "any more than you know your Grandfather Bentley, so how can you tell whether Ju ought to like her or not?"

"I don't *care* whether she liked her or not. That isn't the point. She had a rotten life, anyway, with Gran'father Bentley. He wouldn't let her get married—and then sneered at her all her life for being an old maid. He's a swine."

Sharlie was astonished—as much at this word as at the argument and its fierceness. Looking at Clive, she saw that his face had gone very red. In it Sharlie read confusion and a knowledge of things outside her ken. He made her feel a very little girl indeed. He said: "Ju's too jolly fond of despising people and being clever about them. She ought to consider herself lucky she had a father like Uncle Frank."

"She does," said Sharlie.

"Then she might be a little more sorry for people who haven't," said Clive. "Even Ju wouldn't have got things her own way if old Jeremy Bentley had been her father instead of her gran'father."

"Oh, I think you're *silly*," said Sharlie. "He was Mrs. Norman's father—and your mother's, too. He didn't 'stop' either of *them* from getting married!"

That fierce colour flamed again in Clive's face. Like a clam he shut up, as if afraid of saying too much. Neither would he talk to her again upon the subject. Judy, sounded upon it when she came, said: "Well, of course it doesn't matter about his not *knowing* Jeremy Bentley, Esq. He's a tradition in our family. We all know *about* him. All the same, you're right. He *couldn't* have stopped Aunt Sachie if she'd had any guts. He couldn't stop mother and Aunt Beth!"

Sharlie, impressed by the uncompromising word "guts" as she had been by Clive's "swine," was afflicted again by the sense of her own youth and ignorance, but she was beginning to have a sense of the importance of fathers. She wondered vaguely if her own father would be a help or a hindrance to this thing Judy spoke of as "a woman's career." He probably wouldn't ever care enough about her to care what she did.

Besides, would she ever want to do anything very much? It wasn't as if she were clever like Judy. Much more probable she'd be like Judy's Aunt Sachie, spending her days in the country, an old maid "growing thin on fresh air and good works," as Judy irreverently put it.

One morning, towards the end of the third week of July, there was a letter for Sharlie from her stepmother announcing that by the time she received it they would be on their way home. "Your father is afraid there is going to be war," she wrote, "and we want to get home before it starts, if it's going to. Such a nuisance—it's really lovely here. I shall hate to leave it. But if your father's right, I should also hate to be caught in a lot of war-fever, so we shall be home, if all goes well, early next week, and go straight down to Sidmouth. If your grandparents can spare you, perhaps you might come down with us. The sea air will do you good . . ."

"Oh, isn't that *like* Philip Stratton," ejaculated Ann Selwyn, "getting into a panic about some quite impossible war! How *can* some nasty little Balkan squabble and one of their horrid assassinations make war in Europe?"

But Henry Selwyn was less sanguine of the impossibility. That man Roscoe had upset him considerably. Without agreeing with him in the very least he had yet been seriously disturbed by the argument he had built up, which certainly made war look not only possible, but probable. He did see that it might be true—that the countries of Europe, in the year of grace nineteen-fourteen, might actually fly at each other's throats. Improbable, perhaps, but possible, certainly.

Philip and Fanny got back to London on the day that Austria declared war against Servia. The next day came news of the bombardment of Belgrade, and following upon its heels news that Germany and Russia were already at war.

On the fourth of August, the Germans invaded Belgium, England declared war on Germany, and Philip Stratton came riding down in his car to fetch Sharlie home.

All through lunch Henry Selwyn and his son-in-law wrangled about the war. Much of it went over Sharlie's head. She realised only that her father was maintaining that England had gone to war because Germany had invaded Belgium, and that her grandfather was emphatically denying it, with much talk of Sir Edward Grey and questions in the House. It was years before Sharlie understood the meaning of any of it, and then only to be imbued with such a sense of the muddle and hopelessness of the whole thing that when Eve Norman was standing for Parliament, and Judy came asking her to come and canvass for her, she refused because she so inherently distrusted politics and politicians. But, in August nineteen-fourteen, still some months from her thirteenth birthday, she saw nothing except that something exciting and unexpected had come into her father's world, and had given him back his interest and enthusiasm for life and, strangely, was making her grandmother actually civil to him.

Philip, so he said, was going to apply for a commission at once, and he drove Sharlie home as if he could not get there quickly enough to do it. They had on the way so many narrow squeaks that Sharlie became quite certain that her father was not a very good driver; but he smiled at her so kindly, took so unusual an interest in her affairs and seemed so suddenly and unbelievably fond of her that she would willingly have encountered twice as many tight corners, if they were the outcome of this new surprising and utterly delightful mood. The war was but a mere incidental in the mood of happiness which descended upon her. It meant nothing, nothing at all, save that her father had become, at last, the kind of father she had always wanted him to be.

Three days later, however, he drove Fanny, herself, Lottie and the two babies down in the car to Sidmouth, a couple of servants having preceded them by train the day before. He spent two days in their company, and then went off to Bordon to train. Bordon, on the Surrey-Hampshire border, was a long way from Devonshire, which was why, at the end of August (and because without a man it was tiresomely slow), Fanny brought her household back to town. By then, England had declared war on Austria, Liége had been taken, the First British Expeditionary Force had landed in France, and people were declaring that the war would be over by Christmas. All the same, it seemed to Sharlie that everybody she knew had gone to the war. Mark Norman, like her father, was in training for a commission, as also was Mona's friend, Garth Manistre—Mark on Salisbury Plain, Garth at Bordon with her father. Mona's other admirer, Miles Anderson, Greta Mardinor's brother, was making a habit of being medically examined, but nobody so far would have him. Judy was still in Lincolnshire consoling her Aunt Beth for the loss of two sons—one to Canada earlier in the year and one now to the British Army, for, not waiting for a commission, Tom Blunsdon had hurried away to join up, and Clive had come home from his Agricultural College to try to take his place. Eve Norman had brought the war, as Mona said, into the Marne House drawing-room, together with fine linen and finer phrases—but then Mona made no secret of her scorn and hatred of the war. She brought the *Signal* into the house, left it lying about, and quoted Philip Roscoe and E. D. Morel, to all who would listen. Her Aunt Maud had offered her services to the British Army, and had been told by the War Office to go home and sit still, but her services had subsequently been utilised by the French Government, under whose ægis she had taken out a nursing unit to Servia.

Fanny, a trifle spasmodically, helped Eve Norman to make bandages in the drawing-room of Marne House. The only person who seemed to be unaware that there was a war on was Shane Mostyn. He had been caught in Italy, Judy told her, when the war started, and was never heard to talk of the war beyond retailing, upon arrival, the difficulties it had placed in the way of the returning holiday-maker. He spoke to Sharlie when they met in the grave fashion he always kept for her, which began now to embarrass her a little, as did Judy's comments upon the blushes his remarks called up upon her face. "Can't see what you all *like* in him!" she said. "He's a bit of a slacker, you know—clever enough, too. He's just lazy. And look at him about the war! Just doing nothing. Says he doesn't *believe* in war! Well, I'm sure *I* don't. Seems sort of childish to me—the kind of thing men *would* think of to settle their differences. But he might do *something*. Protest, and go to prison, or push an ambulance. Instead, he just lolls about with this new girl, Pat Ramsden. Oh, I forgot. You haven't seen her yet. Well, you haven't missed much. But she does write anti-war articles, and do unpopular things. She's the courage of her convictions, anyway. Of course, Mona hates her, but then, she would. Nothing to go by. Mother dislikes her, too—chiefly because she's found out she's married, and says she 'arouses misconceptions in men's minds by calling herself "Miss"'—which is probably the idea."

In the middle of September, she and Judy went back to school, where they discovered that they had now to write "Serbia" for "Servia," and "Petrograd" for "St. Petersburg." School was alternately very war-like and devoid of all knowledge of the war, but almost all the girls had fathers or elder brothers taking part in it or getting through the necessary preliminaries. Sharlie herself was not unthrilled when she said: "My father's in camp at Bordon. I expect

he'll go out soon." Sharlie was already a little famous for her father. Most of the girls' mothers read Philip Stratton's novels. The leisured middle-class women said of them (if their daughters were to be believed) that they "were very nice books," and were a little flattered to think his daughter was at school with theirs. But his new book went unnoticed by the school—there were so many other excitements to be had. Shane Mostyn's book, too, came out about this time and Fanny bought a copy and sent it, together with two or three favourable reviews she had culled, to Philip, who made no reference to it, however, in his letters. Handsome, resplendent in his new uniform, he seemed, in this new world of war, singularly at peace with himself and everybody around him, seeming even, these days of week-end leaves, to find Sharlie the nice little daughter he had always desired. Sharlie's approval of his appearance and astonishing good temper was unfeigned. She trotted about for him, waited upon him, pasted up his review cuttings, laughed at his jokes and was delighted to be seen out walking with him. Fanny laughed, but she, too, was delighted, Sharlie could see, with this new and pleasant Philip Stratton who made love to her as he had done in the old days, bought her unexpected and unnecessary presents, took her to theatres, out to dinner, and generally hated her out of his sight. He said things that made Sharlie blush and Fanny laugh and when he suggested at the end of his second week-end at home that Fanny should come and stay near the camp while he was there she assented, after a faint raising of her brows and a deprecating remark about "the depths of the country."

"It isn't the depths of the country," Philip told her, "and we shall have the car. The camp's spoilt Bordon, but the country is good for motoring, and we can get up to town in a couple of hours."

So Fanny packed up and went back with him on the

Sunday, and Sharlie was left to a much flatter and far less interesting world than the one in which she had dwelt for the past six weeks.

Child as she was, she wondered a little how Fanny could go away so easily and leave Penelope and David to Lottie and the servants. Penelope was nearly five—a lovely little creature, already a trifle spoilt and inclined to regard Sharlie as existing entirely for her convenience. But Sharlie, who adored her, did not mind her exactions, and grew to be actually grateful for her stepmother's absence, since it gave Lottie more opportunity for the engagements which crowded upon her these days, and which, had Fanny been at home, would certainly have been seriously curtailed. With Sharlie in the house she denied herself nothing; and Sharlie, afraid to leave her charges and go to bed until Lottie came in, soon developed headaches, and dark rings under her eyes by reason of her late nights, so that Fanny, upon her return, looked at her in alarm, until she bethought herself of an excellent reason for these things. After all, the child would be thirteen in the December—and looked already quite grown up. Something, she supposed, must be done about it—unless she knew already. By a few indirect questions, however, Fanny found that she knew nothing, which amazed her, for Fanny, at Sharlie's age, had been singularly well-informed upon these matters. She supposed, with a shrug, that the girls at Sharlie's school must be particularly nice-minded, and yet that Norman child. . . . She would have sworn *she* wasn't ignorant. Of course, though, Shar was the sort that *doesn't* get told. There always was that sort, she supposed, and herself found it singularly difficult to begin. In the end Sharlie was given some very woolly information which left her embarrassed, but not enlightened until she taxed Judy upon the matter. But Fanny breathed more freely, thought what a nuisance girls were, hoped that Penelope would be the school-acquiring kind, and

went back with Philip to the excitements of life in an almost entirely masculine company, and to the enjoyment of the practice of a side of life which in theory she had found so embarrassing.

On a day in December (and her thirteenth birthday, as it happened, as her father had remembered handsomely that morning), Sharlie said good-bye to a Mark Norman she had never known well, and who now in his uniform seemed quite a stranger. He was going to France and got there in time to help in the strengthening of the Allies' hold on Ypres at the end of the month. Garth Manistre still cooled his heels upon the Surrey hills, and Fanny wrote that they did not see much of him, for Mona, who these days was frequently at her grandfather's, a few miles away, was obviously a powerful magnet. Judy laughed at that and said: "She doesn't go to Gran'pa Bentley's to be near Garth, but because the old man doesn't talk about the war—at least he doesn't talk about *this* war. The Crimea's *his* war, and Mona says it's a relief even to hear people talk about *some other* war."

Despite its effect upon her father, Sharlie thought the war a nuisance, and that it had spoiled some of the things she had learned to regard as part of her life, like those old happy-go-lucky gatherings at Marne House, that quiet routine at Carr, and that budding acquaintanceship with "Jinny" Frome and her children. Mrs. Frome had given up her house in Kensington when her husband went to the war, and when it was over there were so many other things pressing for her attention that Sharlie was forgotten. Virginia Frome, her husband and three children, like Mona Norman, were people whom she occasionally met, but never really knew.

Early in nineteen-fifteen, Philip Stratton, so his daughter thought, was beginning to lose a little of that unexpected peace which had descended upon him six months earlier. The week-ends he spent in town were fewer and less satis

factory, from Sharlie's point of view; neither did he talk any longer about cooling his heels upon the Surrey hills—rather as if he didn't specially want people to notice that he was doing it. But he still showed a tendency to sit in Fanny's pocket. Sharlie saw him looking at her sometimes as if he couldn't bear her out of his sight, but Fanny was unchanged, as pleased with life as ever; cool, unperturbed, easy-going, having her photograph taken with Pen and Dave to please her husband, and ready to humour his every mood and whim. Sharlie wondered how she could be so happy when everybody knew he'd have so soon now to go out to France. It occurred to her that Fanny liked everybody but was not very fond of anyone. Even to her it was obvious that her father was a lot fonder of Fanny than Fanny of him.

One week-end, early in March, they came home bringing with them a young lieutenant named Browne. They both called him Rupert, and they went, the three of them, on the evening of their arrival to the theatre, setting off in the highest of spirits. They must have come in very late, Sharlie thought, for she herself had relieved Lottie until after eleven, and did not get to sleep until long afterwards, and they certainly had not come in when she had last looked at her watch at midnight. In the morning Fanny did not come down to breakfast, and her father, very gay, and humming a little tune, took his visitor out to walk in the Park. Sharlie tip-toed upstairs and went in to see her stepmother, who turned towards her a tear-swollen face, and told her to go away. Sharlie, staggered by this sight of the unusual and a little upset by it, pleaded to be allowed to do something for her, but Fanny, beginning to cry again, said: "You can't. You don't understand. Go away. I only want to be left alone."

A rather troubled Sharlie went away, and presently Fanny came down, mistress again of herself and of the situation, whatever it was, the signs of her tears entirely expunged.

But once, when Lieutenant Browne was out of the room, Sharlie came in just in time to hear her father say: "Good enough, isn't it? You know you always are," but he didn't seem at all perturbed or cross. On the contrary, he seemed to have recovered alike his good spirits and his new contentment, and Sharlie never saw him otherwise until six weeks later, when he went out to France. He kissed Sharlie goodbye then as if, she thought, he really liked her, and said to her twice: "Look after your mother. Don't let her do too much and tire herself," which Sharlie found a queer instruction, for nobody who knew Fanny would be likely to say that she ever did the one or the other.

Certainly she did neither during the first few months which followed her father's departure. She stayed late in bed each morning, paid the shortest of visits to the nursery, spent the afternoon visiting or being visited, made spasmodic visits to Eve Norman's drawing-room for "war work" and went out in the evenings but seldom, once to see Lydia Kyasht dance at the Coliseum, and once to the Duke of York's to see the Manchester Players in *Hindle Wakes*. Sharlie found the programme lying about the next day, and thought that in some ways, at least, it must be quite pleasant, after all, to be grown up. Once or twice Lieutenant Browne came to dinner, and it was with him Fanny went to see *Hindle Wakes*, but for the most part Fanny was more in her home than she had been for some time past. Life had become rather prosaic again, Sharlie thought, after so much unlooked-for and unexpected excitement, if you did not count the air raids, which Sharlie did not. For they usually happened at night and meant little sleep—since David and Pen were always awakened, and Lottie was frightened and had to be reinforced by Sharlie or her stepmother, more often by Sharlie. Her father, she thought, was more worried by the air raids than either she or Fanny, to judge by his letters and particularly by his epistolary

exhortations to Sharlie regarding Fanny. Sharlie, who never once had succeeded in persuading Fanny to do or not to do anything she intended to do or not to do, wondered why he should think she could do anything for Fanny she could not do for herself. But she sent him back reassuring letters and began, what with one thing and another, to feel very grown-up and responsible.

In the August, Judy told her that Shane Mostyn had suddenly joined up. The Air Force had turned him down, and he had been automatically drafted into a line regiment. Sharlie saw him once in his ill-fitting khaki, and wondered why his face looked so white and unhappy. She remembered, of course, that Judy had said he didn't "believe in war," but that did not then mean very much to Sharlie. After that she did not see Shane again for years. Nobody saw him, Judy said, unless it was Patricia Ramsden. They'd seen them together, she told Sharlie, one day when they were at the sea in July, but Mona wouldn't let her speak to them. "Said they didn't want to see us. I don't see why."

Sharlie, these days, was never tired of hearing about Mona Norman. She stood in Sharlie's imagination for somebody incredibly beautiful and clever who, with a host of admirers at her feet, yet remained hopelessly in love with somebody who, it seemed, was not in the least in love with her. Sharlie was at the romantic age, and though she had never had a boy friend in her life except Clive, and though most of those which her school acquaintances affected struck her as what Judy described as "soppy," the idea of being grown-up and lovely like Mona Norman and hopelessly in love, seemed to her unquestionably exciting.

Her own life was singularly uneventful—just school and homework, the children, walks and occasional bus expeditions to Kew and Richmond (these were the only really exciting things). Her visits to Lincolnshire were fewer just

now, and the last of them during the school holiday had been definitely disappointing. To start with, there was a silent, very grown-up Clive at Cross Farm, too busy learning to fill his brother's place to have much time for Sharlie, or walks about the countryside—even if he had shown any such disposition, which Sharlie was aware he did not. And at Carr House there was her grandmother, busy too, very business-like, asking interested, polite-sounding questions about Sharlie's father, so compassed about with war work of every kind that she no more than Clive had any time for the awkward schoolgirl on holiday. She grew a little irritable, too, with Sharlie, because she was of so little use with a needle, and so absurdly distressed by the dug-up lawns upon which that untidyness known as a "kitchen garden" was disporting itself. Beridge was away "doing war work," and the young C3 man Ann Selwyn had secured in his place cared nothing for the herbaceous borders and left Ann Selwyn's lilies unstaked with impunity. Grandfather Selwyn, who seemed to be enjoying the war considerably less than his wife, seemed also to be less dissatisfied with her granddaughter's part in it. He did not tell her it was time she learnt to be useful with her hands, and agreed with her that it was a pity about the lawns and that the C3 young man was no good. But Grandfather Selwyn was in the throes of a bad attack of sciatica, for which the heat, he told Sharlie, was worse than the damp, and which made him a little irritable too, and hard to please, though he was grateful to her for writing his letters and reading the newspaper to him. From a variety of causes Sharlie went back to town with a sense of relief. The war had spoilt Carr House, Carr House garden and the countryside. Moreover, there seemed singularly little fun in growing older. People seemed to like you less and life took on the queerest new shapes, presented all sorts of difficulties you'd never have suspected. On the whole, Sharlie thought, life had

been a lot nicer at eleven than it was now at thirteen.

Philip Stratton did not get leave until the middle of September—the day, unfortunately, of London's second Zeppelin attack—and Sharlie was a little worried because Fanny and her father had gone to the theatre and had not reached home when the bombardment began. But she was not prepared for the fuss that took place when at last they appeared. Her father was very concerned about Fanny, who, however, only laughed, and said she was none the worse—said it so often that at last Philip said: "Do you want me to think you don't *care*?" and his face had gone so white that Sharlie was suddenly much more frightened than she had been during the noise of the air raid. The next morning he announced at breakfast that they were all going into the country: Fanny, Sharlie, Lottie, and the babies. He was driving them down himself to a likely place he knew in Sussex, and they could stay in the inn there or in lodgings until they found a house. When Fanny said: "Oh, *why?* We're not a bit afraid of the raids, are we, Sharlie?" he said: "I don't care. I won't have you in London until this business is over. Sharlie's school? Well, she'll have to find a new school until then. It won't hurt her to miss a term at the usual one."

But Fanny wouldn't hear of that. She would only go, she said, if Sharlie could go back to her own school at the proper time. They fought long and hard about it, but her father won. "Sharlie's going to stay here and look after you until that kid's born, and there's no more to say on the subject. She's not a child any longer, and she's sensible. Which you, for some reason, don't seem to be."

"Oh, well," said Fanny, "it's no use arguing, I see. But I shall be very dull, darling."

Philip Stratton said again that he didn't care.

Fanny laughed. "Oh, well," she said, "I guess it'll be dull

anywhere for a bit, anyway," and the discussion ceased.

Sharlie's cheeks had burned at her father's reference to the fact that her stepmother was going to have another baby, and so soon, but she was so excited by the thought of a new baby in the family that she was not unduly concerned with that part of it which she did not understand. Fanny laughed at her enthusiasm at first, but ended by getting a little bored by it. Come to that, Fanny was bored, these days, from start to finish. She hated the country, and found the long smooth lines of the downs depressing, and after the recent months at camp with Philip, doubtless, Sharlie thought, she was finding it dull by contrast. When Judy wrote after the October raid, and was entertaining about the way she had got stuck in the Tube, Fanny sighed as if Judy had all the luck. Sharlie, however, found it as pleasant as ever in the country, and liked the little house they had found tucked away in a fold of the downs there, though she thought the garden deplorable and wished it were not too late to do something about it.

One day, in late October, Fanny's mother, old Mrs. Cornford, came to stay with her daughter. She was fatter than ever, and as "jingly," Sharlie decided, and she wished she had not looked at her so hard, nor made so many personal remarks about her in her presence—and all as if she were not there. "Not like her father, is she? She's grown since I saw her last. Quite a woman now. . . . She seems fond of the children. . . . Has she found her tongue by now?"

Sharlie did not like her very much, but her presence seemed to cheer Fanny up—if only because they could both abuse the country together. "Never mind, it'll soon be over, now," she said, in her inconsequent fashion. "How do you feel?"

Fanny said that she felt very well, that she always did.

"It's a pity this happened just now," said her mother. "Did you want another?"

"Oh, I didn't mind. It was a bit of a shock at first. Phil wanted it, though."

"He might have waited. Plenty of time."

Fanny laughed.

"I think Phil wanted it to happen now. Thought it would keep me out of mischief."

"The idea!"

"I daresay he's right. I was having a very good time when I was away with Phil. He's rather jealous, you know. I daresay he's all the happier for thinking no man is finding me attractive at the moment."

Fanny laughed again, which somehow took the sting out of her words. Sharlie bent lower over her home-work, and wished she might pick up her things and go elsewhere. But the house was so small, and this was the only room, save the kitchen, which had a large table.

"Heard from Phil?"

"Yes. He was expecting to go up the line again any time. He seemed well and cheerful."

"Where is he? Any idea?"

"Back in the Loos district somewhere, I expect."

"Well, don't worry more than you can help."

"I don't," said Fanny.

"I sometimes wonder if you ever regret doing it all in such a hurry, you know, Fan."

"What? Marrying Phil?"

"Yes. Do you?"

"No. Why should I? Phil's all right, if one *has* to be married! A bit moody, like most writing people. I'm not grumbling."

"No, you certainly don't grumble."

There were a lot of these conversations. Sharlie wondered what the old lady took away from them. They were, on the whole, she thought, singularly without meaning, except that

bit about her father wanting her stepmother to have another baby to keep her out of mischief. She thought Fanny *must* have imagined that.

The old lady went away, and came again a month later, and stayed until Fanny's second son was born. The event happened in the night, and with the minimum of fuss. Sharlie thought the newcomer exciting and spent as much of her spare time in his service as the new and rather terrifying nurse would allow. The only objector was Pen, who from the first showed definite jealousy of the newcomer, and turned her face determinedly away from him. David was interested and a little puzzled and Sharlie felt sorry for him, she did not know why, except that he had been "baby" for so long.

Fanny was up for Christmas, and Sharlie got used to seeing her sitting about the house nursing or feeding her baby, and thought that Fanny looked beautiful as she did it. She told Sharlie she was pleased that it was a boy, and very pleased that it was all over and pleased particularly because of Phil's telegram which had answered her own. But she was secretly determined to have no more children while the war lasted. She wasn't sure that she wanted any more, anyway.

Philip arrived on leave at the end of January, nineteen-sixteen. He was delighted with the baby, who had been called James, and anxious for Fanny to stay where she was and not to go back to London. But she pointed out that they had only taken the house for three months, and that the period was nearly up.

"I don't like it much here, Phil. These young mountains give me the hump. Do let us go back to town. Besides, Sharlie ought to go to her proper school when term begins, and I shall have trouble with Lottie if we stay here much longer. All servants hate the country."

Reluctantly, Phil gave in, and early in February back they went to Edward Street. Philip Stratton got out to France

again in time to take part in the Verdun battle, which began at the end of the month. It made Sharlie sad to see him go, for she understood better now what a dreadful thing the war was, and that he might be killed, like the fathers of several of her acquaintances at school. She smiled at him, however, and kept her lamentations until after he had gone, when she surprisingly cried a little on Fanny's shoulder and said: "Oh, I *wish* he didn't have to go."

"No use wishing that, my dear. Everybody will have to go, whether they want to or not, now that they have passed the Conscription Bill," Fanny said, as calmly as if she spoke of a journey to the post-box at the corner.

Sharlie had heard about the Conscription Bill at school.

"It doesn't look as if the war's going to be over for years," she said sadly. "Daddy may be killed—like poor Miles Anderson."

Miles had been killed only a few weeks earlier, and Sharlie had been a little unhappy about it, though she knew him but slightly. She had seen him the last time he was home on leave calling to take Mona out for the evening—Mona who never thought about him at all when he wasn't there, and always pretended not to see him looking at her with that funny tell-tale expression on his round chubby face.

"We don't have to think gloomy thoughts like that," said Fanny.

"But, he *may*."

"Well, we mustn't think about it."

"But, aren't *you* frightened he may?"

"No. That's silly. We just have to go on and not let things get on our nerves. Just go on doing all the usual things and not meeting trouble half-way."

That, Sharlie supposed, was common sense, and she, in unison with Fanny and the rest of the world, soon found herself doing "all the usual things." School, tea with Judy,

books, visits to Marne House, letters to write, new books to read, new clothes to buy, the new baby to see bathed, and Dave's games to be shared, hockey, tennis, and her piano-practising—so difficult, so elusive. At the end of March there was an exciting arctic storm which felled many trees in Hyde Park, and the Park at Richmond to which she and Judy rode sometimes on the top of a bus on a Saturday afternoon. They went there on the Saturday following the storm, coming back armed with boughs of tender green from a fallen giant beech, and encountering on their bus on the homeward journey what an amused and scornful Judy called "the latest thing in patriotism."

The bus had halted in the Sheen Road to pick up passengers and Judy and Sharlie, sitting just inside, saw a middle-aged man proceeding upstairs with a small dachshund under his arm. Suddenly, the conductor pulled his coat-tails. "No, you don't," he said, "not if *I* know it."

The owner of the dachshund stopped, turned round.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"You can't get on my bus with that there dog."

"Why not? Dogs can be taken on top."

"Not a German dog can't—not on *my* bus!" averred the conductor, with a rightous self-satisfied air that for all her indignation made Sharlie laugh. The owner of the little dog, however, did not laugh. He called the conductor an ignorant fool, patted the little creature's head, and after a wordy interlude, got off. The conductor pulled the cord, reached for his ticket-board and, gazing around for public approval, encountered Judy's amused young countenance.

"Two to Sloane Street," said that young woman, putting her head round her sheaf of beech leaves, and as he punched the tickets she added: "You were wrong about that dog, you know. It isn't German."

"You mean to tell me, a dackshound dog ain't German?"

"The dackshound, as you call it," said Judy, "was originally a *French* dog, which the Germans liked and rather adopted. That doesn't make it German."

"I suppose you think you're very clever?" the conductor asked her, pausing in the business of clipping the tickets to regard her with a baleful eye.

"No, not particularly," said Judy, "merely accurate!" and she took the tickets with a sweet disarming smile for which, Sharlie felt, the patriotic conductor could willingly have slain her.

At the end of March, news came that Philip Stratton had been wounded in the knee, and was in hospital at the base. It wasn't a Blighty wound, but Fanny did not seem to mind.

"*That's* all right," she said to Sharlie, "now we can let up, stop worrying, and have a little enjoyment."

Sharlie, who had never observed any signs that Fanny had worried unduly, said only: "Oh, I *wish* they'd let him come home!"

"But that would mean that his wound was much more serious!" said Fanny.

"Well, *then*, he might not have to go back at *all!*"

Fanny said: "Oh, but you wouldn't like him to have to have his leg off, now would you? I'm quite sure he feels he's very lucky as he is."

"But don't you think he *wants* to come home?"

"Oh, of *course*, but he's not a silly little girl like you. He knows he can't always be running home like that, with a war on."

Sharlie, who did not much like being called a silly little girl, said no more. She noticed that these days Fanny did not sit about with her baby at her breast in the way Sharlie had thought it so lovely to see. She observed that the baby fed these days out of a bottle, and had overheard a scrap of

conversation between Fanny and her mother on the point, when Fanny said her milk didn't seem to agree with him, and that he wasn't "getting on too well." Mrs. Cornford had replied: "If he's delicate, all the more reason. I don't hold with bottle-fed babies, their teeth don't come properly—something to do with the jaw formation." But Fanny, unconcerned, shrugged her shoulders and smiled at her mother's vagueness. For the first time Sharlie was struck by the likeness between them—they were both good-tempered, easy-going, both given to vague statements that though they suggested things certainly never told you anything, in the sense of conveying information. True, Mrs. Cornford was very fat, and Fanny merely plump, that she wore her strange and jingling garments instead of the trim and fashionable clothes her daughter affected, but there was something, Sharlie discovered now, which stamped them mother and daughter. She dwelt upon the possibility of Fanny as she grew older growing fat too. "Fat and comfortable," was Lottie's expression for Mrs. Cornford. "I expect she takes her stays off when she's alone."

Lottie's colleague, Doris, a new, rather pert young girl of sixteen, incorporated into the nursery since baby Jim's arrival, gave it as her opinion that she didn't wear any, "or, if she did, she'd look better without them." A lot of the nursery conversation was like this, varied by accounts of various "fellas," of whom the pert young Doris seemed to know a considerable number. Sharlie, who spent a good deal of time these days in the nursery, thought that if her step-mother could hear some of the talk that went on she would not leave Pen and Dave so often to the pair of them, for Fanny was out so much in the months which followed the news of Philip's wound and removal to the base-hospital that but for Sharlie the children would have seen nobody at all but the servants. Even little Jim, now that he was weaned,

drew his mother to the nursery but seldom. She did not, Sharlie thought, seem as fond of him as of Pen and Dave, despite the fact that he was so small and helpless. He cried a lot more than Dave had done at his age, Sharlie thought, and was smitten with an enveloping passionate tenderness for him. His smile, slow, rare and a little puzzled, was a thing which touched her to strange pain and made her long to do something to reassure him. She wondered how Fanny, bent still on "having a little enjoyment," could bear to leave him so much, and took a childish vow, then and there, if she ever married and had babies, never, never to leave them to the mercies of people she employed. In her young mind grew up, too, although she was not aware of them as yet, the first faint stirrings of criticism of her stepmother. Consciously, she still thought of Fanny only as the kind and good-natured person she had always found her, but underneath her young mind was puzzled by things she was too innocent and too ignorant to recognise for what they were. She did not very much like the people with whom, nowadays, the little house at Edward Street was so frequently filled, and definitely she did not like Lieutenant Rupert Browne, who seemed to be doing very little in the war, nothing, certainly, that took him to France, for he came to the house very often—sometimes with other people, sometimes alone, sometimes to call for Fanny in the evenings, when she went out looking very lovely with a beautiful new velvet wrap thrown over her evening frock, and which, for all she held it up beneath her chin with her long white manicured beautiful hands, flowed out behind her like a canopy, revealing in front far more than it hid, as she swept down the steps to the waiting taxi. Sharlie was a little mystified by this gaiety-loving Fanny, who seemed, somehow, to have come into being with the war, which had made most of the other people she knew so much more serious.

In the April, Mona Norman became engaged to Garth

Manistre just before he went to the front, and one afternoon, soon afterwards, Sharlie went to tea at Marne House, walking down through the bright spring day with Judy from school. And there, in the old familiar room, sat Mona talking to her married friend, Greta Mardinor, who had been Greta Anderson, still wearing black for her brother. They got up and went away, however, in the way of grown-ups, as Sharlie and Judy came in, which disappointed Sharlie, for the joy of looking at Mona did not lessen, though their conversation had by now reached vanishing point. But Judy banged her books down upon the table with an emphatic: "Good riddance!"

"I can't bear Greta," she said. "I never did like her, and she's a bit much these days. It's bad enough to have *Mona* mooning about the way she does, ever since Shane went to France, without *her!*"

"Oh, dear!" said Sharlie. "*Has* he? *When?* I *am* sorry."

"Oh, quite recently. He didn't come to say good-bye—just wrote Mona a line. It came the afternoon Greta and her mother had come to tea—and Mona gave herself away properly. Mother was annoyed that Shane hadn't come to say good-bye—though of course he hasn't been near us for ages—and Mona flared up. She always defends Shane from mother—it's the only time she mentions his name. But Greta's got sharp eyes. *She* knows Mona's really in love with Shane, even if she *is* engaged to Garth. Greta's a beast. She thinks . . ." Judy stopped suddenly. "Well, Greta's a fool, anyway, and it is my belief *she's* sweet on Mark. I *know* she had a letter from him the other day, because she knew before we did that he was expecting leave. That's why she's always stuck here."

"But, Judy—Greta's got a husband."

"She's left him—gone home to mother."

Judy made a grimace.

"Doesn't she like him?"

"Don't ask me. But she won't get very far with Mark, even if he does like her. Mark isn't that sort—war or no war."

"*What* sort?"

"The sort that has affairs with married women, silly!"

"Oh, I see," said Sharlie, but she didn't. Life as one grew older became very complicated and difficult. There were already so many things one simply didn't understand at all. She wondered if Judy understood them.

But books remained. Poetry was there, waiting to be discovered—reams and reams of poetry, catching at one's heart, slipping down and down into the memory.

Now the bright morning-star, day's harbinger,
Comes dancing from the East, and leads with her
The flowery May, who from her green lap throws
The yellow cowslip and the pale primrose . . .

That was Milton, and here was Thomas Hood:

I saw old Autumn in the misty morn
Stand shadowless like Silence, listening
To silence, for no lonely bird would sing
Into his hollow ear from woods forlorn.

And here Gray:

Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight,
And all the air a solemn stillness holds,
Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,
And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds.

She read for the first time Keats's *Odes* and remembered for ever such lines as:

Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu.

Shelley's lines to the moon:

a dying lady lean and pale,
Who totters forth, wrapp'd in a gauzy veil

or

Pale for weariness
Of climbing heaven and gazing on the earth

and a hundred others which became part of a secret sacred life she bore as a pregnant woman carries a child in her body, something so deeply hers that she did not even share it with Judy, whose tastes, however, did not run to poetry.

"It *sounds* sad, it's *meant* to be sad and it *is* sad," that young woman said. "All the poets are too bloomin' elegiac. They love talking about death and the grave. Look at your friend Keats. . . *I have been half in love with easeful Death. . . To cease upon the midnight with no pain.* . . I can't *see* why you have to fill yourself up with that, Shar. I'll lend you Cook's *Life of Florence Nightingale*—when I've finished it. A ripping book, better than all your poetry, that knocks out the Lady-with-the-Lamp fairy tale once and for all. Florence was a devil. A devil who got things done. I always suspected she was. Never could see how so much red-tape was cut with only sweet womanliness."

But Sharlie stuck to her poetry that had, Judy insisted, "no relation to real life." Sharlie didn't care if it hadn't. The sound of the words, the images they built up in her mind, the sense they gave her of natural beauty were for ever exciting, and as she grew older she liked to see how the poet got his effects, how he used words, syllables, letters even, to achieve them, which Judy said was intelligent of her, for most people seemed to like poetry just because it sounded nice. "It's a kind of incantation," she said, "a soporific."

Sharlie began to think that perhaps you only really cared

for poetry if you cared, first, for the country.

"I don't rave about the country as you do, but I haven't a down on it, like mother," said Judy. "It's clean, anyway. But I can't see why the poets can't write about the things that matter, for a change . . ."

"As for instance?" Sharlie asked.

"Well, all the social mess, for one thing."

"Shelley did."

"What is one among so many?" said Judy, and waited for Sharlie to add to the list. But as usual, Sharlie's tricksy memory failed her.

So Judy got away with it.

CHAPTER TEN

NINETEEN-SIXTEEN moved on.

For Sharlie the war slipped into the background. Her father's knee was proving troublesome and there was ("unfortunately," he wrote) no likelihood of his going back into the line for months. Sharlie wondered why "unfortunately," but decided that her father really *liked* the war—or would if it weren't for leaving Fanny. But Fanny was all right. Quite well again now, a little plumper than she had been, very gay and bright and happy, with a long list each week of social engagements and ever, ever so many men friends. That seemed a little strange to Sharlie, for she had not seemed to have many before that time she went to Bordon with her father, but she supposed it was because of the war, and because it was "our duty to do what we could for these nice boys, when they come home, or before they go out." Fanny said: "Oh, dear, how terrible!" when she heard that one of the "nice boys" had been killed, or when the morning paper contained news of air raids and ships sunk at sea and news of the Easter Rebellion in Ireland, and the trial of Sir Roger Casement. But life went on just the same as ever. The war did not seem to make very much difference to people. London, at least, wore an air of having got used to it, of having accepted it as part of life. People grumbled at the price of food and clothes and because they couldn't get enough sugar, butter and meat, and about "food tickets," the darkness of the streets at night, and the suspension of August Bank Holiday, but that was all.

For the first time Sharlie did not that summer go to Carr House, but went instead in June to Salcombe, in South

Devon, with Fanny, the three children, and a complaining Lottie and Doris. Sharlie liked everything about this Devon holiday, beginning with the long ride in the train, the slow, cool journey on the steamboat in the early evening up the Kingsbridge estuary, the first view of the little town itself, a huddle of grey and red stone shut back from the sea behind a stout wall upon which grew red and pink valerian, the ferry-boat, the landing-stage, and the brief journey by car up the white road that ran between its tall valerian-topped walls to Rosemary Cottage, clinging precariously to the hillside, where Fanny and her father, with Lottie and Pen and Dave, had stayed before. A cluttered-up house it proved, not in the least as Sharlie imagined a country cottage should be, or as she remembered Bede Cottage; furnished with satin-walnut, marble-clocks, patterned wall-papers, pink and blue, small tables that got in your way and simply asked to be knocked over, pictures in gilt frames with "stories" in them ("The First Kiss," "The Elopement," "Wedded," and the like), and cushions with white lace covers, which Fanny piled in a heap behind her dark head after lunch each day as she rested on the couch by the window. Fanny thought the house "very comfortable," and never saw that the only lovely thing about it was the sight of the blue estuary from the windows at the front, and the little wood which you saw from those at the back into which you could step from the garden, and in which Sharlie buried herself for hours at a time with her poetry until dragged out by a Fanny who wanted her to go across on the Ferry to Mill Bay with Lottie and the children, to "have a bathe, and keep an eye on them."

"What's the use of coming to the sea if you're never going near it or into it?" she would say. So Sharlie obediently went down to the sea, and swam about in it while Lottie paddled with Pen and Dave, and Doris "minded" James; went home again for lunch, helped to give the children theirs, put them to

bed afterwards, and wondered what Fanny found to do with herself during their absence—either in the cottage or out of it. That Fanny wasn't dull was certain. She knew a lot of people and went on a good many motoring trips with various parties, and once or twice she stayed away for a day or two and came home looking flushed and excited and in the very best of spirits. Sometimes, but not often, because the maid, who had been "let" with the house, grumbled about so much extra work, she brought her friends to the cottage for dinner, and once, to Sharlie's surprise, Lieutenant Browne was among them. Sharlie did not very much like this young man. His dark good looks were too flashing, and she disliked the way his eyes rested upon her stepmother, the way he had of saying things nobody else could hear, that made Fanny laugh as if she would never stop.

"I think he's *horrid*!" said Sharlie one day. "So conceited!" and Fanny said: "Oh, Shar!—and he thinks you so pretty, too!"

Sharlie had blushed deeply. Nobody had ever told her before that she was pretty, and it pleased her so much that she wondered why it shouldn't have made her like Lieutenant Browne more. But it certainly didn't, and she was very relieved, for some reason, when that handsome young officer went back to town.

They themselves got back at the end of the second week in September in time for the air raid on the twenty-fourth, and for Judy Norman's sixteenth birthday on the twenty-seventh. Two days later came the news that Tom Blunsdon had been killed at Verdun, and that Mark Norman had been taken prisoner. Philip Stratton was still at the back of the lines, and Fanny still continued "not to worry, and to have a little enjoyment." As the year crept through a mild October, the house in Edward Street was frequently very full of people on those evenings when Fanny was in it. To Sharlie, it was all

rather like those shadowy days in the house at Chelsea when she had stood at the top of the stairs watching people arrive or lay awake in bed listening to the buzz of their voices climbing the stairs and through the floor of her room. But in these days there was always the sound of the gramophone and the scraping and shuffling of feet as they moved up and down the parquet flooring of the long drawing-room and sometimes the sound of voices raised in queer-sounding songs with words which always struck Sharlie as meaningless.

Two German officers crossed the Rhine,
Parlez-vous.
Two German officers crossed the Rhine
To kiss the women and drink the wine,
Inky, pinky, parlez-vous;

or—

If you've never been the lover of the landlady's daughter,
Then you cannot have a second piece of pie,

which seemed to amuse everybody intensely and was sung as a round over and over again, or:

Are you Mister Reilly who keeps this hotel?
Are you Mister Reilly they speaks of so highly?
Gaw' blimey, O'Reilly, you are looking well.

Sometimes the noise would wake up James, who would be told by an irritable Lottie to go to sleep again, but who would do no such thing until somebody did something about it—usually Sharlie. And more often than not James would wake up Pen and Dave, who didn't mind the noise downstairs a bit and were only to be prevented from going out to sit upon the stairs by Sharlie's sitting at their side and telling them a story. Sharlie, growing fast, and at a critical age, was tired and grew to be thankful on those evenings when Fanny

dressed herself up in her beautiful clothes, kissed her children, told them to be good and not "worry Sharlie," and took herself off, for only on those evenings did she get into bed at a proper hour and sleep until seven-thirty the next morning. Fanny said she needed a tonic and that schools worked girls too hard, but having no idea of her defaulting maids and Sharlie's consequent efforts in the nursery, never connected her shadowed eyes and listless morning air with her own riotous enjoyment overnight.

Lottie and Doris also preferred these evenings when Fanny was out, but not for Sharlie's reasons. They knew a better way of spending their free evenings than going early to bed, and they quarrelled sometimes as to which was going out and which not. They used to each other the queerest expressions, which Sharlie pondered without understanding, and on Doris's evenings she stared in astonishment at the difference between Doris during the day and Doris arrayed for recreation—at the difference between her pasty day face and the pink-and-white and red-lipped Doris who said "So long" from the doorway. Judy had once said that it was a pity Fanny "made-up," so that Sharlie had stared hard at her one evening when she, too, was arrayed for flight, but Fanny's make-up was no more than a heightening of her natural charms which you might think unnecessary but never a mistake, whereas Doris's face, Sharlie thought, was a mistake from start to finish and quite dreadful to behold.

"What on earth does she *do* it for?" Sharlie asked Judy, who said calmly: "To attract men, my love."

"To *attract* men?"

"That's what I said."

Sharlie laughed.

"Mother would send her out to wash her face," said Judy, and laughed, too.

The year ran down into December, bringing heavy fogs

and rumours of peace from Germany, which as usual came to nothing, a Peace Note from America, and a letter from Philip Stratton in which he said he hoped to be coming home for Christmas.

He came, however, quite early in December, and Sharlie always remembered his arrival. Nobody was expecting him. Fanny was giving a party, larger than usual and even noisier, and Sharlie, who could not sleep, had got out of bed, wrapped herself in her dressing-gown and gone to sit on the top of the stairs, listening to the strains of the gramophone and watching such of the company as drifted into the hall and into the rooms on the other side of it. Suddenly there came a sharp double knock at the door. The noise inside drowned the knock, and it was repeated, but as Rose, Fanny's trim parlourmaid, hastened to answer it, the noise in the house did not lessen. If anybody—Fanny or her visitors—had heard the knock they evidently concluded that it was a belated guest, for the noise and the jazz went on. But when Rose opened the door, there on the doorstep stood a familiar khaki-clad figure. With a rush Sharlie was down the stairs and pulling her father inside the door.

"Daddy! Daddy! How lovely!" she cried and was chilled to feel the casual looseness of his embrace, the absent-mindedness of his kiss. He stood still for a few seconds with his arm about her shoulder, looking, as she knew, straight over the top of her head into the crowded room beyond, then putting her on one side he advanced into the open doorway and stood there gazing upon the scene. From where she stood, Sharlie could see into the room, too—could see the people sitting about in chairs, on the chair-arms, on the floor, people Sharlie had seen before and some she had not, most of them with glasses in their hands, even in those of one or two of the couples who danced in the cleared space at the far corner of the long room. In the middle of it stood her

stepmother in a shimmering white frock (Fanny affected white these days) that revealed a good deal of Fanny at the top, and clung warmly elsewhere to the rounded ample curves of her body. Glass in hand, she was looking up into the face of a young man in a lieutenant's uniform—Rupert Browne, as Sharlie knew—her head back, her mouth stretched wide in a smile that showed the double line of her beautiful teeth. Their faces were very near together, and Sharlie was fascinated by the expression upon Rupert Browne's. She felt that at any moment he might put his arms round Fanny and kiss her. She knew that her father was looking at them, too—that they were the only people he saw in all that crowded room.

The gramophone whirred into silence, somebody went forward and switched it off. The dancers stopped, turned about—and suddenly the noise abated, dropped into a hush across which a girl's high laughter cut sharply and broke off mid-way. Sharlie saw her mother turn and look across to the doorway to which so many other eyes were by now directed. She saw the look of recognition in her face, the sudden death of that wide smile, the birth of another, quite different, the raising of a white arm whose hand still held the glass. Then Fanny put the glass down and came over to the door, her guests squeezing themselves against each other to give her a passage. Sharlie looked at her, with her flushed face, her white arms and neck, the curve of her rounded bosom, the red mouth lifted in a smile of welcome.

"Why, *Phil!*" she said.

Sharlie saw her father look at her. The smile wavered on Fanny's mouth, then Philip took a step forward, snatched her in his arms and kissed her fiercely before them all, not only her mouth, but her white neck, the curved and rounded (and to Sharlie so terribly revealed) white bosom. Sharlie's face was very hot; her limbs trembled. The company, how-

ever, were so delighted with this performance that they roared their appreciation. Fanny released herself presently to stand up, laughing and pushing her disordered hair back from her face.

"It's all right," she cried. "He may, he's my husband!"

"Hooray!" cried the company.

"*And* he's come home on forty-eight hours' leave and wants his wife to himself!" said Philip calmly.

In five minutes the last guest had gone. Rupert Browne last of all, with a lingering look at Fanny, a brief "How do, Stratton?" to Philip.

Forgotten, unseen, Sharlie saw Philip turn then upon his wife with a look of such unhappiness upon his face that it gave her a physical shock.

"What's that whipper-snapper to you?" he asked.

"Who?"

"The young man you'd have kissed if I hadn't appeared when I did?"

Fanny laughed.

"Oh, *Rupert!* Well, there wouldn't have been any harm in it if I had. He's just amusing."

"How often do you have him here?"

Fanny shrugged those white expansive shoulders of hers.

"Oh, occasionally."

"Is he your lover?"

"Of course he isn't."

"Swear it."

"If you like."

"Why do you have him here?"

"Why do I have *any* of them here? One must do something."

"Aren't your children enough for you?"

"No."

They stood there looking at each other for a moment, then

Sharlie saw her father take her stepmother by the arm and pull her back into the room. She saw the door shut, heard the key turn in the lock.

As she turned to go upstairs Rose came out of another room with a loaded tray. She must, Sharlie realised, have been there all the time clearing away, must have heard that strange conversation in the drawing-room doorway. Going on slowly up the stairs, Sharlie saw Rose's colleague come along from the passage that led to the kitchen stairs, to be met by Rose, who delivered to her the laden tray. She said: "What's happened to the party?"

"Finished. The master's come 'ome."

"Oh! Then I may as well clear up in there."

"You can't go in. The door's locked."

"You don't mean to say . . ."

Rose did. She jerked her head significantly in the direction of the drawing-room.

"Well," said the other, " 'e 'asn't lost much time, I *must* say . . ."

Sharlie heard them giggling as she ran quickly up the staircase and into her own room.

"What does it mean," said Sharlie, two days later to Judy, "when people are *lovers?*"

Judy told her.

BOOK THREE

FATHER AND DAUGHTER

. . . yet have I left a daughter.

—KING LEAR.

CHAPTER ONE

"Oh, Shar, I don't see why you can't!" said Pen Stratton for the fourth or fifth time. Her voice held a note which Sharlie found exasperating, but she knew that if she looked at her it wouldn't matter. To look would be fatal, for she could never resist the pleading in that lovely petulant little face. So she kept her head bent over her task and gave no sign that she had heard.

"Oh, Shar, I think you *might!*"

Still not looking up, Sharlie said, "Darling—it isn't any use. I must finish this first."

"I don't see why. Mine wouldn't take you a minute," and then, desperately, "It wouldn't, you know, Shar. You're so clever."

Sharlie smiled, but still she would not yield nor look up. Pen, of course, angel-child that she looked, was incorrigibly lazy, much too wrapped up in herself to pay compliments except when she hoped they would do something for her. And she was far too used to having things done for her. She had only to pout and lower her long up-curled eyelashes to have everybody slaving for her. Fanny, herself—even her father, who was fairly good, Sharlie thought, at getting things done for himself by other people. Over Pen's homework there was always the same scene. Neither Fanny nor her father was of very much help here. Shar, who was still at school, was much more likely, Pen had long ago discovered, to possess the particular piece of knowledge of which she was in need at the moment. But Sharlie's studies, these days, took up so much of her time that frequently she had none to spare for her half-sister's emergencies until it

was too late and Fanny was decreeing supper and bed. Her anxious eyes upon the clock she said now: "Oh, Shar, it's nearly seven o'clock—oh, I do think you might! Shar, it's *beastly* of you!"

A hint of tears now in the pleading voice. Sharlie sighed. This idiotic essay! What she was writing was of no use at all. She knew that. She might just as well stop and do what the kid wanted. "The Rise and Development of the English Parliament!" Absurd of her to make such a theme an excuse for a slashing attack upon what she knew of the English Parliament of to-day—hopelessly antiquated, mediæval, expensive, completely unfitted to deal with the pressing problems of post-war England. Sharlie read over the phrases with a frown upon her fine brow. How Miss Rawnsley would laugh! Her eyebrows would rise perceptibly (it was a staggering trick when you first encountered it), and she would say: "What do you, a girl of seventeen, know about such a matter? This striving for originality is a pose, Charlotte. I am afraid I must ask you to write up this theme again—working over the beaten track, *if* you please." And Miss Rawnsley would return the essay with the same kind of pencilled comment which had fallen to that of last week, "The Balance of Power among European States." "Special pleading. Your facts are open to question. A very partisan essay." Asked to supply her sources of information, Sharlie had supplied names and titles, at which Miss Rawnsley's brows had risen so high they seemed in danger of being permanently lost amid the coil of hair which lay across her forehead. *Red Rubber, Morocco in Diplomacy, The Truth About the War, Where Are We Drifting?*—what books, pray, were these? E. D. Morel? Oh, *that* man! . . . Philip Roscoe? *Really?* Miss Rawnsley was unacquainted with their works and, told of them, did not seem to think she had been guilty of any very serious omission. She commended to Sharlie's

notice several more conventional but (according to Miss Rawnsley) much more reliable sources of information. "What the London University wants, Charlotte Stratton, is knowledge, *facts*." Charlotte would please make an effort to supply them in re-writing the essay, instead of handing in a lot of woolly "advanced" opinions that, anyway, were only second-hand, culled from hastily-read and ill-digested dippings into books by queer people nobody had ever heard of! Thus Miss Rawnsley, M.A. Oxon. Sharlie frowned at the recollection.

"Oh, Shar, you *are* being beastly to me!"

Pen's voice had become a wail. Another second and a sob choked her maddeningly repetitive utterance. With another sigh Sharlie tore up the pages before her, crumpled them up and dropped them into the waste-paper basket at her side. Pen checked her sobs and came over to her. Sharlie put an arm around her and gathered her up against her.

"Pen, you're very naughty. How do you think I can do my own lessons if you keep worrying me about yours?"

"Oh, but mine won't take a minute. And you're so *big* to do lessons. I always forget. It can't matter so much when you're *big*, Shar."

"It's just because I *am* 'big' that they do matter. I have to pass exams."

"Why?"

"Oh, because it's expected—because I want to pass them."

"*Do* you? Daddy says exams. are silly. Especially for girls."

"Well, they have to be passed, anyway," said Sharlie, very conscious still of her father's scorn when news had arrived a week or so ago of her failure in her first attempt at matriculation.

"*I* shan't do exams. when I'm as big as you!" Pen said. "I'll be married by then, I expect; don't you?"

"Perhaps," said Sharlie, "but that's a long way off. You're only a little girl of eight at the moment."

"Well, I shall be nine in May—and that's *quite* big. . . . Shar—haven't you ever had a sweetheart?"

"I can't remember one."

"Can't you? I've had lots. Bruce Foster wants me to go with him now. I'll show you his note if you like."

"I don't like," said Sharlie, "and I haven't time to talk about little boys. Run and fetch your book and let me see what you have done."

Extremely little, she found—less, even, than usual. Really, Pen was the limit. She, too, had been wrestling with an English paper—only, she hadn't wrestled much. Sharlie glanced over the questions and Pen's miserable attempts at answers, wondering how it was that she could have so little interest in a subject she herself had always found enthralling.

"Oh, Pen," she said, "can't you really answer *any* of them?"

"No, really not," said an unconcerned Pen.

"Are you supposed to have read these books and poems this term?"

"Bits of them. I don't *see* how you remember the silly things!"

"Do you *really* think Dickens wrote *Ivanhoe*?"

"I thought he might have done."

"Well, he didn't. It was Scott. Put that down. No, two 't's.' *Who said 'I love all things old'?* Haven't you any *idea*?"

Pen shook her head.

"Don't you remember the play the girls did at Christmas about a young man who mistook a gentleman's house for an inn and a girl who pretended she was a servant-girl?"

"Oh yes—but I thought it was so silly. *She Stoops to Conquer*, it was called."

"And you don't remember who wrote it?"

After a while and with a little assistance Pen presently found she did and wrote down "Oliver Goldsmith" in the wrong place and had to cross it out again. At this stage the door opened and Fanny came in.

"Mummy," said Pen instantly, "who said, *Who steals my purse steals trash?*"

"I'm sure I don't know, darling," said Fanny comfortably. "Can't Shar help you?"

"She won't."

Fanny looked inquiringly at Sharlie.

"But it's absurd! She doesn't know one! I can't put down *all* the right answers!"

"Why ever not?" asked Pen.

"Well, do you think that would be quite nice?"

"Oh, it wouldn't matter. But can't you put down some of them just a *weeny* bit wrong, perhaps?"

"No, I can't," said Sharlie crossly.

Fanny laughed.

"I'm sure *I* don't know who said, 'What is Truth?' " said Pen.

"Oh, that's in the Bible," said Fanny. "Is it a Scripture paper?"

"No, English literature," said Pen.

"The Bible *is* English literature," said Sharlie, laughing. "Put down 'Pilate,' Pen."

Fanny looked at her little daughter busily chewing the end of her pen.

"Hurry up, darling. It's very late."

"But I can't hurry if Shar won't help me. She *is* a pig!"

"All right," said Sharlie, throwing her scruples to the winds. "Fire away. What's the next question? *Correct the grammar of 'I am always doing these kind of things!' Say who made the mistake if you can.*"

"I can't," said Pen, with a laugh.

Sharlie sighed, for neither could she. "Well, you must leave that out, then. No, I'm not going to do the grammar bit; you must leave that out, too . . ."

"Oh, Shar, you *are* being beastly to me to-night!"

"Oh, all right," said Sharlie.

"It seems to me a very difficult paper for a child of Pen's age," Fanny said.

"Yes, I know. But Pen admits they've read these plays and books in class. She ought to remember *something*."

"It's so *dull!*" said Pen, still with that beautiful unconcern which Sharlie found so enviable.

"Don't talk, darling. Hurry," said Fanny.

Pen wrote her last laborious word, sighed, put her arms round Sharlie's neck and kissed her.

"Nice Sharlie," she said.

Fanny said: "Run along, pet, and let Sharlie get along with her own work. Got much more to do, Shar?"

"Only a rather tiresome essay."

"You haven't forgotten you're going to Judy's after dinner?"

"No, of course not," said Sharlie. As though she would!

"Only, your father is going out to dinner to-night and I thought, if you didn't mind having your meal alone, I'd go out, too."

Oh dear, thought Sharlie, *that'll* mean trouble, I suppose, with father, if he's to know about it. But probably he wasn't to—her father, as Judy said of her mother, "was born to be deceived," but for very different reasons.

"I don't mind," she said.

"Only, I've told Agnes she might go out if she'd just make you an omelette first."

"*Must* it be an omelette?" Whenever Agnes went out, on

these occasions, Sharlie was fed on omelettes, English fashion, which she detested.

"What would you rather have?"

"Oh, I don't know—anything. Won't it do presently?"

"All right," said Fanny, and went out.

Sharlie settled down to her essay again, but as she put down the correct informed conventional sentences she thought: Oh, bother, why *must* she? Another of father's tantrums! What a bore! How silly it all was! She shut up the side of her mind which was turning this domestic problem around and concentrated upon the stupid essay, so that it was almost finished when the clock struck seven. Hastily putting her things away, she ran downstairs and encountered her father in the act of taking his key from the lock. He'd come home to dress, of course. From the drawing-room came the sounds of the piano—her mother, as she knew, playing, not very accurately, an arrangement of *The Londonderry Air*. Her father said, "Hallo, Shar!" and limping a little went straight to the drawing-room, walked up to the piano and kissed Fanny, who smiled and went on playing. Sharlie's face was blank. She took up a book and sat reading and presently her father went out, casting a backward glance at her as he went.

"Knee painful to-night, Phil?" asked Fanny.

"Little bit," Philip replied.

Charming family piece! thought Sharlie, her eyes on her stepmother as once again she began *The Londonderry Air*. That tune! How sick Sharlie was of it! Who, she wondered, was taking Fanny out this evening? And why was 'being taken out' so important? Why was it so imperative that there should always be something—someone—to save her from an evening alone in her own home? She was only waiting, Shar knew, for her father to be safely gone before she'd fly upstairs, change and be gone, too. But she'd be home in

good time and on the way to bed before he returned. "Your father's so silly!" she said to Sharlie once. "He's jealous, you know. But I can't *never* go anywhere because of that."

Sharlie had receded, shutting herself up from any further confidences, remembering that evening during the war when he had come home unexpectedly, and the day soon afterwards when Judy's information had shown her what he'd meant when he'd asked if Lieutenant Browne was her lover. Hateful, shameful, that he should have asked her that, out loud—not caring who heard!—and that Fanny should have laughed, not minding! He had not been home from that day until he had come, three months ago, for good. Not even when James had died in November of the influenza epidemic. He had not seemed to care very much for James. Nobody had, save Sharlie, who had sat up with him all through that night he had died. She had wept bitterly for James, so tiny and complaining, except here at the last, when even he seemed to know that complaint was quite beside the mark. She was haunted for days by the strange, almost offended expression upon his face that last day of his life.

It was not very long afterwards—before her father came home, soon after the armistice was declared—when she had stumbled upon her mother in the drawing-room locked in the embrace of a young man she never remembered to have seen before. Her mother had herself referred to that occasion. "You are so strait-laced, Sharlie. It didn't mean anything!" (What *could* it mean except that her mother liked it—and allowed it?)

Presently her father had got home, to shut himself up immediately with a war book he had already drafted, emerging for dinner each evening and going back again to his study to work until the early hours of the morning. Fanny, like poor James, did not complain, but her errands abroad, minutely accounted for, induced always in Philip that dark

silent mood which resisted even Fanny's bombardment of smiles and coaxings, but could not tempt her into anger or open wordy resentment. That, at least, Sharlie placed to their credit. They did not quarrel. She could bear anything but that. At least her father's moodiness and her stepmother's good temper kept the house quiet. At Fanny's masculine encounters she shrugged fastidious shoulders. Being sixteen years younger than your husband, apparently, led you into some strange ways. Already, without knowing it, she despised her stepmother and was sorry for her father.

It was now the end of March, nineteen-nineteen. The Peace of Versailles had not yet been signed, but the war was over. The interned German fleet at Scapa had been scuttled and people still stalked about "making Germany pay." But in Central Europe a bloodless food and currency warfare went on, for though the blockade against German-Austria had been lifted, Germany was still blockaded—and Germany was the one neighbour who had any kind of goodwill towards Austria. Maud Norman, who had sent home her nursing unit, had not herself come home. She had gone to Vienna, from which city she wrote to Judy giving her accounts of conditions out there—accounts which, passed on to Sharlie, occupied her mind far more, she found, than the strange atmosphere of her own home life. As she listened to Fanny's playing, she wondered if she would mind so much whether she went out enjoying herself or had to stay in with a husband shut up at work in his study, if she knew that in Vienna mothers stood for hours in a queue with their crying half-starved children—in the forlorn hope of getting them sent by the Dutch Relief Mission out of the country to live with private families in Holland, Switzerland or Sweden, so that they might be decently fed and warmed; if she knew that children of twelve to fourteen years had the appearance of eight-year-olds, that ninety-five per cent of all the children

examined by the head of the Karolinen Children's Hospital were seriously under-nourished; that of the children born during the war years hardly one was free from rickets, and that, to use Maud Norman's own phrase, "they were dying like flies in winter." Sharlie, with her tender love for children, born too late to realise the full horror of the war, was in good case to realise to the full the folly of the peace, its uselessness and injustice to the poor and helpless whose one crime was that they happened to be alive. But she did not believe that Fanny would ever "know." She would say, "How dreadful, dear!" or "Quite shocking!" as she had been used to say sometimes in the war in those brief intervals from "not worrying"—and one could be quite sure that she had not in the very least taken in the meaning of the terrible things to the disapproval of which she gave such easy and glib lip service. Already Sharlie said of her stepmother that she had no imagination, not knowing yet that the world is divided into two parts, those who have it and those who have not. Nor did she know that Fanny's kindness and good nature came from a lazy, easy attitude to life—that both came natural to her, not because she was really kinder or better-dispositioned than other people, but because these things were the natural expression of a mind which never delved, which could evade entirely what was ugly or difficult and centre upon what was pleasant and of good report. The attitude she adopted to her own marriage, to the dark moods of the man who was her husband, was precisely her attitude to everything outside. Life was short. You couldn't prevent the things which happened. You were not responsible for them, so what was the use of worrying?

With an odd air of detachment Sharlie ate the cold uninteresting meal Agnes set before her, for one half of her mind was upon the evening that stretched ahead at Marne House. The prospect of seeing Judy was a pleasing one, for having

passed her matriculation in the autumn, Judy had been going since the beginning of the year down to King's, where she intended to take her B.Sc., at the earliest opportunity. And this evening there would be Mona, who was just back from a long stay in the country with her Grandfather Bentley—Mona, who looked lovely in the black she still wore for Garth Manistre, whose luck had deserted him in the very last phase of the war, who had been killed in what must have been the very last half-hour of it.

Sharlie finished her meal, washed the taste of it away with the equally lamentable one of Agnes's "off-evening" coffee, and went upstairs to see if the children were asleep. Pen was, but David complained that he was thirsty, couldn't sleep and wanted to be told a story. Rowena, who now reigned in the nursery in the place of Lottie, married, and the crude war-time Doris, was not very clever with David and could not, in any case, keep up with his demands for stories.

"He ought to go to sleep, Miss Sharlie," she said, by which she meant that she did not think Sharlie should encourage him to say he could not. But David, two months short as yet of his seventh birthday, was a difficult person to deny. He had not Pen's completely egotistic attitude to life: he did not expect the house to revolve around him. He was quiet and good even when nobody believed in his thirst sufficiently to do anything about it, and when Rowena's stock of stories had run dry and Sharlie was otherwise engaged. But the air-raids which had so seriously interrupted his early slumbers on earth had left him a legacy of nerves and sleep so light that the tiniest movement woke him up—to-night the opening of his bedroom door by a pleasure-bound Fanny discharging prettily a final maternal duty. He had seen her in her "party" clothes, but had pretended not—for he knew that she would not stay, would merely kiss her

hand and dart away again. But Shar was a different matter. Shar would not dart away. She always had time for you. She would certainly do something about his thirst and might even tell him a story. He lay there watching her with his dark intent gaze.

"Can't you sleep, lovey?"

Dave shook his head.

"No. My froat hurth."

"Oh no, Davie. Not *hurts*."

"Yeth. Honeth Injun. Ith all dry."

"You're thirsty. I'll get you an orange. Shall I?"

"Yeth, pleath."

He ate the peeled and quartered orange with dispatch.

"Throat better now?"

Dave nodded.

"Now what about sleep?"

"I would like a storwy."

"Only a short one, then."

"Not *aw*ful short."

"Yes. I'm afraid it is, but *quite* new . . ."

Dave's dark eyes shone and fixed themselves upon Sharlie's face. Neither did they leave it until she had finished.

"A long, long way from here," began Sharlie, "in a city called Vienna, there is a little boy who became ill because he could not get enough to eat. Vienna is in a country called Austria, with a lot of very tall snow-capped mountains, and the second largest river in Europe, called the Danube, which they only *say* is blue. Vienna is built on the Danube, or rather on a little river called the Wien, quite near it. It is a very lovely city with fine tall buildings and a lovely park called the Prater. There is also a church with a very tall tower containing a large bell made out of a cannon taken a long while ago in some war or other. There is also a place called the Ringstrasse, with a lot of open-air cafés where you can sit

and eat and watch the people and the traffic going by. (Sharlie had never seen Vienna, but she was coming, after Maud Norman's post cards to Judy, and much study of the geography book, to believe she had.) Years ago, when you were very tiny, before the war came, Vienna used to be a very gay city. The people loved music and dancing, but that isn't true any longer because, although the war is over, the Allies (who won) won't allow food to be sent into Germany, which is the only way Austria can get any. Also, she can't get any coal, and the people are not only hungry, therefore, but terribly cold as well. At Christmas the weather there was very cold indeed. There was a sharp frost and icy winds. It must have been very horrible. Well, it was just about this time that this little Austrian boy got ill and his grandmother took him to a doctor, who said that there was nothing really the matter with him, but that he wanted a lot of fresh vegetables and fruit.

" 'Vitamins, gnädige Fraul' he said (I *think* 'gnädige Frau' means 'dear lady' or 'gracious lady'). 'Fresh vegetables, fresh milk and fresh fruit,' and the doctor stretched out his hand and wished her good-bye.

"Now that was all very well, but you simply couldn't *buy* fresh fruit in Vienna just then . . ."

"What was the little boy's name?"

"Wolfi."

"What a funny name!"

"Yes, isn't it?"

"How old was Wolfi?"

"Five."

"Littler than me."

"Yes—much. Well, all you could buy in the way of fresh fruit in Vienna were some very ordinary apples—and they were very, very dear. An orange, like the one you have just eaten, wasn't to be had anywhere."

"Why not? Why couldn't they get them from other countrieth like *we* get our orangeth?"

"Because the war had upset all that. There were no goods trains, for one thing, because there wasn't any coal. Even the farmers from the country districts wouldn't bring fruit and butter and eggs and other produce into the towns any longer because the money they got for it wasn't any longer any good—you couldn't buy other things with it. A large bagful of it would hardly buy anything at all."

"Why?" said a puzzled and anxious-eyed David.

"I can't explain very well and it's too hard for a little boy like you to understand. It's because of the war, of course. Austria did not win and nobody any longer has any faith in its Government—so there has been a *fall* in the value of the krone, which *used* to be rather less than an English shilling, but now you have to have heaps and heaps of kronen before you get enough to make up an English pound. Poor Wolfi's grandmother once tried to buy a pair of boots for him. They couldn't be bought in Vienna, but had to be smuggled (that is, brought over when no one was looking) from across one of the new frontiers, and they cost between three hundred and four hundred kronen a pair. So she did not see how she was ever going to get him any fresh fruit or green vegetables, even if the farmers could be persuaded to bring it in."

"Poor Wolfi! I suppoth he juth died!"

"No, you'll be awfully glad to hear he has got much, much better."

"How?"

"Well, you see, just before the war Wolfi's grandmother had been to England with her husband, who was a doctor and had, alas! been killed in the war. And while she was there she noticed that we ate something called 'cress.'"

David nodded. "What Agneth puth in the thandwithes thumtimeth."

"Yes. Well, Wolfi's grandmother had liked this so much she thought she would take some seed home and see if it would grow in Austria. But she had quite forgotten to sow it. However, when she went to look for it, there it still was."

David clapped his hands.

"Oh, I *am* glad," he said.

"So was Wolfi's grandmother. She sowed the cress in all the flower-pots she could find—and it came up! But now came the point. Would Wolfi *like* it? You know, little boys can be very naughty sometimes and won't eat things that are good for them."

"Like me with the powwidge," said David.

"Yes, like you with the porridge, Davey. Well, Wolfi's grandmother picked the first plants when they were ready and put them in front of Wolfi."

"Oh, did he eat them?"

"Yes. He liked them awfully. And they did him heaps and heaps of good and he took special care of the cress plants. So, when he got better he had a little vegetable garden to look after as well as his hen and rabbit, and was ever so happy! There, isn't that a nice new story?"

"Lovely," said David. "I'm glad Wolfi got better—and I think hith grandma wath ever so clever to think of the creth . . . but I'm *awful* sorry for all the other poor little Authrian boyth."

"Yes, so am I, and for all their poor mothers, too."

"Yeth," said David solemnly. "I think war is *thilly*."

"So do I," said Sharlie, covering him up. "Now, you won't fidget any more, will you? but try hard to go to sleep."

"Yeth," said David, "but you aren't going out, are you?"

"Yes, darling, but not for very long."

"I can't *thee* why you all go out! Mummy and daddy and now you!"

"Never mind," said Sharlie. "You go to sleep and forget all about us, like a good boy."

She covered him up, kissed him good night and hurried out. She would be late. However she hurried, she would be late. An absurd despair seized hold upon her at the thought. She opened the door and ran full-tilt into her father, standing immediately outside it.

"Father!" she said, "I thought you were miles away!"

"So did somebody else presumably," said Philip Stratton grimly. "Where's your mother gone, Shar?"

"I don't know, father."

"Is that the truth?"

"Why, yes—she just said that as we were both going to be out she would go as well. She hates to be alone, you know, father."

"So you're going out, too, are you?"

"Yes, to see Judy. Mona is to be there."

"And you want very much to see them?"

She hesitated.

"Yes, I'm afraid I do," she said at length.

"All right."

She did not dream that he wanted her to offer to stay with him, nor did he suspect the answer that had trembled on her lips: "Not if you'd rather I stayed." As she moved to go upstairs to her own room he said:

"Where did you get all *that* from?"

He nodded back to the room in which slept his son.

"The story I told Davey? Oh, from Maud Norman chiefly—at least from her letters to Judy, and also, some of it, from an Austrian girl at school, whose people live in Vienna."

"What made you tell it to Dave?"

"I didn't see why I shouldn't."

"Do you think he's big enough to understand?"

"Yes. No child could possibly believe that it is right to starve other children. *You* don't think it right, father?"

"No."

"Why is England a party to it? I'm so *ashamed!*"

"We haven't been able to help ourselves. We're tied to France—and Foch. But the blockade against Austria has been raised."

"It doesn't help, because Germany's still blockaded. Maud Norman says you have to go back to remote antiquity to find a parallel for such cruelty."

"I daresay."

"Father—why don't you go out there and *write* about it? If English people *knew* they wouldn't allow it. I went to a Save the Children Fund Meeting at the Albert Hall the other evening. It was crowded. Some of the speakers quoted Maud Norman's articles in the Press. . . . There was only one objector. A woman, though. I hated her. They collected a lot of money."

"Some of yours, I suppose."

"I only had five shillings." Sharlie blushed. "Oh, father—I *wish* you'd write a book about it!"

Philip Stratton laughed. "I've just written one book concerning the war that I don't expect to make me very popular in certain quarters."

"As if that mattered!"

"How much of the war do you remember, Shar?"

Her blush deepened. Supposing she said: "You coming home that night—and about you and mother . . ." She didn't. She said: "The air-raids, I think."

"You were lucky," he said, and began to go downstairs, a little stiffly, because his knee was still troublesome and probably always would be.

"Father, did you hate the war, like Shane Mostyn?"

"No—not at first. I was rather obliged to it at the beginning." He laughed in that queer fashion she always found so damping. "You're too young to understand. But I came to hate it pretty thoroughly. It never did anything for me. Far from it."

Something hardened in Sharlie's face as she came down the stairs behind him. To like or dislike the war because of something it did or did not do for you! How *could* he! His book was certain, quite certain, to be horrible!

She said, reaching the foot of the stairs and looking up at him: "I'd have *hated* the war to have done anything for me!"

"Ah, I daresay," said her father coldly. "Well, you'd better be off. Your friends will have given you up."

Without another word Sharlie turned away.

Sharlie encountered Mark Norman on the doorstep of Marne House and shyly greeted him. Mark smiled, raised his hat and fitted his key in the lock. Before he could turn it the door was opened by Judy.

"You're late," she said to them both as she shut the door after them.

"Father came home and found mother out and wanted his hand held!" said Sharlie, by way of flippant excuse.

Mark offered none of any sort. He went on upstairs.

"Well, I've got a nice surprise for *you*, Sharlie. Shane's here. We haven't seen him once all the time Mona's been away. Mona says it's because he's been busy finishing his new book. As if we believe *that!*"

Sharlie hung up her coat and hat in the lobby in the hall, smoothed her dark shiny hair and turned to Judy, who said: "Oh, half a mo! I'll just tell the girl we'll have coffee now. She brought it in once and I made

her take it back until you came."

"Oh, I *am* sorry, Ju . . ."

"It's all right. Do her good. She's a fool. This house has been run disgustingly since Martha retired. We've had so many girls I can't even remember their names."

Sharlie laughed. "Mother's itinerant domestics," Judy called them.

Whilst Judy was in the kitchen talking to the latest addition to the ranks Mark came down the stairs.

"Let's go in, shall we?" he said, and stood there holding open the door for her.

Sharlie's colour ran up swift and fierce into her face. She felt awkward, shy, and very self-conscious—the effect, she recognised with a little spark of annoyance, which Mark Norman always had upon her. She didn't like him very much. Still holding the door he said, smiling: "I hear we have something in common, these days."

Sharlie stared at him.

"Matriculation!" he said.

The colour flooded her face.

"Did *you* fail in maths too?" she said.

"In several other things, too, I expect. And twice over!" Mark went on smiling. "I'm really quite grateful to you. I've never met anybody before who'd failed even once."

"Oh, *lots* of people must have done!"

"I daresay—but it's nice to meet one."

Sharlie laughed—the first time she had managed it on this delicate and pride-shaking topic. She looked up at Mark Norman as if suddenly he had become her friend. For the first time in her life he was not making her feel like a little schoolgirl. It was not that he was making her feel grown up either, but rather that he was making himself somehow her own age. They were both seventeen, and they had both disappointed their elders—and they were both refusing to

be the least little bit crushed by it. The knowledge made a strange unexpected bond between them.

"Oh, here you are!" Eve Norman was saying in her clear comfortable-sounding voice. "Come and sit over here. We'd nearly given you up."

Sharlie did not this time offer the flippantly-worded excuse she had trotted out for Judy. She said: "I'm very sorry to be so late. Father came in unexpectedly."

Somehow everybody did avoid the flippant and slangily-worded for Eve Norman—save her own daughters.

Sharlie found herself seated by Shane, whom she had not expected to see. For a whole month—the month of Mona's absence in Surrey—nobody had set eyes upon him at Marne House, though earlier in the year, soon after the army released him, he had been there a good deal. Shane Mostyn, D.S.O., was a person to be proud to own as a friend, even by Eve Norman, who always found so much, Sharlie knew, to disapprove of in him. And that story which Judy had recounted to her of Private Shane Mostyn carrying in his wounded officer under heavy fire, was thrilling and exciting, however contemptuous you might feel about war and the things that had happened since because of it. He handed her now coffee and a plate of sandwiches, and suddenly shy again and very self-conscious, she hid behind the flippant verbiage she had not dared to offer Eve Norman. But Shane laughed and said, pointing to the sandwiches, "Take two," and made her feel that she had been really clever and witty.

Mona, despite that month in the country, looked pale and fragile, but had discarded her black, and Sharlie saw that her eyes rested upon Shane rather as if she were sorry for him. There was always a disturbing quality about this lovely sister of Judy's—which seemed to have nothing to do with her loveliness, though that, too, was disturbing enough. Sharlie found her eyes to-night irresistibly drawn to her face.

That lovely magnolia skin, the beautiful darkly-grey eyes, set so unusually far apart and well back in her head, the straight line of her profile, the curved line of her throat and neck. She was genuinely beautiful and her expression, always bewitching and haunting, added to her beauty this evening something that Sharlie could not define, but of which she was acutely conscious. She remembered that phrase of Judy's: "Mona's got beauty *and* brains—a perfectly fatal combination!"

Mark Norman did not speak to her again that evening, save when the moment came to wish her good night, for Greta Mardinor had come in too, ostensibly, as usual, to see her friend Mona, though she sat upon a cushion at Mark's feet all the evening, looking up at him adoringly in a way that Sharlie found queerly disgusting. After all, Greta had a husband of her own, even if she didn't choose to live with him. A husband and a son. Besides, she was so *silly*. . . .

Judy laughed when Sharlie, a day or two later, said that to her.

"Oh, Mark *likes* 'em silly. He can't bear women to do things—or to *want* to do 'em. Having a brainy mother's been too much for Mark. She's given him a sort of inferiority complex. I suppose Greta's sort restores the balance."

Sharlie wasn't pleased to reflect that that was how she, too, affected Mark Norman—that he had put her in the same category as Greta. After all, she mightn't be as clever as Judy (who was?), but she wasn't silly. She'd rather be dead than sit at any man's feet as Greta sat at Mark's.

"Come and see the drawing Mona's made of Greta's little boy," she said. "She's been using him as a model—which is another *ostensible* reason for Greta's coming here such a lot. Mona's come home with a perfect passion for work."

Mona was out that afternoon in April and Judy and Sharlie had the studio at the bottom of the garden to themselves.

Sharlie moved about in it with that sense of awe which always afflicted her, confronted with the result of other people's work with their hands. The little sketch of Greta Mardinor's small son who was David's age, very slight and fair, and like his mother; the little bronze statuette of Mark in his army uniform upon a table in the corner, done, as Sharlie knew, during the war, and with which Mona was too dissatisfied to have in the house; an unfinished sketch in water-colour on Mona's easel of a large tree sticking out of a yellow bank on which were growing sparsely pink and mauve wild flowers, and a flowering clump of elder bushes. The sun was catching the yellow sand and filling the whole picture with warmth and colour, and Sharlie recognised the scene for a bit of Lincolnshire marsh.

"It's for Uncle Joe's birthday when it's finished," Judy said. "Mona says it wants some more cuckoo flowers or whatever they are. She started it last summer when she was at the farm, and he took a fancy to it. Mother says it's ridiculous to send it to hang in a farmer's house where nobody will see it and that she ought to send it to some of the summer exhibitions first and let him have it afterwards, if she must. Of course she won't. . . . *This* you can't see. It's going to be a bust of Shane."

Sharlie gazed in silence upon the shrouded shape on the stand, and upon all the other evidence of Mona's activities in a world that to Sharlie, who couldn't draw a straight line or make the usual daubs that stand for the pictorial efforts of most people, was nothing less than black magic. These clever interesting girls of Eve Norman's! No wonder Mark felt lost and out of it, looked with friendly eyes upon the idiotic Greta! She felt a sneaking sympathy with him as she looked about her. Lovely to be as clever as either of them—certainly lovely to be Mona to do what you liked with a box of paints and a brush, a pencil, a piece of crayon, a lump of clay.

Loveliest of all things to have this skill with your hands, to be able to make them do your bidding. Even to *sew* well—that Cinderella of the arts!—would be something. And Sharlie couldn't even do that. She felt useless, clumsy. . . .

"I wish," she said presently, "*I* could do something. I feel like twopence-ha'penny, confronted with all of you."

"Oh, cheer up!" said Judy. "You'll write, I expect."

"Write? *I?* Whatever makes you think that?"

"Oh, well, it's in the family for one thing. And then your essays . . ."

Sharlie reflected. She didn't want to write very much—at least she didn't think she wanted to write like her father. True, she had read only one of his books, but it had left in her no urge to read any of the others. And as for her essays, she thought of Miss Rawnsley's scorn of her recent ambitious efforts and was not comforted.

After a little she said: "No. I don't seem to want to write. . . . I'd have to find something worth writing about first, anyway," and did not know that her words conveyed her unspoken thought that her father hadn't—not even when she added: "Most people don't *seem* to have."

"Oh, you got that from mother," said Judy lightly. "Don't be so *highbrow*, Sharl Books don't *all* have to instruct."

"I didn't mean that," said Sharlie.

"What did you mean, then?"

"Books . . . *novels* . . . ought not to create the wrong impression. They ought not to pretend things are what they *aren't*. I can't explain."

"They oughtn't to falsify life, you mean?"

From the height of her seventeen and a quarter completed years, Sharlie gravely considered this. She said at last: "What I *think* I mean is that literature should not falsify *experience*."

And then for the first time, that unexpected unchildish phrase gave her the truth—as if it cleared a space in the mass of muddled ideas and disappointments her father's work had left in her mind. *That* was why it hadn't seemed to matter. Life wasn't *like* that. And her father knew it wasn't. Why, then, did he do it? Because people liked to think it was—liked to pretend? All this talk you met in his articles in *The Sentinel* about "clean literature," did it just mean that he encouraged people to believe that life was really like that?—the sentimental, soft, essentially good and happy thing he had made it in that book? (Why did she know already so certainly that it wasn't?—that life was cruel and hard, and did not bear thinking about?) She had forgotten he had just told her he'd finished a war book which wouldn't be "popular." She judged him entirely by what she had read—and rejected him. Rejected, too, then and for ever, literature as an *escape*. Poetry, said Matthew Arnold, should be "a criticism of life." Not poetry *only* . . . thought Sharlie.

Toward the end of June that year Sharlie fell ill for the first time in her life—not seriously, but her steady growth and her determined grind at her studies for the matriculation exam. for which she would sit again in the autumn, took heavy toll even of her fundamental strength and vitality. A worried Fanny took her to a doctor, who prescribed country air for the rest of the summer and a very restricted amount of study. So Sharlie went off to Lincolnshire, where she found an Ann Selwyn busy about the replanting of her lawn and garden, already convinced that with the end of the war all was well with the world. Returfing her lawn, planting out the remainder of her dahlias, clipping back rock-plants and sewing biennials in the seed-bed, she was already the occupied, contented person who had so mysteriously disappeared during the years of the war. She thought, with a little sinking of her

heart, that Sharlie was much too thin and pale, and watched her with anxiety those first few weeks while the dark circles beneath her eyes disappeared and the first pale colour lighted up the chiselled beauty of her face. Later, with the anxiety lifted, she decided that the girl had imbibed a lot of queer ideas about things she was not old enough to understand—the war and what had happened after it. But from where, from whom? Not, surely, from her father, who had seemed on the subject agreeably free from "queer" ideas. Of course, nobody liked war and there was always this social upset after it, but that couldn't be helped. She failed quite lamentably to be interested in the state of Central Europe and the Save the Children Fund—for these were the days before the bishops had given it their blessing and converted it into a popular and respectable charity. Ann Selwyn, like many another, would not have heard unmoved a child crying in the next room for food, but her imagination could not travel as far as Central Europe, and she was not going to encourage her granddaughter to let hers travel as far, either. It must be the fault of that Norman woman, with her lectures and letters and the rest of it! Bother the creature! After all, whatever happened, you *had* to defend your country! She frowned with annoyance when, walking home one Sunday morning from church, Sharlie again brought up the tiresome subject.

"It can't be Christian to *starve* people," she said, "even 'enemies.' "

"It isn't," said her grandmother, "but who told you this was a Christian world?"

"It's supposed to be—at least, Europe is."

Her grandmother laughed.

"Oh, *supposed!*" she said.

"But you believe in the Sermon on the Mount, gran'ma?"

"As an ethical code, my child, certainly, but not as practical politics. Neither does the church."

"Oh, gran'ma!"

"Well, do you think it does? If you or I tried to run our lives on the lines of the Sermon on the Mount, my child, we should pretty soon find ourselves either in prison or the asylum!" And Ann Selwyn laughed.

Sharlie said soberly: "Then I can't see why we go to church at all."

"Well, we don't—much, do we? But it's quite a pleasant thing to do. And after all you must be fair. If the church doesn't act upon the lines of the Sermon on the Mount at ordinary times, why should it when there's a war?"

"But this *isn't* war now. The war's over. It's just *starving* people."

"Well, it's one of the results of the war, anyway. It'll right itself in time, I expect. We're all suffering. . . . And what do you expect the church to do? The church is merely the servant of the state, and it's the state that calls the tune. The church merely gives its actions a moral gloss."

Sharlie was silent for a long time after that, but as they turned in at their own gate she said: "Gran'ma, do you mind very much whether I go to church or not?"

"No, only I thought you found it rather a pleasant thing to do."

"Yes, so I do. But I think I won't go any more, if you don't mind."

"I certainly shouldn't, my dear, if you feel like that about it," said Ann Selwyn pacifically.

So for the rest of the summer she went, when she felt like it, to church by herself, and Sharlie gave up discussing these urgent matters with her. Her grandfather she found much more sympathetic, and she coaxed money out of him (though she would not have admitted the word) for Maud Norman and other people's relief schemes. At least temporarily, and with distinct regret, she decided that on the whole

men were more intelligent than women.

"Not about war," said her grandfather, "that prime idiocy of adult minds."

One morning a letter lay upon her breakfast plate which induced in her the same feeling of deep happiness which the sight of her father's handwriting had once called up in her. The letter was from Judy—one of those compact, neatly-written letters, which told you facts in a few succinct phrases, with the characteristic comments thereupon for which Judy was famous. The fact of this letter was startling and exciting, and Sharlie looked up after a first quick reading to pass it on to her grandmother. Her grandfather was not yet down. His sciatica was troublesome enough these days to slow down his morning toilet.

"Judy says they've just found out that Mona is married to Shane Mostyn."

Ann Selwyn paused in the pouring out of coffee to look across at the speaker.

"*Just found out!* What *do* you mean, child?"

"They were married in March—when Mona was supposed to be staying in Surrey with her grandfather."

"How very extraordinary!" said Ann, going on with her coffee-pouring. "Why must they make a secret of it?"

"Because, Judy says, her mother thought they ought to wait at least a year—because of Garth."

Less well up than Sharlie in the Norman family history, Ann said only, "Garth? Garth who?"

"Garth Manistre. Mona was engaged to him, you know, and he was killed just before the Armistice."

"Well, it certainly *would* have been more decent to wait, then, I agree. And why make a secret of it at all, if they meant to announce it after three months?"

"They didn't mean to. Only Mona's going to have a baby."

"Oh, I see. That does alter matters. How old is Monica Norman?"

"Twenty-three," said Sharlie, with recollections of the birthday tea-party Mona had given in February in the studio.

"A very good age," said Ann Selwyn. She meant to have a first baby, but did not think this was a thing to say to a young girl like Sharlie. "Where are they going to live? At Marne House?"

"Judy says not. Mrs. Norman thinks married people want a home of their own. But Shane says he's too busy to look for one at the moment—he's correcting the proof of his new book. So Mrs. Norman is doing the looking."

"How is Mrs. Norman taking it?"

"All right, Judy says. But she's angry with Mona's grandfather. She says *he* encouraged them, and that he did it to spite her."

"He probably did. A very tiresome old man he must be. And tiresome *before* he was old—from all accounts. Have you ever met him at Marne House?"

"No," said Sharlie; "he's nearly ninety-three—much too old to travel."

"But you've seen a good deal of Shane?"

"Only since the war ended. Mrs. Norman never *wanted* Mona to marry him—she said they were too much alike. I think that sounds silly."

"It mayn't be as silly as it sounds. It isn't easy always to live with people too much like yourself."

Sharlie frowned as if the wisdom of such a saying was entirely beyond her. She said nothing, but sat there neglecting her breakfast, running her eyes over and over Judy's neat epistle. Ann Selwyn said: "Well, eat some breakfast, child. Mona's made her bed and will lie on it—at least, as long as it suits her, after the fashion of her day."

"Judy always *said* Mona would only marry Shane, even

when she got engaged to Garth."

"Then what made her get engaged to Garth?"

"I *think* it must have been because he kept bothering her. And also because Shane seemed to like somebody else."

"Well, you can't put old heads on young shoulders. No use trying. Mona's married—and that's the end of it. I can't see why you should let it interfere so much with your breakfast."

Sharlie looked at her grandmother with a little quiver of surprise upon her face. She sounded as if she were *angry*. Because you couldn't put old heads on young shoulders? Or because people married people their parents didn't approve of? It couldn't be anything to do with Mona and Shane. She didn't know either of them well enough. Sharlie took a piece of toast and as she buttered it and helped herself to an egg Henry Selwyn came in. Sharlie got up at once and held his chair while he painfully lowered himself into it. Told the news, he said, "Really! Let us hope she will be very happy. When is the interesting event to take place?"

Sharlie referred to her letter.

"In December, Judy says."

"And do you know the happy man?"

"Not awfully. But I like him. He used to come with Mona to the farm sometimes. You must have seen him."

"No, I don't think so. But he's a lucky man to have carried off that very lovely person."

"Let us hope they will be happy," said Ann Selwyn brusquely.

"My dear, why shouldn't they be?"

But Ann did not tell him until later, when Sharlie was out of the way.

"It's really a thousand pities that lovely creature should have married that young man," she said. Then: "Of course he's clever, although he earns very little, I gather, from his

books. And I'm quite *sure* there was something about an entanglement with a married woman. I distinctly remember Beth telling me how worried her sister was about it."

Henry Selwyn was silent, knowing quite well how far this story of Mona's marriage had taken her back—all the way to the year nineteen-hundred, the year of Kimberley and Ladysmith, and to another marriage which had taken place then. If he shut his eyes he would see, even now, after all those years, poor Alex coming down the church aisle upon Philip Stratton's arm. Only, she hadn't been 'poor Alex' then. She had seemed singularly richly endowed; happiness had shone from her face, brightening her lovely lifted eyes, and as she came the winter sun had turned to gold the fair hair revealed by the thrown-back veil. But Henry didn't shut his eyes. He looked at his wife, and his eyes, very wide open, smiled mischievously into hers.

"My dear, Shane Mostyn, I seem to remember, achieved the D.S.O. I fancy that, with Mrs. Norman, will wipe out the memory of any regrettable affair with a married woman, won't it?"

"My dear Henry! Why should it? You're *most* unfair to Eve Norman. You dislike all women who took any sort of part in the war. But all intelligent women did, surely? Why shouldn't women be patriotic?"

"That," said Henry, "is what I find so puzzling. That really intelligent women like yourself and Eve Norman should have been so *very* patriotic."

"Oh, Henry, how perverse you are on this subject!"

"Merely curious, my dear. I never have been able to understand why women should accept, so unquestioningly, these periodic evidences of the bankruptcy of male statesmanship."

"Well . . . what do you *expect* them to do? Women don't make the wars."

"I should like to think," said Henry, "that now that women have the vote they will insist that *men* don't make them either."

"Well, perhaps they will," said Ann comfortably. "Are you driving into Stamford this morning?"

"If this damned sciatica will let me."

"I wish you'd let me iron you."

"Well, I won't. What can I do for you in Stamford, my dear?"

Ann told him.

"Take Sharlie with you," she said. "The drive will do her good, and I want some cottons. Besides, I'm sure she's anxious to buy a wedding present for Mona and her young man."

This suggestion, received via her grandfather, distinctly gave Sharlie a shock—it was so much like offering a bouquet to a goddess. At no time had Mona ever given her more than the sweetness of her smile, the friendly easy kindness of the elder sister towards the friend of the much younger. Sharlie did not suppose Mona ever thought of her when she did not happen to see her, any more than did Mark. Nevertheless, the suggestion once received worked like yeast in her, so that the trap was stopped at the silversmith's in the High Street, and after much anxious thoughts she purchased a slender silver vase for Mona's dressing-table. It was solid, not nickel, and took nearly all the money she had in her purse, but as she watched the man wrapping it up with such slow tenderness, as if, after all, he could not bear to part with it, Sharlie felt that it was well worth the sacrifice of so much pocket-money.

Told of the present and shown it, Ann Selwyn said very nice—very nice indeed, and that Sharlie had good taste, and that she was quite sure Mrs. Mostyn would like it very much indeed. Somehow the "Mrs. Mostyn"

made it seem more than ever like a present for a stranger.

Of Clive Blunsdon on this visit she saw very little—of the old Clive, whom she had known as a child and with whom she had shared so many interests, she saw nothing at all. He had grown, Sharlie thought, surprisingly like his father—had deepened the familiar reticence of speech he had inherited from him and had acquired, too, something of Joe's quietly determined and dignified manner. He had the same independence of character—the same blunt edge to his statements. He was completely grown up, and his smile was shy and infrequent. They met only when Sharlie went to the farm with her grandmother to have tea with his mother, or to order eggs or butter, and not always then, for it was June, and they were getting in the hay and Clive worked in the fields with the men. There was nothing of the "gentleman" farmer about Clive—he was just plain farmer all through, like his father. Neither were the Blunsdons taking any part in that wild post-war rush after pleasure which was already seducing the countryside as earlier it had seduced the towns. These were the flourishing days of farming and most farmers had war profits which they seemed in a hurry to dissipate, but not Joe Blunsdon or his son. They did not hunt or play golf; Clive neither played tennis nor went to dances, and Ann Selwyn, watching the antics of some of the other of her tenants who lived as though a guaranteed price for wheat was a bulwark against anything the future might have in store, warmly commended them to Sharlie. She did not in any case approve, as Sharlie knew, of this lowering of the social barriers and was mightily scornful of the farmers who had taken to having late dinner, the giving of tennis parties, the wearing of plus-fours, and the driving of motor cars. Despite its apparent prosperity, farming, she said, was in a bad way; but when events proved her to be right it was singularly

small satisfaction the reflection brought to her.

One day as Sharlie passed the farm gate on her way to the post office, Clive turned out of it. He, too, was bound for the post office and was walking because he found his cycle had a tyre down. The Blunsdons did not run a car. Sharlie and Clive walked along together, Sharlie doing most of the talking because the silence of the first few minutes had so embarrassed her that she had plunged headlong into conversation in order to break it. She was embarrassed, too, by the way he turned once and looked at her and then looked away again quickly; by the sudden rush of colour to his face, and most of all by what he said when, for a moment, the conversation had turned to the marriage of Mona and Shane.

"Well, I suppose you'll be getting married soon, too."

"Good heavens, no!" said Sharlie, in the tone of one who not only refused marriage for herself but envisaged it as the very end and ultimate outpost of all desirable things.

She thought him grown very handsome. His face was browned golden with the sun, his hair was a little bleached, his eyes very blue as if some reflection of the sky beneath which he spent his days had got into them. She was sorry about the conclusion of their old companionship, but in much the same way as she felt sorry when she thought of Mona married, because it necessitated her no longer living at Marne House. This new relationship with Clive, like the removing of Mona from the immediacy of her life, was a distinct snapping of a link in the chain of things she had taken for granted as part of her existence. She was grown-up. Soon she would be leaving school. And after that? She did not know. She had no special talents, no ambitions. And she had just rejected with emphasis the idea of marriage. Where did that land her? She sighed, and reflected that growing up was a good deal less of an adventure than she had supposed.

Told of the walk with Clive, Ann Selwyn remarked: "I

shouldn't let that happen too often, if I were you, Sharlie."

"It hasn't happened before, gran'ma."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Ann Selwyn.

"And *then* it only just *happened*," said Sharlie, by the shifting of the accent giving a new significance to the sentence.

"I'm very glad to hear that, too."

"Why, gran'ma? Clive and I *used* to go walking without your minding."

"That was different—you were children. Clive is twenty-one now, and you're getting on for eighteen. Being friends now is *quite* a different matter."

"Oh!" said Sharlie, a little blankly, and then added, unexpectedly: "Clive doesn't want to be friends with me now very much, you know."

"What makes you think that?"

"I don't know. But I'm sure he doesn't."

"Just as well," said Ann Selwyn, but not in the least, Sharlie thought, as one who was really convinced. She also thought that perhaps what her father had always contended was true, after all—that her grandmother was a snob. But this too she kept to herself.

CHAPTER TWO

PHILIP STRATTON'S book on the war, *Conflict*, came out the same week as Shane Mostyn's novel, *The Journal of Henry Houghton*, which also proved to have a war background. Both were angry violent books, Philip's contrasting strangely with the charming feathery novels with which his name was connected, and Shane's the natural outcome of the disillusion and disgust which, present in his initial effort, *Mirage*, had been deepened by his participation in that "prime idiocy of adult minds," the war. Both volumes were widely reviewed, praised and anathematised. Philip's went into a third and fourth edition within a first month of its appearance, but Shane's, so Sharlie gathered from the omniscient Judy, was doing much less spectacularly, having sold in that initial month exactly fifteen hundred copies. Philip's success, however, had had, as Sharlie observed, a most satisfactory effect upon the domestic atmosphere—and upon Philip. The little house in Edward Street had come to life again, and through its narrow lofty rooms streamed on the first Wednesday of every month a considerable unit of London's literary army. To Sharlie it was all very much as she remembered it, not during the days of Fanny's hectic war-parties, but all those years ago when her mother had been alive and she herself had stolen out of bed to watch from the top of the staircase the coming and going of the more or less distinguished, except that now she did not sit on the stairs. She came down in a white frock (a colour which didn't suit her at all, but which Fanny thought the only wear for sweet seventeen) and with her dark straight hair tied in a white bow at the nape of her neck (which did not suit her either). She

was not a success. So many people, such a buzz of conversation, made her feel a little shy—and so much talk of books she had never read, more than a little ignorant—so that she was glad of the evenings when Shane Mostyn came, because he would sit at her side and talk to her in the fashion he had always kept for her, as if she were really grown up and very, very sensible indeed. Shane, too, it soon appeared, had read about as few of the new books as she had, and was minded to do even less about it. He wanted to write, he said, and that left, Sharlie gathered, singularly little time to read the efforts of other people, especially since the public liked his books so little he had to write "far too many rubbishy articles." But *Conflict* he had read, and talked about it to Sharlie quite as if he hadn't heard her when she said that she hadn't.

"I can't make it out," he said. "It isn't the usual kind of war-book, though it *is* damned good reporting (I beg your pardon—very unusually good reporting!). Your father doesn't seem to have had many more patriotic illusions about the war than I, but he was glad to go to it, glad to take part in it. He seems to have enjoyed all the muck and horror of it, but never quite succeeds in forgetting that war is an imbecility and evidently despises himself for not having behaved differently about it. It's difficult to explain. It's a kind of muddled thinking, somewhere. Probably lots of people did go into it with their minds in that state. . . . I suppose you were too young to have any ideas about the war, weren't you?"

"I was nearly thirteen," said Sharlie.

"I was born with mine left over from some other life, I think. That's the only explanation of people like me and Mona. We've died and suffered so often in so many other wars."

Sharlie said nothing.

Shane went on: "*Conflict's* interesting as a psychological study. But I can't help thinking there's something wrong somewhere with a man who gets some sort of satisfaction out of seeing ordinary decent civilised men engaged in killing as many other decent civilised men as possible. And that's what your father seems to have done. . . . Have you ever tried to imagine what a bayonet charge is like, Shar?"

Sharlie shook her head.

"Well, read *Conflict* and you'll know. It's the best piece of war-description I've encountered yet. I didn't think Stratton could have done it. But what I can't get over is his *own* attitude about the slaughter. He seems to have been glad to have been in it, as if it did something for him, somehow. I don't mean just glad to be in things as a kind of adventurous change from a dull civilised existence, but glad of the personal killing. It comes out again and again in his denunciation of the modern trench warfare, the dull mowing down of men in mass formation. His account of his first bayonet charge is appalling, because it's so damn cold-blooded. It's almost as if seeing one man kill another by running his bayonet through his throat or middle somehow satisfied something in him."

Shane stopped as suddenly as he had begun; as if the expression upon Sharlie's white face and in her horror-stricken eyes brought him up sharply, or as if he had remembered suddenly that the man he was talking about was her father.

"Sorry, Shar!" he said, and put his hand upon hers with a desperate comforting gesture. "Forget it."

"It's all right," said Sharlie, managing a smile and conquering a terrible desire to be sick there on Fanny's blue carpet. Like most other people she had often thought about her father being killed, never about his *killing*. And now to have Shane suggesting that he had enjoyed it—doing it and seeing it done. That was horrible. Shane must be wrong,

because nothing so horrible could be true. And yet the war was horrible—and that was certainly true. But whenever she had tried to disentangle the memories of the war years she could remember nothing save her father's initial eagerness to be in it, his subsequent reluctance to leave Fanny; something she had heard Fanny say to her mother in those months before poor James was born, about her "being kept out of mischief," and being found unattractive by men; and that evening when her father had come home unexpectedly and put an end to Fanny's party. That had all been disturbing and puzzling, but not horrible. What Shane was suggesting now *was* horrible . . . unbearably horrible, so that she hated Shane and wanted somehow to defend her father from him and what he said, but didn't know how to begin. She sat there striving hard not to be sick and feeling stupid and very ignorant, and suddenly conscious that Shane was talking about something else—inviting her to come and see Mona and the new flat, and promising not to talk any more rot about war and war books. She said she would and then they both sat still, quite silent, his hand resting still upon her own, like a strange but instinctive apology, as unreal in its way as the conversation for which it asked her pardon.

Turning her head after a while, she saw at once, however, that Shane had quite forgotten her. His eyes were upon her stepmother, who stood not very far away talking and laughing to a young man who seemed to be amusing her, for presently her mouth opened in that expansive brilliant smile Sharlie knew so well, which showed her excellent teeth and called up upon men's faces the look she had seen years ago on Lieutenant Browne's, and saw now upon her present companion's. Quite unconsciously Sharlie's own lips parted, to let out a long quivering sigh that made Shane turn his head and look at her. Their eyes were almost on a level. He said, surprisingly: "Shar—you've got the most lovely eyes!"

He saw the colour come flooding her pale cheeks, and for one instant an expression of such delight came into the eyes he praised that the smile on his mouth was halted, checked—killed. For one instant they closed. His hand upon hers gave it the very tiniest squeeze before she withdrew it, opened her eyes and looked away again to her stepmother and her young man.

"Who is that?" she asked faintly.

"The young man talking to Mrs. Stratton? Michael Ross—'the novelist who understands women.'"

He was relieved to see her make a little *moue*. She was a delightful kid—and not, nowadays, such a kid, either. He had a most pronounced desire to flirt with her—to wake her up. She looked so detached, so cold. That look, when he'd paid her that quite unpremeditated compliment, had stirred his pulse. Amusing to see her grow up—she'd been such a nice youngster. He'd always liked her; she'd always, hadn't she, liked him? He could like her a lot more, too. He stopped there, lingering on the thought. She was so young, so fresh, so utterly without a past. He thought: I could fall in love with you, my dear, and remembered suddenly that falling in love had always been so easy even although his heart had been given all those years ago to Mona. He put his hand back upon Sharlie's, laughed a little and saw her turn again to him with that young and ardent look upon her face that he found so exciting.

It was that moment which Philip Stratton selected to come up and take Shane away from her.

"I've been looking everywhere for you, my dear fellow," he said, and Sharlie was left to sit there for a moment, feeling shy and lost, and very much *de trop* and presently to slip out and go to bed. The thought of Shane and what he had said of her father's book and implied about him, mingled untidily with the way he had looked at her, the thing

he had said about her eyes. She felt curiously excited. How foolish to be pleased about a thing like that—how "soppy," as Judy would say. Shane was interesting—and queer, and Mona's husband. And he had absolutely no right—no right at all—to have said those things about her father! And then for her to be pleased because he had paid her a paltry silly compliment! What a stupid little idiot she was!

So thinking she fell asleep, and in the morning her humiliation was complete when her father said at breakfast: "Shar, don't buttonhole Shane Mostyn quite so much next time he comes. He comes to meet people—not to talk to a schoolgirl all the evening."

"I don't buttonhole him. He comes and talks to me."

Philip smiled. "Well, don't be so fascinating!"

Sharlie's face went very pink.

"It's because he doesn't like crowds and because he's known me so long. He doesn't feel shy with me."

"No, he certainly doesn't seem to be shy," said Philip, and Sharlie could not imagine what he found so very amusing. She still felt a little self-conscious about that talk with Shane and about his compliment and the rather startling, if momentary, pleasure it gave her; and on the next of her father's evenings she talked to as many people as she could bring herself to approach, avoiding Shane and corners. But very few of them seemed to realise who she was, and most of them looked as though they wondered a little how she came there. So eventually, the corner was achieved again—this time with Michael Ross, "the novelist who understood women." She wondered if he did, and she didn't think he was as clever as rumour said, and found, to her astonishment and not a little to her relief, that his compliments (much more persistent than Shane's) left her quite untouched. Somehow, from Michael Ross they were to be expected and didn't matter, but Shane's sudden twist to the personal was quite a

different thing. Not that her father saw any difference between Michael's attentions and those of Shane's: at any rate, he teased her about them both.

"Shar has a great attraction for married men," he said to Fanny. "I had, if you please, to rescue Michael Ross from her clutches last night," and he went on making jokes on the subject until a kick from Fanny beneath the table and the sight of the frozen expression upon Sharlie's face constrained him to conclude. Later, Fanny said that Sharlie wasn't old enough to appreciate that kind of joke, but Philip, still sore about her opinion of that recently-read novel of his, said Sharlie appreciated nobody but herself. He forgot with what reluctance and under what pressure she had uttered that self-deprecatory, "I don't know anything *about* novels—not modern ones, so I'm no judge," with which she had prefaced what at last he had constrained her to say—"It doesn't seem to me awfully like life!" *Like life!* What did she know about life? Smug—that was what Sharlie was! Smug and complacent.

"I suppose if she read *Conflict*, she'd tell me it wasn't 'very much like war!' " he complained to Fanny.

"Oh, nonsense, Phil!" Fanny said. "Besides, you're not going to get her to read *Conflict*. It isn't a book for a young girl to read."

"Heaps of girls of Sharlie's age are reading war books."

"I know—for the wrong reasons," said Fanny, unexpectedly. "Do leave the child alone, Phil, and don't force quarrels."

It worried Fanny that Sharlie and Philip should not get on better—at least that he should not get on better with her, for she could see nothing upon Sharlie's part which justified his outbursts concerning her. He could never leave her alone. Sometimes it seemed as if he hated her. There was, Fanny thought, nothing about Sharlie that you could possibly hate—

even if Fanny could have hated anybody, which was highly improbable. True, she did not understand Sharlie any more than did Philip—but then, Fanny did not want to. Understanding people—or trying to, perhaps—was so boring and so ill-rewarded. Far better leave people alone.

It was the policy she adopted still with Philip, who was difficult enough, she supposed, in all conscience, though she did not fail to be grateful to *Conflict* (which privately, and despite the gratitude, she thought so unnecessary) for the improvement it had made in Philip as a social animal. And Fanny was a social animal above all things and appreciated the qualities of the social animal above all others. If she had ever thought about it she would have admitted quite candidly to herself (for at least Fanny's mind, what there was of it, was honest!) that she cared for Philip considerably less now than in the days which preceded or immediately followed their marriage—and she had never imagined herself in love with him, or with anybody else for that matter. Love was a tiresome and silly business anyway, in Fanny's estimation, and if she had ever read Stevenson's essay upon the subject she would have agreed with his conclusion that, like the lion, it did not make a good domestic pet. The development of Philip's feeling for her—once so easy and light-hearted—did not incline her to think otherwise; he had been a lot nicer, she thought, in the olden days before the word had been so much as mentioned between them. She was aware that he had never forgiven her for a friendship (construed by Philip as an "affair") in which he had surprised her that December evening during the war, and she retained several far too lively recollections of the interview which had preceded that quite amusing and quite ridiculous encounter he had forced upon her. She knew that he had gone back to France not really believing that she had not been Rupert Browne's mistress; what she did not know, what she was miles from suspecting,

was that he had hoped never to come back. Neither was she within a hundred miles of understanding that every time he looked at Sharlie, so young, so thin, with her clear candid eyes and their thick straight lashes, making that dark shadow on her pale cheeks, he was reminded that he had sold his soul; and every time he looked at Fanny, every time he was torn between his doubt and his passion for her, he was reminded that he had sold it for a mess of pottage.

Fanny, good-tempered and easy-going as ever, found Sharlie useful, and was relieved when, after taking her matriculation in the September of nineteen hundred and nineteen, she settled down without demur to the quiet domestic life in which books and Pen and David figured with approximately equal importance. Pen was eleven in the spring and already a handful. In danger of being spoiled by her father, indulged by her mother, the hours spent with her half-sister represented all the discipline she ever knew. She was as fair as a lily, with hair as soft and curly as Fanny's own, large dark eyes in a pink and white face, and no brains. She was petulant, lazy, unscrupulous, lovely. She cared for nobody but herself, whom she admired with passion, looking eagerly forward to the day when she would leave school and enter upon her inheritance as the beautiful Penelope Stratton. She was sorry for Sharlie because at eighteen she had straight hair and no sweetheart. But Sharlie could do more with Pen than her mother could do, partly because she was less lazy-minded, less prone to demand a comfortable surface to life, but also because she adored Pen, knew her faults and had not only the patience to wrestle with them, but the optimism to believe that beneath her selfishness and feminine tyranny there was something worth while to be dug out. Her father laughed and told her not to waste her time, for he found Pen a delight without harbouring any of Sharlie's delusions about her. For

him, she could do no wrong. David, a quieter, more simple proposition altogether, was in some danger at this point of being over-shadowed by his sister. He was eight, and young for his age—with half his sister's good looks, but twice her good nature, and a pair of thoughtful, sombre grey eyes which he fixed upon her so intently that she was never sure whether he was criticising or admiring her. He gave signs already of a sharp keen intelligence and never said six words where three would do. Philip looked at his son with appraising eyes. He had brains enough, and spirit, for all his quiet. He would "do." At least Fanny, slut though he believed her, had given him two entirely satisfactory children. It was the one thing he counted to her for righteousness. When he saw them together he had a fleeting moment of satisfaction, the mess of pottage forgotten. But sometimes, too, he would think of the child who had died and be glad. For after his discovery of what he thought of as Fanny's "affair" with Rupert Browne, he had never known for certain that James was his child at all. Fanny had known Browne too long before his advent—he would never know when the "affair" she denied had started. She had not been unduly perturbed when he had said this to her, had used her favourite formula: "Phil, don't be so *silly!*" But she had never cared very much for James, anyway, however she got him. If she'd stayed in the country, Philip had told her, as he had wanted, the boy might not have died, but she had come to London for a reason of her own, and James had to take his chance. If he had been quite sure that he had been his son, he would, he thought, have hated her for that.

When, in the spring of nineteen-twenty, Sharlie said she would like to learn shorthand and typewriting, Fanny was at first quite frankly dismayed. She had got used to the idea of Sharlie at home—to the idea of her wrestling with Pen's

petulance and Dave's eternal interrogations. It was Sharlie who took Dave to his kindergarten and usually she who went to fetch him. Certainly it was Sharlie who furnished the bedtime stories, wrestled with Dave's initial difficulty to fall upon sleep and composed the stormiest of Pen's disputes with Rowena, who was at times peculiarly helpless with Pen, for that young woman had found out certain of her special weaknesses and baited her with them when she attempted to withstand her more outrageous designs upon established juvenile law and order. With Sharlie engaged upon some special study of her own, she would, Fanny thought, be a good deal less available for wrestling with these minor obstacles in the way of a peaceful existence. At the same time, she knew that Sharlie had been kicking her heels in vague disquiet for the past three months and was not entirely unprepared for some such decision upon her part. Fanny, who had been quite content to accept Sharlie's services without thought or question, had a mind sufficiently fair not only to see the justice of Sharlie's case when she made it, but to applaud her decision. She hoped audibly and to Sharlie's secret annoyance, that some day "some nice young man would come along," but until then she quite saw, etc., etc., and pleaded Sharlie's case to a Philip who said: "Shorthand and typewriting? Why, in God's name?"

Sharlie said she thought the shorthand part of it would be interesting, and that perhaps later she might be able to help him in a secretarial capacity.

Her father was startled.

"I can't dictate," he said—quite terrified, he found, at the idea of dictating his "stuff" to this strange critical young daughter of his. Later, as if to comfort himself, he said to Fanny: "I suppose she'll get married some day?"

"I hope so," said Fanny, but had no special conviction about it. She considered Sharlie at eighteen to be not very

attractive, though she thought her very good-looking. But in a cold, too perfectly-featured fashion. She was, in Fanny's opinion, quite painfully thin, with no figure to speak of—and much too pale; a pallor enhanced by those long unusually thick straight lashes which hung upon her cheek like a disfiguring bruise. Moreover, she was too serious, gave the impression of being cleverer than she was (or, had proved, at least), and had curiously little of what Fanny thought of, though she did not use the phrase, as "sex appeal." Even Judy, she considered, had more than Sharlie, though she, too, in Fanny's opinion, would frighten away far more men than she attracted. Also, Fanny thought them both a little conceited—not an endearing trait, as she knew, to men, who had too much of the quality themselves to relish it in women. All things considered, Fanny did not think that Sharlie's hopes of attracting a husband were especially rosy. She had never had even the usual boy-and-girl affairs at school (Fanny smiled, remembering Pen's already!) and what Philip so disagreeably implied about her, and such young and personable creatures as Shane Mostyn and Mickey Ross meant nothing—nothing whatever, save that Philip, for God knew what reason, liked saying things of this kind to the child.

So after the Easter of nineteen-twenty, Sharlie enrolled herself at her Commercial School and began her new studies with that air of quiet detachment characteristic of her. She stayed there a year and made no friends, not so much as a single acquaintance. She went to learn shorthand and to learn to work a typewriter, and this she did, getting there at ten each morning and reaching home again at five. She never talked to Fanny or to her father about the hours of her absence, or of anything that happened in them. Confidences of this sort she kept entirely for Judy, still going down to King's, still the same hard, bright jewel of a girl, who had made Philip Stratton's "blood run cold," and reported the

family history in her cool, amused impersonal fashion. Sharlie did not make friends easily. Judy was enough.

Pitman's shorthand, she confided to that young woman, was as interesting as she had expected. There was something in the scientific exactitude with which it expressed in symbol the component sounds of the English language that delighted her, and keener even than that was her pleasure at the surprising discovery that she could make the outlines so unusually neatly and boldly as to call down upon herself the special commendation of a teacher who had good reason to know how very rare an accomplishment it was. Her legible handwriting, her knowledge and sense of words, her ability to spell, her general knowledge and intelligence, together with her matriculation, rendered her, so she was informed, a really admirable secretary in the making.

Sharlie was very happy all that spring and summer, while *Conflict* went into its twelfth thousand, and Mona Mostyn nursed her small son and exhibited her bust of Shane at Burlington House, while Maud Norman wrote home to say that the Austrian krone had fallen to 0.02 Swiss centimes, that the Militarist Revolution had been a complete failure and that the Communist fighting in the streets of Berlin was so severe that mothers barricaded their small children playing about a room that looked on to a street, with all the heavier furniture, for fear of flying bullets. Throughout the hot days of that early summer of nineteen-twenty, while Germany signed the Allied Disarmament Terms at Spa, while riots convulsed Belfast and an earthquake erupted in Italy, Sharlie went quietly on with her studies—for her Commercial School did not close for any definite holiday period. But, with the coming of September, Fanny, slipping away from the Devon sea, where she had been in exile with Pen and Dave, to endeavour to persuade Philip to join them, was alarmed by her pallor and heavy eyes, and bundled her, books

and all, away to Lincolnshire.

There she stayed until the middle of October, watching the colour slip out of Ann Selwyn's garden, and into the elms and sycamores, until quite unexpectedly Judy arrived to spend a week with her aunt, bringing with her a copy of the American edition of Shane Mostyn's book, and the news that America had gone a little mad about it, and that Shane had "arrived."

"God be praised!" said Judy, "for all this year, ever since Richard Frank arrived, that young man of Mona's has been like a bear with a sore head. He's not at all bucked with this business of being a father, and keeps telling Mona they couldn't afford luxuries! Come to think of it, she *was* in a bit of a hurry! Matrimony *and* a baby on nothing at all must be a trifle messy."

"Oh, Jul" said Sharlie, remembering the look upon Mona's face when she had come upon her once embroidering a shawl for her unborn child.

But Judy only laughed.

"Oh, if you *will* be so sentimental about babies—and about Shane! You're as bad as Mona—no use talking to either of you. . . . Have you seen Shane lately? Has he been to your father's 'do's'?"

"No," said Sharlie, "I don't think so—but I haven't been to them very much myself." She had only seen Shane once since that evening when his little compliment had roused in her so much unexpected pleasure—and that was the afternoon some little time before Mona's child was born, when she had gone out to have tea with her at Kensal Rise. Shane had come in before the meal was over, had been very surly and irritable, regaining his good temper, apparently, only on his way with her to the bus. He had said then one or two disturbing things about marriage, and warned her laughingly against it; and all the way home she had thought: I'm glad I'm not married to you. . . . I'm glad I'm not married to you! over and over

like a chant or incantation, but she had remembered the white exhausted look upon Mona's face, and its expression when she had looked at Shane's dark sulky one, and was bitterly ashamed of that moment in her own father's drawing-room. Knowing nothing as yet of the intoxication of love, of the power of physical attraction, she had yet acknowledged to herself her liking for Shane, was aware that he was fully conscious of it and knew that, had she been encouraging, he would, that afternoon, have initiated with her a mild flirtation. But Sharlie had not been encouraging. She had been very, very detached and cool, appraising alike his mood and her own. I'm not in the least bit in love with you, she told herself, and you shan't even begin to make me believe I am. So now, when Judy said: "I suppose it'll be all right if he's going to make a fortune," something grateful bubbled up in her, and something that was a little sad and regretful—at the thought, perhaps, that happiness in marriage should seem to depend upon money. . . .

Sharlie spent a good deal of time at Cross Farm that week of Judy's stay. Beth Blunsdon got used to seeing them together, curled up on the old settee, or in the shabby armchairs talking, talking, talking. . . . She liked seeing them there. She envied Eve her two girls, and wished more than ever, with Harry in Canada and Tom in his French grave, that she had a daughter. She thought sometimes of the young man she might have married at eighteen, who had given his wife six children, five of them girls. Beth thought of him quite a lot these days, when she heard Sharlie talking of her small half-brother, for their names were the same. Well, if she coveted a couple of Dave Rustall's daughters she had no doubt he'd envied her her sons (if he'd ever heard of them), for he was a farmer—but neither of them, she thought, need envy the other, surely, for to all intents and purposes, she too, now, had only one son. Harry, away in Canada, married to a

Canadian-French girl, with a couple of sons whose photos she had not even seen, seemed already to have passed out of her life. She had not wanted him to go, but she would not stand in his way nor encourage Joe to do it. So many people, so many things, had stood in her way when she had been his age, she had thought never to get beyond them. And yet, she'd had more than thirty years of such happiness as she would never have dreamed of. Life had not cheated her after all. Since that spring night when she had ridden with Joe Blunsdon up through the dark woods of Imberford, it sometimes seemed to her that she had never known anything in the world but happiness, happiness so essential, so deep that even the going of Harry and the death of poor Tom had made no more than a scar on its surface. The roots of her life went deeply, hidden not in God, but in Joe Blunsdon. The only thing that made her sad, after thirty years of him, was that she hadn't given him the daughter he would have loved. But she had been forty when Clive was born in '98, and Joe wouldn't let her try again. "We met too late," she said to herself now as she looked at these exciting daughters of other people.

When Clive came in sometimes and had tea with them, she looked at him with a faint trouble in her eyes. He was so like his father, grew more like him every day, so that the sound of his voice, the turn of his head gave a tug at her heart. He had none of her coarse vigour, the vigour she inherited from that stern old man, her father, who'd never acknowledged her existence since the day she'd gone off to Joe. Thirty-two years ago. Queer that one could remember a grudge for so long, could carry it to the very edge of the grave. Harry had been like his grandfather, not alone in looks, but in character, knowing his own mind and fighting right and left, regardless of the claims of others, to achieve what he wanted. She did not blame him. At his age she had done enough

fighting of her own. One had but a single life, and had to make the most of it. Tom, poor boy, was another matter. He had liked neither the farm nor farming, and she at least had known that the war had been an escape. She had wept not so much for his death as because he had never had, out of his adult life, one single simple thing he had really wanted. Clive was his antithesis. He was a natural farmer. He loved his work and the county in which he had been born. When she had told him, as a child, of that other county he had never seen, but which she had never forgotten, which had been so much a part of her that for years the very thought of the sun coming up over the shoulder of Solbury Hill filled her with a dreadful nostalgia, he had only looked at her with surprise. There couldn't be anything better than these miles and miles of open country that was the Lincolnshire fenland! He would never be happy away from it. But he loved the stories she told of his grandfather's experiments with steam and was thrilled by the boast she repeated for him that he was the third man in England to use Smith's cultivator. He grew excited about the account she gave him of the farm where, in eighteen hundred and sixty, he had sunk drain-pipes and a fortune into its soil of clay and marl, as sticky as glue in wet weather, as porous as a honeycomb in time of frost. The story of Eye Farm, which had belonged to his grandfather and at which, when his mother first met him, his father had been working, thrilled the boy even more than did her stories of the quiet triumph of steam which Jeremy Bentley had achieved in the face of opposition and gibes and early failures. In Clive's mind, it was all of a piece with farming in Lincolnshire, where men had toiled from earliest times, as far back as the days of the Romans, to wrest unwilling victory from nature. Clive knew all about that.

This youngest of her sons, Beth knew, was strong and lithe, and happy in his work, but still she looked at him

anxiously these days when the girls were there. For she thought he was too fond of one of them, and she did not see what good could come of it. Even if Sharlie cared for him (but of course in that way she didn't—nothing could have been more obvious), she did not believe Ann Selwyn would smile upon such an alliance. No more than her own father, all those years ago, had smiled upon hers. She would not want her granddaughter to marry a common farmer, the son of one of her own tenants. Had it been Tom it might have been different, for Tom no more looked like a farmer than he could ever have happily become one. There had been a town look about Tom, a harking back to all those Bentleys who had gone into the church or one of the services. But it wasn't Tom. It was Clive—Clive who belonged to the soil—and she could see, if nobody else could, that the old childish friendship, over perhaps for them both, had ripened for Clive into something it caught at her heart to contemplate. The way he looked at Sharlie, with such brightly shy eyes that watched her when she was not looking and met her own with such new embarrassment—Beth knew well enough what that meant. Clive was twenty-two, and obviously very much in love; Sharlie eighteen and obviously not in love at all, with Clive or anybody else. Beth watched them anxiously, saying nothing, hoping for the best, quite unable to have said what, just exactly, the best was, but comforting herself with the thought that Clive was sensible and level-headed, that he would get over it.

Judy, too, saw what was the matter with Clive, and made no bones about talking to Sharlie concerning it.

"I suppose it doesn't occur to you that my young cousin's in love with you, does it?" she asked her one day.

Sharlie stared at her.

"Of course it doesn't. Why should he be?"

"Don't ask me!" said Judy. "*I'm* only stating the obvious.

He's as soppy about you as Mona is about Shane."

"I think you're perfectly *idiotic!*" Sharlie said. "Why, I've known Clive all my life!"

"Well, familiarity doesn't always breed contempt, you know," Judy told her. "But it's just silly of you to pretend you didn't know."

"Why, I never even *thought* of it!" Sharlie cried, mightily indignant. "If he is I hope he'll stop being it pretty soon. But I daresay you're wrong—for once."

"I'm not, don't you believe it," said Judy, who seemed to think it rather a joke. "But don't for goodness' sake go and get married—*yet*. I'll hate you if you do!"

"There's no danger," Sharlie told her, but after Judy's departure she did not go very much to the farm, for the rest of her stay. She stayed quietly at Carr House, helping Ann Selwyn plant her bulbs and reading the American edition of *The Journal of Henry Houghton.*

It made, she found, an enormous impression upon her mind. Its youth and bitterness tore at her heart, and the first person in which it was couched gave it a personal flavour quite irresistible, so that Henry Houghton, who had hated the war, struggled to keep out of it, and had finally gone in to fight as one without hope or ideals to sustain him, became for her, from the beginning, Shane Mostyn. His picture of war-time England made her feel that by being born a few years too late she would never really know anything about the war, and what it did to people, that by it her generation and his was sundered for ever. War-time England, as she remembered it, had its high lights for her, she suspected now, in the wrong place—on the personal, like that incident of her father's unexpected return; the queer exciting life at Edward Street with its hectic noisy parties, the gramophone and odd songs; the strange conduct of Lottie and Doris; the occasional shortness of sugar and butter; poor James's screaming when

the air raids came and his falling asleep in her arms when they went; the silly grumblings of people you met, that plump Austrian girl at school whose parents lived in Vienna, whom she and Judy had defended after the sinking of the *Lusitania;* that silly funny incident on the bus with the German dog—these things and many more like them made up the picture of England in war-time as she remembered it. But here in Shane's book was paraded for her all the ugliness of mob-feeling, all the contemptibility of the patriotism that waves a boastful flag, all the greed, vanity, and inhumanity war squeezed out of the civilian soul; the cheap insults of the "White Feather" tribe, the lies and manufactured hatreds of a cheap and short-sighted press; incidents as stupid as the one she and Judy had encountered in the Richmond bus—harsh incidents, incidents that were cruel, outrageous, stabbed its pages. Had people really been as bad as this—believed these things, suffered and committed them? Shane's picture was compelling enough. She could not disbelieve in it.

And Shane at war! He looked at the war as he had looked at civilian life in war-time before he went, and seemed, on the whole, to like it rather better. It was not the men who fought who said the stupid bloodthirsty things or talked of the enemy as though they were fiends and not human beings, cruelly thrust like themselves into a set of circumstances they had not contrived. Shane at war was cynical, bitter, humorous, but he was less unhappy, and always impersonal, hating the war and what it did to people, laughing at its pretensions, its idiotic claim to be engaged in destroying all future wars, knowing, even then, that it would bring humanity nothing that was worth one iota of the sacrifice it demanded.

The book fascinated Sharlie, and the portrait it presented of this new Shane removed from her for ever the less considerable one of a young man who sulked because a stupid world wouldn't buy his books and because his wife was going

to have a baby, and who sat in corners in her father's drawing-room not so much talking to her as avoiding other people and amusing himself meanwhile by paying her silly compliments. The Shane who wrote *Henry Houghton* was a brilliant person she was proud to think she knew, and when she heard her father say one evening to another writer that the book had genius, her heart beat with a queer unexpected excitement. Nevertheless, when she went back to town she avoided Shane upon those "evenings" of her father's. That dark thin face, the slow smile he turned upon her, were far, far too attractive. For weeks she lived with the exciting belief that she cherished for Shane a hopeless passion that coloured her days and made her ridiculously happy—which yet seemed, when she came to think of it, all wrong. She ought to have grown thin and hollow-eyed, and despaired and sighed. But she looked and felt extremely well. She had begun to fill out. Her eyes were bright and clear. She went down to her Commercial School as before, and with all her old enthusiasm, and for eight out of the twelve hours in her day she never thought of Shane at all. But for weeks, just to hear his name, to catch sight of him as he came into a room, gave her a little thrill of excitement. When it began to go she missed it; when it had gone altogether it left but the tiniest gap. Then, presently, that, too, was gone. She knew it was gone completely that evening when Shane had kissed her good night. She had let him do it (she who did not kiss people), holding up her face in a sisterly, indifferent fashion, definitely commonplace. The kiss was commonplace, too—so commonplace that for ever after when they met, and as a matter of course, they repeated it. Well, that was a lot better. Hopeless passions were doubtless a nuisance and three parts imagination. Sharlie was glad she had been so wrong about hers.

CHAPTER THREE

By the spring of 'twenty-one, whilst the Allied troops were taking occupation of the Ruhr, the Irish fighting in the streets of Dublin, and the Triple Alliance in Industrial England threatening a strike, Sharlie had left her Commercial College. Fully certificated, she looked round for somebody upon whom to practise, and consented with some eagerness to her father's suggestion that she should undertake the typing of his almost-completed new novel, and that he should dictate to her notes for replies to his morning post. Delighted, Fanny rearranged as an office the room that had once been the night nursery, and thought in her comfortable, unirritated fashion that for once Philip had done the obvious and sensible thing without her having suggested it—perhaps for that reason, though this did not occur to Fanny. She merely rejoiced at what she considered evidence of Philip's more reasonable attitude to the daughter he declared (so unreasonably in Fanny's opinion) to be "difficult" and smug.

Philip, however, was by no means so sure of the wisdom of his action, for he feared, more than he cared to admit, the judgment of this young daughter of his. At the same time his new novel—the first since *Conflict*—seemed to him so severe a twist from his earlier manner of silver and gold that it might, for that very reason, assure to him some measure of her approval—or did he mean something less of her disapproval? Sharlie, grown-up, was no less a problem to him, a thorn in his side, than Sharlie the child. That straight candid gaze with which she fixed you while you enunciated a point or answered a question could still put him out of countenance, for her self-possession, or the appearance of it, did not lessen

as she grew older, and always it induced in him a feeling of irritation against her so strong as to amount almost to dislike. Yet he had a respect for her commonsense and her well-balanced mind, and would have admired her strength of character if his irrational irritation had not always made him see it as priggishness and self-complacence.

However, Sharlie typed the new manuscript with no sort of comment—accounted for, not, as her father's sick fancy persuaded him to believe, by her immense superiority to what she read, but first, by her belief that as her father's secretary comment was quite uncalled for, and second, by her quite genuine feeling that she was utterly incompetent to offer an opinion. Her essential humility, so deceptively screened by that air of self-possession as to be for ever missed by her father, was real enough. It embarrassed her terribly to be asked by him what she thought of anything he wrote. Since those early days when, with Judy, she had dismissed all novels with an airy gesture, she had read many, arriving at no very final opinion concerning them, awarding the palm of her appreciation to many, and definitely bored by others. Truth to tell, too, so far as her father's new book was concerned, she could not see any very great difference in theme between it and that earlier example of his work she had read a few years before, for still it seemed to have little to do with life as she saw it lived all around her, save that the war came into it, though used as the *deus ex machina*, which Sharlie found a little annoyed her. She had, however, no idea that the attitude of detachment she brought to her occupation with his story (which she would have brought to anyone's) irritated her father, for it did not occur to her that he had attached any importance to her earlier remarks, so unwittingly uttered. When, therefore, one day towards its completion, he said to her: "Well, how does it strike you?" she was completely nonplussed and a good deal surprised.

"It reads," she said at length, "very smoothly," and then, as if moved by the expression on his face, "It's awfully well-written."

Flattered in a way that surprised him, her father said: "Do you like the book a little?"

"Oh yes—but I don't think I enjoy novels *very* much, you know. I can't tell why. They seem to me too emotional, somehow. People in real life don't seem to me to *mind* things as much as the people in novels do."

"But your experience of life, at twenty, if I may say so . . ."

"I know," said Sharlie, and hoped that might conclude the conversation, but Philip only said: "Well, say what you think."

"But I don't *know* what I think. It's a question of emphasis, perhaps. Novelists seem to take the emotional side of life, and make it do duty for everything else."

Philip said suddenly: "Have you ever been in love?"

"No," said Sharlie.

"Well, perhaps you never will be. But people *do* fall in love, and the state, though you may not believe it, seems to them the most important thing in the world. While it lasts."

"Yes—but in most novels it doesn't. And that's all the story—it's not lasting, I mean. . . . But suppose it did? Wouldn't there, then, be anything worth writing about?"

"Happy marriages, perhaps, like countries at peace, have no histories."

"You mean, they aren't *interesting*?"

"No—that they haven't enough high-lights—that's why novels used to end with marriage bells. All the excitement was what went before. And there's another theory. The novel, in many cases, definitely sets out to give only the emotional phases of its characters' lives."

"I think it's a pity," Sharlie said. "Ordinary life is interest-

ing. Why don't the novelists think so, I wonder? A family like the Normans—or like us, for that matter. Why don't people write about *us?* It wouldn't be very exciting, I suppose—but then real life doesn't seem to me to *be* very exciting. When the novelist insists that life is full of emotional scenes, and people exciting each other, and being unhappy, and getting divorced, I feel it's wrong, or at least, out of shape. I don't *know* people like that."

"*Because* you don't know people like that?"

"I suppose so."

"Do you remember your mother?"

"Very faintly."

"Do you remember enough to know that we were unhappy?"

"Yes, I think so. But she died when I was seven."

"But I should have left her for your stepmother if she hadn't."

"Oh," said Sharlie, and had an uneasy feeling that, though surprise was in her voice, it wasn't really surprise she felt.

"Hasn't anybody ever suggested that to you?"

"No."

This was quite true. Ann Selwyn would never have passed on her suspicions to the child Sharlie was at the time, and since the war and Philip's part in it, a feeling of surprised relief had urged her to drop her worst animosity towards him—though not to the extent of meeting Fanny, or making the acquaintance of her children.

"Well, it's true. Your mother and I were certainly not happy. Do you think your stepmother and I are?"

"Oh yes—surely!" said Sharlie. "You get on awfully well together." Anyone, she thought, would get on with Fanny.

"Think so? Do you remember much of the war years?"

"At home, you mean? Oh yes. Why?"

"Didn't anything occur to you about them?"

"Then? I don't think so. Ought it to have?"

"Probably not. You weren't old enough to understand, anyway."

Sharlie remembered again that queer evening of her father's unexpected return, the look on his face as he had hurled those shameful questions at Fanny, the sudden way he had pulled her inside and locked the door. She heard herself saying to Judy: "What does it mean when people are lovers?"—felt again the burning of her face as Judy had told her. But that was war-time, when everybody had seemed a little mad, had said and done idiotic things—like that bus conductor at Richmond waging his absurd war against the German dog. . . . She said nothing. Her father went on:

"Well, that's an unprofitable discussion, anyway. As well to remember, however, that things aren't always what they seem. If you take ordinary people and begin to write about them you'll find in nine cases out of ten that they're not half as ordinary as you think. You'll find them acting from all kinds of subterranean motives."

"Yes—but it's you, the novelist, who'll arrange all that. You won't be content for them to *be* ordinary. They wouldn't interest you that way. You must plot and contrive." She sighed. "Well, I suppose I'm not romantic. I don't want people to do unexpected or sensational things, and I'd like a novel in which there was a good deal more about them doing the ordinary ones—like going to the theatre, seeing their friends, talking to them, buying new clothes, staying with relations, arguing. And about gardening and children. Children are interesting enough."

"And not about falling in love at all?"

"Not so much, anyway. And not falling out, either. That doesn't seem to me the most interesting part of life."

Her father stared at her, bleak dislike in his face.

"You seem to me the most cold-blooded young woman

I have ever met. . . . Don't you *ever* think about young men?"

"Oh yes. Sometimes. Why not?"

"But you haven't ever been in love?"

Again Sharlie considered.

"No," she said at last. "I'm afraid I haven't."

"Don't you ever think you'll want to get married?"

"I think I'd like to be married some day."

"Well, that'll mean falling in love."

"Will it? Do all the people who marry fall in love?"

"Up to some point, yes."

"You know, father, I *don't* believe that. You know what Stevenson says?—that you only have to look at the faces of the people you meet in the streets to see that they have never been 'in love or in any high passion in all their lives.' "

"Then how would you explain all this marrying, divorcing and the rest of it?"

"I don't know. Partly, I suppose, by this romantic tradition which the novelists foster, and the poets too, for that matter. Most people wouldn't *think* about love if they didn't read so much about it everywhere and see so many versions of it at the cinema. Love oughtn't to be spelt, for most people, you know, father, with a capital letter."

"People commit murder for love," said Philip Stratton, and was startled to hear his own words—as if some dark subterranean self had risen up and hurled itself upon speech.

"Only very abnormal people, surely," said Sharlie coolly.

This conversation disturbed Philip considerably. What this young daughter of his said was so uncannily like the things he had once said and believed of love. She didn't see it yet as an appetite, a high-sounding term for a biological necessity, but, even as she did now, so once had he as warmly contended that people allowed love to interfere too much with their lives, thought too much about it, built too much

upon it. He had wanted (as Sharlie did not yet—probably never would, for she was a cold type, he believed) the delights of the flesh, had married Sharlie's mother to secure them: had felt himself cheated and talked no more of love, save, scornfully, as a means of destroying the romantic impossible dreams to which his wife had continued to cling. Meeting Fanny, he had talked of love not at all—and neither had she. They had taken what they wanted of each other and decorated it with no fine language. In their pre-war day they had considered themselves (not without reason) fine and free and sane level-headed young people. The violent hopeless passion he had conceived for her much later and so unexpectedly (perhaps at her cool suggestion that she should marry another) had sent him abruptly into hell, urged him to that which had broken his peace and destroyed his life, until the war, which made murderers of so many, had submerged that chapter in his life in others as desperately in need of oblivion. No use to worry about that old incident now. In a world of violence and horror it had taken its own place. It had ceased to torment his mind or exacerbate his body. But Fanny continued to do both—Fanny who was nearly thirty-two and getting already very plump, who gave herself to him with the same sensual, if tempered delight, that the sexual act always induced in her. It meant nothing. It was, as Judy Norman would say, biological—but bereft, surely, even of sex-purpose, for Fanny had borne her children with indifference, as the price one paid, with what grace one could muster, for the thing which gave one pleasure. Philip knew Fanny's surrender meant nothing that mattered—nothing romantic, nothing personal to him. Any other man would have done as well—*had* done as well before him and in his absence, for all he knew. Yet his love for her persisted, in spite of his disgusts, his memories and suspicions, as if its very existence was necessary to his self-respect, as though

in some queer fashion he could not afford to let it go, to see Fanny too often and too clearly for what she was.

He was aware that his feeling for this vision of her had killed in him that gift once his, so alien to his personality, yet so reassuring to possess, that had produced his early books which people had thought "so delightfully whimsical, showing such a really beautiful mind," so that now what he wrote must be violent, cynical, touched with disgust and a searing disillusion, at which his large public (willing enough perhaps to swallow such a mood in a book about the war) would certainly, encountering it in its successor, stretch its eyes, and which already Sharlie, in her cocksure youth, informed him was not "like life." But what, for all her candid eyes and cool appraising modernity, did she know of that dark tide which rushed men and women to their fate, urged them to cruel deeds—deeds that were mean and incomparably foolish, plunging them down into the depths of despair and self-abasement? Nothing—and probably never would. Her generation was hard, impercipient—it wouldn't get hurt. . . . That many people were washed away by this dark tide, swept by it into the abyss, was probably not a fact. There was truth (he admitted it to himself though not to Sharlie) in Stevenson's contention regarding the "tailorish and anæmic persons" who inhabit the earth, but for the rest of his life he would write, he knew, if at all, about the minority that was nothing of the kind. And Sharlie would go on typing these novels with her cool-hearted detachment, her refusal to accept what they postulated. He watched her doing it, at this stage, with an envy he vehemently disdained.

Sharlie's acceptance of the Stevensonian view of love as exemplified in the Norman family was seriously disrupted that summer of 'twenty-two by the news that Mona's marriage had fallen into the dust and by Judy's news that

her brother Mark was going back to Canada with his cousin in order to avoid an entanglement with "that fool of a girl, Greta Mardinor." Even Eve Norman, it seemed, was smiling now upon the Canadian project. "She'd rather it was Canada than the divorce court," said Judy, "and it hasn't anything to do with respectability, either. She's naturally monogamous, but so's Mark, so I don't see why she should worry overmuch." Sharlie had found nothing to say, busy with her mental reviewing of the fact that so quiet and laconic a young man as Mark Norman should be in any danger of proving, even partially, one of her father's unpalatable theories.

Mona's marriage was a different matter. Shane's name just then was rather prominently in the public eye, for he had a very successful play running at one of the London theatres and *Henry Houghton* was as obstinate a success in its cheap editions as, after the American furore, it had been in the original, so that the divorce case in which he was cited as co-respondent attracted too much attention for Mona's mother, even though it was undefended. Sharlie knew that both Eve and Judy thought that Mona, too, should apply for a divorce, but Mona wouldn't, and had packed up and gone off to her grandfather in the country, running away from all the advice they forced upon her.

"Poor girl!" said Fanny. "Why can't they leave her alone? Why should she have to divorce her husband if she doesn't want to—whatever he's done?"

Sharlie was grateful to Fanny for that level, natural and reasonable tone. Fanny, at least, didn't think it necessary to get worked-up and emotional and she sounded kind, with no deep meanings and personal innuendoes in the things she said. "I think too much fuss is made about unfaithfulness," she remarked. "There are worse things. To live with, anyhow."

Philip, with a twist on his mouth not good to see, said only: "Well, it's all part of Sharlie's education, anyway, which upon these matters was before singularly incomplete."

Sharlie, however, did not excuse Shane. What he had done seemed to her incredibly beastly. It aroused in her a horror of the very thing Fanny dismissed so easily, a detestation so fierce and deep that she wondered if it were a subconscious weapon turned sharply against her father's romantic theories or merely the measure of her old-time liking for and admiration of the offender himself.

She was glad when she could escape to Carr House, where even if Mona's matrimonial infelicities were known they would be neither so widely discussed nor discussed from her father's angle, and where (as she saw with amusement) her grandmother was a little relieved to find that though immersed in the love affairs of other people she had none yet of her own. She was to experience during this short stay with her grandparents not only a resurgence of that rock-like affection that was as old as her life, but a feeling of immense gratitude to them for their interpretation of life in terms of dignity and common sense. Impossible to believe that either of them had ever been racked by the problems which racked the people you encountered in fiction and the newspapers, which had darkened her own early years, or which had brought to naught the romantic relationship of a Mona and Shane.

The summer of 'twenty-two was a trial to gardeners. August arrived with soft perpetual winds blowing over the fens, shaking down the petals of Ann Selwyn's roses, spoiling her early lilies and beating flat the gladioli spears and racines of hydrangea bloom. Ann groaned and lamented and continued unabashed when her husband reminded her of the really fine summer just gone by. No gardener was ever content with the weather that arrived. The sweet peas, at

least, and the spireas had thrived on the rain—one couldn't have everything. One hoped for it if one was a gardener, Ann declared, and continued to grumble at the samples of undesirable weather August exhibited outside her windows, whilst Henry said she was like the farmer who prayed that it might rain upon the potatoes but not upon the turnips.

To Sharlie, life here in the heart of the country seemed a desirable, lovely thing. She thought she would like to live there for ever, rain or no rain, and to keep before her eyes this benevolent example of Darby and Joan, this concrete instance of people who enclosed their span of life with dignity and reticence. But soon into all this peace and loveliness came Judy bursting with energy and bristling with news of Mona, hot, so to speak, from the horse's mouth, for Judy had betaken herself for one brief day and night to the Surrey hills, where old Jeremy Bentley, too, it appeared, was grumbling at the weather and what it did to his roses.

Sharlie went over to Cross Farm to tea the day of her arrival and, curled up on Beth's old settee, sat listening to the story she had to relate of how, in the middle of the night, Mona had waked her up to tell her that she was going back to Shane, and of how she had risen betimes in the morning and had taken herself off before her mother, who was coming for the week-end, could arrive with a fresh lot of arguments against it. Sharlie said she was glad, found Judy in violent opposition, and herself involved in all kinds of difficult reflections that seemed to lead nowhere, so that she was glad when the door opened and Beth Blunsdon came in. Looking at that calm reposeful face, Sharlie found it difficult to believe that she had ever done anything which had caused her father to maintain against her a silence of more than thirty years. She was Sharlie's idea of a happy woman, whose energies and affections were all usefully and worthily employed. As she sat down now her brightly-coloured face

looked happy and full of content. She said at once: "Harry's ship's due on Friday."

"Oh, you *must* be excited!" Sharlie cried.

"I am, rather, my dear. It's nearly eight years, you know, since he went."

"Is he bringing his French wife?"

"No. The children are too young. And it's very expensive."

"Oh, what a pity! You must want to see them all so badly."

"Mother seems resigned about Mark, you'll be glad to hear," put in Judy.

"Has he really made up his mind this time?"

"He's had it made up for him by circumstances."

"Oh yes—that poor young girl."

"She isn't poor, Aunt Beth. Don't be sentimental. She merely doesn't like her husband—or likes Mark better. And she has nothing to complain of. He allows her to have the child."

"Is Mark very fond of her?"

"Not *very*—yet, but fond, certainly. It's better for him to get away. The lesser of two evils, with mother. She wouldn't care about that kind of scandal, you know, Aunt Beth—and Mardinor's being rather beastly about it."

Beth Blunsdon smiled in her tolerant, really amused fashion.

"I'm afraid she wouldn't, Ju," she said.

"Well, anyway, mother 'll have something else to think about soon, beside her tiresome children," said Judy. "She's been adopted as the Liberal candidate for Bayswater again. There'll be a General Election, she says, before the end of the year."

"Is she going to get in this time?"

"Shouldn't wonder. She'd have done it last time if she'd

been a man. Can't vote for a woman, they said in 'eighteen. All the weedy youths she could pick up with one hand said that, you know. '*Me* be represented by a woman? No bloody fear!' "

Beth and Shar burst out laughing and in the middle of it the door opened and Joe Blunsdon came in.

"You sound very merry," he said.

"I don't think we are—very, you know," Judy told him. "We've all been very solemn indeed. Especially Sharlie. Where's Clive?"

"Gone over to Beechcroft. He didn't know Sharlie was to be here."

Judy grinned. The colour came into Sharlie's face. She said nothing and indeed she was not thinking of what Joe Blunsdon had said so much as that he looked tired and much older than when she had seen him last.

"You looked fagged," she said, and got up to pull forward a chair. But Beth was first.

"A little tired, aren't you, Joe?" she asked him.

"Oh, nothing to speak of, my gal. I'm not as young as I was, you know. I'll be as fit as a fiddle when I've had some tea. No job for you yet, Ju . . . Has Ju told you, Sharlie, that she's made up her mind at last to be a doctor?"

"Oh, Ju—*no!* Why *didn't* you?"

"Well, *one* of us has to be!" Judy said calmly, "and Mona and Mark wouldn't oblige. I intend to be very successful indeed, and I'll bring your babies into the world for nothing, Shar."

Everybody laughed.

Sharlie said: "Idiot!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Two days later Clive Blunsdon asked Sharlie to marry him.

She met him as she was coming back from a walk. He got off his bicycle to greet her and to tell her that Harry was expected home on the morrow and to ask her to come in to tea before she went home. She promised she would, and then walking along together they began to talk of Harry, the French wife they had none of them seen, and about Mark, who was coming down for the week-end. It was late September, and already evening had hung her coloured banners in the sky, and over the stubble fields the moon hung low like a lighted lantern. By a mutual impulse they both turned to look at the last fragment of the bright day that hung upon the edge of the dusk, and as they went on again, Clive wheeling his cycle and Sharlie swinging her hat by its lining, he said, quite without preamble of any sort, "Shar—will you marry me?"

For all Judy's statement on the subject of Clive's feelings towards her, Sharlie was surprised. She had never believed what Judy had said and she did not find it easy to believe it now—perhaps she had known Clive too long to believe that he felt "this way" about her. Vague as that phrase was, it was all of definiteness her mind could hold. How *did* you feel when you wanted to marry somebody? Alas, she was only aware of how you felt when you did not. So, whilst she hunted for suitable words Clive, still walking along, still pushing his bicycle, said: "I wish you would, Shar. I'm very fond of you."

"I'm very fond of you, too," she said.

"Well, then. . . ."

"But I don't want to marry you."

"Why not?"

She was guilty of the tiniest, softest laugh.

"I don't know. Perhaps I don't want to marry anyone."

"Of course you do. You're not like Ju!"

"Then perhaps it's only that I don't want to marry *you*."

"Is there anybody you like better?"

"No."

"Then why won't you? We've always got on. We'd make a 'go' of it."

"I can't *think* why. I can't say, 'Yes, thank you very much, as if you were asking me to have an ice, can I?"

"*Why* can't you?"

"It sounds so—so cold-blooded."

"Well, *I* don't feel very cold-blooded, but I can't say a lot of pretty things. Is that what you want?"

It was, rather, Sharlie found. When it came to the point, the ordinary everyday liking did not seem after all to be sufficient. Something, some magic of words, some kindling of the blood was necessary to bridge all the space between friendship (even of so long a standing as theirs) and all the intimacies of marriage. She did not see—she simply did not see—how without these things the gap could ever be bridged. Was she too physically cold, perhaps—or too disinclined to surrender herself in marriage? She did not know, but in that embarrassed moment there flashed across her mind a phrase of Judy's from the long ago that was their childhood, to the effect that marriage didn't seem "a very pleasant arrangement," but that Maud Norman had thought she might one day alter her mind—that most people did! What, she wondered now, *was* it that made them? Love? *Being* loved? Loving? Being *in love?* She didn't know. She just couldn't *imagine* Clive as her husband, and when she tried to she was certain that she could not marry him.

Embarrassed—or encouraged—by her silence, Clive said: "We needn't be married at once, of course. There's plenty of time—and of course there's your grandmother and grandfather. I don't suppose they'd be very pleased about it. After all, we're their tenants, and even if my mother's a 'lady,' my father's only a common farmer, like me. And I haven't any special recommendations."

"Oh, Clive—you've heaps! Anybody would be proud to marry you!"

"But not you, eh?"

"I am proud to have been asked."

Clive stopped and faced her.

"Do you want me to ask you again, presently?" he said. "Is that it?"

Her straight level glance met his. He thought her eyes quite the loveliest he had ever seen, just as he thought her the most attractive girl he had ever met. He was very deeply in love and had been for years, though he could not say so. He stood there looking at her, seeing the colour come running up into her face and embarrassment veiling that candid glance.

"I don't think so," she said. "I don't know *what* I want. I don't want to marry you—but perhaps I *want* to want to. I feel you ought to be able to make me do that or it can't possibly be any good."

"I see," he said. "You don't care for me enough?"

"I don't care in the right way."

"What *is* the right way, Shar?"

"I don't know."

"All right. Let's go on as we are. There's plenty of time. Shall we?"

Relieved, she said: "Yes, oh yes—let's," and they walked on.

All the same, Sharlie was puzzled. This was by no means

a romantic proposal. Clive's declaration had emphasised for her the unsensational habit of life which was most people's—and yet she had not been satisfied with it. She had wanted Clive to do or say something which he had not said or done. What? She didn't know. She supposed scornfully that, like any silly heroine in a book, she wanted to be rushed off her feet, bludgeoned into consent. She wanted, more than all else, it seemed, to be quite sure that for her there really was and could be nothing else—no quickening of the pulse, no desire, no longing to be possessed, no headlong falling into this thing love which filled the novels, inspired far too many poems and filled the sensational newspapers. She had to *know*. She couldn't, yet, get married without some reasonable assurance that this thing for her did not exist. I can't do anything in a hurry, she thought. I can't *miss* anything. I must find out.

The next year yielded her nothing. Her life was frankly dull and completely uneventful, and sometimes she envied Judy, who knew what she wanted and moved steadily after it. She regretted that she had no talent to be developed, no career to carve, and thought with wistfulness of Mona Mostyn away there with the man she loved in Italy (whither she had removed herself, and him, to Joe Blunsdon's dismay, from the family displeasure), sending home Italian landscapes for the London exhibitions and photographs of her new baby that Sharlie found exquisite. Even Mark, running away from one little bit of life, had come upon something that interested and occupied his mind and body, for Judy's reports concerning Canada were highly satisfactory. Only for Sharlie did there seem to be nothing that mattered very much. Her visits to Carr House, her somewhat crippled friendship with Clive, her love for the country—these were the only things that might count as high lights in her long days at the

Edward Street house, in and out of which Fanny ran on her busy social round, with both her children at school and a husband silently immersed for the greater part of the week in his work. Fanny, it seemed to Sharlie, got more out of her life than any of them. She was uniformly good-tempered, occupied and satisfied. Her bridge and tennis parties took the place of those Wednesday evenings which her father had dropped and the house was always full of people to whom Philip did little more than show himself. Fanny's friends thought him a bore, though inclined to make allowances for the "literary temperament," but Fanny never complained or seemed in the slightest need of sympathy.

When Pen came home—very grown-up and with her fairy beauty deepened—this round of visitors and gaiety quickened and intensified. Theatres, shops, the cinema, a perpetual round of visits—there was no end to it. Sharlie, participating sometimes in these jaunts, was frankly bored by them. She did not care for the plays Fanny and Pen preferred: she loathed the cinema as a medium of entertainment, would never have cared for it even if all the pictures had been good, as they certainly were not, for anything which you got purely through the eye was less interesting to Sharlie than something which reached you through the intellect or emotions, like music or poetry. At bridge she was no good whatever, having the kind of brain which went to sleep when the cards came out, and the mere pursuit of fashion was, she found, immensely boring. Dave was more fun, since he retained his liking for books and stories and was as interested as she had been at his age in places and their history. They trapesed London together staring at its churches, identifying its monuments and ferreting out the birthplaces of its great. They spent hours at the Tower, at Westminster Abbey, roaming in the Inns of Court, in the various museums and picture galleries, and at places like Hampton Court. They

went to Lord's (though cricket was a dead letter to Sharlie), and once she contrived to get some tickets for the ceremony of Maundy Thursday. Dave was a highly-strung, imaginative youngster, not likely to be very happy under the English public-school system, if his experience at his "prep" was any indication. Philip, however, did not encourage such ideas, and Dave, certainly, did not expect it. He had a quiet manner and a way of folding himself away that struck Philip as very much like his half-sister's. He hoped that school would knock it out of him.

Save at these times when Dave was home on holiday it seemed to Sharlie that her life was singularly useless. Fanny's house was too well run for her to be able to find overmuch employment there for fingers kept persistently idle these days by her father's disinclination to pass over to her the draft of his new novel. He was obviously a tired man, discouraged by the strength of the modern literary current he could not contend with, and far less able than formerly to bury himself in his work, which seemed to him to have (and in fact did have) but little place in this post-war world of young, startling and unamiable talent. Though its old silver-and-gold note had long ago given place to the cynical, his work showed no very outstanding quality: his last two novels had not earned their advance, though the reviewers accorded him the courtesy due to a writer who, in an earlier day, had been a public favourite. "Mr. Stratton," they said, "has not lost his old gift for telling a story." One even began, "Time has not dimmed . . ." as if he were Methuselah, instead of only just past his fiftieth birthday. He saw plainly that his talent was a very pale star in a literary firmament studded with all these amazing post-war constellations, and that unless the present book, the last to be handled under his existing contract, did better than its predecessors, he would find himself, despite his private income, definitely dwindled

to-day, unable to afford to continue to write novels. True, there was his journalism, but his loss of the weekly articles he had done for years for the paper once owned by Fanny's father and recently swallowed up by the latest combine, had been a considerable blow. He saw that his articles bore a more definite relationship to his novels than he had once suspected. In these days the papers wanted "names." He complained, with truth, that if you wrote a successful or popular book your opinion was requested upon every damn-fool topic under the sun, or you were invited to review other people's novels at a princely salary—as witness Shane Mostyn's fortnightly page in the *Evening Mercury*. Divorce or no divorce, that young man had been able with his latest book to cement the position he had created with *Henry Houghton*, and nothing had made Philip realise more bitterly how very back a number he had become than that book's successor. Whatever the reviewers found to say of his story-telling, he realised acutely that the sort of story he could tell was no longer wanted—and a good many of the novels he read did not even trouble to tell a story of any sort. They were extensions of moods, of passing moments. People wrote whole books about a visit to a church! There was no such thing as design or plot left in novel-writing—at least not as practised by the people most persistently acclaimed. The novel which was planned, constructed, architecturally designed, was dismissed as "the orderly novel of talented minds." In public he opined that technically the novel had gone to pot, and in private wished he could put his hand upon the secret of whatever it was the novel had achieved in the place of the things once counted imperative. But he could not, and so, working fitfully at his new book, discontented and unhappy with it, he emerged from his study to scowl upon a serene untroubled Fanny spending money right and left as if it grew on trees and merely had to be

picked overnight, and to growl negatives at an unemployed Sharlie who asked if there was really nothing she could do to help him with the book. It seemed to her that as she had grown older her life had become aimless and useless. Here am I, she would think sometimes, not a fool and not brilliant, but intelligent, decently educated, and if with no outstanding talent, then at least with some practical training—and what am I doing all day long?

It was a relief to go to Marne House, where the women she met certainly lacked nothing in employment—not Judy, busy with her first year's work at hospital, nor Maud Norman, back from her relief work in Vienna, busy with her articles in the Press, with her mothers and babies at her clinic, and not Eve Norman, still wrestling with the business of getting herself into Parliament. Sharlie, avowing no party, feeling ill-informed and confused, and mistrustful of Parliament and its capacity to deal with the woes of post-war modernity, had cast the first vote of her life for Eve Norman, out of a personal admiration and a conviction of her intelligence and sincerity. But the election of 'twenty-three, which had sent nearly two hundred Labour members and eight women to the House, had not given Eve a seat; neither did she fare any better in the upheaval of 'twenty-four, which sent the Conservatives back into power. But she remained undaunted.

Judy, however, was mightily scornful, seeing the whole business as ruinous ("If mother doesn't get a seat soon we shall all be in the workhouse!"), and agreeing with Judy as to the futility of the English mediæval Parliament. She would quote with delight the instance of a woman member who had stood up to ask some question *without a hat on*, and had been howled down or counted out, or in some other equally silly way prevented from doing what she had stood up to do. But if Judy despised Parliament she also despised the electorate to which her mother devoted so much of her

time and which had, she declared, no convictions at all, swaying about like a pendulum, now to the left, now to the right. Her mother, she said, would have done better to have stuck to her first love, medicine, and doctored bodies instead of tinkering with minds.

Sharlie found it of immense interest to listen to what they all had to say, but she found, for the first time in her life, that a good many of Judy's opinions quite appalled her. The scientifically-run universe she adumbrated filled Sharlie with horror. To her it was efficient and abominable—like a machine-gun, and Maud Norman supported her.

"Science?" she said. "We're science mad! We assert that we've given the whole world better health, learnt how to make drains and how to cut people up and lengthen the span of life. But we've also invented the machine-gun, poison gas, the air-bomber and submarine, so what we give the world with one hand we take away again with the other. Science can't have it both ways. The world's mad—and I'm not sure that the scientists aren't the maddest people in it! We've learnt nothing from the war—except how to achieve more horrible ways of killing people! It's the very foundation of society that's wrong. What we want is not more science—God forbid!—but something which will change things from the bottom up, some change of heart which our chemists certainly won't achieve. But when we've got it we shall have the millennium, but I shan't be here to see, nor any of the rest of you, I fear—not even the first instalment!"

Maud Norman's service abroad, her first-hand knowledge of war and its aftermath, had sent her home with that kind of despair of humanity which is not a drug but an incentive to harder effort. She cared for nothing save her anti-war campaign and the poor mothers and their children who came to Stephanie House. All the money she earned by her private practice and by her articles in the Press went into these things,

and only the fact that Maud Norman would have nobody in the clinic but trained, certificated people, kept Sharlie from begging for a job.

Another person whom she met sometimes at Marne House was Virginia Frome—the woman she had met first on the doorstep that afternoon just before Frank Norman's death and which the war had prevented her from getting to know any better. Her visits were both occasional and brief, but her life, empty of either social or political activities though it was, seemed to Sharlie to be most satisfyingly full. There was something that appealed tremendously to Sharlie about her—a keen intelligence, a quiet serenity of manner, an equability of temper, a suggestion of something deeply and richly satisfied—and for years she stood in Sharlie's life, as Beth Blunsdon had always done, as an example of a really happy woman. No compliment ever pleased her quite as much as Judy's "You're like Jinny, you know, Shar. The same type—and you ought to have the same kind of life. If you had half the housework to do and three children, like Jinny, you'd be happy. Strange, but true."

It remained one of Sharlie's keenest regrets that circumstances had so combined to prevent her and Virginia Frome from being anything more than the merest acquaintances. Virginia was past her fortieth birthday, Sharlie barely past her majority, and the years, Sharlie saw, made an insurmountable barrier between them. It never occurred to Mrs. Frome to offer friendship to this young girl she occasionally met. Had her children been older they might have been a link, but they were all still at school, and deeply engaged, when they came to Marne House, with their own urgent affairs. To them Sharlie was "Miss Stratton," daughter of the well-known novelist (not that that thrilled them!), a friend of Judy Norman's and "just somebody mother knows." They were no help at all.

In the end her visits to Marne House only deepened within Sharlie the sense that in a world in which so many things were happening there was no place for her at all. She wondered idly if she would have been wise, after all, to have married Clive . . .

Her work for her father continued to be intermittent, and his moods, his cold hurtful remarks, more numerous than ever and as difficult to bear. The wound in his knee was giving him a lot of fresh trouble; he was still plagued with intermittent toothache and even the sixpence which came off the income-tax in Mr. Churchill's Budget of 'twenty-five failed to improve his state of mind. He seemed to Sharlie a sick man in body and in soul, but her efforts to help him were singularly unavailing and not encouraged by Fanny, who continued to go her own blithely-contented way.

"Much better leave him alone, Shar. You know what he is! He'll come out of his mood presently and finish the book and all will be well. It isn't any use *bothering!*"

Sharlie stared at her, wondering how much she cared for her husband—if she cared at all, and the same kind of vague, ill-directed criticism sprang up in her mind of Fanny as had been there all those years ago during the war, when she had left Dave and Pen to the tender mercies of the people she employed and had gone off and enjoyed herself.

In the July of 'twenty-five Sharlie went off to Lincolnshire with a sense of deep relief, for at Carr House she knew that she would be considerably less conscious of that quite appalling sense which assailed her of time, of life, running to waste—slipping by like water under a bridge. For at Carr House there were things to do, and luncheons, tennis or bridge parties were by no means the whole programme of life. Neither would there be the sight of her father to harrow her soul, and she could lose for a while that sense

of pity that nowadays encroached upon all the emotions that came to her in regard to him, and of which she was afraid, because she found it difficult to hide and knew that his scorn and anger would be unbounded if he as much as suspected its existence. At Carr House her grandparents were getting old, though her grandfather had never been heard to admit it; his sight was troubling him and he was finding his sciatica more and more a constant companion. It was Sharlie who read the papers to him and wrote his letters, as it was Sharlie who picked the dead heads off Ann's pinks and helped Beridge with the weeding; and when the cook (the same cook Sharlie remembered as a child) fell ill and was taken off to hospital, it was Sharlie again who undertook the preparation of meals for the weeks which intervened before her grandmother could find another who would stay in a house that did not boast a wireless set. Rather to her astonishment, for she had not done any before, Sharlie found that the business of cooking was one by no means disagreeable to her. She thought vaguely that she ought to have been a poor man's daughter, that even as Virginia Frome had done, she might find it a satisfying thing to be, and decided again that on the whole the people who worked with their hands were to be envied.

But the countryside, too, rang with lamentations, for by the summer of 'twenty-five the financial position among farmers had become acute. The Corn Production Act had been repealed and a guaranteed price for wheat was no longer ensuring to the farmer a measure of security. The prosperity in which so many farmers had sunned themselves immediately after the war was long a thing of the past; the harvest of 'twenty-two had been calamitous and ruin stared many of them in the face. Sharlie found herself wishing that Eve Norman might hear some of the hard things that were already being said by the farmers about the politicians.

At Cross Farm an argument was raging. Joe, who was seventy and not inclined to new ideas, had always grown wheat at Cross Farm and believed that the answer to adverse conditions was to grow more and more wheat. Clive maintained that wheat-growing in England was finished—that the climate was against it, that they grew better corn abroad, that people preferred it, and that in any case you could not grow corn on the same land year after year. That, countered Joe, might be true of some parts of England, but it wasn't true of Lincolnshire, where it was all a matter of seeing that the right manures, chemical or otherwise, went into the ground. Clive continued to contend that the salvation of the English farmer was to be found in his putting down his land to pasture. Its dairy produce had always been an outstanding feature of Cross Farm—why not make it more so? Why not concentrate upon dairy farming? Clive was all for wholesale extension along these lines and for letting corn-growing look after itself or be left to the fools, as he expressed it. But Joe was adamant and not to be stirred even by the argument of diminishing returns. Like most other farmers, he thought something would happen to prevent the ultimate ruin of the farmer—that the Government would hit upon some panacea for the ills of British agriculture. He could afford meantime, he said, to lose money temporarily—he had not dissipated his war-time profits as some of his neighbours had done. The argument waged perpetually and with unusual bitterness, and as she listened, Sharlie wondered upon which side Beth Blunsdon stood, rather fancying that it was upon Clive's, or would have been but for her love for Joe and her sense that he was an old and rather sick man, and ought to be humoured.

During that visit Sharlie tried hard to persuade her grandmother to invite Dave and Pen to Carr, but without success,

and because she wanted to see them before they went back to school, she packed up and returned to London at the beginning of September. Ann was chagrined but firm. She considered Sharlie's request outrageous. And Sharlie, quietly accepting defeat, thought her grandmother rather ridiculous to continue her vendetta against Fanny and her children. After all, it was a long time ago now since her father had married Fanny, and whether hasty or tardy, wisely or not, it was no longer a matter for argument. Her father, she told her grandmother, however he had behaved to her mother, was not by any means a happy man. And whether Fanny or fate or circumstances or what her grandmother called retribution, was the cause of it, the fact was patent to all beholders. But Ann Selwyn was not to be moved, so back to London Sharlie went, carrying with her the expression on Clive Blunsdon's face when for the second time he asked her to marry him and for the second time she refused.

She found that during his month at the sea with Fanny and the children her father had contrived to finish his novel and had sent it off to his old-time typist—for all the world as if she didn't exist. She said nothing to this, devoted herself to Pen and Dave for the rest of their holiday, and when school reclaimed them went off to classes to rub up her shorthand speed upon the speeches of Ramsay MacDonald and Philip Snowden. This done, she set herself to the finding of a post which should take the place of the one she had believed she had with her father, and was sufficiently lucky to secure in the late autumn a post as secretary to Charles Anstruther, the managing director of an important London publishing firm.

"Anstruther?" said Philip. "Anstruther of Ffoliots?"

"Yes," Sharlie said, aware that Ffoliots had been her father's publishers at the height of his career, and waiting for him to remind her of it. He did.

"Why, I took you there once, years ago, when I went to see Anstruther. Not this new posh place—when they were in Covent Garden. Perhaps you don't remember?"

"I do. So did Anstruther." She smiled.

She saw that her father was not pleased. His sun had a little declined since those days (all these *fashions* in writers!), and if she was earning her living they'd assume it had sunk a lot lower than it had—which he couldn't afford to allow any firm of publishers to assume. Newsy lot, anyway, publishers. Knew everything. . . .

Hardening her heart, Sharlie said they would surely assume nothing, save that like most modern girls she wanted to be independent—and her father was forced to leave it at that.

Truth to tell, however, it seemed to her imperative that she should earn her own living, since her father had gone back upon their implicit business arrangement, and she had relinquished, to his scornful amusement, the allowance he had made her in respect of it. All the same, she was surprised that he made so little to do about it. For once, Fanny was annoyed with him, but as he too was annoyed with her for championing Sharlie's desire to work and her right to work at Ffoliots' if she chose, what she said moved him not at all—to Sharlie's relief, for she did not want her father to think he need give her any allowance and had judged from his acquiescence that he was a little harassed by the cost of his household. Pen and Dave's schools were expensive and Fanny's idea of running a house and of hospitality all erred upon the bounteous side.

Philip's attitude to Fanny these days would certainly, Sharlie thought, have infuriated a less good-tempered woman. His temper was morose: his manner indifferent. The greater part of the time he ignored her, was studiously, icily polite to her friends, men and women alike, and rude about them behind their backs. Fanny, however, took it easily, treated

him as if he were a spoiled and moody child and, since he could not even now entirely leave her alone, surrendered her body to his sulky passions by night as if unmindful of his tantrums by day. Fanny saw that he was disappointed in his career and put it down to the war, which had altered so many things for so many people, bringing into existence a world in which he had no footing at all, but in which she was even more comfortably and happily at home than in that which had preceded it.

And Philip, perhaps because he saw that he had not the power to make her unhappy, grew more set in his moods, more introspective and more difficult-tempered. Sharlie, less patient than Fanny, younger and harder and more free in her judgments, was glad to be spared the sight and sound of him and congratulated herself warmly upon her successful bid for independence.

From the first she liked her job. Charles Anstruther was an interesting man to work for. He knew everybody and had an easy unassuming air that took no cognizance of that flair for books for which he was famous among literary people and by which he had helped to make Ffoliots the thriving concern it was. Into his office—actually a large, lofty, beautifully proportioned room in one of London's oldest and most famous houses—came the well-known, the successful, the "arrived," the "arriving" and the about-to-begin. Sharlie made appointments for them all, knew all about their contracts and their sales and contrived to look as though none of these secrets of the prison-house were hers. Her quiet dignity of manner, her unyielding self-possession, no less than her efficiency, made her an extremely useful secretary—a state of affairs about which Charlie Anstruther was in no doubt. At their first interview he was impressed by her and haunted by the feeling that he had seen her before. Had he? he asked her. Sharlie explained that once, many

years ago, as a child, she had accompanied her father when he came on a business appointment.

Anstruther looked at her.

"Who *is* your father?" he asked.

"Philip Stratton."

"Funny that never occurred to me," said Anstruther, and stared at her, thinking what an extraordinary creature she was for Philip Stratton to have had for a daughter. He had never liked Stratton very much or cared for his work, and had been mighty scornful about "the rubbish he wrote in the *Sentinel*." All Stratton's contracts with the firm had been made before his day, though he'd got himself at one time into disgrace by turning down a book of his, he remembered, just before the war. But he'd remained unrepentant, even when *Conflict* had jumped into a best-seller. Stratton had done nothing since—nothing worth while, at any rate.

"You haven't altered a bit," he said now to Philip Stratton's daughter. "Haven't even learnt not to look people straight in the eye." He laughed, remembering how embarrassing all those years ago he had found that straight unchildish gaze of hers. "Want to write?"

"No," said Sharlie. Her turn to laugh. "I seem to be intelligent but not talented."

Intelligent he certainly found her—and obliging and full of sound common sense. A jewel of a secretary. Philip Stratton had justified his existence. From the first he and Sharlie got on excellently.

Joe Blunsdon died in the November of that year, and at the Christmas Sharlie and Judy travelled north together, each spending the holiday with their respective relatives. It was arranged that on the Boxing Day Sharlie should go over to Cross Farm to have tea, and when she arrived she found Judy alone. Her aunt was lying down.

"She's upset, poor old thing!" said Judy. "She's just had

a letter (it was addressed, I think, to Uncle Joe) saying that his wife had just died. It was from the asylum where she's been for donkeys' years. They've been waiting all this time for her to die. Ever since they first met. Nearly forty years ago."

Sharlie stared at her, feeling foolish.

"Do you mean that they weren't married?" she stammered, and that seemed foolish too.

"Yes—that was what all the trouble with my revered grandfather was about. Blunsdon was his tenant and when Aunt Beth went off and lived with him he went off the deep end—turned Blunsdon out of his farm as soon as the lease allowed him. Then they came here. I don't think anybody ever knew about them—except your grandmother—and Aunt Beth told her. They were friends from the beginning. Aunt Beth certainly never cared a scrap until now. I suppose she can't bear it should have happened just after Uncle Joe's death. If this news had come when he lay upon his death-bed I believe she would have made him go through the ceremony. People are queer!"

Queer indeed, thought Sharlie—and not alone Beth Blunsdon, who thought that a ceremony could have added anything to that close and lovely thing which had been her relationship with Joe, but that old man, her father, now nearing his hundredth birthday, who had gone on for forty years believing her depraved and abandoned; and her own grandmother, who still refused to meet the woman who had supplanted her daughter.

"The law's an ass!" said Judy. "Why worry about it?"

"A disgraceful law!" said Sharlie's grandmother. "Nobody could possibly have blamed either Joe or Beth—though I always did wonder what she could possibly have seen in him!"

Sharlie was a little staggered, she found, by this consonance

of old with new opinion, for everybody grumbled at the laws—especially the laws governing marriage. She wondered a little why anybody ever had the temerity to submit to them. No doubt about it, marriage was in the dock to her own generation, but Judy and she agreed that the substitutes weren't promising—Joe and Beth were exceptions. *Free love!* said Judy scornfully. "*Much* too free! If you ask me, 'love' can do with a little discipline. It's made the excuse for everything. I shall dislike you quite considerably, Shar, if you live with a man instead of marrying him."

Sharlie laughed.

"Either contingency," she said, "is extremely remote."

Clive asked her for the third time that Christmas to be engaged to him. And for the third time she refused him.

"Please don't ask me any more," she said; "there are plenty of other girls."

"I'll ask you when you come down in the summer," said Clive.

"Oh no, not again," she said, and she laughed because it seemed so absolutely ridiculous—just as though she had somehow become suddenly aware that long before the summer came any chance Clive had ever had with her would entirely have vanished; as if she knew that in the next few months she was to meet that someone who resolved all her doubts, "filled in the gap," and for years made all other men as nothing to her.

CHAPTER FIVE

GOODNESS only knows what it was about Julian Evesham that she found so attractive. He was lean and dark, tall and had a pleasant smile. True, he shared her passion for the country, but this she could not have known that first morning; and he wrote the most delightful novels, but that she couldn't have known either, for as yet she had read none of them.

He came in that bright March morning with poor Vickey Jardine, whose death a few weeks later, with her husband in a car that fell over a cliff, shocked all literary London. Sharlie knew of her as V. M. Jardine, whose successful first novel Ffoliots had published in the autumn, and wrote to her as Mrs. Murray Gullan, for she had married a farmer only a very little while ago and gone to live in Northumberland. She was very young—not yet twenty-two, as Sharlie knew—and seeing her for the first time to-day it struck her, as it struck most other people, as faintly ridiculous that she should be either a novelist or a married woman. She looked like a little girl, with her mass of reddish-brown hair sticking out all around her little green hat, her wide-open eyes in her pale oval face and her slim long-legged body. Nobody had seen her at Ffoliots since her marriage and her letter to Charlie Anstruther saying she was in town for the Easter and would like to see him, had created a pleasurable stir in the office.

She came in laughing with this man whose name Sharlie didn't know then, and whom she thought must be her husband, until she remembered he was a farmer, and by no stretch of imagination could her companion be considered as such.

Still laughing a little, as if he had been very amusing, Vickey Jardine introduced herself to Sharlie. "Oh, you're Miss Stratton, I expect, aren't you, who writes such nice answers to my tiresome letters? Well, I'm Vickey Jardine—and I've an appointment, as you know, with Mr. Anstruther. I'm afraid I'm a little early."

"And I'm a little late," said her companion. "I ought to have been here at half-past ten, if you remember."

Sharlie looked enlightened.

"Oh, then you must be Mr. Evesham," she said.

"Yes, Julian Evesham. What had I better do about it? About being late, I mean?"

Before Sharlie could reply the door opened and Charlie Anstruther came in. He greeted Evesham and turned to Vickey.

"Hallo, my dear!" he said, and kissed her warmly. "Nice to see you! And looking sixteen—and marvellous. Where's your husband?"

"At Chelsea. We're staying with father. Grandmother's there—being ill. That's why we came."

"*Very* ill?"

"No," said Miss Jardine, her face clouding. "Just ill enough to have spoilt my arrangements for Easter. Father and Martin were to have come to see *me*."

"Well, *I'm* grateful to the old lady, anyway!" said Charles. "Have you brought me that new book?"

"No."

"When's it coming?"

"Soon."

"Good. What about lunch?"

"To-day? Love to," said Vickey.

"Husband mind?"

"He will have, of course, to be spoken to nicely on the 'phone."

"Excellent! Go and do it in Miss Stratton's room while I get rid of this man."

So Vickey Jardine made her laughing adieux to Julian Evesham and followed Sharlie into the adjoining room, where she sat down at the telephone and had a funny conversation with somebody she called "Hinney," telling him to come to meet her at three, at the "Ivy," and where it was. He'd better take a taxi. Afterwards she asked Sharlie if she'd ever been to Northumberland and if she'd read any of Mr. Evesham's books, and if she had seen *The Cenci* when it was produced recently or *Uncle Vanya*, and Sharlie felt a little chagrined because the reply to all these questions was "No." But Vickey Jardine laughed and said, "That's the only drawback to living in the country—such far country. You can't keep up with the theatres. Most of the plays are disappointing, but you never believe they're going to be. My most hopeful action in life is sitting in a theatre waiting for the curtain to go up. . . . Do you like Tchekov?"

Sharlie said she did and told her an amusing story about two women who had sat behind her at a recent performance of *The Sea Gull*, and while they were both laughing the door opened, Charlie Anstruther put his head round the door and said: "Now, my dear," to Vickey, and to Sharlie: "Take Mr. Evesham downstairs to Mr. Pullen, will you, Miss Stratton?"

It annoyed her a little to find how much in the next few days Julian Evesham was in her mind, how exciting it seemed to type his name at the head of a letter—how strange to see what a queer ugly outline it made in Pitmanic shorthand. Yet for years his name had been familiar and meaningless to her. She had no idea what his books were like. Ffoliots were doing their first book of his—*Good Sister*—and she made a mental note to get hold of an early proof copy. The book was not due until May, and she was to see him once again

before then—on that Thursday morning while it was still April, when news of Vickey Jardine's death was in the papers.

Mr. Anstruther was late that morning and about half-past ten they had rung up from downstairs to say Mr. Julian Evesham to see Mr. Anstruther. Did she know when he was expected?

"No," said Sharlie, hoping her excitement did not show in her voice, "but send Mr. Evesham up."

She was shocked at his appearance when he reached her. He had no thought of her. He had a paper in his hand, and he thrust it at her.

"Seen this?" he said.

"No," she said, thinking for one wild moment that somebody had prematurely reviewed his book—a proceeding, she had learned, which never failed to madden the mildest of authors.

"*Don't* you see the morning paper?"

She flushed at his angry tone.

"Usually. This morning I was so interested in my book I didn't open it, and then left it behind me on the bus." *Your* book, she thought, but kept that to herself. "What's the matter?"

"It's Vickey Jardine—Mrs. Gullan. She's been killed, driven over some cliff or other by that fool husband of hers. . . . Here, read it for yourself."

He thrust the paper into her hands and sank into a chair, covering his face with his hands. Sharlie opened the paper, read the headlines: "Car over Northumbrian Cliff. Tragic Death of Brilliant Daughter of Well-known Editor and Critic"; and forced herself to read the two short paragraphs beneath. Mrs. Gullan had been to the station in the car to meet her husband, who had apparently taken a turn at the wheel. It was common knowledge in the village that he was

learning to drive. They had both been killed outright.

Sharlie felt very shocked as she put the paper down, but as she stood there regarding Julian Evesham's dark bowed head, she had no thought in her mind save that she wished she knew what to say to comfort him. The very sight of his misery tore at her bewilderingly, but, too, the sight of emotion now, as ever, petrified something within her. She could think of nothing at all to say. After what seemed an eternity she managed to get out: "How appalling!" and then, "I suppose you knew Mrs. Gullan very well?"

Julian Evesham raised his head and she saw that his face was drawn and haggard. She thought miserably: I suppose he was in love with her! He said: "I've known her all her life. I can't *believe* she's dead!"

He went on saying that at intervals until Charles Anstruther came in. He, too, looked haggard and wretched. He greeted Evesham and said: "My God, isn't it awful!" and began to walk up and down the room.

Sharlie looked at them helplessly for a second or so, then went away and left them. A little later the sound of her typewriter stole in upon them, aggravating them beyond words, as she felt. But she did not desist. She'd wasted far too much time that morning as it was. And though the thought of sudden death was shocking and she could not rid her mind of that young happy creature sitting in this very room asking her if she liked Tchekov and of the merry laughing face she had turned up to Julian Evesham, it was of Evesham she thought most. *Had* he been in love with her? He'd seemed so happy that morning he came in with her—not like a man whose girl had married another man. Besides, was Anstruther in love with her, too? He was equally distraught. She found, as the days went on, that most people who had known Vickey Gullan were all, to some extent or other, in love with her. Afterwards it seemed to

her symbolic that her first meetings with Evesham should have been associated with this ill-fated young creature about whom everybody who came into the office in the next few days had something to say.

She did not see him again for some weeks and satisfied something at least of her desire to do so by reading *Good Sister* in proof. It surprised her to find that Evesham was an historical novelist in the real and unusual sense—not, that is, merely a writer of stories equipped with an historical background about imaginary people with a few historical personages striding the pages. Evesham treated his historical characters as if they were fictional, applying to the novel the methods of the modern biographer. In biography Sharlie had always resented the method, but encountering it here for the first time in fiction, it seemed to her the only way to make the historical novel alive and vital.

Evesham's century was the sixteenth and *Good Sister* was a study of Anne of Cleves, the fourth wife of Henry the Eighth. The idea of Henry, fat, fifty, and with a running ulcer in his leg, turning up his royal nose at Anne, twenty-four, bony, pitted with pock-scars, and whom Holbein, it seems, had so outrageously flattered, moved Sharlie to sardonic amusement. She considered that Anne, left at last with her own household and jewels, had much the best of a bargain driven not on her behalf, and not by Henry, but by and for the warring sections of the country he ruled. The earlier books, she discovered, dealt with the divorced Katherine, with Anne Boleyn and Jane Seymour, and with *Good Sister* and the two designed to follow it, were meant to exhibit the lamentable Henry less as a lascivious tyrant than as a tool whose carnal passions were utilised by the rival forces in the religious and political worlds of his day. Of Henry's usual claim to consideration as Defender of the

Faith, or far-sighted statesman concerned only with the religious and political freedom of England, these studies of Evesham's made short shrift indeed. What especially appealed to Sharlie in them all, however, was that this attitude to his period automatically ruled out of court all possibility of the more usual presentation of Henry's queens as mere feminine appendages. Each of them was pushed forward as a pawn in a clever game, the rules and objects of which only its inventors really understood.

Good Sister had appeared and was being excellently reviewed when, in early June, Evesham came again into the office. No tragedy ran out this time to catch them by the heels—they found they had a common meeting-ground in the new book and its predecessors. Sharlie had the feeling that Evesham noticed her now for the first time and was not unaware of the fact that even so he was seeing her in a haze of sixteenth-century agreement and contemporary approval. Nevertheless, their friendship sent down roots from the day he took her out to lunch when she ate sole *à la maison* and *pêche Melba* with as much indifference as if they had been sawdust and went back to the office with an exalted air that lasted throughout a busy afternoon and a dull evening at home. After that they went occasionally to the theatre and sometimes walking in Richmond Park, and then suddenly the bottom of Sharlie's new bright world fell out with Evesham's announcement that he was going away for the rest of the year. He was off to a little place in Italy because he could work there, though nobody else ever dreamed of doing so.

"The natives can't, of course, work on Sunday," he told her. "On Monday they can't work because they're recovering from Sunday. On Tuesday they can't work because it's too wet—or too hot. On Wednesday they're recovering from the rain—or from the heat. On Friday again, it's too hot—or

too wet. And on Saturday it's so near Sunday it's not worth while to begin."

Sharlie laughed and inquired when he expected to be back, and when he said "New Yearl" listened to his plans for going down to the South of France when the north of Italy got too cold, wondering what he would say if she told him she had never been out of England. Not that she did. Their friendship was the most impersonal thing in the world, concerned with everything but their own affairs or activities. She knew nothing, actually, of him and he nothing of her. She wondered faintly whether they would ever know anything more of each other, or whether these last few weeks were just an interlude which he had found pleasant but would not find it difficult to forget.

But when, for the third time, Clive Blunsdon proposed to her, she again refused him, and for the first time understood why.

"There's somebody else?" Clive asked her, and she nodded.

"I hope you'll be very happy," he said, simply.

Sharlie startled him and herself by the sudden little laugh she gave, not quite free from bitterness.

"Oh, don't be so prematurel" she said, hastily reaching out after some ease of manner.

"Doesn't he care for you?"

"Oh, we're just friends, only . . ."

"Only what?"

Sharlie was silent. Was she in love with Julian Evesham? She didn't know. He interested her, and he stirred her pulse as no man before had ever done save, perhaps, Shane Mostyn in her far-off green-and-salad youth. She didn't want to be in love—to feel like this about anybody.

Clive looked at her.

"All right," he said, "I understand."

She knew that that was the end of that. Clive would never again ask her to marry him. It gave her a queer unexpected sense of relief. It left her strangely free.

At Edward Street when she got home she found that her father had engaged a morning secretary—a young girl of nineteen or twenty, with a mop of dark very wavy hair, the smooth heavily made-up countenance of her day and generation and a pair of dark brown eyes of the variety called cowlike by the people who do not admire them, and "fine" by the people who do. Sharlie didn't. She admired, she found, nothing about Helen Carter and a little resented her.

Fanny, she found, resented her too—but not for any of the more usual reasons, and for one, at least, that she shared with Sharlie. She told her that she could not see why Philip, if he *must* have a secretary, could not have continued to make use of her services. "If he has to spend money in this way," she said, "I think he might have put it into your pocket. It's too absurd. Your father grumbles continually nowadays about expense and then goes and does a thing like this. It isn't, even, as if she's typing his new book. *That* goes to the copying office, as usual. Miss Carter's doing some other book altogether. I don't know what. He never tells me anything."

"*Does* he grumble about expenses?"

"Yes, rather a lot. I know Pen's schooling is expensive—and her clothes. And she *had* to have new things to go off this holiday with those girls in Deauville. They have so much money and are always so beautifully dressed. I *had* to get Pen some things."

"Did he grumble about that?"

"Yes, a little. But as I pointed out, we aren't having to take her away this year—and that's an immense saving. And Dave's been staying away for part of the holidays too, though I'll have to take him down to the sea for a bit when he

comes home next week. But it isn't only the children. It's everything—me, the house, entertaining and the new carpets we just *had* to have! *Is* he doing so badly, Shar?"

"I don't know. He doesn't tell me anything either, you know. But the fashions in writing change. People don't read Philip Stratton these days, I imagine, as much as they read Michael Arlen, and all the other newcomers. And I suppose *his* investments aren't any better than anybody else's. All the same . . ."

It was the young Pen who found the most significant thing to say of the new secretary. Home from France, jabbering its speech, looking lovely and amazingly grown-up in her smart new clothes, she surveyed the newcomer with her casual fleeting merciless glance and observed:

"Poor father! She's *in love* with him! Can you *beat* it?" and although they all said "Nonsense!" and "Don't be idiotic!" Pen only shrugged her shoulders.

David laughed.

"Pen always thinks somebody's in love with somebody," he said.

"Do I?" said Pen sweetly, looking at him, Sharlie thought, as though he wasn't there.

But David said nothing—and he, too, looked at his sister in a way that arrested Sharlie's attention, rather, she thought, as if he saw things about her that nobody else so much as suspected. Sharlie wondered what they were.

The arguments between Fanny and Philip, if they had ever been as frequent and tiresome as Fanny had indicated (which Sharlie doubted, for Fanny so disliked and avoided dissension she was apt to call a mild suggestion an argument) certainly ceased after Sharlie's return from Carr. Even with Pen temporarily installed in the household looking for fresh ways of spending money, and with Fanny making plans for a holiday that certainly didn't look cheap and which, originally

planned for David, now appeared also to be embracing Pen, no word came from her father concerning economy. He was too busy to accompany them, he said, but he certainly put no obstacle in Fanny's way for giving herself and her children a good time. The weeks which preceded their departure seemed to Sharlie one of the most peaceful she remembered—and in them her father presented a calmer, more contented front to his family than she could remember for some time. Even the fact of his forthcoming book (usually so upsetting) seemed not to disturb him, and whatever it was he was working at behind it, seemed to be going so satisfactorily that he was not to be persuaded to leave it, and on its account Miss Carter had postponed her own holiday. True, Sharlie's offer to take Miss Carter's place had been definitely rejected, but neither with the heavy sarcasm nor the impassioned haste to which she was used. Helen Carter's enthusiasm was undeniable. She was in the house before Sharlie left it in the morning and frequently the tap-tap of her typewriter was the first sound she heard when she got back soon after six. Her devotion to her employer was undeniable. She was completely at his beck and call: nothing was ever too much trouble. Sharlie caught her large cowlike eyes resting upon him at times with unyielding admiration, and she remembered Pen's silly story of that morning she had come upon her in the study sitting upon a tuffit at his feet turning over some pages of typed manuscript which she had apparently been reading through to him. As Pen opened the door she had been saying: "Oh, Mr. Stratton, I do so *adore* your work!"—at least, according to Pen, who had no right to be going into her father's study in the middle of the morning, anyway, and had furnished on this occasion but the poorest excuse for doing so. Well, why shouldn't she "adore" his work—and tell him so? Obviously it was the kind of thing it did him good to hear, and Sharlie had wished, often enough, that she could

have said such things! There was no reason to suppose, because Helen Carter could gush in this fashion about her employer's work, that she had fallen in love with him. Pen's statement as to that Sharlie considered the sort of exaggeration to which she was given. It meant nothing. Miss Carter, Sharlie decided, had merely that exaggerated respect which so many young girls achieve for their male employers, and which, although it can only too readily take a romantic twist, seldom does much harm, unless the man is minded to take advantage of it. In the way that Pen had obviously meant there was certainly, Sharlie decided, no immediate danger to Helen Carter, and she could not imagine why Pen should have suggested there was. Really, Pen could be outrageous at times! Sharlie reflected that she had never seen her father evince the least interest in any woman but Fanny; he was no philanderer. All the same, she did not wholly acquit him of making use of Helen Carter's admiration to serve other ends. He must get out of her, Sharlie knew, much more work, much more single-minded service, than he would have got from a Helen Carter who neither admired nor "adored." What other reason would make a girl give up all her time to her job, calmly putting off social engagements and holidays to further her employer's ends? Men should surely be grateful to this romantic impulse, Sharlie thought, despising it, that sprang eternal in the female breast. She dismissed the impudent young Pen's comment from her mind, which, truth to tell, and despite her efforts and much to her annoyance, was sufficiently occupied with romantic concerns of its own.

What had happened to her that she should behave like a romantic creature in a novel, build so much on so little? That Julian Evesham attracted her—as she had not believed people ever were attracted—she didn't deny, but she dismissed the fact with a shrug of the shoulders and Judy's old gibe about "biological necessity." She would not be dragged

at the heels of *that!* She would not, ever, be ruled and made miserable by a mere physical attraction, as her father all his life had been ruled and made miserable. She despised it. If she couldn't manage her friendship with Evesham without that, then she would do without it—as, in any case, she might have to do, for when he came back he might give her no chance to pick it up again. Impatient, she told herself she had been reading too much fiction—and this silly talk of Pen's about Helen Carter was the last straw. She told herself, too, that she would be relieved when Pen took herself and her omniscience off to her penultimate term at school. It would be pleasant when she encountered Helen Carter not to find herself speculating upon the truth or otherwise of Pen's amazing assertion. But even Judy, first making Miss Carter's acquaintance, raised her eyebrows and enquired: "What's she doing here?"

"Taking my place, I believe," Sharlie told her, and Pen laughed.

"Oh, if it's only *your* place, Shar!"

Judy raised her eyebrows still further, but said nothing.

"What did she mean?" she asked Sharlie after Pen had gone out.

"Nothing. Just one of Pen's bright remarks."

"Too bright—by a long chalk. How old is that young woman?"

"Sixteen. Seventeen in May."

"Ye gods!" said Judy. "It's a pity she's too old to have her bottom smacked. . . . Any truth in what she says?"

"That Miss Carter adores father? Oh, probably, she's the sort. Why not? Father likes admiration."

"What about Fanny?"

"Oh, *she* won't mind. She never minds anything. And she's like me—not much good at the adoration stunts."

"Aren't you?"

"Well, *am* I? I don't grudge father the fair Helen, you know, Ju. I always wished I could play that rôle myself. I used to feel such a beast criticising his stuff."

"Why did you?"

"Because he would have me say what I thought."

"Couldn't you dissemble?"

"No—that doesn't seem to come naturally to me either. On the whole he deserves his Helen."

"You don't think *he's* going to fall in love with *her?*"

"Of course not. He's never looked at any woman but Fanny since he saw her. He told me once he would have left my mother for her—if she hadn't happened to die just when she did!"

"Are you making that up?"

"Fiction is also outside my list of accomplishments."

Judy laughed.

"Oh well," she said, "it's a queer world. Fanny doesn't look the sort, somehow. That inspires an eternal passion, I mean. She doesn't seem that sort at all. *Nor* the sort that would get herself all worked up about a man."

"She never gets worked up about anything. She's always the same—just kind and easy-going."

"And highly sexed."

"What makes you say that?"

"My powers of observation. You've only to look at her! Not that sex has anything to do with love or falling in love. And even if she never loved or was in love she certainly liked being made love to. Probably does still. Well—it would content ninety-nine men out of a hundred!"

Sharlie said nothing. Into her mind there floated, untidily, a scrap of verse from an Elizabethan poet, who had called Shakespeare an "upstart crow," and was said to have died, so she incongruously remembered, from a surfeit of pickled herrings and Rhenish wine.

"By the way," said Judy, "I've got some news for you.

Clive's getting married at Christmas. To a girl called Melody Moore. Pretty name, isn't it? She's a farmer's daughter. *Most* suitable. I suppose he got tired of asking you?"

Still revolving her poem, Sharlie said:

"I suppose so."

"Well, I wish you'd get married before Pen comes home from school next year for good. She'll eat up all the men as they appear. She's the regulation predatory female—and then some."

Sharlie abandoned her poem-hunting for a defence of her half-sister, in the middle of which Judy rose and took herself off.

The couplet she wanted came to Sharlie in the middle of the night:

> Their love begun and ended both in one;
> Phillis was loved, and she liked Corydon.

No use to blame Phillis—but poor Corydon!

She felt scornful and yet a little troubled too—perhaps at the contrariness of human affairs. Her mother had adored her father—and he had wanted to leave her for another woman! He adored Fanny and Pen—and Fanny was indulgent and kind, and Pen cared no more for him than for anyone else! And as for her, who, as a child, had felt about him, she supposed, rather as Helen Carter now felt—why, he had never really even liked her! She wondered why. She had wanted him so much to like her—had long ago accepted the fact that he couldn't. She annoyed and irritated him, and as she had grown older there was his work, which she had honestly tried to admire. . . . But she hadn't deceived him—and it had made one more gap in the bridge between them. And now it no longer mattered. Her thoughts were elsewhere, and the gods had sent him Helen—to whom they all ought to be very grateful. Life at Edward Street was suddenly so much more comfortable! And on this thought Sharlie laughed a little, turned on her pillows and slept.

BOOK FOUR

DAUGHTER TO FANNY

. . . *the red young mouth and the hair's young gold.*

—BROWNING.

CHAPTER ONE

It was the middle of March when Julian Evesham got back to London—walked unannounced into the office, with the completed manuscript of a new book under his arm, and a couple of tickets for *Berkeley Square* in his pocket. Finishing his talk with Anstruther, he came into Sharlie's room, and sitting down produced the theatre tickets.

"Well?" he said. "What about it?"

Sudden anger seized upon her that he should assume, so calmly, that her evening would be free. She said: "Supposing I have an engagement already?"

He smiled at her.

"Well, have you?"

"No, as it happens."

"And if you had, you'd put it off, wouldn't you?"

"Of course I shouldn't. Here you come back after nine months—in which I might have *died* for all you knew (or cared, said her angry heart), and just walk in here and think I'm so certain to be at your disposal that you can safely buy theatre tickets for the evening."

He went on smiling at her.

"Well, wasn't I justified?—supposing I did buy the tickets with you in mind!"

"*Didn't* you?"

"Would you really like to know?"

"Not in the least, thank you."

"Hoity-toity, mademoiselle."

She swung round to her typewriter.

"Oh, *keep* your theatre tickets! Doubtless, you'll be able to find plenty of other disengaged females to whom it

will be a pleasure to go to the theatre with you."

"Think so? It won't be as easy as all that, you know. *Berkeley Square's* rather highbrow—an adaptation of Henry James's *A sense of the Past*."

"I know all about the play, thank you."

"Then there's not much point, certainly, in my dragging you to see it!"

"None whatever."

She slipped a sheet of paper in the machine, arranged her margin and turned over the pages of her notebook. Her heart was beating with heavy hammer-strokes. Her face felt hot. She was afraid he would stop smiling and being amiable and go away, but still she would not look at him. She began to type.

"Sharlie!" he said softly, staring at the thick dark line of her lashes upon her cheeks.

"Please don't call me that."

"But I don't like 'Charlotte.' "

"There was no thought of pleasing you when I was christened."

Evesham put back his head and roared with laughter.

"What an extremely well read young person it is! . . . Sharlie, have you thought about me at all since I went away?"

"Why should I?"

"Well, I've thought about you—a lot."

"You surprise me."

"Did you expect me to write to you?"

"No."

"Really not? Well, I did."

Her hands dropped from the keys to her lap. The colour rushed into her face. She sat there in front of him, flying an unmistakable signal in both cheeks.

"You *wrote* to me?"

"Yes, several times."

"I never got any letters from you."

"They were never posted."

She continued to sit there, staring at him, all her blood in her face, all her secret in her eyes.

"Sharlie—didn't you guess why I went away?"

"What was there to guess? You said you went away to write."

"I didn't. At least, not primarily. I went away to get away from you!"

"Oh!" she said, and the blood drained out of her face, leaving her very white. "Why?"

"Lots of reasons. They don't matter now."

He got up and walked across the room. She did not move until he came behind her, reached over her shoulders and put his hands upon her breasts. The wild beating of her heart told him all he wanted to know. He stooped, twisted his face round to hers and found her mouth with his. She moved then—turned in her chair, half-rose, was caught up in his embrace, and gave herself up to his kiss with a passion that entirely forgot time and place.

"I've wanted to do that for months," he said.

"Before you went away?"

"Yes."

"Then why didn't you?"

He was a little abashed by the look she turned upon him. Those lovely eyes had stayed so exactly in his memory he believed he could have made an accurate drawing of that unusual marking of the iris.

"I told you in those letters I didn't send."

"Why didn't you send them?"

"Because I hadn't the courage! Sharlie—how old are you?"

"Twenty-five."

"Have you ever been in love before?"

"No. Have you?"

"Often. Not like this. Haven't you ever *fancied* yourself in love?"

"Once—for a few weeks, when I was seventeen."

"That isn't any use."

"Do you wish I had been?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I can't explain. Not here. Not now. I wasn't sure when I went away that you cared—you were so damned impersonal. And I'd heard you say that you believed hardly anybody fell in love—that people generally just *liked* each other."

"So they do—most of them. Not us."

Again he was abashed by that lovely candid offering gaze. He turned away from it.

"I thought I'd gone away in time—for both of us. I fancied I'd recover—and that you'd not have anything (or not much) to recover from. I was wrong. I knew that about myself pretty soon. I came here to-day to find out about you."

He saw the bewilderment in her face, her fine brows puckered with it.

"Didn't you *want* me to love you?" she asked him.

"Yes—but I hoped you wouldn't all the same."

"I don't understand."

"Don't try, sweetheart . . ."

He put his arms around her, kissed her again, felt once more that wild beating of her heart and let her go.

"I must be off," he said. "I shall have Anstruther on my track for wasting your time. To-night. Dinner first. Where? . . . I'll ring you presently. . . . Good-bye, darling."

He had gone, leaving her white and exhausted, and too deliriously happy to be able to run back along the lines of their talk and begin to be apprehensive. She didn't know

why he had run away from her, why he had hoped to stop what had begun in the first moment they met, and she didn't care. It was sufficient that he had come back.

It continued to be sufficient for the rest of that afternoon, shining like a thread of gold through the ordinary weft and woof of her everyday existence, bursting into a flame that scorched her when later Julian rang up with the time and place of their meeting, and leaving her cold and frightened when she stepped out of her taxi at seven o'clock and did not immediately see him. When she did, the colour came quick and warm in her face, her eyes shone. She looked as if she had run every inch of the way to get there.

"If you look like that everybody will know," he told her, and was halted as he had been that afternoon by the brilliant frankness of the look she bent upon him. He knew—and she didn't—why he ought not to have come back. If he had never come back she would never have realised—would have forgotten what little there had been to remember. As he piloted her through the already crowded restaurant and sat down with her in his chosen corner, he told himself he was a cad to have come back, to have made love to her that afternoon. But over the *hors-d'œuvres* he made up his mind that she should have, at least, her one evening. They should both have that. Perhaps when she knew, she wouldn't have anything more to do with him, would never see him again. That lovely ardent look would be quenched. . . . He let himself sit there, looking at her, noticing the dark shadow those thick straight eyelashes made upon her cheek when she looked down, the lovely curve of her mouth and chin, the finely-drawn outline of her face, flushed now to that glamorous unusual pink, as if a pale flame had been lighted behind her skin. He felt a little dazzled. For nine months he had hoped that she would have forgotten all about him and

now he wondered what he could have done, how he could have borne it, if she had. He had a sudden aching desire to be alone with her, to hold her again in his arms, to be making love to her. . . .

She raised her head, smiled, and began to listen to the things he said about the menu. Did she like this, that, or the other thing? She said yes to everything as though she didn't care what she ate, as, indeed, she did not. All was manna to-night that was put in front of her. He said, though they drank a still and golden hock, "We ought to be drinking champagne."

He was going away, he told her, as they sat over their coffee. To Ireland, quite early next morning, but he would be back at the end of the week in time for Easter—perhaps before. What he had to tell her could wait until then. Perhaps, too, it might then be something rather different he had to tell her. He could see she was not frightened—not even worried, and he escaped from the topic with haste, for he wanted her to stay so—untroubled, at peace—until his return. God knew what would happen after that. . . .

They did not speak of it again. The play was good and interesting, but they wouldn't have cared if it hadn't been. She thought, watching Jean Forbes-Robertson's wistful acting, "I shall remember this all my life." But what she remembered all that night and the days of his immediate absence was just a golden haze of happiness, in which a young man called her "darling," and told her she was lovely, and in which, quite silent, they lay in each other's arms in the taxi that took her home, and in which she thought: "Whatever happens, when I'm an old woman I'll remember how happy I was on a March evening in 'twenty-seven, when there was a full moon and an almost cloudless sky. . . ."

It was almost as if, never before, had she been happy in all her life. She had the sense of something significant and

lovely having come to her—something which was profoundly part of her life, part of the very essence of living, so that, whatever happened, one could not regret. Always it would remain one of the major experiences of life, like recovering from a dangerous illness or the birth of one's first child.

The days of his absence passed uneventfully—dropping like beads from a string into a deep well from which they would never be retrieved.

Neither Pen nor Dave was coming home for the Easter holidays, and she was vaguely glad of this. Fanny and her father were taking the car and going to the near sea for the week-end, and Miss Carter was going with them—partly because Philip had some pages to revise with her and partly because Fanny thought she was looking pale (though how *could* she, with all that rouge?) and needed some fresh air. And on the Thursday morning before she left for the office, Sharlie saw them off—Fanny, very smart in her Easter clothes, tucking herself up in the back seat, with her feet in a muff and her plump figure wrapped like a cocoon in the fur rug, leaving an ecstatic Miss Carter to see that everything that should be in the car was there, and finally to tuck herself in beside her employer looking as though it were a front seat in heaven.

"If you alter your mind, Shar, mind you 'phone," said Fanny, at the last moment. "There'll be plenty of trains this evening."

"I will," said Sharlie, thinking of the other and far lovelier thing she hoped that evening to be doing, then wondering at the very last moment if the expression she'd wear would be anything like Helen Carter's. Fanny's marvellous, she thought, quite marvellous. Even considered as Phillis, quite marvellous. For Helen Carter's state of mind was now obvious to the one-eyed. Pen, so sharp of eye, so frank of

tongue, had been right. Poor girl, she thought, to be in love so hopelessly—and to be in love with *father!* and hugged her own love and her own hope to her heart.

Julian rang through to her soon after she arrived at the office, and the sound of his voice—soft and caressing even over the 'phone—stung her senses to a wild heady delight, so that her own voice trembled and had to be mastered before she could answer his questions. Could she get off early? (She could, Mr. Anstruther was not coming up.) Would she come out in the car and where should they go—and would she like a picnic lunch or should they lunch somewhere first in town? She plumped for the car and picnic lunch, and promised to be ready when he called.

His face looked grave and subtly older when he came in, but he took her in his arms and kissed her face, her mouth, her eyes, her throat, as if he would never have done.

"We're going to Ashdown Forest," he said. "It's some distance. Can you hang out until then?"

She said she could, straightened her hat, re-powdered her face and said she was ready. The day was fine, the car fast, and the traffic considerable, so that their conversation was desultory, and the gravity of his face, unchanged save when in the traffic blocks he turned and smiled upon her, unremarkable. But even when they swung out into the country beyond Bromley through Keston and over Westerham Hill, he did not do very much talking and Sharlie had time to notice how very good a driver he was. She suffered now none of that tenseness that came to her when she sat at her father's side. A block in the traffic did not mean that she was jerked off her seat or put up her hand instinctively before her face as if to be ready for the smash of glass. At the top of Crockham Hill Julian stopped the car that she might look at the lovely view across the weald.

"Happy?" he said, "or merely hungry? We can get a

proper lunch at Edenbridge if you'd rather."

"I wouldn't," she said. "Let's keep to our plan." They went on through Edenbridge, Hartfield and along into Wych Cross and Coleman's Hatch—a mere huddle of houses, a pub and a pond, and suddenly opening out on either side of them was the Forest and the stretched-out glory of the country beyond and beyond.

"Oh, stop and let me look!" she exclaimed, and he obeyed, turning to smile at her. As he brought the car to rest he laid a hand upon her knee.

"Like it?"

"It's beautiful," she said. "But then I love the country. I'd always be in it if I could."

"Would you?"

He turned and looked at her—a quiet intimate look that quickened the beating of her heart, a prolonged very tender look, to which her own responded, the scenery forgotten by the pair of them.

"Let's go on a little bit, then we can park the car on the side. I know a good spot for lunch," he said, and drove slowly on.

The lunch was simple—some good sandwiches, half a bottle of wine, a flask of coffee and some fruit. He ate, she noticed, scarcely anything, and at the end said: "I've ordered dinner at my flat. It's a service one. Will you come?"

"I'd love to."

"Good. Now lie back there against the bank and listen to what I have to say. If you want afterwards to take your promise back, you may."

She stared at him, her face suddenly as grave as his, a pricking of apprehension at her heart. Then without a word she obeyed. She leant back against the leather cushion he had pushed behind her head, and stared away across the valley and up the hill to the little group of trees that stood in a

forlorn circle on the windy ridge. Gill's Lap, he had said it was called—a landmark in those parts—and it was at that she stared while he threw at her the beginning of what he had to say in short sharp sentences that fell upon her happy heart like snow.

"I ought to have told you this before. The day I came back, I mean, before I kissed you. I haven't any excuse. I'm not even going to say I thought things would be different to-day—after my visit to Ireland, I mean. I knew they wouldn't be. I *must* have known. You must forgive me if you can."

She moved her head and looked at him. She had then one quick perfect moment of complete self-realisation. She was aware that it wouldn't matter what he had done—there would be nothing to forgive. They belonged to each other. She would never again be really happy until she had given herself to him.

"Go on," she said.

"I ought to have told you I was married," he said, "and that there was no hope of a divorce. My wife is an ardent Catholic. With her marriage is for ever."

He saw her face go very white before she turned away. She lay back again against the bank without a word. Her eyes were on the hillside. Evesham went on.

"I knew this when we first met. I've always known it—only, before, it hadn't mattered. Kathleen and I are good friends enough, but she oughtn't to have got married. That she did was my fault entirely. I met her during the war, fell absolutely flat about her, and bullied her into it. I haven't a word to say against her. She was frank enough about it—but I just wouldn't listen. It isn't that she doesn't care for me—she's fond enough of me in her own way, but she just is subnormal, sexually. I thought I could change all that—but I soon saw that I couldn't, and at last the inevitable happened.

. . . But for her religion I think Kathleen would have divorced me—but there was never any question of that, then or since. And no scene. The affair (which was already over, and never serious) simply put an automatic end to what remained of our physical relationship. We've remained good friends. I took a flat in town and went abroad a good deal. It was all very much as before. When I was in town I went at intervals to see her. There weren't any money difficulties—Kathleen has plenty—and the place in Ireland is hers. Her family have been there for centuries. She's entirely independent of me and anything I can do for her. She's a fine woman in many ways and very lovely. She'd have been happy as a nun. I forced her to do something dead against her nature, and I knew how she felt about marriage on all counts, so there's no excuse for me."

He looked at Sharlie, who lay quite still, her eyes closed, her face so white beneath the blue sky that it looked like something cut out of marble. He waited for her to speak or move, but as she did neither he went on:

"When I first met you that was the situation. We became friends. You attracted me. I saw you liked me. I thought at first it would be safe enough and very pleasant. After a little I began to see that 'safe was exactly what it wasn't—for me, anyway. I wasn't so sure about you. You're not superficially emotional and you seemed, so far as I could see, to harbour none of the usual romantic ideas common to your sex. Quite otherwise, indeed. I found you a great relief. It wasn't until I'd made up my mind to go away and came and told you so that I suspected it wasn't half as safe for you as I had imagined. So I speeded things up a bit and went.

"I'll be quite frank. I hoped to 'get over' you. You weren't the sort to drag into an affair, and friendship, I knew (for me), wasn't going to be enough. I was dead certain of that. I stayed away longer than I'd intended—but it didn't do

anything for me so far as you were concerned, though it enabled me to finish my book. I even hoped you might have left Ffoliots, so that when I came here I needn't see you. Directly I got back I rang up and found out. . . . Luckily, they put me on to Anstruther, who mentioned you quite casually and naturally. Then, coming along, I got those tickets—on the spur of the moment—not really meaning to ask you to come with me to the play. I didn't see you when I came in—and it was Anstruther who sent me in to you. Honestly, if he hadn't I'd have gone straight out—tickets and all."

Still the quiet figure against the bank gave no sign. He suppressed the desire to go over to her and after a bit went on with his story.

"I thought I'd know when I saw you—but I just didn't. You were so quiet—just as if you expected me. I didn't stop to think that you probably knew I had an appointment with Anstruther—or had heard my voice and so was prepared for my appearance. Honestly, I thought it was going to be all right—that *you* were all right, anyhow!—until I told you I'd written to you and never posted the letters. And then it was too late—too late for everything. . . .

"I don't know why I thought that by going to see Kathleen I could do any good—alter things. But I had to go, anyway—and I did hope that a miracle would happen. Well, it didn't."

The quiet figure on the bank rolled over suddenly, so that her face was hidden. Evesham got up then and went over to her. Lifting her in his arms he laid her face against his, and felt her arms come swiftly round his neck. She was not crying, but against his own he could feel the frantic beating of her heart.

"Darling, do forgive me, I'm hurting you so dreadfully."

She said nothing, just lay there with her face pressed against his. It felt very cold, and her hands were very

cold, too. She began to tremble violently.

It was very quiet there in the forest. On the road behind only a stray car went by, and now and again a dog barked somewhere away in the valley. They had the world and their misery to themselves.

After a little she sat up, pushed back her hair, and smiled at him.

"It's all right," she said. "It's not your fault."

She sat there, her hands in her lap, looking away over valley and hill to Gill's Lap.

"It *is* my fault. I'd no right to tell you I loved you or to kiss you. . . . No right to make love to you."

She said simply: "I wanted you to. I want you to now."

"Oh, darling, *do* you? Even now? Hasn't it made any difference?"

She shook her head.

"What are we going to do?" he asked her.

She made no reply. A little scared by the white still look of her, he said suddenly: "Come, let's get in the car and go on somewhere. . . . You're upset. We'll talk about it later."

"No," she said, "now. Please."

"All right. But what is there to say? I've behaved like a cad. It isn't any excuse that I'm so deeply in love with you—that I feel about you as I've never felt for any woman, not even when I was mad for Kathleen. I can go away again—discipline myself into forgetfulness. But you! What I've done to you's a very different matter."

Her eyes met his.

"You couldn't prevent my loving you," she said.

"No—but I could have prevented *this*. I *went* away, why in God's name couldn't I have *stayed* away! Darling, do you want me to clear out?"

She shook her head.

"No."

"But what's the alternative?"

"Can't we go on?"

"How? Pretending we don't care?"

"*Have* we been pretending?"

"Look, darling. I can't be near you and not want to make love to you. If you want me as much as I want you, don't you see where that lands us?"

That candid lovely gaze met his unflinchingly.

"Yes," she said.

He saw that she was his for the taking—that she had no reproaches, no self-pity, no false pride—only this wealth of passion which she flung now at his feet. He kept his hands off her with an effort.

"Look, Sharlie. You're not the sort mistresses are made of. You're made for wifehood. You ought to have a home—a home and children. All the happy ordinary conventional things. Whatever happens between us I can never give you these—so long as Kathleen is alive."

He was startled by the look on her face, as if something had suddenly frightened her. She said quickly: "Don't say things like that," and shutting her eyes, pressed her hand tightly over them as if to shut out some horrid vision. And so she did—that vision of her mother dead in her bed, and her father standing at her side with something round his neck with blood on it. Her father who had wanted to marry Fanny, and must, therefore, have been glad her mother was dead! Once again her mind pushed forward against the unknown, struggled to get just that one step beyond the obvious in the sickening way it had done sometimes when she was a child. And failed. Horror filled her soul as she sat there in the spring sunshine, aware that she would never know why that scene should have lived in her memory—why it should come crawling out now, when her mind was so full of other things, into the light.

"Don't ever say that again!" she said. "I can bear anything but that!"

"Why of course I won't, darling. I won't even mention Kathleen again, if you like. I only wanted you to understand."

"I do," she said. "Perfectly. I understand that you and I can be lovers, but never husband and wife." She laughed suddenly, a little shakily. "And I did so want to be both! . . . The alternative is to part—never to see each other again."

"Can we?"

"I don't think I can—not yet."

"Do you think we ought?"

"I haven't any convictions about it. A ceremony couldn't make any difference. It's only that I couldn't bear to hurt anybody else . . ."

"You won't hurt Kathleen, if that's what you mean. She doesn't want me, that way—or any other, much. You see, our marriage wasn't very . . . decent. To make love to somebody who just *lets* you!—how *could* it be? Wives, submit yourselves unto your husbands! That was Kathleen's reason for enduring me. Her religion enjoined it upon her. But I can't help feeling she liked me a lot less because of it (I don't blame her), and that she'd be glad enough to get rid of me if it didn't mean eternal damnation or whatever it is. Even being nominally married to me must, to one with her beliefs, look a little better than that!"

Sharlie put her arm through his. The scared look had gone out of her face. She said: "I'm glad I haven't any religion."

"Haven't you?"

"I don't think so. My mother was religious. But she died when I was quite small, and I lived with my grandmother—who wasn't. Though she taught me to go to church, she never forgot to tell me that religion has caused most of the trouble in the world."

They sat quite still, talking about religion and those early days at Carr—about her mother who loved her father so much more than he loved her, and about her stepmother, who loved him so much less.

"I never wanted to fall in love," she said. "I always hoped that I wouldn't. But I always *supposed* I'd get married." That seemed so stupid to her now.

"How many men have asked you?"

"Only one. But he did it three times."

"Why didn't you have him?"

"I didn't know—until I met you. I sometimes thought I might some day. But not after I met you."

He drew her up against him, and kissed the top of her head.

"Poor wretch!"

"You don't have to be sorry for him. He married a very nice girl at Christmas. My grandmother says they're very happy—that it's a most suitable marriage." She laughed. "That's the sensible way, I suppose . . ."

He wouldn't go by that road. He took his lips from her hair and held her away from him.

"What about to-night? Do you want me to let you off your promise to dine with me at the flat?"

"No. Why should I?"

"You're not afraid?"

"There's nothing to be afraid of."

"Suppose I start making love to you?"

"I *want* you to make love to me."

"Even now?"

"I shall always want that—whatever we decide."

He let go her arm and got to his feet.

"We've sat here too long," he said. Let's go on. It's getting chilly. Do you want to go straight back?"

"No—not unless you do."

"All right. We'll cruise a bit."

He extended a hand and helped her to her feet. She stood quite still, her eyes roving the lovely scene. He came nearer and pulled her up against him.

"I haven't kissed you to-day," he said.

She shook her head.

"We've been so solemn."

"I know."

His eyes devoured her face. He kept her body pulled against his but made no attempt to kiss her. He wished vaguely that he knew whether this was to be the end. He was very far from knowing it. He knew nothing save that she had made her decision—and the moment when she made it—when she had said suddenly that she was glad she had no religion, and the conversation had stopped being emotional. Not that hers had been—very. She had great self-control, unusual, he thought, in so young a woman. Well—he hadn't expected a scene. Even if it was good-bye there'd be none. She's better than I am, he thought, stronger, more serene. Kathleen would approve of her. . . . And then, suddenly, he thought of nothing save that she was beautiful and desirable, that he loved her, and that without her the world was going to look very empty.

"We'd better go," he said, stooping to pick up the rugs and cushions spread upon the ground.

"I'm ready," she said, and followed him to the car.

Dinner was over and they sat one on either side of the small fire that burned in the grate, talking, talking, talking.

"I can't see," said Sharlie, "that a natural impulse can be wicked. What *we* choose to do is nobody's affair but our own, unless it hurts other people. If I believe what you say about your wife (and I do) there's nobody to be hurt."

"Is that all your code of morality?"

"Yes. I believe so. Do you find it insufficient?"

"Far from it. It would seem to embrace everything."

"I know. I imbibed it as a child from my grandmother, who waged eternal war against the cruelty of the countryside —and against my father because she thought he had been cruel to my mother."

"Was he?"

"He was bored with her, wanted another woman and didn't trouble to hide either fact. My grandmother said that he'd been trying to bully her into consenting to a divorce— that that was what had upset her and caused the heart-attack which killed her. I remember a row they had the night before, and another the next morning just before she died."

"How old were you?"

"Seven."

"And you remember it?"

"Yes."

She told him why.

"I never can make out why it should be just that scene I remember. Or why it should affect me the way it always has. I remember, some years later, going into that room when an old servant of my grandmother's was living in the house, and seeing the whole scene come up again, blood-stained towel and all. I've always felt I'd only seen part of it—that I'd come in *late*. I haven't the faintest idea what I mean."

"It's uncanny. Were you very unhappy as a child?"

"No. I don't think so. But I believe I was only fond of my parents *separately*. They weren't good company for a child, I suppose, together. I used to listen all the time for a certain note in my mother's voice. And I couldn't bear it when she cried. But I lived in the country a lot—and my mother, who loved poetry, and used, as a girl, to write it, taught me to love it too. I didn't understand then what the trouble was. Since I have I've always sworn I'd never be a party to doing that to any woman."

"You won't be. I give you my word of honour. Can you trust me?"

Her candid serious gaze gave him his answer.

"Then there's nothing else to consider."

"But what about your father? People are a little apt as they get older to forget the hot-blooded escapades of their youth."

Sharlie smiled.

"My father would probably rejoice to have proof of what he would doubtless regard as my possession of a little natural feeling—in which he considers me to be lamentably lacking! Queer, that. He disliked my mother for making scenes and he dislikes me for not making them. Oh yes, I think he does dislike me. I think he did even when I was a child. And now the tables are turned, somehow—I never can quite understand why. But they are. Any scenes to-day are made by him. He doesn't like it any better that way—but he'd feel more comfortable if other people got worked up too. Fanny's too easy-going and never out of temper. I am, often, but I don't show it. My mother and father between them killed in me years ago any desire to be emotional."

Evesham looked at her and smiled.

"A whole page out of Freud, I expect, aren't you?" he said. "Were your father and stepmother happy?"

"I took it for granted that they were because they never quarrelled. My acid test for husbands and wives. But since I've grown up I've come to the conclusion that my father has *never* been happy. Of course he's a lot fonder of Fanny than she is of him, and there was something during the war I wasn't old enough then to understand. Fanny had a lot of men-friends, and I think father thought one of them was her lover."

"Was he?"

"I don't know. I shouldn't think so. She *likes* men—and

father never wants to go anywhere, except in spasms, anyway. She's younger than he is, and attractive. You can't blame her. She's not brainy or booky—she has to have something to do! Of course father's a disappointed man. As a writer he's gone out of fashion. Fanny excuses everything he does on that ground."

"Fanny sounds human."

"She is. I've always liked her."

"Human enough, do you think, to understand us?"

"I should think so. It would probably sound common sense to her because she'd not have any sympathy at all with your wife. Besides, my grandmother always said she was my father's mistress long before my mother died. They were certainly married very soon afterwards—too soon for the gossips and my grandmother, who would never meet Fanny or her children. Not that Fanny minds. She would tell you people were 'funny.' But why should I take my family into my confidence? It's my affair what I do. I don't see how it could affect anybody."

"No. I think it's the better plan at the moment. But it isn't going to be easy. People aren't always on holiday. We should have to contrive meetings—plot and plan."

"Well, it would be worth it. Besides, I've a little money of my own since my last birthday. From my mother's estate. I could go and live away from home if I like. I'm not really wanted there any longer now that my father has a secretary, and the children are nearly grown-up. Dave's still at school, but Pen leaves at midsummer. I expect she will get married very early. Dave, I suppose, will go on to Oxford. He's most certainly going to write. . . . Nobody will bother about me."

He gave her a smile that went through her like a dagger.

"Darling! Come over here."

Sharlie rose and went and sat on a cushion at his feet.

"Darling, you've used up all the arguments. I've nothing left to say."

She turned suddenly and buried her head against his knee. After a while he said:

"It's ten o'clock. Time I took you home."

She raised her head.

"I don't want to go home," she said.

"And I don't want you to go."

"Then why shouldn't I stay?"

"Darling, you can't *begin* by putting everybody by the ears . . ."

"You mean—the people here who come in to clean, the hall porter?"

"They? Oh no, I wasn't thinking of them."

She thought quickly: They wouldn't be surprised. He's had girls here before—and put it away from her. She knew there'd been others. He'd hidden nothing. He wasn't a rake. He'd probably lived no more than a normal life. It wasn't his fault. It didn't matter. None of it. She said: "Who, then?"

"Your own people. You'd have to find some explanation. That's the worst part of it—the petty deceits and lies."

"No need for them this time, anyway. The family's away, and the servants have leave, too. There's an old woman and her husband caretaking and looking after my meals. I can 'phone them presently—or in the morning. They won't worry. . . . Let me stay, darling."

"You really want to?"

"More than anything."

He took her by the shoulders and looked long and close into her face.

"Darling, you do know, exactly, what you are doing?"

She laughed softly.

"I'm not ignorant. Merely inexperienced. At twenty-five, too!"

"Darling—hasn't there really been anybody, ever?"

"Yes, I told you—calf-love, when I was seventeen, for three months. For Shane Mostyn, *that* successful young man! I'd known him all my life. He married the sister of my best friend and used to come to our house before all the trouble. People said things about him, but I used to like him. I thought it would be marvellous if he'd kiss me—until he did." She laughed. "Girls of seventeen are such *fools!*"

They fell suddenly into the depths of a long passionate embrace. Lifted against him in the low chair she felt the hardness and warmth of his body against the yielding softness of her own, and his kisses filled her with a rich deep delight. This, she thought, is what all my life I've been waiting for. For this I was born. This is why I couldn't marry Clive. . . .

She felt his hands at her neck, slipping down the curve of her throat, warm tender hands, apt at caresses. They slipped lower, moved, very gently, beneath the low loose collar of her dress. She sighed deeply but made no dissenting movement. Lying there in his arms, trembling a little, utterly surrendered to his will, she remembered, as something from another life, that she had once wondered what force it was that brought a woman to all the intimacies of marriage, that could make her either willing or desirous. Yet even in that moment, when all her senses sprang to passionate birth beneath her lover's touch, she was filled with a sudden dreadful foreboding that in some way or other she would fail or disappoint him. It seemed to her then that there was nothing any longer worth doing in all the world save that she should make him happy.

CHAPTER TWO

WHEN she got back from the office on Tuesday evening, Sharlie found the family reassembled—an unfussed Fanny wearing a new frock, a still ecstatic Helen Carter, her father looking calm and pleased with himself, Pen, nonchalant and impertinent as ever, with carmine-coloured lips and finger-nails, and David a silent, observant and amused watcher of the family circle.

Fanny said: "You didn't come down, after all, Shar. Did you have a nice time on your own?" and was quite satisfied with Sharlie's reply—or didn't listen to it, perhaps.

Her father evinced no interest whatever in her doings, greeting her as though there had been no holiday at all, and no more than usual was Helen Carter aware of the elder Miss Stratton's existence. But, getting her quietly by herself for a few minutes before dinner, Pen said: "Where *did* you go for the holiday, Shar?"

"What makes you think I went anywhere?" Sharlie asked.

"Oh, I know you did. You must have. You weren't here when I came up on the Saturday, and the Browns said you'd 'phoned on Thursday night to say you wouldn't be home, and that next morning you'd come and collected your things."

Perfectly true. Sharlie thought of them lying in Julian Evesham's drawers, hanging on pegs in his wardrobe. She had, somehow, to evade the difficulty of getting out of the house periodically with a suitcase. She felt infinitely removed from the little sister, who tried so hard to be grown-up, but was still, she thought, such a young and innocent little creature, for all her modern talk and bravado.

"You came *up*?"

"Yes—to get my fancy-dress costume. There was a dance at the hotel on the Monday."

"Did father drive you up?"

"Rather not. He was too busy playing golf with the fair Helen!—and mother had an engagement elsewhere. Captain Stewart drove me up in his Bentley."

"Who is Captain Stewart?"

"A man we met down there last Christmas. Lots of money, and a house in the country, as well as a flat in town—*and* the Bentley. It passed everything on the road."

Sharlie laughed. She had been waiting for that. They all said it—every one of these young creatures born in an age of machines and speed.

"How exciting!" she said. "Is Captain Stewart in the army?"

"No!" Pen looked surprised, then enlightened. "Oh, the title? He's just hung on to that, I suppose."

"Isn't he married?"

"Yes. But he doesn't live with his wife."

Sharlie said nothing, and then it seemed suddenly to strike Pen that she was answering more questions than she asked, which hadn't at all been her intention. She said: "Aren't you going to tell me where you went, Shar?"

"Yes, if it interests you. To a place called Ashdown Forest."

"Never heard of it. Whom with?"

"Somebody I know at the office."

"Oh—you never told me about her." There was the slightest possible pause before the pronoun. "All right. I'm glad you had a good time, you look as though it agreed with you, anyway," and Pen smiled her impudent very attractive smile.

After dinner David came upstairs and talked to her about the holiday.

"It was all right, Shar, except for that man Stewart. Didn't like him. How Fanny can have him about! And Pen flirted with him a lot, the silly little idiot. Thinks him good-looking, I suppose! I wish you'd been there! I had to go walking alone. P. A. didn't want me for golf—too busy teaching Miss Carter."

"Did you only walk?"

"Oh, I bathed, of course. Pen wouldn't—said it was too cold. But she sat about in that smart costume of hers—with that Stewart creature about, too, all the time."

"Did Miss Carter bathe?"

"Only once. *She* thought it was too cold, too."

"And P. A.?"

"Once. He told Pen to go and get some clothes on. She laughed." Dave laughed, too. "Miss Carter did all the right things. Wrapped herself up to her chin in one of those Turkish towel contraptions before and after. Pen said, 'Perhaps she hadn't got anything to show' (you know Pen *is* a vulgar little beast sometimes, Shar). But she was wrong. Miss Carter has a very nice figure even if she doesn't want Captain Stewart running his eye over it. She's not half a bad sort, Shar—or wouldn't be if she wasn't so all wrapped up in P. A."

"What else did you do besides walking alone, and bathing, and approving of Miss Carter's figure—and of Miss Carter, with certain reservations?"

"Don't rag, Shar . . ."

"Sorry. I didn't mean it. What *did* you do, lovey?"

"I wrote a story. A short one."

"Is it good?"

"Not very."

"Will you let me read it?"

"Later on. You know, Shar, they've asked that man *here!* P. A. *will* be pleased!"

"Doesn't father like him?"

"Well, he never does like Fanny's pals much, does he? Don't blame him. She has rotten taste in men. . . . He hadn't time, this hol, to notice him, of course. He's been so busy with the golf lessons."

"Perhaps he won't have much time, either, when (and if) he comes here."

"Because of the book, you mean? He does seem a bit full up with it. I heard Miss C. gushing away like billy-o about it. Do you know anything about it, Shar?"

"Not a word."

"Well, I don't suppose it's as good as she says, anyhow."

"Don't you think she's any judge?"

"Not with P. A.'s stuff. She's too soppy about him to see straight."

Sharlie laughed.

"How on earth do you know that?"

"Oh, you can always tell."

Sharlie laughed again. These children of Fanny's! Amazing young creatures! What was one to do with them, who called their mother by her Christian name, discussed, criticised, and were fond of her, and had an explanation for everything! Well, anyway, they were shortly going back to school, and the rest of the household were obviously going to be far too busy with their own affairs to bother about hers, the very thought of which filled her with astounding joy.

The next day Sharlie went to see Judy. Judy had to be told. Impossible to keep a secret like this from Judy. Besides, she wanted Judy to know.

"Why don't you go and live with the man openly?" Judy asked at once.

"I suppose we shall do that eventually."

"Well, the wife may die."

"Don't say that, Jul"

"Why not?"

"Well, don't say it, anyway."

"I won't—if it's going to make you look like that. Queer creature you are, Shar! . . . When am I to meet the miracle-worker?"

"Why do you call him that?"

"Well, isn't he? It is a bit of an accomplishment, you know, his! I'd begun to think you'd never meet a man who could do the trick!"

"Whenever you like."

"We'll arrange something, then. And, Shar—if you want my assistance, I mean, if you want to account for any marked absences, count on me."

"But what about your mother? She'll strongly disapprove."

"Mother's at home so little. Always away now at her prospective constituency since she threw over Bayswater—or was thrown over by it. But go off and live by yourself—if you won't entirely defy the conventions. I can't *see* why you stay on at Edward Street, now you've enough money. You'll regret it, you know."

Sharlie laughed, kissed her friend and went away. But the conversation had made her thoughtful. When Judy had asked her why she did not have the courage of her convictions and openly acknowledge the situation, she was aware that, though she had answered, she had given her no reply. She did not know why. That first evening when they had discussed it, she and Julian had agreed, more or less tacitly, that it was their own affair. She had received the impression that though his wife was in possession of the facts and had shown him, as Judy would have said, no consideration, he wanted at least to spare her the pain of knowing that her attitude had forced him into living with another woman in what she would consider *open* sin. He wanted, she supposed, to let her down

lightly. Had she given this reason to Judy she would have been aware that it was not all the truth. The rest was all mixed up with her natural reserve, her feeling against shouting anything whatsoever from the house-tops. The ordinary public marriage, with its food and drink, the wedding guests and their jokes had always inspired in her some small revolt, and she knew that she was glad to be spared them. Yet neither was this all. Pen and Dave—but particularly Pen, perhaps (and for that she could ascribe no reason)—were definitely at the back of her decision to keep the situation to herself. She did not attempt to work this out. David she considered too young and she had only some vague idea of shielding Pen, not from something she ought not to know or knowledge of which might do her harm, but from some interpretation she might put upon it of her own. She could not bear, she thought, Pen's impudent acceptance of it. A strange undisciplined little creature, idolised by her father, indulged by her mother, she still saw her, nevertheless, beneath her semblance of worldly wisdom, as an ignorant child. Constantly Sharlie had the instinct to shield her from herself. She disliked most of her friends, the young women more perhaps than the young men, and wished that it was somebody's business to censor some of them. But Fanny censored nothing and nobody. She thought the child was entitled to have as good a time as she could. "She would only be young once." The best thing that could happen to Pen, Sharlie sometimes thought, would be for her to meet some decent man a good deal older than herself who would marry her and keep her in order.

She thought so all the more when at the end of July Pen came home from school, just past her seventeenth birthday, a very lovely slip of a girl with the airs and graces of a grown woman and out for all the "good time" she could get. Her father gave her an absurd allowance, which she spent entirely

on clothes and self-adornment, so that she looked as expensive as her wealthy friends and considerably more attractive than any of them. Philip stayed his progress with the secret book, roused from his absorption in Helen Carter's devotion, to take her about—in the car, to the theatre, to the new films, even for a week to Paris, where she bought herself more clothes and ran a pretty customs bill which Philip had to settle at Victoria. Pen, indeed, seemed to be the young daughter of his dreams. She was amusing, daring, lovely—alive. She teased him and flattered him by liking to be seen about with him, but she confided privately to Sharlie that she considered him an appalling driver and that being out in the car with him gave her "nerves," a state of affairs to which she put an end by herself learning to drive and by coaxing a small car of her own out of her adoring parent, in which she dodged very competently in and out of the traffic and took herself off for long periods of time—and without Philip, which was one reason why he often wished he had never given it to her. The other was that when he said he didn't like her driving in London everybody assured him she was quite safe—that already she was a much better driver than he was. But to himself he acknowledged the truth of the assertion. The beauty and charm and cleverness of his younger daughter became his trinity of faith. He even felt again that old satisfaction with Fanny for having produced her. Fanny had grown over-plump and uninteresting and had developed an appalling taste in men, to whom she seemed to expect him to be polite. He had ruined his life for her and cared for her now only in those odd flarings of a dying passion—but he remained grateful to her for having given him Pen. David was a different proposition and at the moment not his concern, but Pen was everything he had ever wanted a daughter to be. He was a little ridiculous about her.

Aware of this and strangely warmed and pleased with the

knowledge, Sharlie was amused to see how Helen Carter resented it. Her dislike of Pen was cordial and avowed—a marked contrast to the urbanity she evinced always towards Fanny, who never interfered and for whom Philip never by any chance neglected his work.

As the months slipped by Sharlie had found nothing to regret in the decision—so calmly taken, so whole-heartedly assented to—that she and Julian Evesham should become lovers. Neither, since they had surrendered to it, did their attraction for each other lessen. Nothing was cheapened: nothing lost. He had now as much power to thrill and delight her as upon that first consummation of a passion which seemed to Sharlie to be not only a physical delight but a symbol of so many other things equally in tune between them. Their minds marched in step: they shared an enthusiasm for so many things—books, poetry, music, the open country—and their very disagreements created but a new angle from which to survey their relationship.

Neither did either of them repine or lament the scurvy trick Fate had played upon them. They took with thankfulness what she had accorded them, and knew in their hearts that it was so very much more than many people ever achieved. They accepted the situation, making no attempt to twist or alter it. The attitude of Julian's wife was never further discussed and in her own happiness Sharlie did not even pause to bear her a grudge. She could respect convictions she did not share, even when they got in her way. Her feeling for Julian was sufficient, giving to the hours she spent in his company a burnished brilliant happiness and to those outside it a quality of peace and contentment that was unfailing. They managed, more or less, to see a good deal of each other and as the evenings lengthened went twice or thrice a week out into the Surrey or Kent country, leaving

the car at an inn, walking for an hour and coming back to sit over a simple meal before driving home along the darkening road. Sometimes these journeys ended at Edward Street, but sometimes they were extended to the flat in Regent's Park. They were discreet, however, and by them the surface of their conventional existence was barely ruffled. Sharlie had been right when she had said that nobody wanted to bother about her doings. Nobody did. Even Pen, pursuing happiness like a July butterfly, forgot except on the rarest occasions to tease Sharlie about "her friend at the office." So natural had her new life become, so integral a part of her existence, that when this happened Sharlie would smile and tell her without the smallest change of countenance that she was an impudent young puss.

As for Julian Evesham, he found, a little perhaps to his surprise (for that unemotional exterior had a little misled even him), that Sharlie was the most normal woman he had ever encountered. Six years of a woman who responded to none of the more ordinary instincts and impulses of adult humanity had urged him towards a type so opposite that he had frequently found that, far from being completely unemotional, life was indeed far too emotional altogether. The things of the mind, all the hundred-and-one things there were to do in the world, if you were not making love or chasing recreation, went by the board, and he had soon come to find the demands made upon his time as upon his emotions a good deal more than he could stand, so that he would go back to Ireland and Kathleen and her calm remoteness with a satisfaction and gratitude that was balm to soul and body alike. It was soothing to spend days in that quiet old house sleeping amid its green hills, to let the hours slip by in the assurance that whilst he worked Kathleen would have her own occupations and would neither sulk nor fume nor

imagine herself neglected; and to hold that white unresponsive undemanding body in his arms and so fall asleep, a thing for which to thank high heaven. When that affair with Sheila (as unmeaning as the rest, but staged too near at home) had put an end to these oases in his emotional desert, he had been extremely unhappy. Sheila, terrified at Kathleen's discovery, and knowing that Julian could never marry her, had taken herself off, thinking she had had a lucky escape. Julian had gone abroad, where emotional adventures, at least for an itinerant Englishman, were more easily come by and less painfully discarded. None of his subsequent affairs (and he had not pretended otherwise) were anything but the flimsiest disguises of biological necessity—for him as for the young women concerned. Post-war England had seen to that. Hard-working decent young women, for the most part, their natural mates sacrificed in the holocaust, themselves planted down in a country which boasted a couple of million "surplus" women, resigned to the fact that there were not enough men to go round, but not at all resigned to the utter relinquishment of all experience of one side of life—they had taken what Evesham could give them and left it at that. Invariably he tired: never did any thought of a permanent if illegal relationship with them enter his head. Sex had become to him no more than an appetite which had to be satisfied if it was to be forgotten. Then he had met Sharlie and with her had entered upon a human existence consonant with that he had once shared with Kathleen, plus that emotional stimulus and response he did not know with her. Sharlie had the same sense of the dignity of human existence, she had occupations of her own: she made no demands upon his time. You could talk to her. She had a mind. She cared for books and could talk intelligently of his own, and in addition she gave him love in season unstintingly and without prudish scruples or inhibitions, having

in this, as in all else, as he saw it, a finely balanced sense of proportion. With her he knew an inner quiet, a bodily well-being he had never in this world expected to know at the hands of any woman.

Neither did their fortnight in September by the Cornish sea in any way modify their mutual pleasure and satisfaction; and when at the end of it they separated, she to go for a week to her grandmother's and he to cross to Ireland to visit his wife, who had had influenza, it was understood that he would return in time to come up to Lincolnshire to fetch her.

Ann Selwyn approved of him.

"I must read some of his books," she said to Henry after they had gone. "I hope Sharlie's going to marry him. She ought to be married at her age. Can't think what the men are about. Do *you* think Shar's going to marry him?"

"I don't know," said Henry, wondering whether marriage was in the minds of young men who could get, apparently, what they want without it. Henry, whose sciatica kept him awake at night, had heard at midnight an opening door, the opening and shutting of another. And silence. And then, long afterwards, that business again of doors opening and shutting. In the morning he had looked at his visitors with interest. They were unselfconscious. They had done it before. He was sure of it. The thing was established. Sharlie had a lover. Undeniable. You could tell it just by looking at her. Nothing but satisfied love ever gave a woman that lighted-up look which Sharlie wore that morning. Queer Ann didn't notice it. And fortunate.

"Don't you think he'd make a very good husband for Sharlie?" she asked.

"I do, indeed. None better," said Henry, and opening his morning paper began to read aloud an account of Jeremy

Sacheverell Bentley, who was that day celebrating his hundredth birthday.

"*Celebrating!*" said Ann. "Does one *celebrate* a hundredth birthday?"

"If you're lucky enough to get one!" said Henry.

Ann went away.

CHAPTER THREE

It was towards the end of November of 'twenty-seven, following Pen's final leaving of school in the July, that Sharlie awoke to the fact that something was happening at Edward Street which she thought she ought to have noticed before. Her work and her lover had taken her of late so much out of the house that she had, in fact, noticed nothing until, with Julian gone on business to Paris and with Judy Norman there, too, taking some special maternity course, she found herself suddenly with more time on her hands than had been there for many months. Gradually it began to dawn upon her that Captain Stewart, who had come to the house for the last year at intervals as Fanny's friend, had become definitely less her friend than Pen's—a fact which she found distinctly disturbing. She did not like Geoffrey Stewart very much—but then she did not particularly like any of the men Fanny brought to the house, mentally indicting, with her father, Fanny's taste in the opposite sex. She found, however, that she liked Geoffrey Stewart a good deal less as a friend or her half-sister's than of her stepmother's, that her dislike was now definitely active, whereas before it had been entirely passive. He had been just one of Fanny's "men"—one didn't, needn't, bother. Fanny, presumably, knew how to deal with his intimate glances, his over-freedom with his hands and his too-ready compliments. Not that these things had been lavished overmuch on Sharlie, whose calm self-possession had upon him, as upon others of his sex, a definitely chilling effect, and who, when all was said and done, had not been there very much to encounter them. With Julian in Paris, however, she certainly was there often enough

to begin to wonder whether or not Captain Stewart was not there a good deal more often than he used to be—and to ponder that disturbing little fact about the fresh direction of his interest.

Looking from Stewart to Pen, Sharlie saw no reason to dismiss her faintly-moving anxieties. Pen, when she had left school a few months ago, had been already something of a finished modern product; but when she looked at her now Sharlie saw that she had advanced far beyond that stage. In manner, in that hard bright conversation of hers, she was definitely grown-up, with the schoolgirl, finished or otherwise, far enough away, at least to a casual eye, to be no more regarded. And yet the adjective seemed to Sharlie to be singularly inapt applied to Pen, to all that slender length of body which occupied so much of her time and thought. There seemed to be nothing of her at all. Her small hips, her hard firm little breasts, set rather low, her slim neck and slenderly moulded arms, were still, surely, the habiliments of extreme youth and immaturity. She looked like a young and very pretty boy. And yet there was something about her which did suggest maturity—and knowledge of far more things than she had at her age, and even in the year of grace nineteen-twenty-seven, or so Sharlie considered, to know as much as existed. Her face had every allure of femininity. Her large eyes, beautifully placed in her head and contrasting in their dark depths with the soft honey-tones of her hair, which she altered with every whim of fashion and now wore severely shingled, revealing the lovely shape of her head, all completed a picture Sharlie believed no man could fail to find enchanting. But to her familiar ripened beauty Sharlie saw was added now more than the touch of artificiality to which she had long been accustomed and which seemed as much a part of the modern toilette as the brushing of one's hair. Those thick upcurling lashes were made even

more beguiling by being artificially lengthened, the faintest of blue shadows had crept up into the corners of the eyes they veiled, the curving eyebrows had been plucked to a thin straight line, and the red of her full curving mouth more definitely enhanced. Even her clothes—always, in Sharlie's opinion, much too fashionable and fine for so young a girl—had taken on an added sophistication to match all this artificial enhancement of natural beauty. Endless in their variety, they looked immensely expensive, and Sharlie wondered if her father had added to Pen's already generous allowance or if she was running up bills. The former seemed the more probable, for from the age of ten she had perfected the art of wheedling. It presently occurred to a shocked and embarrassed Sharlie to wonder for whose benefit all this effort was being put forth. Had Pen fallen in love—at seventeen and a half? If so, it couldn't be serious. Besides, who was there among the young men Pen brought to the house, with whom she went joy-riding and dancing? She smiled on all, flirted with all—for that to Pen was the gospel of life. But love? Who among those callow young youths was the lovely young Penelope Stratton likely to be taking so much pains about? Unable to think of one, Sharlie was drawn against her will to the thought of Geoffrey Stewart, sophisticated, mature. Anxiously, her brow puckered with thought, she watched them together, her deeply protective instinct, always so ready to spring into action for Pen, on the *qui-vive*. His admiration was open enough—it must always have been, of course, but it existed now upon a different plane, very definitely offered no longer to a schoolgirl but to a young woman ready for masculine attentions and openly inviting them. That Pen was flattered was obvious, too. Sharlie's heart contracted. Hateful the way he looked at her, the compliments he paid her. Less, far less, than he offered would turn the head of a girl less spoiled

and self-centred than Pen. He ought to be stopped, Sharlie thought, in sudden panic. He ought not to be allowed to come there so much—to treat her as so complete an adult. Her father should have something to say to him. Or Fanny. Fanny, more properly, who was responsible for the situation and must surely have noticed her admirer's secession.

One evening when Pen had gone off to a theatre, Sharlie made use of her knowledge that Geoffrey Stewart was her escort, to broach the subject to Fanny. Her father was quite useless, these days. He regarded his household as the necessary concomitant to life, paid its bills, ate the food put before him, and listened to what it said when he found it impossible to avoid doing so, swore at the wireless with which it enlivened its duller hours and complained that Pen's admirers, bringing her home at outlandish hours from dances and parties, disturbed his slumbers. But for the rest, his mind was elsewhere. He took it for granted that Pen dressed herself up and went about. He smiled and approved of her when they met, but he conducted no catechism as to her doings any more than as to Fanny's. Stewart was his wife's affair—a golfing, dancing type, with enviably too much money, the sort of good-looking fool she liked. If Sharlie told him that he was taking Pen to the theatre he'd say, "Why not—if the kid can stand him?" And he wouldn't *see* why not. Stewart was Fanny's responsibility. Sharlie doubted if he'd ever properly looked at or considered him any more than had she—until now. Besides, Pen could look after herself. He'd be certain to say that. If she persisted he'd call her a prig and be suavely unpleasant after his fashion. No, her father was worse than useless. So Sharlie tackled Fanny. And Fanny said, "Oh, poor Geoff! Why shouldn't he?"

"Don't you really know why?"

"My dear Shar! What reason *can* there be? Geoff likes the

child and she's so pretty—of course he likes to take her about occasionally."

"Has he done it often before?"

"Oh yes, once or twice. To the Academy in the summer—and to Ranelagh once. All very public and proper."

"He's too old for her. Forty-five if he's a day."

Fanny laughed.

"Forty-five! You speak as though it means one foot in the grave."

"But Pen's only seventeen. He might be her father!"

"Well, isn't that the point, rather?"

"It might be, if he regarded her paternally. He doesn't."

"Oh, Shar, *must* you? I thought you'd grown out of your Puritanic ideas a little lately."

Sharlie flushed.

"Why 'lately'?" she said.

Fanny said, "Well, perhaps I'm wrong, dear, but I did think once that you were interested in somebody yourself—and that it was—making a difference."

" 'Somebody?' Whom do you mean?"

"How do *I* know?" said Fanny, "but it's no disgrace. Why shouldn't you? It would be very nice for you, Shar."

Sharlie made a movement of impatience.

"I'm sure it would," she said icily, "but it wouldn't alter my belief that Pen ought not to be allowed to run round with Captain Stewart. I don't like him. I think he's a wealthy loafer and he can't be a good influence for any young girl."

"My dear Shar, Captain Stewart is my friend."

"Well—you're old enough to take care of yourself. Pen isn't. *Any* girl of her age would be flattered by the attentions of a man three times her age. He'll turn her head. Besides, he's married, isn't he?"

"My dear Shar, Pen's head isn't so easily to be turned.

And things have changed since you were Pen's age. Besides, Geoff never makes any secret about his marriage. . . . I'm sure you mean to be very kind and not just horrid—but I'm *quite* sure you needn't worry. If it's any consolation to you to know it, Geoff asked me to go with them to-night, but unfortunately I had another engagement, and of course he asked my permission to take Pen alone. He's always most particular in that way. *Please* don't put ideas into the child's head, Shar."

Baffled, Sharlie moved her ground.

"Very well. But what about all this make-up? Is that for Captain Stewart's benefit? Do you approve of that, too?"

"Well—everybody does it. Even the youngest girls. No, I *don't* approve altogether, but there seems no way to prevent it. Of course with a girl with Pen's complexion it's quite *idiotic*." And Fanny shrugged complacent shoulders.

So Sharlie tried a little of her old disciplinary medicine upon the girl herself. She edged away from the business of her public appearances with Stewart, finding to her dismay that she was somehow afraid of it. Of what she might discover? Or of what she might bring about by the power of suggestion—what Fanny called "putting ideas into the child's head"? All she did finally, and despising herself for lack of courage, was to make one or two emphatic remarks upon the use of cosmetics by the young and lovely. And Pen laughed.

"Don't be so *frowsty*, Shar!" she said. "Everybody makes up—except you, and you'd look better if you did! You're far too pale."

"Nonsense!" said Shar, a little disconcerted by this carrying of the war into the enemy's territory.

"It *isn't* nonsense!" said Pen winningly. "You'd look ever so nice, Shar, with the tiniest bit of rouge and if you lengthened your eyes just a little. They're such a lovely shape, you know, Shar—like a sole. The proper

shape for eyes. Mine are much too wide and round."

Refusing to be side-tracked, Sharlie said:

"My dear child—make-up doubtless has its uses, but not in the toilet of a child of seventeen. It entirely spoils you. Hardens your face and makes you look much older than you are."

"Well—that's the idea. I *want* to look older. I'm sick of looking such a kid. I wish it didn't take so long to grow up!"

Sharlie looked at her and was struck by something new in the lovely little face—something wistful yet stubborn, something unhappy, restless. And again there stirred in her that deep instinct of protection.

"Don't wish anything of the sort," she said, more sharply than she meant because she felt helpless—and because that fleeting expression on Pen's face was new to her and stabbed at her heart.

Things rested there when Julian came back and temporarily, at least, tore the thought of them out of her mind, and her father's casual inquiry one evening about a week after his return still further kept her from giving to them more than a passing thought.

"Isn't Julian Evesham one of your authors?"

"Julian Evesham?" With astonishment Sharlie heard herself calmly repeating the familiar syllables. "Yes. Do you know his work?"

"Known it for years. Just had an advance copy of his latest. When is it due?"

"Next week."

"Do you know him?"

"Yes."

"Then you might tell him how much I like his book."

"Of course I will," said Sharlie, and became aware that Pen, dressed for a dance and looking vivid and excited, was

regarding her with a long considering gaze. She added hastily, "When next I see him."

She was surprised when, mentioning this to Julian, he said, "Do you think he would like me to go and see him?"

"I'm sure he would—he sees so few people these days. But do you think you want to go?"

"I've been thinking lately that it might be a good idea—that it would make things easier for you."

"I don't know. I don't find them difficult. We manage very well."

"I know we do. But it might help a bit, all the same, if your family recognised our friendship. Don't you think so? Think it over and arrange what you like."

In this way did Julian Evesham become an occasional visitor at Edward Street and Sharlie get used to hearing his name upon her own lips in the family circle and upon those of its various members. After the first shock of it she agreed that it was a sensible move—that it did away at least with some of the complications their relationship had created. Nevertheless, when Pen confided to her that she thought him *most* attractive and inquired if she were going to marry him, she felt the hot unusual colour mount her cheek as she replied with precision that she was not. "Why not?" asked Pen. "Anyone can see that you like each other!" (Heavens, was it so obvious, Sharlie thought, hastily reviewing her behaviour, and his, in the family circle.) "Has he got a wife already?"

Brought up thus sharply with the unexpected, Sharlie uttered the simple truth. "Yes, he has," she said.

"All the nice men have!" said Pen. "Wives who don't want them, too, but hang on all the same! Women can be *pigs!*"

Sharlie was astonished at the passion in the young voice and distressed by the light it shed upon all those other things

which had been troubling her, but she preserved sufficient presence of mind to laugh and say, "Well, there are plenty of young men not accommodated with wives—so cheer up!"

"*Boys!*" said Pen, with great scorn. "I'm so *sick* of them! They're so silly!"

"Oh, not all of them, surely?"

"*Most*," said Pen, gloomily, studying her lovely touched-up face in the small mirror she had extracted from her handbag. "They're not a bit exciting—and so clumsy. I don't think I like men who haven't had *experience*. I'd like to marry a man who'd had heaps of women before I ever met him!"

"And intended to have 'heaps' afterwards!" Sharlie attempted a laugh. "You talk the most dreadful nonsense, my child. Happily you don't mean it!"

"But I *do* mean it!"

"Of course you don't!"

With difficulty Sharlie continued to laugh as if she found the situation amusing. She wondered if that were the thing to do or if she ought to essay some other tactics. To what end? The thing would die if you laughed about it. It *couldn't* really be serious. Sharlie told herself she was making a mountain out of a very small molehill indeed.

Julian accepted her family, she found, calmly enough. Her father, who exerted himself that first evening to be agreeable, confided to him that behind the pot-boiler, needed to keep his extravagant household going, he was writing the best book of his life. Julian opined to Sharlie that the writing of it seemed to make him happy—so that it probably *was* a good book and would send his stock up considerably.

Sharlie said she hoped it would—and also that Miss Carter would survive.

"Is that the dark girl who stayed to dinner?"

"Yes. And worked for a couple of hours after it! Father

overworks her outrageously. Pen says she has an infatuation for father. But I don't think he notices her. He doesn't even see she's looking ill. Didn't you think she was?"

"Yes. She looked on edge. As if she needed a holiday."

"From father?" Sharlie laughed. "He's not an easy person to work for—at least I didn't find him so. But then I couldn't say the right things. Helen Carter finds that, at least, no difficulty. What did you think of Pen?"

"I wondered, most of the time, what it was she *wanted* me to think of her?"

"Oh, I can tell you that. Very grown-up, full of knowledge and teeming with experience of men, women and things. Actually, she's a child—spoiled, wilful, vain, and quite unable to see why *anything* she fancies she wants she can't have."

"You're very fond of her, aren't you?"

"I was when she was a child. I still am, I suppose. But I haven't any illusions about her. I do know what she is. She's not at all a strong character, but she's so intensely self-centred she gives the impression of being so. And everybody says her head's screwed on the right way and that she can take care of herself."

"You're worried about her. Why?"

"I don't know. I haven't anything really to go on. But I don't think she ought to be allowed to go out and about with this Stewart man. Girls of her age are so stupid about men of his—if they show them any sort of attention. He was one of Fanny's men. She's always had a retinue. He used to come here first when Pen was away at school. She met him, of course. But since she came home in the summer for good, he seems to have attached himself to her and to have *de*tached himself from Fanny. I don't like it, and I'm very much afraid she fancies herself in love with him. I did speak to Fanny about it, but she was as airy-fairy-Lilian as ever."

"How old is Pen?"

"Not eighteen until next May. He's at least forty-five and married!"

"You know that?"

"Fanny didn't deny it. She said he never made any secret of it. And Pen says *all* the nice men are married and that their wives are dogs in the manger. Or pigs. I told her *you* were married. She asked me my intentions, you see—so I had to. Hence the remark about dogs and pigs. She said *anybody* could see we're fond of each other. Can they, do you think?"

"Maybe. But we behave very nicely. Too nicely for me, at the moment. Come over here, darling, and forget your troublesome family. And behave a little less nicely."

Julian's presence in London had the effect of taking Sharlie's mind considerably off her family affairs, even of persuading her that she was allowing her imagination too free a rein. Certainly, as Christmas approached, Pen seemed to have grown out of her dissatisfactions and moodiness. That she went out still with Stewart Sharlie was aware, but he certainly came less to the house, and at least Pen made no further oblique references to him and his circumstances. There was, indeed, an assurance about her nowadays that took her several stages nearer the young womanhood state of her desires and which had a strongly reassuring effect upon Sharlie. Evidently the silly child was "getting over it," whatever it was, and as she grew older and before very long she would meet men who would effectively spoke the Captain's wheel.

As the year fell down the hill of winter her young life seemed absorbed in the round of gaiety and pleasure which Fanny so earnestly desired for her. Sharlie sighed a little, reflecting that gaiety and pleasure were apt to become barren

if persisted in too long, and not thinking much of them, anyway, as a full-time occupation. But at least her indeterminate fears for the girl were quietened—for that she was happy and pleased with her life seemed now to be undeniable.

Suddenly the centre of Sharlie's anxieties shifted to her father's secretary. Helen Carter was a different matter. Pale of face beneath the rouge (less carefully applied these days), heavy of eye and inclined to irritability, she induced in Sharlie a kind of scornful pity. To work herself to death for the sake of a man who never even noticed she did five minutes' more work than she was paid to do! The supreme idiocy! When she asked her father why he didn't send her away for a holiday, he said: "Why? She never complains!" and when Sharlie tackled Helen herself, she said, "What *nonsense*, Miss Stratton! I have my work to think of!"

"But can't it wait? You really do look extremely unwell."

"Mr. Stratton is anxious to get his new book out by the spring. I can't possibly."

"But you ought to think of your health first!"

"Oh, my health is all right, thank you," Helen Carter said rather rudely.

"Well," said Sharlie, feeling helpless, "it isn't any use my arguing about it, but you must allow me to say that appearances are not in your favour. I'm quite sure you're doing too much. You stay late every evening now—and then you have quite a long journey home. And you're here punctually every morning at half-past nine. I *wish* you'd let me speak to my father. I'm sure, if he understood, he'd be quite willing to spare you for a month or so. I could give him a hand in the evenings if necessary while you were away."

The effect of this mild speech upon Miss Carter was quite extraordinary. Her heavy eyes glared, her face crimsoned, her hands clenched, her foot stamped.

"*Really*, Miss Stratton, I do think you might allow me

to know my own business best. This is intolerable—intolerable!"

Sharlie stared at her for a moment in sheer amazement, then murmuring an apology she made good her escape. The recollection of that angry face, that all-but-surrendered control, haunted her all day, so that finding her father disengaged after dinner that evening, and deserted by his pleasure-seeking family, she broached the subject to him again, and again he said, "*Is* she ill, how am I to know? She never says. She's always here and always ready for work. *How* am I to know?"

"Well—it's fairly obvious. She looks dreadful."

"Does she?"

Sharlie knew then what was really the matter with Helen Carter. Not overwork. At least, not primarily. She was ill with love for a man who never looked at her—whose glance was so casual, so impersonal, it never even perceived the change that had taken place in her during the months since her arrival at Edward Street.

"Can't you insist upon her taking a holiday? I think I could find you a temporary substitute."

"It's going to be very awkward. This pot-boiler must be done for the Spring Lists and I hate new people." Philip took a gulp at the drink at his side. "Can't she manage until Christmas?"

"That's nearly a month. Will the book be finished by then?"

"It must be. . . . Yes, I should think so."

"And you will insist that she goes then?"

"Insist! I don't know about that. If her health's really going to be troublesome, perhaps I'd better get rid of her altogether. The finish of the book would be a good enough excuse."

Poor Helen Carter! On health or any other pretext it

would certainly be better he got rid of her—but she didn't believe he would. He found her too useful. Anyway, the memory of that ravaged face entirely prevented Sharlie from backing this suggestion. She said instead: "Why not talk it over with her and suggest a long holiday after the book is finished? And couldn't she, perhaps, get here a little later in the morning or work only until two o'clock or so? She used never to be here after midday."

Philip Stratton frowned.

"Well, we've got to finish the book or retire to the workhouse." (Whoever's health goes to pieces, thought Sharlie.) "But I might suggest she lives in—that would save her the journey both ends." (And leave her on tap for work at hours she would otherwise be free of you, Sharlie thought.) She said coldly, "I don't think that's at all a good idea—but you must please yourself, of course."

The cold voice, the suddenly withdrawn interest, aroused Philip's touchy temper.

"*Why* wouldn't it be a good idea?" he demanded. "Do you think I've got designs on the girl's virginity—or what?" Sharlie's face was expressionless. She eyed her father with frank dislike as she said: "I'm afraid I haven't given that side of the question any thought."

"Well, you needn't. I don't want Helen Carter. . . . Where's your mother gone?"

"To the theatre, I understand."

"With that new bounder she's got hold of, eh?"

"Mr. Ducane. *Is* he a bounder?"

"I expect so—if your mother likes him. Where's Pen gone?"

"To a dance at Vera Laing's house. She's staying the night."

"She goes to a hell of a lot of dances."

"This generation does."

"So did yours. So did mine. But you're too high and mighty to dance, of course . . ."

Sharlie said nothing, thinking of the rare occasions when, clasped in Julian's arms, dancing was the half-way house to Paradise. What was the use of saying anything? This was one of the evenings when her father definitely disliked her—and she knew enough to understand that he was suffering from one of his periodical fits of savage jealousy. Fanny's philanderings, so frequently these days taken for granted, were apt suddenly to rouse in him a flare of his blind passion for her. She saw that he hated her for what he thought of as her worthlessness and himself because, even now, she could still stir his slumbering senses.

"Too high and mighty for anything human, aren't you?" he asked Sharlie. "Never kissed a man in your life! Never had the chance, probably. You'd scare any man. . . . Well, think yourself lucky, my girl. Love's a hell of a thing. No good to anybody. All the same, you're not bad-looking in your way. You'd get a man all right if you weren't so high horse. If Fanny can, I should think you could. Fanny's fat. She'll get fatter."

He laughed and lapsed into silence, as if pondering a thought that gave him the greatest possible satisfaction.

Watching him pour out more whisky and soda Sharlie sighed. Any rational discussion of Helen Carter was now out of the question. He'd go on in that strain without cessation. Two double whiskies always made him incredibly vulgar. A sudden memory assailed her. A child standing in a window, turning at the sound of car-wheels to greet the newcomer; a laughing, handsome face, an attractive voice inquiring if she thought he had forgotten her, and a kiss that stunk of whisky. And after that, some conversation she did not understand between her father and grandmother, whose face was red and angry, though her father's continued

to smile. Well, she supposed he'd had some drink on the way down and poor Ann Selwyn had suffered.

"If there's nothing I can do for you," she said, "I think I'll go to bed. The returning revellers are certain to wake us both up, and to keep us awake for some time afterwards, so an hour's sleep before they come in might be as well."

Philip Stratton laughed—as though the idea of sleep was another of the things which roused in him a sardonic humour.

Sharlie heard, without astonishment, a day or so later that Helen Carter was to sleep in the house until Christmas. She was given a room next to Fanny's and was accepted by that lady as a permanent member of her household, which meant that she bothered neither her nor (very much) about her. Fanny liked Helen, but was not interested in or by her. Nice but dull, she thought, but an efficient secretary, and she got on well with Philip, which was everything—and not easy. Fanny was inclined to respect anybody who could achieve it. She called Helen "My dear," and inquired in the mornings if she had slept well, to which Miss Carter always replied in so quiet and good-mannered a fashion that Sharlie could not understand why she should from the first receive the impression that she hated Fanny. To see her accepting kindnesses and politenesses from Fanny was to get a hint of things snapping—like dry twigs beneath a pot.

But there was nothing now she could do for Helen Carter, who was lacking, she could not but think, in the more elementary principles of self-preservation.

Towards the end of November, yielding to Julian's persuasions, she decided to leave the family circle and take a flat of her own. Finding what she wanted at St. John's Wood, she arranged to move into it before Christmas. Nobody raised any objections. She suspected that her father was definitely relieved, but Fanny, showering household goods

upon her, hoping that she wouldn't regret it, assuring and reassuring her that if she was lonely she had only to come back to be welcome, was as sorry to see her go as she was ever sorry about anything. For Fanny, approaching her thirty-seventh birthday, growing fat as Philip had so genially remarked, and too easy-going to "slim," yet found life good. Men still found her good company, wondered how she put up with her bear of a husband and would have been a consolation to her if she had permitted it. But Fanny took Philip as lightly as ever—as lightly as she took most things. They had had some good times together—useless to expect them to last for ever. And marriage was no more and no less than she had expected. Now, as ever, she was not intense. To make a scene—to feel aggrieved—was beyond her, and she was sorry for Philip, who had had so many disappointments and really *had* lost so much of his old position in the literary world. It was terribly sad, for he was fifty-two and not likely nowadays to do anything to recover it. Anything she could do for him she was pleased enough to be able to do, and because of him ended by being a little glad that Sharlie had decided to go—though it was a pity, of course, it wasn't to a husband—for Philip had never cared for Sharlie, had never been very kind or fair to her. So different from his attitude to Pen, who was a much more troublesome young person altogether. Men were queer, to say the least of it.

"I wish you weren't going," Pen said to Sharlie at the last. "I shall miss you."

This amused Sharlie, who laughed and said, "Nonsense!"

"But I shall, awfully. You've always been so *nice* to me, Sharlie. Can I come and see you a lot? And I'll ring you up and give you all the news."

"Do," said Sharlie, "and if you ever want me—if I can ever do anything for you, be sure you come to me."

The lovely colour in Pen's face deepened ever so slightly. "Thanks, I will," she said, but Sharlie felt that she had suddenly gone a long, long way off and that it was of no use to say any more to her because already she was out of hearing.

Her father's farewell was strangely familiar. She had heard it all her life, since that day all those years ago on King's Cross Station, a strange mixture of the regretful and the relieved, leaving her with the old familiar feeling that he would have cared for her if he could. But now it no longer mattered whether he did or did not.

Fanny said, "Oh, my dear, it's so *dreadful* you should go at night, after dinner, like this. It makes me feel as though we're turning you out. . . . It'll keep me awake thinking about you over there all by yourself—in a cold lonely bed . . ."

Sharlie laughed—as she could afford to do—for her bed, she knew, would not be cold and neither would it be lonely. She left the tall Knightsbridge house which had been her home for more than sixteen years with scarcely a pang, for from it she drove, like a bird to its nest, straight to her lover's arms.

CHAPTER FOUR

JULIAN and Sharlie went up to Lincolnshire for the Christmas. Christmas Day itself that year came on a Sunday, and for all Tuesday was proclaimed a holiday, the journey was only held to be worth while because Charles Anstruther had gone away, giving Sharlie permission to remain away from the office until the Friday, when he wanted her to be there to deal with accumulated correspondence and to make appointments for the following week against his return.

The weather was wintry and very cold. The snow lay upon the ground, preventing Ann Selwyn from going out to see how her Christmas roses fared under the bell-jar with which she had protected their waxen winter beauty. The trees were tipped with frost. The days were crisp and fresh and the countryside shone as if it had been polished by some invisible hand. Beside the roses, the pernettyas were in bloom, standing up above the snows darkly green, bearing their sheaves of coloured berries—deep red, flesh-pink, rose-pink, coral-pink and lilac. The dark stem of the witch-hazel at the end of the lawn was already lighting her yellow torch, and the reds and pinks of the winter heaths shone here and there through their white winter cloak, valiantly saluting the snow and frost. It gave Sharlie a new and tender pleasure to show these miracles to a Julian who did not know that a garden could show colour or life in winter, and Ann Selwyn approved him for his interest and re-established the belief in the intelligence and common sense with which she had invested him as Sharlie's friend. She had asked her if she was engaged to him and been frankly irritated at her reply. She didn't know, she exclaimed, what young women were coming to—or

young men! Sharlie was old enough to be married, and she was obviously fond of the man. Didn't she, didn't he . . . ? Sharlie's face took on that detached remote look the old lady knew so well. She wasn't going to say anything. This friendship had to be accepted upon her terms or not at all. For all her fondness for Sharlie, Ann Selwyn resented this so emphatically that she played with the idea of approaching Julian on the point, but Julian did not look as if he would be easy to interrogate upon the subject of his intentions and she thought better of the impulse. Nothing, therefore, occurred to mar the peace and happiness of these few days of holiday in which Sharlie revisited with her lover the familiar scenes of her childhood. She spent hours wandering with him about the streets of the old town, took him to the "George" for a drink that he might be shown those two rooms just inside the door, one on either side of the hall, in which people used to wait for the coaches to York and London. The neat labels, "York" and "London," were still there, though beneath one of them now was written "Private." She took him to see the old cottage which her father had once rented and which harboured so many confused and confusing memories. Lucy Caxton (Lucy Beridge as she had been) was still there, and told Sharlie to go upstairs and show the gentleman round. She had not been up that staircase since that day, all those years ago, when she had gone to see Lucy's baby and that queer thing had happened to her in the room that used to be her mother's. But to-day no terrifying transformation took place. There were only Lucy's homely belongings: her brass-knobbed bedstead, her rush-bottomed chairs, her spotless curtains covering every inch of glass, despite the fact that there was no other house for miles. The room gave her no distress, not even an æsthetic one, for Sharlie, like her grandmother, had a liking to see a cottage furnished as a cottage. Already she had almost

forgotten the days when for a brief spell Bede Cottage had found itself converted into a gentleman's week-end residence.

On the Wednesday morning Sharlie received a wire from her father asking for the name and address of the girl whom she had recommended to take Helen Carter's place whilst she went for a holiday. She sent a wire with the required information and wondered what had happened to Miss Carter.

They told her when she got back.

Fanny said: "It was *most* unfortunate. I oughtn't to have had her here for Christmas, I suppose. . . . I'm afraid she's starting a complete breakdown. She seemed to be upset because Philip spent Christmas night in my room. I'm afraid what she *said* was in my *bed*, but she was so wrought up it isn't kind to bother very much about what she said, poor girl! I had to send for her people to come and take her home. Your father's fearfully worried at being left like this. And that girl of yours can't come. . . . Couldn't *you*, perhaps. . . . Well, it's a pity, dear. I can't help thinking he would find you a relief after what has occurred."

Philip said: "I've *got* to have someone at once in the place of that fool of a girl. . . . Someone who can spell and has some sense."

Pen showed a distinct inclination not to talk of it. She said: "It was disgusting. Fanny was marvellous, though."

Sharlie hadn't expected Pen to feel like this about it and looked at her in surprise. She thought she looked rather wrought-up and not very well, as if the incident had really upset her, and went to David for her information.

David was full of it. He had obviously enjoyed the whole thing immensely. It had started, he said, at breakfast, on Christmas Day morning when Philip had exhibited the cigar-case Helen Carter had bought him for a present.

"P.A., I must say, was perfectly filthy about it," David

said, "not to say indecent, because he must have known that he was calling attention to the singular number, so to speak, of her Christmas gifts. What makes P.A. do that sort of thing, do you suppose? He seems to love to see people squirm. Besides, there was Fanny, who'd remembered to buy Helen a present too!"

"I'm sure," said Sharlie, "Fanny didn't mind."

"Not a bit, bless her! She seemed pleased somebody had thought of something at last P.A. really appreciated. You know his way with a gift! Looking it in the mouth isn't in it!"

Sharlie nodded, wondering if Philip really appreciated David's irreverent designation of "P.A."

"Go on," she said.

"Well, then, in the afternoon we went in the car to Richmond. P.A. up. (And you know the kind of day it was!—half snow, half rain!) Pen wouldn't come. She said P.A.'s driving gave her a headache even on *dry* ground, and besides, she was expecting a 'phone call. At the gates of the Park Helen screamed to father to stop, got out, bought an armful of chrysanthemums from a man standing at the entrance and threw them into Fanny's lap. (To make up for the cigar-case, I suppose, or because Fanny'd been such a gentleman about it!) Fanny, as we've all noticed, save Helen, hates chrysanthemums, but she went on being a gentleman. She said, 'How kind, how kind!' (you know the way she does), and sat there looking like a *prima donna* after a successful concert. When we got home I nipped out and got Pen to come and have a squint. But, like Queen Victoria, she wasn't amused. Bathed in gloom—so I suppose the telephoner hadn't obliged."

"Go on," said Sharlie, whose mind had picked out the essential facts in this rigmarole—that Pen had stayed at home for a telephone call and had

been depressed because it hadn't come.

"Well, then Tommy Ducane arrived. Fanny's latest. Quite a sport! We had dinner and then bridge. P.A. was in a good humour. He almost saluted Ducane under the mistletoe bough and managed not to see when Ducane achieved it later with Fanny. He congratulated him upon his bridge (and took five bob off him), and encouraged him to flirt with Pen. Only Pen, still a bit bathed in gloom, didn't rise."

"Go on," said Sharlie again.

"Well, all went merry as a marriage bell until ten o'clock, when Tommy, who'd come up from Surrey, thought he'd better be starting back. But it had been snowing, we found, apparently for hours and hours. Edward Street looked like a Christmas card. Of course Fanny said at once that he'd have to stay the night and gave him P.A.'s room. P.A. went off up to yours, but in the middle of the night came down and turned in with Fanny. I know, because he woke me up by talking a lot when he got there. Unfortunately, he woke up Helen too, for presently doors opened and I could hear her saying the queerest things in a funny excited voice over and over again as if she was wound up and couldn't stop. I supposed she wasn't well or something and shoved my head in the pillow hard and hoped she'd soon let up. I could hear Fanny's voice—very quiet and soothing, and presently peace reigned."

"Was that all?"

"By no means. The real rumpus didn't begin until the next morning. Helen didn't appear at breakfast, and later on we heard her tap-tapping away upstairs at the typewriter. Fanny said: '*Need* she do that on Boxing Day?' and P.A. said of course she needn't, and went upstairs to stop her. For some reason or other Fanny and I followed him upstairs, and we'd got to the first landing when the sound of the

typewriter ceased. There seemed to be an awful pandemonium going on upstairs and then suddenly down the stairs came Helen, running as if all the furies were pursuing her. She ran by us as if we weren't there and rushed on down into the hall. Whilst we stood there staring at her, father came dashing down after her, with a face like thunder. He paused when he saw us and came over to Fanny, spreading his hands out in that funny way he has when he's dealing with somebody else's unreasonableness. We saw then that he had a black bruise upon his forehead. He said: 'For God's sake go and give that girl some sal volatile or something. Look what she's done to me! I think she's going off her head. She started to tear up my manuscript, and when I stopped her she picked up a paper-weight and threw it at my head and rushed out.'

"Fanny immediately went off downstairs with him and I looked over the banisters and saw that Helen was leaning against the wall looking like a ghost (she must have forgotten her rouge) and breathing as if she'd been running a long way. Fanny went down to her, took her by the arm and began to lead her upstairs. As she came by me I saw she looked pretty awful. Mother had her arm round her and was being very kind, helping her up the stairs and saying she'd feel better if she went to lie down. . . . Helen didn't look as though she'd heard. She seemed to be miles away, as if she'd really been running—as if she'd run so far she was out of the world altogether."

"Where was Pen all this while?"

"In the morning-room writing a letter. She looked sort of scared when I went in, and covered the letter with the blotter. Then Ducane came in, trying to look as if he'd noticed nothing. He asked Pen to go for a walk and she went. Sort of quickly, as if she had to get away from the house."

"What did she do with the letter?"

"Put it on the fire."

"What happened next?"

"Well, Helen was up there on the landing waving her arms about and looking like Sybil Thorndike as Medea and screaming things out at father who was there, too, at the top of her voice. She was using the most priceless words and saying awful things about Fanny and Tommy. When mother saw me she began pushing Helen into her room and told me to go away. I didn't."

"You'd no right to have been there."

"Well, I was. Fanny got her inside at last, shut the door and turned the key. Father went off to his study and I suppose Fanny 'phoned her family or something, for presently somebody came and took her away in a taxi."

"Was that the end?"

"More or less. Pen wouldn't talk about it when she came back with Tommy, and when I did she looked as if she'd eaten a sour apple. Father didn't come down to lunch. And Fanny apologised to Tommy."

Sharlie wondered how much David really understood of all this. He said with a grin, "Well, anyway, it was exciting. I'm going to make a short story of it!"

Sharlie looked at him. Yes, that was what David would always do with the un-understood and disturbing facts of life. He'd make them into a story. Dave, she thought, was safe. He'd played in this turbulent, painful domestic scene no more than the part of an interested spectator. It was all so much unexpected "copy." Dave could not be hurt. But Pen?

Sharlie was surprised to find that the only thing that stayed in her mind out of this account of what came to be known as the Helen Saga was the picture of Pen covering a letter with a blotter—a Pen who'd stopped being scornful and amused and was merely white-faced and disgusted—a

Pen who shrugged her shoulders and committed a very private letter to the flames.

If she could only get these things in their proper sequence they would, Sharlie was convinced, mean something significant. But try as she would, she couldn't get them right and they continued, most maddeningly, to mean anything, nothing at all. . . .

"It seems impossible," she said later to Julian, "that father didn't *see* what was the matter with Helen Carter. I know he doesn't *like* women and doesn't notice them much, anyway. But I can't help thinking he did see—and that he let it go on because he could use her feelings to get so much more work out of her."

Julian laughed.

"You think it would have been honester to have seduced her?"

Sharlie laughed, too, but a little uneasily. Even in Julian she did not care overmuch for the light bandying of words with so unpleasant a meaning.

"*Is* there such a thing as 'seduction' to-day?"

"Oh yes, even to-day. But the term's misused—as it always was. Quite a number of people, for instance, would say that *I* had seduced you."

"Why?"

"Oh, because I'm older, have been married, had more experience. Lots of reasons like that!"

"And all silly," said Sharlie. "Well, at least Helen Carter's unfortunate exhibition seems to have had a salutary effect upon Pen."

"You mean she isn't seeing her elderly cavalier?"

"No. She's avoiding him, too. She gave up going to Vera Laing's, where they had expected to meet. Not that she said so. She never mentions his name, but I think my

conclusions are the right ones. I'm afraid I'd sacrifice any number of Helen Carters to save Pen from getting hurt."

"You'd sacrifice me, too, wouldn't you?"

Sharlie looked a little scared, then she smiled, but did not reply. Julian said:

"What makes you think she can *get* hurt?"

"Lots of things. I hate the way she's been brought up, for one thing. Fanny's an amiable creature, but she has no idea of bringing up children. The way Pen and Dave were left to the servants during the war used to make me so angry. And I disliked Pen's school, too—one of those places where she learnt all the wrong things and mixed with girls with rich parents, who gave her a lot of false ideas about life as she will have to live it. When first she went to stay with Vera Laing she used to send her maid in to undress her at night and to change her shoes when she came in from a walk! She laughed then, but I'm not sure she wouldn't take it for granted now. The idea of wealth appeals to her enormously."

"I know. Pen's a go-getter."

"Oh, Julian, she isn't! That's only the silly way she talks, because she thinks it's clever and the thing to do! She'd never marry a man just because he had money and could keep her in luxury. She's full of high-flown sentiment underneath. That's what's dangerous—and what nobody seems to suspect. Even Fanny thinks she's been attracted to Geoffrey Stewart because he's got so much money and can give her a good time. It occurs to nobody (save me) that she feels romantic about him. Fanny says she has 'too much sense,' and father doesn't bother. He thinks 'the modern girl' (whatever that is!) knows how to take care of herself. He *likes* Pen as she is—so charming and *soignée*, so grown-up, so self-possessed and smart with her phrases. He never sees the little girl underneath. Neither does

anybody else. *You* don't, you know."

"Don't I?" He smiled at her, but Sharlie pushed past the charm of that and wrinkled her brows at him.

"Julian. Don't you *like* Pen?"

"Oh yes, well enough. But I think she's a typical product of her day and generation—and perhaps I don't like *that* very much."

"I don't believe she is," Sharlie said, "but it's no use arguing the point with you. You're like Judy. She always will have it that my family devours me, and nothing pleased her so much as hearing that I'd gone off and left them to fend for themselves."

"Well, I agree with Judy, rather. Have you heard from her lately? When is she coming back from Paris?"

"Not until after Easter. I wish she hadn't gone."

"Do you miss her?"

"Oh yes."

Sharlie smiled, however, aware that there were good reasons why she had missed her a lot less than she would have done a year ago. But all the same, she did wish she would come back. She had wished it several times lately without knowing in the least why.

"Sensible creature, Judy!" said Julian. "Do you know what she asked me when last we met?"

"No. What?"

"Why you and I didn't live together openly."

"Oh! She asked me that, too. What did you say?"

"I said I didn't know. Do you?"

Sharlie said: "Yes, I think I do. I can't explain it very well, though!"

"It's Pen again, isn't it? Pen and Dave—but chiefly Pen."

"Yes."

"Don't you think they're old enough to understand?"

"I daresay. Dave, certainly. I can't be sure."

"Wouldn't it simplify matters?"

"I suppose it would."

"Well—won't you think about it? We don't want to go on like this for ever, do we?"

Sharlie said: "Give me a little while."

"How long is that? If you agree we'd go off to Italy and stay there until the weather got too hot. It would have all blown over by then."

"What about Kathleen?"

"Kathleen knows it must come to that eventually. She knows it isn't just an *affaire*. Kathleen's accepted the situation. But it isn't Kathleen who prevents you. It's Pen. It's Pen all the time with you." He laughed and coming over to her kissed her flushed face. "What are you afraid of?"

"I'm not afraid of anything."

"Sure? Sure you're not afraid that Pen would think she was entitled to do likewise?"

"Oh, Julian, don't!"

"But *isn't* that what you think?"

"Is it? No, no . . ."

"Of course it is. Only you can't bear it put into words."

She certainly couldn't.

"But it wouldn't be 'likewise'—I mean if Pen thought that she and this man Stewart . . ."

"My dear, if Pen is going to be saved from herself—or her upbringing, or whatever it is you think it is she wants saving from—it can't be done by your following her about like a watch-dog and shielding her. She's a very knowledgeable young woman, and has got to find things out for herself—even make her own mistakes. A thing like this Helen Carter business, for example, will do much more to stop her making a fool of herself over some impossible man than your spoiling your own life to look after her. Besides, you've left home, anyway—and she has a father

and mother. She's *their* job, not yours."

"Darling. You've said all this before."

"I know. I shall go on saying it until you see the force of the argument. I've no intention of being sacrificed or letting you sacrifice yourself for ever to your entirely fallacious opinions about this young sister of yours." He took out his diary and turned over the pages. "Look here, darling. Easter comes early this year. Good Friday's the sixth of April. So we'll give that a miss. Let's say a month afterwards—the middle of May. I'm going to fix up a three months' tenancy at an Italian villa I often use—only I usually get there much earlier. It's a hill-town and we can stay there until quite late into the summer and then go out to the coast. I'll give you till the middle of May—say Saturday, the twentieth—to make up your mind. That's nearly four months."

"All right," said Sharlie. "But you're bullying me dreadfully."

"You need it. Do you think you'll have made up your mind in four months' time?"

"I'll try. What happens if I don't?"

"I shall go just the same. Italy in the spring's a foible of mine."

"A habit, you mean. A very silly one. There's no place so nice as England in the spring."

"How do you know? You've never been out of England—in the spring or any other time."

Sharlie smiled.

"True, oh King! But I'm sure I'm right. Wouldn't a country cottage here do as well?"

"No. Italy or nothing. It'll be a lot more definite. A real wrench. That's what you want, my girl."

"Am I so unsatisfactory?"

"Far from it. But we ought to have the courage of our

convictions. This isn't a hole-in-the-corner affair—as it would certainly look to your precious Pen if she ever found us out. A clean break would be a much more excellent moral lesson, if that's what you're after. I want a normal life together without all these comings and goings. A home—and children. So do you. Why shouldn't we have them?"

"Children? Illegitimate?"

"Don't be led by the nose by words, my love. Illegitimate children, like any other, depend entirely upon their parents. Ours would be all right, never fear! . . . Or *do* you fear?"

"No," said Sharlie. "I'd love them. But this is no world for children, anyway."

Julian stared at her.

"Oh, if you're going to wait until the world is perfect you'll wait for ever. Our youngsters will probably be like us—glad of life under whatever conditions it's granted to them. Don't be morbid, Shar—and don't side-track."

Sharlie said nothing. She thought it might very well be true. She did not question her own zest for life—certainly not for life as she might live it with Julian, but her anxiety about Pen was real enough, and she could not bear that Julian should subscribe so easily to the reach-me-down assumptions concerning her.

He came over to her side, put an arm round her, and kissed the top of her head.

"We won't talk about this any more, Shar, if you'd rather not. But on Saturday, the twentieth of May, I go to Italy—with you, I hope. But to Italy, anyway. . . . How long have we got now?"

"Before you have to dress for your dinner?"

"Yes—to stay here with you."

Sharlie turned up her wrist and looked at her watch.

"Half-an-hour," she said.

"Then don't let us waste any more of it in idle talk."

"Don't you want to talk?"

"Not much. Do you?"

She laughed. "No," she said, and let herself sink into the comfort and warmth of his embrace.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE year drifted on, through rainy days and sunny in February, into fog and snow and biting cold in early March. On the most wintry morning of the month Sharlie came hurrying into her flat just as the clock struck half-past nine. Mrs. Wood, who "obliged," had not yet made her appearance, for which, despising herself, Sharlie was grateful. Mrs. Wood, who would look disapproving and draw down the corners of her mouth when she said "good morning," as if the words hurt her, didn't matter, and could think what she liked—and as there were no evidences of breakfast or Sharlie having slept in her own bed Sharlie knew that she would. Moreover, Julian's presence at the front door would complete a picture already, as Sharlie also knew, fairly distinctly etched in that lady's mind. None of it mattered, but being late on a busy morning at the office did. Save for the forgotten key of her desk she would not have had to make this journey from Julian's flat to hers—but then when she went last night to the theatre she had not intended to stay with Julian—the weather had settled that. It had snowed all the evening, and Julian had had one of his fits of impatience over the business of separation after an evening together, and the weather coming up as an ally, there had been no further thought of her getting from Regent's Park to St. John's Wood. But this morning as she hunted for the key Sharlie reflected that it was tiresome the journey had to be made now—and in the snow, too, for it was falling fast. She would most certainly be late. She had secured the key and was turning to leave the room when the telephone bell rang and she flew back to answer it. Julian, who cared nothing for all the Mrs. Woods in the world, had

no office and was therefore in no hurry to get to it, came into the room, closed the door and lighted a cigarette. Idiotic, all this running backwards and forwards—waste of time, waste of money, and O Lord, of life. He looked across the room beyond the window at the falling snow and hated it, thinking of the blue of the Italian sky above a little hill-town he knew, and wishing they were there, the two of them, with the long bright day before them—and then he heard Sharlie's voice say sharply, "*Who?* Pen?"

The surprise in her voice, acute, dismayed, must have travelled straight across the wire to whoever it was at the other end, and looking at her Julian saw the dismay written upon her face. Nothing she said now could undo the effect of that single impatient surprised syllable—she didn't attempt it. He heard her say, "But I haven't seen her. . . . I didn't get any message. I wasn't in. . . . No, late. What? I went to the theatre. . . . Oh, I expect as she couldn't get me she altered her arrangements. . . . What? I don't know. . . . Yes, of course I will. Good-bye."

She put up the receiver and turned to see Julian leaning nonchalantly against the wall, smilingly regarding her and indifferently puffing out cigarette smoke. She said, rather as if it were somehow his fault, "That was father asking to speak to Pen. He thought she was here."

"Why?"

"She 'phoned them in the early evening yesterday from Bucks to say it was snowing and that she was afraid she'd be late back and as she hadn't her key she'd spend the night here."

"Well, she obviously changed her mind and stayed in Bucks. Nothing more natural, given the lovely English spring weather."

"I know. Let's hope father agrees. We must go. It's so late. We'd better get a taxi."

"Underground's quicker and warmer."

"All right. . . . Ready?"

She had reached the front door, had her hand on the door knob, when the telephone bell rang again.

Julian laughed.

"Shall I answer it?" he asked.

"No. I will. . . ."

She dashed back and took up the instrument.

"Yes? Who is it? *Who?* Oh, *Pen!* . . . Look, darling, I can't stop now. I'm already late for the office. Ring me there. About ten-fifteen. Museum 00072. Of *course* I'll be there. Good-bye."

Sharlie hung up the 'phone and turned a harassed face to her lover, who said, "Why didn't you let her talk?"

"Because I don't want to be late."

"All right. Come along."

They cannoned into Mrs. Wood at the door, but now Sharlie had her mind too much elsewhere to notice either her expression of disapproval or the long stare with which she favoured her companion. She was, however, only a minute or so late at the office, and Pen's 'phone call came through five minutes after her arrival. She said at once: "Oh, *Shar!* I tried all last evening and ever since seven this morning to get you."

"Sorry, darling, I was out last night."

"But this morning? Why didn't you answer then?"

"Because I didn't get the call, presumably."

"The bell rang and rang—I could hear it. I'd rung Edward Street overnight, you see, to say I was delayed by the snow and that I'd stop the night with you, as I hadn't a key. But it snowed so much I decided to stay here. I just wanted to warn you—in case father makes a fuss."

"I'm afraid you're too late. He was on the 'phone at the flat just before you."

"Oh, Shar!—you *beast!* You might have told a white lie for me!"

Sharlie's heart jumped a little. There was a moment's silence, then Pen asked, "What did he want?"

"I don't know. He rang off."

"Oh Lord!" said Pen, "what a damn nuisance! Can I come and see you?"

"Of course. Come here. Can you arrive by one? I won't go out to lunch."

"I'll try."

"Where are you now?"

Hesitation at the other end of the 'phone. Then a defiant young voice said: "Gisborough."

No need to ask who lived there. Sharlie knew. Her heart seemed to drop out of her body. It was a second or so before she said faintly, "All right. One o'clock then. I must go now. Good-bye."

Very shortly after one, they 'phoned from downstairs to say Pen had arrived. "Tell her to come up," said Sharlie, and sat with her eye on the door until Pen came in at it. It was nearly three weeks since she had seen Pen. If she saw her face in that first second she'd know, wouldn't she, whether this thing which had sat in her mind ever since Pen had pronounced that defiant "Gisborough!" over the 'phone was true or not. But she didn't. She saw in that moment nothing save that Pen looked as if she'd run all the way to get there. The mask was down—and Pen was an adept, when she liked, at keeping it in place. She didn't look scared, anyway, nor guilty. Nor ashamed. (Had she *really* expected her to look like that?) She leant up against Sharlie's desk, smiled at her sister and said: "Oh, Shar, what a bore! Why *couldn't* I get you last night? Or this morning?"

"I've told you I was out last night. I went to a theatre."

"But I tried *long* after midnight."

"Sorry—I didn't come straight home."

"But at seven this morning! The exchange said 'No answer' every time."

"Sorry," said Sharlie, angry that the warm colour should come into her face and because Pen looked at her as if she had said something else. "Why was it so important that father should think you stayed here when, in fact, you stayed at Gisborough?"

"Well—he knows that's where Geoff's cottage is."

"And were you at Geoff's cottage last night?"

"No."

"But you had been?"

"I went out to see the Newtons, who live five miles beyond. Geoff happened to be there."

"Did you know he would be?"

"I thought he might be."

"I thought you weren't seeing that gentleman these days?"

"I hadn't seen him since Christmas."

"Well, where *did* you stay last night?"

"With the Newtons."

The mask slipped ever so little. A hint of defiance peeped out, a tiny touch of fear, and something else to which Sharlie could not at first fit a name. Then, suddenly, it came. She got up, took her sister by the shoulders and pulled her round to face her.

"Pen, you're lying."

"All right," said Pen. Her voice was indifferent.

"It *isn't* all right. It's very far from all right. Tell me the truth, Pen, if you want me to help you."

"I *have* told you."

"And I don't believe what you've told me."

"All right," said Pen again—and again with that note of indifference in her voice—as if, thought Sharlie in despair, she had some secret source of happiness which made less than

nothing of such tiresome matters as disbelieving sisters and unreasonable fathers.

"Pen, if you won't trust me I can't help you. Oh, darling, do tell me the truth."

"I can't . . ."

"You weren't with the Newtons."

"I was."

"Will they confirm that?"

"I daresay . . ."

A hint of trouble in the indifference now.

"I don't want *father* ringing them up. I'm going to say I was with Vera—that I went on to her after I found I couldn't get you on the 'phone, and I want you to back me up."

"But why not the Newtons?—if you'd really been with them."

"Because they're too near Gisborough. I don't want father to know I've been anywhere near it."

"Did he know where you were going?"

"No—only mother."

"And who answered your 'phone call last night?"

"Mother."

"And you told her you were staying here?"

"Yes . . ."

"Did she believe you?"

"Of course."

"But you didn't mean to come here. Why did you tell her that, Pen?"

"Oh, I don't know. It seemed easiest. I wish I'd said Vera now. It would have saved a lot of trouble."

"Why do you think father will trouble to check whatever statement you make?"

"Well, he won't, of course, if he doesn't remember how near the Newtons live to Gisborough! But I'm afraid he will —if he asks me where I've been."

"But he never does."

"He has, lately. He's been marking me up over Geoff. Something somebody said. He wouldn't believe I haven't seen him since Christmas. And now after all this telephone fiasco . . ."

"*Why* are you taking all this trouble, Pen?"

"I've told you, Shar."

"Oh, Pen!" said Sharlie. "What *am* I to do with you? If you won't be frank, how *can* I help you?"

Pen shrugged her shoulders. She said: "Oh, Shar, don't be so cross! It's only that if father begins to make a fuss it'll spoil everything. . . . I can't *bear* it if he does."

"What can he *possibly* spoil?"

"I can't talk about it. I do hate father's scenes. He was so beastly about Helen Carter, Shar. You weren't there!"

Sharlie made a little gesture of despair.

"I don't understand why you won't be honest with me, Pen. I *know* there's more in this than appears. Why won't you, darling?"

A fleeting hesitancy ran over Pen's face, which hardened quickly to obstinacy. Sharlie knew she would get nothing else from her. She turned and went back to her seat. "There's no more to say, then," she said.

"But you'll back me up if father asks? About Vera, I mean. And *please* don't mention the Newtons. I'm going to say I just went out for a run—I often do—Beaconsfield way, and called in on some people. . . . It was a nice sunny morning, but cold. No snow. It'll be quite reasonable."

Too reasonable, thought Sharlie miserably.

"All right," she said. "I've promised, anyway, to come in to dinner to-night."

"You won't forget—and let me down? Thanks awfully, Shar. Good-bye. I'd better go. I'm sorry to have been such a nuisance."

Sharlie looked sadly at her. The mask was off, and beneath it was no defiance now and no trepidation. The lovely little face wore a look that to Sharlie was unmistakable, that she had surprised, once, upon her own. Pen was not sorry, Sharlie knew, about anything at all. She was living in some far remote world of her own—a fool's paradise, and Sharlie loved her so much she would have died just then to know that she could stay there for ever.

Dragged some part of the way out of it she certainly was that evening by an angry triumphant Philip, who held all the cards and inquired in honeyed casual fashion where she had, in fact, passed the night. Pen explained. She had no suspicions. Sharlie listened to it all with a faint sad dismay in her heart that anyone so young, her darling, darling Pen, should be able to utter so many lies with so much of the appearance of truth. Philip listened with a dangerous smile that Pen didn't even see.

" . . . so I went round to Vera's," she finished.

"And you came from Vera's this morning?"

"Of course."

"Then why, this morning, did Vera ring up here for you?" Philip's smile cut his words in half as if it were a dagger and after one look at his face Sharlie looked away. "According to her version, you'd gone to Gisborough to see some people near-by called Newton. That true?"

Pen threw down her defences.

"Quite true," she said.

"Then why did you lie to me?"

Pen shrugged her shoulders.

"Answer me."

"What's the use?" said Pen. "I just didn't want another of your hateful rows. What right have you suddenly to start badgering me with questions? It's something new, isn't it? You've always left me alone, let me do what I

like. And now lately you start treating me like a kid!"

"I left you alone because I thought you could be trusted—and knew how to take care of yourself. I didn't think a daughter of mine would behave like a woman of the street."

Pen got up from her chair, flinging her head back as if there were not scorn enough in the world to hurl back at the insulter.

"How dare you!" she said.

"Deny it, then. Did you or did you not spend the night you've lied so carefully about at that man's cottage?"

"I won't tell you. It's my business—not yours."

"You *will* tell me—if I have to lock you in your room for a week."

Philip caught hold of her hand and pulled her savagely towards him.

"Answer me. Did you or did you not?"

Pen flung back her head again.

"Very well, I did. *Now* are you satisfied?"

"Were you alone with him?"

"There were the servants."

Pen's tone was insufferable. So was Philip's.

"But not his wife?"

"He doesn't live with his wife. You know that!"

"I don't know that."

"Then why did you think he was there alone?"

Philip looked as if he were going to break a blood-vessel. His face was crimson. He clenched his hands as if only so could he keep them off that defiant and lovely face in front of him.

"How *dare* you do a thing like that!" His fury seemed to Sharlie so much more than that of an angry father: there was something else in it, something that seemed washed up by his anger from the dark bed in which it had lain hidden, some-

thing he'd not known was there. "To spend a night alone with a man old enough to be your father, a man who can't even marry you! . . . Did he seduce you?"

Again that expression of unutterable scorn upon Pen's face, and no expression in her voice at all as she said: "No."

"I don't believe you. You're his mistress."

Without batting an eyelash, Pen replied: "I said 'no.' "

"Then it could only have been because it was unnecessary. You've thrown yourself at his head long enough. It's time you were taught a lesson. Your fine gentleman will find that the law has an ugly name for his sort of conduct with a girl of seventeen. Did you tell him you were under the age of consent?"

"It didn't occur to me to discuss the matter with him," said Pen coolly.

"Well, then, discuss it with me. You aren't eighteen yet, my girl. It's a criminal offence."

Pen went so pale Sharlie thought she was going to faint, but her voice was under her control and cold as the weather as she said: "Oh, don't be so melodramatic!"

The door opened before Philip could think of any retort to this, and without moving, as Fanny came in, Pen said: "Mother, father's being so idiotic. Do stop him!"

"Your mother," shouted Philip, "can keep her mouth shut. The whole thing's her fault. If she hadn't brought him here in the first place you'd never have met the man at all. She always did have a rotten taste in men."

To this Fanny said in her unhurried fashion: "Please—whatever is the matter?"

"Seduction, madam—that's what's the matter. Your daughter coolly arranges to spend the night with one of your cast-off charmers and comes home here with a pack of carefully-planned lies to hide behind. Look at her—brazen and unashamed."

"I'm not brazen—and I haven't done anything I'm ashamed of," said Pen.

"Of course you haven't, darling. . . . Oh, Phil, do be quiet a moment. What *have* you done, Pen, darling?"

"She's spent the night at Gisborough with that scoundrel, I tell you—out somewhere in Bucks in his cottage, if you please. . . . I've heard a lot more about this affair than you ever knew—and now it's going to come to an end. If you can't look after your daughter, somebody else must. The girl's a fool, but the man's a blackguard—and I fancy the law of the land will have an excellent way of drawing the fact to his notice."

Fanny said: "*Did* you stay with Geoff, darling?"

"I've said so, mother. At least, I've said I stayed at the cottage. Then father begins all this horrid business about seduction and Geoff being a blackguard. He isn't a blackguard . . ."

Philip laughed.

"I suppose you fancy you're in love with him? Bah!—you don't know what love is!"

"Don't I?" said Pen, still with that frozen note in her voice, as one speaking from an immensely cold and distant place. Sharlie looked at her bereft of words. She felt as cold as Pen sounded. A little shiver ran through her body. Pen and that man—with his familiar appraising eyes! No, it wasn't possible. It simply wouldn't be believed.

"Well—we'll soon see what he has to say for himself when he's brought up on a charge of abduction," said Philip.

With the suspicion of a break in her voice Pen said: "I simply don't know what he's *talking* about, mother!"

"I'm talking about the legal age, my girl, the Age of Consent," shouted Philip. "And it's not seventeen. It's *eighteen*—and you're not that until May."

Pen's pallor seemed to deepen, but she said nothing—just stood there looking at her mother, who came quickly over and put an arm around her.

"My dear Phil! Surely you forget!" she said.

Something happened suddenly to Phil's face. All the fury went out of it, age crept into it. With his mouth hanging a little open and his eyes fixed in a queer fascinated gaze upon Fanny's face, he stood there as if waiting for her to continue. But Fanny spoke to Pen, not to Philip.

"It's all right, darling," she said, "your father's forgotten that years ago we made a little mistake over your birthday."

Nobody spoke. Fanny went on:

"We were abroad at the time, and there was all the bother of your grandfather's death. . . . It has always been kept in May, but actually you were born in March. It never seemed worth while to alter it. . . . Of course, some day, when you had to produce your birth certificate, it would all have been straightened out, but it's only a question of two months —it can't make any difference either way . . ."

Still nobody spoke. Philip continued to stare at her as if her face were a magnet. Sharlie's eyes were upon Pen and Pen's upon her father. Fanny tightened the arm around her daughter and pulled her young body a little nearer her own.

"So you see, my darling," she said, "whatever silly indiscreet thing you've been doing nothing so unpleasant as what your father suggests can possibly happen."

Sharlie's face flamed. In that moment she knew that what her grandmother had maintained all those years ago was true—that Fanny had been her father's mistress in her mother's lifetime and *enceinte* with Pen when they married. And she saw that Pen understood, too. Still staring at her father, she disengaged herself from her mother's embrace, said, with a quick scornful little laugh: "What a humbug you are, father!" and strolled out of the room.

It was Fanny who went to see Geoffrey Stewart—an unfussed cheerful Fanny, and unfussed and cheerful she came back. Trust Fanny! Geoff, she reported, had behaved

very properly—had agreed not to see Pen again until she was twenty-one. He had "apologised profusely" for allowing Pen to spend the night beneath his roof—but the weather was vile, and these modern girls took everything so much for granted. They made things a bit difficult for the mere man (this bit Fanny kept to herself). But of course he'd no idea she cherished romantic ideas about him. She didn't give you the idea of romance, somehow. (This, too, Fanny kept to herself.) Of course he was very fond of the child, but in any case he was hopelessly tied up. Fanny knew he had never made any secret of that.

Pen's scornful detachment miraculously disappeared under Fanny's discreetly administered cold douche of easy common sense. She stormed, wept, sulked, spent hours writing letters (some of which Fanny managed to prevent getting into the post-box), but finally she pulled herself together, seemed to accept the situation and went on again with her ordinary life. Her father made no attempt to re-establish their relationship upon its old footing, but his anger against her died down, as if, thought Fanny, that little detail regarding her birthday had cut the moral ground from under his feet. Not unaware that Philip owed her a grudge for acquainting Pen with the truth in this matter, she was also quite certain that there had been nothing else to do—with Phil worked up like that. Besides, the child had to hear about it some day! How was she to know she would jump to the right conclusion so quickly? You never knew with Pen. She was a little worried about her, all the same—worried about that unexpected hysteria when she had told her that Geoffrey was upset and that he had given his word not to see her again until she was of age. She had obviously not expected that. The silly child evidently fancied herself in love and was taking it far too seriously—more, she apparently imagined Geoff felt more for her than he so obviously did. Fanny, remembering the light-

heartedness of her own first love-affair when she was not so very much older than Pen, had not expected these things in any daughter of hers. Moreover, Pen had always been so self-possessed, so calm, so sure of herself—that she could make this kind of romantic fool of herself had never occurred to her mother. On her own confession, too—and Geoffrey's confirmation—she had refused every invitation he had sent her since Christmas, and he had not known she was to be at the Newtons that day. How could Fanny possibly have known the child imagined herself in love? When she said that to Philip he said it was her business to know. Besides, Pen was her daughter. Like mother, like daughter. That ought to have made Fanny wince, but it didn't. Neither did it make her retort: "Why not like father?" Really, Philip was not quite normal. Writers weren't, perhaps—and she had long ago ceased to expect Philip to be reasonable. But she thought she knew him well enough to be sure that he would recover; that if Pen behaved sensibly he would forget all about this piece of silliness which for the moment had driven them apart. She did not believe that what Pen had learnt through that tiresome old business of the date of her birthday would make any difference to her feeling for him—once she had forgotten what she thought of now as his hypocrisy. She was obviously (if surprisingly) far too romantic not to feel sympathy with a father who had himself fallen a victim in the lists. But he'd have to give her time to get over it. For the rest, she belittled Pen's infatuation to Philip, insisted that he made too much of it—that she would get over it the quicker if its importance was not insisted upon—and at the same time thought Pen's methods a little lacking in finesse. She even thought how much cleverer she had been at throwing dust in her parents' eyes in those mad days of her own hot-headed youth, without it once occurring to her that the last thing Pen really wanted to do was to throw dust in

their eyes. Only Sharlie saw that, for Sharlie had read correctly the expression upon Pen's face—that you might surprise there, when she was not being cold or smart or indifferent. Sharlie knew that Pen's infatuation was at the stage when she wanted it shouted from the housetops. But, luckily, something had prevented that. Whatever had happened, in the last resort Pen had lied about it. Sharlie didn't know what *had* happened—at least, she shut her mind against knowing, relieved at the end that Pen offered her no confidences. But she knew the thing to be far more serious than Fanny would have it—silly, amiable Fanny, saying so easily: "A storm in a teacup, my dear, as usual! *So* like your father! The child will get over it. People make too much fuss about these scrapes. Even nowadays! Of course Geoff ought *not* to have allowed her to stay. But I don't altogether blame him—Pen can be *very* obstinate, and she has absolutely *no* respect for the conventions."

About the date of Pen's birthday neither she nor Sharlie ever uttered a word. Fanny had always imagined that the old lady at Carr had long ago acquainted Sharlie with what she had undoubtedly long held to be the facts, and at this time of day they seemed to Fanny neither relevant nor important—so why refer to them? Sharlie, who had always thought her grandmother prejudiced and libellous, had tried, now that she found she was not, to dislike Fanny, but without overmuch success. It was not possible to hate Fanny—she was such an amiable kindly human being, and you always found yourself remembering this when you would rather be remembering she was a fool.

Pen said of her: "Mother isn't a *humbug*, anyway! That business of my birthday completely gave her away! She needn't have said it *then*. Or at *all*—to me! But *father* makes me sick!"

That, Sharlie knew, was what her father held now with so much passion against Fanny—that through her Pen had come

to despise him. He had borne with her for years because she had given him Pen, and now that she had been the means of his losing her he detested her. But this did not occur to Fanny, dismissing his worst excesses of temper as "your father's tantrums." Thank heaven, Pen was beginning to be sensible, settling down. The whole thing, like so much else that had preceded it, would blow over and be forgotten, if only people wouldn't fuss!

As the days drew towards the end of the month, appearances were all in favour of this comfortable conclusion. Pen looked all right. She smiled, talked in her old fashion, had her friends to the house, went out and about in her little car as of old. Her relationship with her father looked all right, too, when Sharlie saw them together, but its old ease and friendliness were gone. The lovely little face had grown harder, but sometimes Sharlie surprised a look upon it that did not seem to belong there though it was quickly covered up. Sharlie had the feeling that the old Pen, so certain of herself and things, had disappeared. What was left in her place? She didn't know. Groping after knowledge Sharlie attempted one day, a fortnight after Fanny's interview with Stewart, some kind of approach, but Pen, sharp as a needle, saw what she was after.

"I suppose you want to know if I *see* Geoff now?" she said. "Is that it? Well, I don't. I hope I never see him again—ever."

Sharlie knew then that the essentials in Fanny's version of her interview, despite Fanny's illusions, had got through to her—assisted by the fate of those long and stormy letters. But what she was by no means so sure of was that Fanny was right when she said so easily: "She's getting over it. In a month she'll wonder what it was all about."

Hearing that passionate note in Pen's voice and looking at her suddenly enraged face, Sharlie thought that at least it would take a lot longer than a month.

CHAPTER SIX

EASTER came warm and fine that year, but for once the Strattons did not betake themselves to the sea. Philip, sick to death of his family, shut himself up with his book. Fanny sighed, invited Tommy Ducane to dinner and a theatre, and resigned herself to "keeping her eye on Pen," who had refused two invitations and seemed to have no plans. Sharlie, pledged to spend Easter with Julian at the house of some friends of his in Surrey, tried to wriggle out of it at the last moment—without quite knowing why. There was nothing she could do for Pen, she knew that. She would probably fill the house with the noisier of her friends who would disport themselves with dancing to the wireless or visits to the cinema after bouts of tennis or jaunts abroad in the car. Pen's moods never lasted. All the same, Sharlie was a little worried by the look of her, and the idea of leaving her, who had always been so full of plans, so occupied with the joyful business of doing things and going to places, looking limp and wretched, while she went off and enjoyed herself so ecstatically (for four whole days under the same roof with Julian was only so to be described) was markedly distasteful.

Her efforts to establish any sort of contact with Pen were, however, entirely unsuccessful. As definitely as she approached so Pen receded. She was all right, she said. There wasn't anything the matter. Why should there be? She just didn't want to go away, and she wished Sharlie would leave her alone. . . .

When Julian arrived on the Friday morning he was shown into the drawing-room, where Pen sat curled up in a deep chair before the fire with a book, and when Sharlie came

hurrying in she found him standing in front of the small fire looking down at her and talking. She turned her head as Sharlie came into the room and smiled. Julian was talking nonsense, Sharlie thought, and Pen did not seem to be saying much, but the expression on her face as she leant back again amid her cushions and looked up at him and away from him to Sharlie was one which her sister found disturbing. The openest, purest envy. . . .

"I wish you were coming too, darling," she said to her, and Pen said lazily: "Do you?" and smiled and went on listening to Julian until, assured that Sharlie was really ready, he said good-bye to Pen and went out to start the car and take out Sharlie's suitcase. Left with Pen, Sharlie said: "I *hope* you won't be very dull, darling."

"I'll be all right," said Pen.

"Take mother out in the car."

"She doesn't like driving round London."

"Take her out of London, then."

"Perhaps I will. If Tommy doesn't absorb her."

"You look so—tired, Pen. I hope you aren't going to be ill."

"Oh, don't bother about me. I'm all right."

"I wish I knew these people we're going to better. I'd ring them up and suggest bringing you."

"What an idea! I could have gone away if I wanted! I just don't feel like it. I just want to be alone. *Left* alone perhaps I mean. Sorry, Shar."

Sharlie stooped down and kissed her.

"Good-bye then. Only don't be dull. *Don't* be, Pen. Make mother go out with you. Go down and see Dave."

"That would be popular with Dave, anyway," said Pen, and got up and put on a gramophone record. She stood there smiling at her sister and jigging her feet to the tune of "Tea for Two" until Julian came in and said: "Want to dance, Pen?"

Pen looked at him, stopped jigging her feet, said: "Not particularly," and went on looking at him with a funny, uncertain little smile upon her face.

"Right," said Julian. "Come on, then, Shar."

Pen followed them out into the hall and stood in the open doorway watching them climb into the car. Inside "Tea for Two" finished itself and began all over again, after the fashion of the super-gramophone Philip had bought for his daughter. Julian started the car, Pen raised her hand in farewell, and the bright tune pursued them as they moved off until the sharp shutting of the front door cut it in half.

Julian drove out through Epsom, because he wanted to show Sharlie the house in the market-place, next to the "King's Head," where Nell Gwynne had once briefly lived. Not that she could not have seen it for herself, for to-day tea is served there and high above the busy street blazons its legend in letters not to be missed—"Nell Gwynne's old House." Julian, still engaged upon the last of his novels dealing with the ladies of Tudor Henry, was already turning his novelistic eye upon those of Stuart Charles. He had been reading Peter Cunningham, Cecil Chesterton and a more recent book by Arthur Dasent upon the theme of Nell Gwynne, and was already in love with his subject and must talk of her. There was not, as he reluctantly admitted, much left of the house as Nell had known it—probably only the bay windows looking on to the street. If Nell should come walking to-day down the street she wouldn't recognise it.

"Did she live there long?" Sharlie asked.

"No, only a few weeks. She is said to have spent an unofficial honeymoon there when she was seventeen."

"With the King of England?"

"No, with another Charles—one Lord Buckhurst, who seems to have been a bit of a lad, the friend of Dryden and all the big-wigs in the literary world of the day. But he seems to

have made sure of not having a dull moment by taking Sedley with him—another of the literary sparks."

Sharlie knew Sir Charles Sedley as the author of several poems she did not admire—the "conceits" of English literature were still not to her taste; and now Julian supplemented her knowledge of the poet by recounting to her an anecdote of his youth in which Sir Charles and his friends, having had too much to drink at the "Cock" in Bow Street, had divested themselves of their clothes and disported themselves on the balcony overlooking the street, to the riotous enjoyment of a fast-gathering crowd of onlookers. Sharlie did not like the story very much better than she liked the poems, and said so. Julian laughed, called her a Puritan, and offered to lend her the book. Sharlie laughingly demurred, and sat there listening to his plans for his new trilogy, staggered to find that every now and then her mind had flown back to the house in Edward Street, to Pen left behind there.

"What's the matter?" Julian asked her presently. "Doesn't the Orange Girl interest you overmuch?"

"I don't know anything about her save that she was Charles the Second's mistress."

"One of them. Charles was a erotomaniac. He liked women as he liked his spaniels—but they were a lot more expensive. Nell is supposed to have been the least greedy of the lot, but during the first four years of his association with her she cost him sixty thousand pounds, and to the end of his life he had a whole procession of women pensioners."

"Nice for the country!" said Sharlie, seeing not the Merry Monarch's procession of charmers, but only Pen sitting curled up in her chair, that look, so like envy, breaking through the mask she wore. She wondered how much of the truth about herself and Julian Pen had guessed.

"The country didn't count. It didn't have votes. And the Divine Right of Kings was still extant. Aren't you

drawn to the Merry Monarch?"

"Why should I be? He was a bad king. And he was dissolute. A king is entitled to be the one, perhaps, but surely not both?"

"But he was kind. He made a good many women happy—and he fathered all their children!"

"Well, I think his reign will make a dull novel."

"Do you? What about the Plague and the Great Fire? And how dare you suggest that anything I write could be dull?"

Sharlie had the grace to smile. Julian put a hand upon her knee.

"What's up?" he said. "Pen again?"

"I suppose so. I hate to think of her there with nothing to do—and being unhappy."

"*Is* she so unhappy? She seemed all right to me this morning."

"Did she?"

"Of course she did. Darling, you see what you look for. You think Stewart has broken her heart. I expect it's only a wee bit cracked. Hearts don't break—certainly not at her age. This time next year she'll be engaged to some nice boy—or married, even—and have forgotten all about this silly business."

"I hope so," said Sharlie, wondering why she was always a little irritated when Julian talked liked this, because what he said was so obviously common sense. Why didn't she let it rest there—as Fanny did? Was it because she remembered that look on Pen's face that morning in the office when for one moment the carefully-adjusted mask had lifted? In that moment she had been so dreadfully certain that Pen and he—that Pen and that man. . . . No, no, she *must* have been mistaken. That *could* not be true. Pen had merely been a little excited, *exaltée*. . . . And yet, for that one brief

fraction of time it had seemed to be the only certain thing in an uncertain universe.

"Come, darling, cheer *up!* What a mugwump you are—a positive insult to the morning! What about *me?* What about *us?*"

"Sorry!" said Sharlie. "I'm a fool!"

"Not often," said Julian, encouragingly.

When she got home she found a letter from Judy—with two pieces of news. The first, that Mark was coming to England for a holiday, her mind barely registered, for the second, that Judy's maternity course would keep her in Paris until the end of May, filled her with a deep sense of dismay that startled her. For what difference could four weeks make? She ought, by now, to be used to the fact that seeing less of Judy was another of the inevitabilities of growing-up. When, a day or so later, Pen said that she had received an invitation to go to Paris to stay with Vera Laing and her mother, who had gone there for Easter and not yet returned, she suggested that Pen might look her up. But Pen looked startled and said she didn't suppose she'd have time. . . .

"Well, I'll give you the address, anyhow, if you'll remind me," Sharlie told her.

"I mayn't go, of course," she said then, and as the days went on it began to look as though she really meant not to go, which Sharlie found surprising, for usually Pen found an invitation to France quite irrisistible. Pen, who had learnt nothing at school (certainly no French grammar), had managed to get a surprising grip on the practical side of the language during her stays abroad and through her friendship with Vera Laing and her French mother.

"But, darling, you usually *love* going to Paris," a protesting Fanny said. "And it's such a good opportunity to air your French!"

Pen laughed.

"My one accomplishment!" she said, and did not seem to care this time whether they contradicted her or not. Nothing more was said about the trip, and it was tacitly assumed that Pen had given up all idea of it when she announced abruptly at dinner almost a week later that she was going. Three days later she went—after looking scornful and detached for a couple of days while Philip made inquiries which satisfied him that she was really going to Paris and that the Laings were to be her hosts, and after bidding him a cold undaughterly good-bye.

Fanny complained on the 'phone to Sharlie that it was a pity she went off like that—it had upset her father so much. Of course the child wanted a change—she certainly didn't seem very well lately. But really, Philip was being tiresome enough without this. He had been having toothache again and wouldn't go to the dentist, and that girl she'd recommended still couldn't come, and couldn't she, Sharlie, possibly do anything about it?

Sharlie decided, after a little priming from Julian, that she couldn't. Her family had got to do without her, after the middle of the month, anyway. He'd obtained her consent to that, and she needn't think she was going back upon it. He'd already told Anstruther he'd got to find another secretary, and why. Anstruther was a good chap—one could talk to him. Besides, he'd known the facts about his life with Kathleen for years, and had not been, it seemed, without his suspicions regarding Sharlie and himself. He was certainly kindness itself to Sharlie when he mentioned the subject. He'd be sorry to lose her, but he thought they were doing the sensible thing.

"Tiresome thing, religion," he said. "Causes half the trouble in the world. But you and Evesham are well suited. You'll make a go of it. . . . Never tried to write, have you?

Now you'll have babies instead, I expect. Pity . . ."

Charles Anstruther was always lamenting that people didn't write—or that when they did, if they were women, they got married and had babies instead of going on with it. It amused her that Anstruther should be so convinced there were too many children in the world and not suspect that there were too many novelists.

"If you ever write a novel send it to me," he said, and then: "When do you want to leave me?"

"I don't *want* to, and I don't know just yet. About the middle of next month, I think."

Anstruther made a note on his blotter.

"Right," he said. "By the way, I ran into your father the other day. He says he's nearly finished a new novel and is sending it to me. Know anything about it?"

"No—except that he's been writing it for the last two years behind the necessary pot-boilers."

"I've told him to send it along when it's ready."

In spite of all these preliminaries Sharlie did not find it easy to accept the fact that in less than three weeks' time she would be leaving England with Julian, that her life from then onwards would be his concern and his, hers. They would live together as man and wife. She would take his name, bear him children. They had settled it so quickly—with no high-sounding phrases. And no fuss. It was the only thing to do. They were of mature age: they knew what they were doing. They only had to go. Nevertheless, Sharlie found it difficult to communicate the facts either to Fanny or to her father—and having tried three times to write to her grandparents had decided that she and Julian before leaving England would go up for a week-end and give them the news in person. Everything was in order—their passage booked. Julian was taking the car and was driving across Europe from Boulogne, spending a few days in Paris, then going on to Tirol, where

Julian had things he wanted to show her, and then across the Brenner into Italy, and over the Apennines to Florence and then, moving a little north-west, back to the villa on the hill which awaited them.

The more Julian talked of it, the more Sharlie thought about it, and the oftener she looked at the map, the less like life it seemed. She did not see what it could have to do with her, and she never felt this more strongly than when, summoning her nerve, she broke the news to Fanny and her father. Her father, certainly, was not encouraging, for he looked as if she were handing out to him a fairy tale—as indeed, she felt she was. And yet he had heard, it seems, some echo of the state of affairs before, for looking at Fanny he said: "So Pen was right, after all!"

"Pen!" Sharlie was genuinely alarmed. "How could Pen have known about it?" she asked.

"She has sharp eyes—and her wits," said Philip.

"What has she said?" Sharlie asked.

"Not much. Only that anybody could see you and Evesham liked each other."

"Oh," said Sharlie, relieved. "Was that so obvious?"

"Not to me, I confess," said Philip, in his nastiest tone. "Are we to believe you are Evesham's mistress?"

"I don't think that is the word I should have used," said Sharlie.

Philip laughed.

"No, I expect you prefer 'lover.' Well, I have a fine pair of daughters, I must say! Both of them with a penchant for men who've had the bad taste to choose wives elsewhere."

At this point Fanny said smoothly: "Don't be silly, Phil. . . . I'm sure we both hope you'll be happy, Sharlie, thought I must say I'm surprised. I'd never have believed you'd have *looked* at a married man, whatever kind of wife he'd got. But there, one lives and learns. Mr. Evesham

seems to me quite charming, and even if he *is* married you never know what may happen . . ."

At this Philip laughed loudly. Sharlie couldn't see why except that it was his pleasure these days to deride anything Fanny said. She looked at him in sudden dislike, trying to remember what he was like when she was a child and so ready to adore him. He was handsome still, but had grown heavy. His face was pouchy, his mouth down-drawn. He was fifty-four that year—but it wasn't age that was drawn upon his face, but rather something that had, as it were, disagreed with him. He looks, Sharlie thought, as if the source of his life has soured and poisoned him. She wondered why that had never occurred to her before—and what exactly it meant now that it had. Was it the eclipse of his literary fame? Had the years really brought him no philosophy with which to bear the common lot? He had always "done" very well. He was not without means—and could he really have believed that his books had anything but an ephemeral value, that they were anything but a phase, a fashion that must pass? Was it, perhaps, his marriage to Fanny—stupid, vain, good-natured Fanny—so obviously the wrong woman for him, yet whom he had most certainly loved, of whom he had most certainly been jealous. Sometimes it seemed to Sharlie that she was just on the point of knowing what it was that had gone wrong—of seeing for just one illuminating second back far enough to understand once and for all. Looking at him now, she was touched to pity and regret. He thought her hard and unfeeling, never saw that she had affection to squander, that because he had not wanted or valued it, she had lavished it upon Pen and Dave—until Julian had come. That he had never liked her she knew. She knew, too, that he thought her like the mother she could scarcely recall, and with whom he'd been unhappy, who, as she remembered, had cried so much, and with whom he had quarrelled. Well, it was too

late now. There was nothing to be done. She hadn't been unhappy. She wasn't escaping from anything—but she had had for so long a sense of things wasted, running to seed. She was twenty-six, and nothing had ever happened to her until she had met Julian two years ago. Her life had run away like a river under a bridge. Now, for the first time, she was riding the stream, going with it, not watching it slip by. She thought suddenly of Julian and was flooded with a happiness so deep, so unexpected, it was like a physical pain.

Neither did Julian, who had meant to forestall Sharlie's announcement, fare very much better at the hands of her father. Apart from telling him that he would repent his bargain, he did not seem to mind whether Sharlie went off with him or not. Julian was intrigued by the attitude, but came away with the confirmed opinion that Philip was a "rotten psychologist." He had lived with Sharlie all his life and did not know the first thing about her. Nothing emerged from the interview more clearly than that he would be glad to get rid of her. Well, Sharlie had always contended that her father disliked her. . . .

The week-end came bright and sunny, and Julian and Sharlie set out to do some walking. They took the car out to Hindhead, parked it, and started off across the Punch Bowl. They got back at seven, went for dinner to the Moorlands, playing a game of tennis before it on the hard court at the hotel, then collected the car and drove back along the road to the village they had reached on foot earlier in the afternoon, and at which they had stayed for tea. The tiny inn struck on the hillside amid pines and the springing heather had so taken their fancy that nothing would do but they should spend the rest of their week-end there. "It's the last week-end we shall have in England together for years," Julian said, "and we may as well have that pine tree against the sky to remember."

The pine tree stood at the top of the green hill on to which

their room looked and the pattern it made against the evening sky was enchanting and somehow, Sharlie thought, dramatic. While they looked at it, Julian told her of the cypress that stood below the window of their room on the Italian hillside, and of the Tuscany plain that stretched on and on as far as the eye could see, and for some reason she could not fathom she wondered again why it had to be Italy rather than the English countryside. Italy was so far away and not very real—even when Julian talked about it; not real at all to-night as she sat looking at the pine, which seemed, in some queer fashion, to have become part of her life, as was the stretched-out glory of the fens in summer-time, the sharply-defined landscape when summer was over, flecked here and there with the silver gleam of water, and across which and up and down moved the plough, the familiar scarlet-painted farm wagons. Suddenly the sound of the soft prelude of the nightingale singing in the wood on the other side of the hill began to fill up the silence. Sharlie's thoughts ended abruptly, and she held her breath to listen. The sweet and lovely sound stabbed beauty down into the night, studded it with pearls and set it in Sharlie's mind with the dark patterning of the pine upon the sky, as something to be remembered for ever. But presently the song faded, slipping down into the next valley, leaving again only the quiet room, the pale cloudless sky and the bewitching pattern of the pine against it.

On the Monday morning they got into town about ten, and Sharlie going straight to the office did not get Pen's wires until six o'clock that evening. There were three of them, and Mrs. Wood, busy with the preparation of Sharlie's meal, explained that the first two she had found on the mat that morning when she came in. The third had arrived half an hour ago. She didn't know what to do with them. . . . Sharlie tore them open in a sudden inexplicable panic. The

first was sent from Ostend, gave the name of a *pension* there, and asked Sharlie to go there at once; the second was sent from the town and said only that Pen was starting home that afternoon. The third was sent from Dover and read: *Just arrived here catching the* 5.10 *coming straight to you.*

Sharlie stood still, looking from one to the other. She felt suddenly very cold. Questions crowded her mind. What was Pen, who was supposed to be staying in Paris, doing at Ostend? Was she ill? Why had she wanted her so urgently? And why did she come to her instead of going home? Did they expect her? To all these and many other questions Sharlie could supply no sort of answer. Jumbling each other, they surged and pressed so violently into her mind that she did not think of Mrs. Wood and her inquisitive staring until, with the hopefulness of her kind, she said "Nothin' wrong, I 'ope, miss?" Sharlie put back the messages into their buff envelopes then and said: "No—no thank you. My sister is coming back from the Continent unexpectedly, that's all. She will be here any moment. Have we enough dinner?"

" 'Eaps, miss, I should say," said Mrs. Wood, taking herself off again unwillingly into the kitchen.

Sharlie went into her bedroom, lighted the gas fire, washed and changed her frock. She kept thinking, Pen will arrive at any moment. She unpacked her week-end case, put away her belongings, had an overwhelming desire to ring Julian, but dismissed it with the thought that he had to go out to dinner and would be dressing. Perhaps he would 'phone her. . . . He didn't. She remembered, her eyes resting upon a pair of bedroom slippers that belonged to him, that on the morrow they were going to a theatre together, that he was coming to the flat to dinner—and suddenly to-morrow seemed a very long way off. She picked up the shoes and thrust them into her wardrobe, looked round for other traces of his occasional occupation, and suddenly found those unanswerable questions

pushing again into her mind, crowding out every other thought. They made a crazy maddening pattern in her mind —a crazy pattern that jigged up and down, up and down, that resisted all her efforts to make it keep still. She turned down the fire a little, went into the sitting-room, glanced at the table set for two, improved a little upon Mrs. Wood's idea of table-laying, and then put on the gramophone record of Kreisler playing the *Adagietto* from *L'Arlésienne*. Its sweet and charming air was still filling the room (and, as Sharlie hoped, the soul of Mrs. Wood with a sense of the completely ordinary) when the ring came at the front door. She went to the gramophone, put back the needle to the beginning of the disc and looked round upon the room. It certainly looked ordinary enough—the little table laid, as so frequently, for two, the small bright fire, the window open to the sweet spring evening, the green tracery of the London trees against the sky and the sound of Kreisler's beautiful playing. With her hand on the front-door handle she hesitated a moment as if afraid that the mere act of opening it would sweep these things away—wipe out that pretty room, steeped so happily in the everyday, snap off that thread of melody as surely as if she had taken off the disc from which it was called forth. The bell rang again. She drew back the knob and pulled open the door.

A taxi-man stood outside.

"Name of Stratton?" he inquired.

Sharlie said: "Yes."

"I've got a young lady down in the keb, miss. Seems a bit queer. I told 'er to wait and I'd see if there was a lift or something."

"Yes, there's a lift. It's automatic. You have to work it yourself. Wait. I'll come down . . ."

Snatching up her handbag, she began to run down in front of him, thinking, she's ill—too ill to face one flight of quite

short stairs. . . . She sent the lift down with a jerk, ran through the open door, sped along the short asphalted path and out to the taxi, to stand looking in upon a Pen huddled in the corner, who turned at her voice, as if surprised, lifting towards her a white face, guiltless of rouge and gone terribly thin, in which the eyes looked enormous—dark holes dug in the white skin.

"Hullo!" she said, feebly. "Are we here?"

"Pen! Oh, my poor child! What have you been doing to yourself! Can you manage to get to the lift?"

Pen said: "Hallo, Shar," as if she had only that instant seen her. "I think I must have fallen asleep when we got here," and pulled herself up, with a visible effort, from her corner. She got out of the taxi and shut her eyes for a moment as though the mere business of standing on her feet was a tremendous and rather frightening adventure. The hand she put out to Sharlie was dry and burning.

"Heavens, you're feverish!" Sharlie said. "Come along in and get straight to bed. Lean on me . . ."

Pen dragged open her heavy eyes, smiled again a little feebly, and gave the weight of her slender body to Sharlie. "It's all right," she said to the taxi-driver, who stood on one side, not knowing if he should offer his services or not. "Just help me get her to the lift, please."

"Oh, Shar, I'm not as bad as all that!" protested Pen, "honestly, I must just have been dozing." But she allowed herself to be helped, and with a little sigh sank down upon the seat in the lift as if unaware of them. She leant back against the wall and closed her eyes, oblivious to Sharlie's conversation with the taxi-man, the tinkling of coins, and her assurance that they could manage now quite well. Sharlie pressed the button and as the lift moved upwards saw that it wasn't going to stop at the first floor. She had pressed the wrong button. She pressed another, and down the lift came

again. This time it went to the bottom and Sharlie remembered that you had to keep your finger on the button or it sometimes behaved in this erratic fashion. She tried again, and the lift began to rise. All the time her eyes were on Pen, who didn't move. The thought went through Sharlie's mind that she looked as if she need make no further effort at all, as if she had spurred herself to reach home, and was beyond anything further.

"Here we are, darling," she said, when at last the lift stopped at the proper place. "Can you make just one more effort? The last one?"

Pen sighed, but allowed Sharlie to lift her to her feet. She seemed now quite unaware of her surroundings, lying against Sharlie's shoulder as though all effort, great or small, final or not, was entirely beyond her. But they got into the flat at last and into Sharlie's bedroom, where Pen slipped down on to the bed and Sharlie rushed for smelling-salts. Pen stirred and opened her eyes, twisting her head from the pungent odour.

"Pen, are you in pain?"

"No, not now—not very much, but I feel so cold."

"Well, let us get you into bed with a hot-water bottle. Then we'll send for a doctor."

A scared look came into Pen's face, which was worn and had a strange dragged-down look about it. Her youth and beauty were eclipsed. She looked as though she had been terribly ill for months. And as if it had badly frightened her.

"No, Shar, I don't want a doctor. I'll be all right now I'm here. I'm so frightfully tired. It was that horrible journey on the boat."

"Well, we'll see how you are presently. Would you like me to ring up Edward Street and get Fanny?"

"No, no, *please*, Shar . . ."

"All right, darling. Don't let's talk about it now. Bed's the place for you."

Lying quite still in bed, her knees drawn slightly upwards, Pen certainly seemed to revive, but despite the hot-water bottle she still complained that she felt cold and she did not seem to be breathing properly. Obviously she had a temperature, and Sharlie remembered, with the dismay of the healthy brought suddenly face to face with serious illness, that she had no thermometer. She'd slip out presently and buy one. Meantime, she sat by Pen's bedside, looking at her with eyes out of which she strove to keep the anxiety that racked her, and a little comforted that Pen answered her questions in a weak, but perfectly audible voice.

"Darling, whatever were you doing in Ostend?"

"I went to see somebody on my way home."

Sharlie's heart missed a beat. She said: "When was that, darling?"

"On the Friday. I got there in the evening."

"And when were you taken ill?"

"On the Saturday, in the afternoon. Madame didn't like it and wanted me to go. I got frightened and sent for you."

"But didn't you have a doctor?"

"I'd been to one. In the morning. He said I'd be all right if I went to bed and stayed there for a day or two."

"But you weren't all right. You got worse?"

Pen nodded.

"Madame was so horrid," she said. "I thought you could make her leave me alone. . . . But you didn't come."

"Darling, I didn't get the wire—I didn't get any of them until I got home this evening. I'd gone away for the week-end."

The dark eyes looked at her.

"Yes, I guessed that."

"Guessed what, darling?"

"That you were away. I was terribly afraid you might be, when I sent the telegram."

Sharlie's heart seemed to stop. Into her mind came the memory of the pattern of the pine against the sky, of the song of the nightingale in the wood. She said: "You should have stayed where you were. It was madness to undertake a journey like that when you were feeling ill. You knew I'd come directly I knew. . . . There, are you comfortable now?"

"Yes."

"What would you like to eat?"

A look of disgust moved across the white face.

"Nothing."

"Not even a little soup?"

The look of disgust deepened.

"Do you feel sick?"

"A little."

"Have you *been* sick?"

"I was in Ostend and on the boat . . ."

"But you've still got a pain?"

"Not so bad though. Go and have your own dinner. I'll be all right now. It was only that horrible journey."

Sharlie went out into the sitting-room where Mrs. Wood was fiddling with the table. She had turned the gramophone off and shut the lid. Already it seemed to Sharlie that the *Adagietto* had been playing in some other world. She was very frightened. Thoughts, conjectures, fears, certainties, jumbled themselves up still in her mind, making again that crazy pattern. She said to Mrs. Wood: "My sister is rather unwell and has gone to bed. She doesn't want anything to eat."

"Oh, pore young thing. I s'p'ose it's that nasty sea?"

"Probably."

"Wouldn't she like a little drop of consummy? There's a bottle full. Crawss and Blackwell's it is, miss."

"I think we'd better let her know best," Sharlie said,

and reluctantly Mrs. Wood took herself off.

Conscious of the need of advice, of reinforcement, Sharlie looked at the clock. It was not quite half-past seven, and she might, perhaps, just catch Julian before he went to his dinner. It would be comforting to hear his voice across the 'phone, and she might ask him to come to the flat when his evening engagement was over. With her hand on the telephone she hesitated, reflecting that she could not say anything that mattered to Julian while that woman was in the house. And later (because, of *course*, she had to send for a doctor!) she'd know what was the matter with Pen, and perhaps she'd not then feel so frightened. She pushed the instrument away and sat down to her dinner just as if she weren't frightened at all, as if Pen would come in soon and sit down at the table, too, as self-composed, as *soignée* as ever. But all the while she struggled to swallow Mrs. Wood's cutlets and green peas she thought: What is *wrong* with Pen? What was it took her to Ostend? Hadn't she been in Paris at all? But that was absurd, of course, for she'd sent post cards from Paris and Philip had taken tremendous pains to assure himself, to Pen's disgust, that she was, in fact, going there to be with the Laing girl. Had she been ill in Paris? Sharlie found herself remembering the Pen of the last few weeks before her departure, slightly off-colour, unfriendly, detached, indifferent; that earlier Pen who'd said so passionately: "I hope I never see him again—ever!" And the Pen who, in the end, had gone off in her smart clothes looking as if she cared for nobody and nothing in the world. . . .

She did not make a very good job of her dinner. The food stuck in her throat and all the time that sensation of disaster was with her, of disaster that she ought somehow to have prevented—that she *could* have prevented, in part at least, if she hadn't been so concerned with her own affairs, if she had been there when Pen had sent for her; if she hadn't been

watching the pattern a tree could make on the sky, listening to Julian as he talked of cypresses and Italy, and to the song of a nightingale in the wood on the hillside. . . . Oh, no bird had sung in any wood for Pen, she thought inconsequently. We've thrown you between us to the wolves. . . . But why she thought it she could not have said. She told herself that it wasn't true, in Julian's sense, that Pen had parents. She never had anybody but me—nobody who ever knew that for all she wanted you to think otherwise she was very young and ignorant, such a very little girl. She kept thinking. Whatever has happened to her I ought to have saved her from it. . . . It went round and round in her head like the refrain of a silly song.

The meal over she slipped out, bought a thermometer and went into the bedroom. Pen was not asleep. She lay in the same position. She smiled a little wanly at the thermometer Sharlie displayed.

"How do you feel now, darling?" she asked.

"I don't know. . . . I'm terribly thirsty. I'd like some water, I think."

"In a minute. Let me take your temperature first, there's a dear."

Pen submitted to this, but did not ask at the end what the reading was. Sharlie looked at it with dismay. 104.6. Surely that was *very* high? As she poured out the water she thought: I ought to get a doctor at once. . . . Pen drank the water and instantly brought up a dull liquid brown in colour—an operation which seemed to be quite effortless. Could that be called sickness? The stomach seemed to take no part in it at all. Pen lay back on her pillows and shut her eyes. Again that tremor of black unreasoning fear went over Sharlie. A fresh, crazy pattern danced about in her brain, equipped now with several fresh pieces which danced more crazily. She sat silent, holding Pen's hand, until observing that she was quiet she

went out and telephoned to the doctor whose name she had seen on a plate outside a house not five minutes away.

The doctor sounded tired and irritable. Was it urgent? Yes. What was the trouble? . . . Well, what were the symptoms? Sharlie described them as well as she could. Was she in pain? Had she a temperature—been sick? Oh, damn the man, why doesn't he come and see for himself? thought Sharlie.

Pen turned her head away when she told her what she had done, and the tears rolled feebly down her cheeks for a second, but she did not protest. Sharlie saw that she was beyond protest, that she was too ill to care any longer what happened to her. "Don't cry, my love," she said, "I'm here. I'll stay with you."

The doctor came. He treated her with something of the same exasperated impatience as had reached her across the 'phone. She thought: He is probably very tired and didn't want to come out on a fool's errand. She led the way into the bedroom, smiled encouragement at Pen and stood there at her side, taut and rigid, not uttering a word, while the doctor made his examination. At length he had finished, was following her out of the room. . . .

"Her condition is very grave. You know that?"

"I was afraid so. What is it?"

"Septicæmia. I suspect an operation for abortion."

"You suspect *what?*"

He said it again.

"You had no suspicion of it?"

"None. My sister arrived home from the Continent this evening. Just about seven. I thought she seemed very ill and got her to bed."

"Did she say anything to you?"

"Only that she was taken ill in Ostend on Saturday and had decided to try to get home."

"Anything else?"

"She said she had been to a doctor on Saturday morning, who had said she would be all right if she went to bed and stayed there."

"Um—m. Did you know she was pregnant?"

The harsh question was like a blow in the face.

"No."

"How long has she been away?"

"About a fortnight. She went to friends in Paris."

"That's all you know?"

"Yes."

He looked as if he doubted her. He did not like her. She was one of those close-lipped self-controlled females who never gave themselves away. He formed the opinion that she knew more than she said.

"She'd better go to a nursing home at once. There's one close at hand. I'll get on to them. And I must have another opinion."

He gave her brusque instructions and asked her name. She gave it, and he said: "Stratton? Isn't there a writer of that name?"

"It's not an uncommon name."

"*Miss* Stratton?"

"Yes."

She wondered if his eye, travelling round the room, had alighted upon the pipe on the little table by the fireplace. Julian must have left it on Saturday when he came to fetch her. He was always mislaying his pipes. Oh, what did it matter what this man thought? What did anything matter? Pen was going to die. She heard the doctor say, "If her parents are alive, I think they should be informed." Watching him pick up his hat and gloves Sharlie forced herself to a question. "Do you think the journey did her a great deal of harm? I mean would she be less ill if she had stayed where she was?"

"In Ostend? Impossible to say. If the facts are as I believe she'd have been seriously ill by now, anyway, but proper medical attention three days ago might have made a difference. Certainly she ought never to have undertaken such a journey. It's a marvel how she did it in her state . . ."

"Thank you," said Sharlie quietly.

"I'll look in again in a little while and let you know what I've arranged about getting her moved. And I'll get Cutcliffe. He's a good man."

"Very well," said Sharlie automatically.

He wished her good evening and took his leave.

Sharlie sank down into a chair, and putting her arms on the table laid her head on them. She had no courage yet to speak to anyone at Edward Street. Pen was going to die. That man hadn't actually said so, but he thought it. Her mind refused for a while to get beyond that fact, but presently it began to range untidily over the immediate past, pausing, moving back on its tracks, struggling to make sense of the mad jumble of events and impressions that cluttered it up. But cutting sharply across them all came that happiness of her own with Julian that had blinded her for too long to what was going on—and that was the unendurable thing. It did not seem to her now that she had really been deceived—only that she hadn't troubled, or hadn't troubled enough. That scornful young woman who'd finally emerged from hysterics and despairs, who'd done with her frantic telephonings and letter-writing, who had elevated her chin when Fanny had trotted out her bromides and had declared that her father "made her *sick!*"—Sharlie knew now she had never really believed in her. Lying there so still, tearing at the palimpsest that was her mind, Sharlie knew now that she had wanted to believe in her, so that it had been as easy to deceive her as it had been to deceive Fanny and her father. Was that what Pen had meant to do? Had she coldly, gritting her teeth, made up her mind

to find her way unaided out of her calamitous mistake, or had she acted on impulse, envisaged somewhere, somehow, in that visit abroad, what seemed a simple way out?

I shall never know, thought Sharlie. I'll never know anything except that we all failed her—that I wasn't here when she wanted me, that she's dying because I was so taken up with my own happiness I couldn't see what she had done to hers.

She found courage presently to go back to Pen. As she opened the door a small weak voice said: "Shar, what did he say?"

"He wants to have a good look at you, darling, and thinks you'd be better in a nursing home . . ."

"Did he say what was the matter with me?"

"He said he'd like another opinion, lovey . . ."

"But he didn't say anything—anything else?"

Sharlie said: "No, darling," and knew that she had hesitated just a fraction too long before saying it. She saw with dismay that the tears were rolling down Pen's face, squeezing themselves out with an appalling rapidity that was the measure of her weakness. Sharlie fell on her knees by her side and tried to comfort her.

"Don't cry, my darling. Oh, Pen, darling, please don't cry!"

The heavy eyes dragged themselves open, and gazed for a second into Sharlie's with such a desperate agony of appeal that something in Sharlie fainted and died even as her own encountered it.

"Oh, Shar, I've been such a fool. From beginning to end. Such a bloody fool!"

"Never mind, my pet. It's over. It doesn't matter any longer. And don't cry, sweetie. I can't bear it if you cry."

"Can't you? Oh, Shar, I wish I'd told you!"

"Why didn't you, darling?"

"I couldn't—I couldn't tell anybody after his saying those awful things to Fanny, and not speaking to me on the 'phone, and never answering my letters—I couldn't even tell *him!*"

"Oh, darling, don't talk about it any more!"

"There was something I wanted to tell you. About that time at Gisborough."

"Darling, I *do* know about Gisborough. Captain Stewart persuaded you to stay there."

"Yes. We hadn't met for a long while. We'd quarrelled. I can't remember why. I *wanted* to stay . . ."

"But that's all over now, darling—right back in the winter. Don't think about it any more. This is May. The trees are all green and the hawthorns in bloom. Directly you're better we'll go away to the country and see them properly . . ."

For a while Pen said nothing, then: "Is Julian coming?" she asked.

"Julian? To-night? No, he's at a dinner."

"Shar, it was Julian you went away with this week-end, wasn't it?"

"What makes you think that?"

"Because I know about you and Julian. I found out a long while ago. In a way, it was because of you and Julian . . ."

Agonised, Sharlie said: "You're talking too much, darling. I think you ought to keep quite quiet for a little."

"Oh, Shar, I did love him! And I thought he loved me, too—that it would be like you and Julian. . . . And it wasn't. He didn't care at all, really!"

"You mustn't think about it now, darling. We'll have a long talk about it when you're better. Won't that do?"

Pen nodded.

"I'm so thirsty," she said presently.

Sharlie held her up against her shoulder and gave her water to drink, and immediately that horrible effortless operation was again performed. Pen lay back upon the

pillows and began weakly to cry. "Oh, Shar, I feel so ill," she said; "I think I'm going to die!"

Sharlie sat there saying soothing things, her loving heart torn asunder, feeling frightened and impotent, with that half-sentence going through and through her like a sword-thrust. *In a way it was because of you and Julian.* . . . It was worse than she had feared. A thousand times worse. It seemed to her that if she lived to be a hundred and whether Pen lived or died, she would never get over it. She sat there drowning in a bitter tide of regret until the sighing of the lift aroused her, when she rose and went quickly out, so that she might forestall the ring at the door. Had they come for Pen, or was it the doctor come back as he had promised?

She sighed with relief when she opened the door and saw that it was he. Following her into the sitting-room he said at once: "Well, how does she seem?"

"About the same, I think."

"I'll have a look at her. I've arranged things with the nursing home. The ambulance should be here very soon."

His stay with Pen was short. Sharlie thought him competent, and so could find no crumb of comfort in the thought that he might be mistaken. He wasn't mistaken. And his manner to Pen was kind and encouraging. She smiled wanly upon him as he wished her good-bye and followed Sharlie out into the sitting-room.

"How is she?" Sharlie forced herself to speak calmly.

"The temperature's still very high, and she's very weak. If she lives through the next twenty-four hours she may be all right..."

She saw that he did not really believe she would. She could think of nothing to say. She saw him out and went to the telephone. Somehow or other she must find courage to ring up the house in Edward Street. As she reached for the instrument the bell rang and picking up the receiver she heard Julian's voice.

"Hallo, darling. I got away early from my very dull dinner, and thought I'd see how you are. You've been on my mind a bit this evening. Like me to come along?"

She said: "I've got Pen here. She's very ill. The doctor thinks she's going to die."

Julian's quiet voice said: "What's wrong?" falling on her ears like a gentle rebuke. It didn't matter. She gave him the doctor's diagnosis, explained about the nursing-home and said that she was just about to ring up Fanny and her father.

Julian said: "Don't. I'll do that. What do you want me to say?"

"That Pen's seriously ill, and where they are taking her. They'd better ring up the nursing home a little later on. It's no use coming here. She'll be gone."

"All right. What about you?"

"I'm all right."

She strove to say something else, something personal, tender, but couldn't manage it. All her tenderness, all her kindness were given to that quiet figure in the other room. Julian's anxious voice said: "Would you like me to come along? I've got the car outside."

She said: "If you like," hesitated and then rang off. She felt as if she had been talking to an obliging stranger.

What happened afterwards lived in her memory like a nightmare; a nightmare in which Pen went away and in which Julian arrived to fetch her a coat, make up a neglected fire and look at her with tender eyes of concern; who came and sat presently on the edge of the table at her side and said quietly: "Shar, what is it you're keeping back?"

She made no attempt then to keep anything back. She poured it all out in a flood and at the end the stony grief in her face broke up. Convulsed, she said: "Oh, Julian, I wish we hadn't gone away on Saturday! If I'd been here when the telegram came and had gone to her this wouldn't have happened."

"You can't be sure of that, my dear," Julian told her. "You mustn't worry about it."

"I do worry about it!" Sharlie cried. "I'm haunted by it. I always shall be!"

"My dear child! We can't refrain from doing things because somebody else may do something else we've no earthly means of knowing they have the least intention of doing! When we went off on Saturday, to the best of our knowledge Pen was enjoying herself in Paris, as she had been doing for the past two or three weeks."

Sharlie sat silent.

"Darling, you've nothing to reproach yourself with!"

"Nothing? I've everything to reproach myself with! From the very first! I shall always feel about this that when she wanted me I wasn't here—I was away enjoying myself with you!"

Julian felt a little cold. And lonely—as if she had gone a long way off. He said, "You won't feel like that always, my dear. You're far too sensible. It's just shock."

He was baffled by the expression on her face as she shook her head.

"No, it's not that. I shall always feel I failed her . . . took away her one chance! *Why* should she be ill like this? The man she went to wasn't a quack. She distinctly said she went to a doctor. You can, abroad, where an operation for abortion isn't a criminal offence."

"There are doctors *and* doctors. That proves nothing. Besides, she got ill, you say, on the Saturday, immediately afterwards—ill enough to get frightened and to send for you. I don't see how you can blame the journey."

He thought in his heart, however, that to make the journey was about the most foolhardy of all the foolhardy things Pen had ever done. There, as in all else, she had been a self-willed little idiot. But he wondered at the touch of anger he felt,

for he was desperately sorry for her—as he would have been for anything caught or hurt in a trap. And Sharlie was fond of her—was going to break her heart over it all. . . . He put an arm round her and pulled her up against him.

"Darling, don't, it's worse than useless!"

She said, "I know, but I can't help it!" She suffered his kiss, and though she did not respond it broke up that awful calm. She clung to him for a moment, her face pressed against his shoulder. "Oh, Julian, she can't be going to die! She can't! She can't!"

"Don't think it," Julian said.

But she did die—the next morning at nine o'clock with nobody at her side but people doing their duty, while Sharlie and Fanny and her father were on their way to her. And Philip's face, gaunt and terrible, and Fanny's, strangely unfamiliar with its red swollen eyelids, became part of the nightmare with which Sharlie lived for days to come.

BOOK FIVE

SHARLIE HERSELF

You are . . . asking me questions and I hear you.
I answer that I cannot answer, you must find out for yourself.

—WALT WHITMAN

CHAPTER ONE

A WEEK later Sharlie sat talking to Julian. She sat very still; as still, he thought, as that spring day in the forest when he had told her about Kathleen, only now, in some curious fashion, her immobility suggested flight. Already, he thought, she had taken wing, had gone from him for ever. He had exhausted his arguments—poor ones, he felt, if their love could do nothing for him; and when she said, "It's all spoilt —if you don't feel it, I can't explain," he was aware that neither arguments nor love remembered was going to be of the least avail. He *didn't* feel it and he had run the gamut of all the emotions over her attempts to explain. But now he considered her with a whelming poignancy of emotion that did not prevent him from perceiving that she, whose balance and proportion he had so admired, was here driven by nothing he could control. Reason was no longer in the driving seat. They talked at each other from different planes.

Sharlie had been through a bad time—a much worse time, he knew, than was necessary because of that fool of a doctor whose neck he'd wanted to wring. If he hadn't insisted upon an inquest she would have been spared something, at least. Producing two of her three wires, the one from the Ostend post office and the one from Dover (the one sent from the *pension* he knew she had put in the fire), she had maintained that no end could possibly be served by an inquiry into Pen's death, even if, she said coldly, his suspicions were true. But he was that kind of fool with whom his public duty is an obsession, and neither Sharlie's cold logic nor Philip Stratton's blustering anger could move him. Julian had found himself immeasurably touched by Sharlie's efforts to

safeguard her dead sister's good name, had mentally commended the destruction of that first telegram which made it impossible for Pen's precious "madame" to contribute her quota to the history of that brief and tragic stay in Ostend.

Even that foregone conclusion of Death from Natural Causes, however, had done nothing for Julian. He saw now that he had never expected it would. With Sharlie he had taken, he reflected, the wrong line about Pen from the first—a fact which the wretched intrigue which had ended in her death had stamped deeply down into Sharlie's mind. He had known that from the effects of this she would not recover for a long while; and now, as he sat and faced her, he knew that so far as he was concerned she would never recover. In her own mind this dreadful thing which had happened to Pen and the love she had borne him (already he put it like that, in the past tense) were indissolubly connected. He stopped his sensible level-headed arguments, seeing the dead girl as a formidable impassable barrier between him and his love. Pitifully dead as she was, her young life thrown on the waste-heap, his exasperation against Pen yet continued. He could not forgive her for that suggestion that anything she had ever done had been affected in any degree whatsoever by the knowledge she had acquired of his relationship with Sharlie. He and Sharlie had nothing to do with it. Pen belonged to a generation which took its own way, believed more perhaps than any generation at any time that it had a right to do what it liked with its youth, had revised the whole extant code of morals and bought its own experience with a recklessness peculiar to itself. Doubtless Pen had been badly brought up; certainly, he allowed, she was, like Sharlie, unfortunate enough in her parentage, but he did not believe that anything could have stopped Pen from carrying her infatuation to its logical conclusion. She had schemed and contrived cleverly throughout to achieve it, and not all

Julian's regret for the pitiful result prevented him from thinking of her as something febrile and unstable. These things were writ more deeply—would have happened, he was convinced, if he and Sharlie had never met, never kissed. He had no doubt that Pen had been Geoffrey Stewart's mistress before that fatal night at Gisborough, and though he would have welcomed the opportunity of administering condign punishment to the cad who had been capable of taking advantage of a vain and love-sick girl, he admired the thoroughness with which Sharlie had kept his name out of the resultant tragedy. It seemed to him outrageous that this sordid affair could in any way affect his relationship with Sharlie, even while he recognised that Sharlie being Sharlie, it was futile to expect her to see the thing other than as she did. For her, now, their love for each other had withered to no more than a sensual indulgence which had brought disaster or helped to bring it upon the bright and sunny child she had loved from babyhood. It deserved no better fate than to be put aside. Her own conduct, as she saw it, had been only a temptation to someone younger and weaker than herself and was to be abjured from henceforth. He knew, even as he pleaded, as he laid his passion aside, put his cold commonsensical points, that he but wasted his breath. She was lost to him.

He cursed himself for the rope he had given fate; reflected in bitterness of spirit that had he but set his plans ten days earlier this tragedy would not have struck them in this fashion, head-on. For he and Sharlie would have been gone and Pen's suggestion that her own conduct had been set by Sharlie's might never have been made, or if it had been, she would not have been there to receive it. As he sat there now, looking at her utterly pale composed face, with its suggestion, none the less, of things leaping and surging behind, watching the dark sweep of her lashes against the

curve of her cheek, remembering the passion and companionship they had shared and knowing that it lay between them no longer, he had a sudden overpowering desire to be gone, not to see her again, to lie, as he had done before, in that old high-walled garden that was Kathleen's, his face turned up to the spring sky, knowing that she was at hand, serene, untroubled, demanding nothing of him—of him or of God.

He got up, surprised to find himself trembling, but managing to keep his voice steady as he said, "If you change your mind, write to me at Greenover," but he knew she would do neither the one nor the other. Eternally she was lost to him.

"Good-bye, then, my dear," he said.

She let him hold her in his arms, suffered his caress, felt herself momentarily lifted out of her moody, stony indifference by the wave of emotion which swept through her being. Feeling it, too, he wondered for an instant if he might even now sweep her off her feet, secure something at least of the old sweetness by taking advantage of that momentary weakness. But that, he knew, she would never forgive. And in the end what he would secure would be valueless. He wanted the familiar sweet compulsion of a passion mutually shared, the quiet and lovely companionship which had been theirs—not the retention of something given at the dictation of a physical urge that she would yet loathe as a selfish indulgence which had brought harm to another. He was quite sure that was nonsense—but it was not enough that he should know it. *She* must know it for nonsense, too.

He released her to hold her at arm's length, to gaze with a lingering desperate fondness upon the chiselled beauty of the face that had enchanted him from the first day he saw it, to search her eyes for some hope that this,

after all, was not the last of all he had valued and enjoyed, until suddenly the lids closed over them and those long straight lashes made that familiar dark smudge upon the pale cheeks.

"Good-bye, my dear," he said. "It has been very sweet . . ."

CHAPTER TWO

SAVE for that one moment when he held her in his arms as he wished her good-bye, Sharlie felt scarcely anything. She had spoken the simple truth when she said it was "spoilt," and knew that, like religion and good taste, it was not a thing to be argued about. She blamed herself with an unyielding bitterness for Pen's death and with that Julian and her feeling for him were so inextricably intermingled that one had become automatically as dreadful to her as the other. Of the physical loss she felt then too numb, too dead emotionally (save along that one narrow channel of the miserable events of Pen's last hours on earth) to be sensible. Everything she did at this juncture was conditioned by the one idea of closing down for ever something which had led to a thing so disastrous, and of which she would never think again, if she could help it. If there was any idea of expiation it was subconscious. What she did seemed to her both reasonable and unarguable since what she desired to end had become, even in thought, abhorrent to her. There was neither room nor need for argument.

She set about getting rid of the flat and everything in it and prepared to move back to Edward Street—not at all a good place to live in these days. Shut up with the finishing of his new book, Philip had refused her offer of assistance, engaging a hard-faced young woman who never did an ounce more work than she was paid for, saw nothing in the remotest degree attractive about her employer and secretly held the opinion that it was enough to make any girl go wrong "with that for a father." Fanny said, "Oh, well, she won't be likely to play the Helen Carter trick, anyway—that's

something." Poor Fanny—who did not think that life could be so melodramatic (or even dramatic) and didn't like it that way—had already wept all her easy comfortable tears for her daughter. She had long ago come to the conclusion that "that fool of a doctor" was as wrong as those sensible men and women—the British jury—had considered him. Why, after all, imagine the worst? *Why* suspect poor Geoff, who had been so emphatic and indignant about his denials to Sharlie, and who had been so *kind* to the child? Fanny wept those easy tears for a Pen already packed neatly away in her mind as a victim of one of those unaccountable illnesses with which doctors seem so strangely unable to cope, and if at times it crossed her mind that Sharlie knew more about it than she had ever said, well, she thought it very decent of her, for what good would it be to fish up this, that or the other, or to inquire too closely what had taken Pen to Ostend? After all, she had so many friends and Vera Laing had known that she was going there. Pen couldn't have made any secret about it. . . . Did Fanny recognise Pen as a true daughter of hers? Were there moments when she did really look the truth in the face, know for what Pen had thrown away her life? Impossible, thought Sharlie, to know what the Fannys of the world ever thought or felt about anything, or if they felt anything whatever. Fanny did not cause her sorrow or anxiety. Her father did both. What emotion lived in her at all these days was for her father, whose grief for the little daughter he had loved, indulged and admired, who had gone off in that scornful fashion with that crazy idea, surely, even then in her head, who had died without thought or recognition of him, tore her heart in pieces every time she looked at him. If her father had cared for anything or anybody unselfishly in his life it had, she knew, been Pen—and he thought of Pen now only as another of the things which Fanny had spoiled.

Fanny, Sharlie was aware, did not believe this. That is to say, she did no more than accept with a shrug of her shoulders the fact that with Phil *most* things were her fault—most things that went wrong. She considered him to be "not quite normal," a comforting phrase, and she had long ago recognised in him the man who never trusted a woman with whom he'd had anything to do before marriage. She knew he'd never trusted her. Well, she might have played the same trick, but she wasn't such a fool! Husbands were a queer lot—and hers one of the queerest. Poor Fanny! Marriage had proved no bed of roses and she had lain upon it with a fortitude and good humour for which she was beginning to think she was entitled to a little commendation. Well, she had never wanted very much to marry Philip, though nobody would believe her if she said so, and it was too late for repining, too late even to hope Philip would go off with another woman. He had never looked at another woman since he had married her—a fact which had never ceased to surprise her. No use to sit at home lamenting. That wouldn't bring Pen back or make you feel any better about things; so, dressed in her becoming black, Fanny began to go out again. She was never in need of escorts and had long ago accustomed Philip to their existence. Life at thirty-eight was certainly not finished for Fanny, whatever it might be for Philip at fifty-four. One had to get through it somehow, and might as well do it as pleasantly as possible. Besides, Philip would feel better as Dave grew older. Dave was clever—everybody agreed about that—with the kind of cleverness Phil would be able to understand. It was quite certain he was going to be a writer and would soon be going up to Oxford, where, she supposed vaguely, you could as well learn to write as anything else, if it was a thing you had to learn—Fanny didn't know. Boys on the whole were less bother than girls and a son at Oxford, a son presently

producing clever books (or would he write plays?) would be so nice for Phil to have, wouldn't it? Dave was nice to look at too, with his queer sombre-looking face, and quite unexpectedly amusing, for the things he said weren't sombre at all, but cheeky and impudent. Fanny saw herself escorted about by this handsome successful young man and wished the years would hurry, just a little. Time, she felt, was her ally. And Sharlie, perhaps.

It was nice to have her back again, even if she was quite in the dark as to why she had come. She flattered herself if she thought her father wanted her there. He didn't—he never had, even as a child, though he had always kept her there—probably, Fanny thought, to spite those disagreeable Selwyns. Had he ever, once, taken her on a holiday? He had never cared for her—some complex or other Fanny had never understood and which didn't matter, anyway, at this time of day. But Sharlie's idea of being a comfort to her father or anything like that was just silly, of course, though it *was* pleasant to have her in the house again now that she had thought better of going off with that nice Evesham man. (Why?—since the wife wasn't going to make a fuss?) Sharlie would make things easier. Now, as ever, she would be a bulwark between Philip and herself when his moods and tempers were at their worst.

Philip certainly was not an easy man to live with these days, but he extended to Sharlie an unwonted modicum of friendliness because he had admired the way she had stood up to that doctor with his impudent suggestions. Had he forgotten, Sharlie sometimes asked herself, that he had once accused Pen of that very thing which she knew now to have been a fact? She was aware that her efforts to thwart that inquiry had been if not as much for his sake as for that of Pen's memory, at least for it partly. Unexpectedly that morning of Pen's death something had happened to her feeling for him

and she had longed to do something for him who had loved Pen and spoilt her and helped, with the rest of them, to send her to her death. He was not very responsive. Apart from that modicum of friendliness, that tendency to approach Fanny through her, there was nothing. He shut himself up with his book, with which he hoped, she knew, to stage a come-back. He had shrugged his shoulders when she had told him she was not going away with Julian after all, and had said disagreeably, "Attempting to rehabilitate the family honour? Can't be done. Don't be a fool. Go to your lover, if you want him!"

"I don't," said Sharlie, hearing the words with a sad, shocked amazement.

And Philip Stratton had laughed.

But Judy Norman, coming home from Paris for a week, partly because of Sharlie's letter about Pen and partly because she wanted to see Mark, who was expected to arrive in England any day—Judy Norman did not laugh.

"You're a quixotic fool, Charlotte Stratton," she said, in real exasperation. She had had lunch the day before with Julian and she agreed entirely with his point of view concerning the hapless Pen, as Sharlie was aware. "Because there's been one quite unnecessary tragedy, must you make another to keep it company?"

"Is it a tragedy that an intrigue should come to an end?"

"It wasn't an 'intrigue,' and you know it. Don't use such idiotic words."

"Whatever you choose to call it," said Sharlie, "it's over. Don't let us discuss it."

"Very well," said Judy. "May one ask why you're giving up the flat?"

"Because I couldn't possibly live there now."

"Why not get another?"

"I feel I ought to be at home."

"For the usual rotten reasons, I suppose?"

"You can think them so, if you like. I couldn't just leave father—and then, Fanny. She's having a thin time with him. He thinks, of course, that it was all her fault."

"Whereas you, of course, think it was all yours and Julian's." Judy's voice was scornful. "What a family! What does Fanny think?"

"She doesn't—much."

"And you don't allot any of the blame to her?"

"Oh yes. She let Pen do too much as she liked and she never knew anything about her. Neither did father. But I did. I knew all that sophistication and hardness was only a veneer, that underneath she was terribly young and romantic, that she wanted looking after. So there isn't any excuse for me. I just did what I wanted to do, set her a rotten example, and left her to her fate."

"You really believe that?"

"I have to believe it. . . . Oh, Ju, you weren't there when she came back. You don't know what she was like—if you did you couldn't be so *beastly* about her . . ."

"I'm not beastly about her, but I can't sit still and see you spoiling your life because Pen spoiled hers. There's no sense in it. You've been at the mercy of this family of yours as long as I can remember. You've been Philip's daughter too long. It's time you stopped and gave yourself a chance of becoming yourself. There's nothing for you here—and never will be. You love Julian and he loves you; you've been his wife, in fact, for two years and suddenly for a whim, because you blame yourself for something that couldn't possibly have had anything to do with you, you throw it all over and come back here. What are you going to do with the rest of your life?"

"I haven't thought about it."

"Do you now devote yourself to David?"

"No, David's all right. I can't do anything for him. He's quite certain of himself and what he wants to do. He's already decided he's not going up to Oxford but to travel instead. He wants to be a writer and says that Oxford's no use."

"Well, that disposes of David. Oh, Shar, you're being such a fool! The only advice I can give you is to marry the first decent man who asks you. It's your only salvation."

Sharlie said nothing to this and Judy began again elsewhere.

"By the way, I found time to go down and see Mona and Shane. They've a pretty house on the top of a hill with a view over the Tuscan plain. Quite marvellous. Mona's got two of the loveliest children I've ever seen. We were all of us wrong about her and Shane, apparently. . . . I told them about you and Julian—sorry, but you *said* I might!—and they'll be expecting to see you any day."

Sharlie said nothing to that either. She sat there thinking of Mona and Shane in their pretty house, of their children and of the house on a hill she had expected to share with Julian in some other world—a house with one tall cypress stuck up in front of it and not another tree in sight for miles. The kind of landscape to which she had been used all her life, if you left out the cypress,

—the country does not even boast a tree,
As you see,
To distinguish slopes of verdure, certain rills
From the hills
Intersect and give a name to (else they run into one) . . .

She wondered—but as if the matter concerned somebody else—if out there with Julian she could indeed have recaptured her belief in the essential goodness of the passion they

had shared, if with children of her own she might have forgotten the thing she had allowed to happen to Pen. . . . She thought, children are my job, perhaps; but if it were that too did not seem to matter any more. She said, "When do you expect Mark?"

"His ship gets in to-morrow," Judy said. "He came via New York, which he wanted to see. He's only staying in London until Friday. He's going down to the farm to give Clive a hand. He's had to get rid of some men for the sake of economy, I gather. Harry ought to come home, of course, but he won't. And Mark's only staying till the spring."

"He likes the life out there?"

"I suppose so. No accounting for tastes. He and another man have just bought some land of their own and they're going to farm it together. I gather that Harry's Canadian relations are pushing him out. There's always been trouble about it. Aunt Beth would like him to stop here for good, but he doesn't want to and mother isn't going to encourage the idea. She'll never be happy to have Mark in England while Greta's alive, unless he gets married."

"Hasn't Mark got over that?"

"I should think so. What mother doesn't realise is that it doesn't matter if he hasn't. He'd never act as she thinks he might. Mark isn't that sort. But mother thinks there's been too much of that kind of thing in our family, what with one thing and another—especially that affair of Mona's with Garth during the war . . ."

Sharlie said nothing. She remembered that story of Mona and Garth and how shocked she had been when Judy had told her, and how she had said, "But *why?* She was engaged to Garth. She could have married him whenever she liked." And how Judy had laughed and said, "She didn't want to marry him, stupid. It was just sex!" She thought: Is that all it is, *ever*—just sex? Just something which betrays you,

lets you down? Mona had always been in love with Shane (even as a child Judy had always maintained that), and yet she had had that affair with Garth, had covered it up with the cloak of an engagement, gone on with it every time he had come home from France, until he was killed right at the end. . . . Sharlie remembered how Judy had always said that Mona never intended to marry him. Just sex, a physical attraction, something you got over like an illness. . . . Choked with disgust, with a faint weary distaste of love and all it connoted, she sat silent.

Judy said, "By the way, mother sent her love to you—and her sympathy."

Sharlie said, "She didn't like Pen very much."

"I wouldn't say that. She didn't approve of her, but then she didn't approve of us either, when we were her age. I mean, me and Mona, not you. Mother approved of you all right—wished we were more like you, solemn and serious-minded, all worked up about the condition of Europe and the results of the war and wanting to alter the world. . . . Mother doesn't like the young very much, you know—the immature mind bores her. But you weren't young, you know, Shar. Not very. . . . Are you going to stay on at Ffoliots'?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"No reason, if you like it—except that it isn't your job. When are you going down to Carr?"

"I don't know."

"I'm going down on Friday with Mark—just for the week-end. Why not come too?"

"No," said Sharlie.

"Why not?"

"I couldn't get away from the office early enough on Friday."

"That's not the reason."

"No," said Sharlie again.

Judy stood up.

"All right, my dear, have it your own way. I must go." She put on her coat, dug her hands into her gloves and said suddenly: "I wish I'd been here, Shar. I probably couldn't have saved Pen for you, but I could have saved you all this business since. . . . Why didn't Julian horsewhip that cad?"

"What would have been the use?"

"Didn't anyone go to see him?"

"I did. He denied everything, of course, as I knew he would."

"Did you leave it at that?"

"What else was there to do? It was hopeless, anyway. Besides, he couldn't have done her any harm if the rest of us had looked after her. Between us we made Geoffrey Stewart possible."

Judy shrugged her shoulders. She shared Julian's opinion about that, but like him was not prepared to argue it. Like him, too, she could but hope that Sharlie would "recover," and like him again, knowing Sharlie, was pretty sure that she would not.

"Well, I must go. Let me know if you change your mind about the week-end."

"I will," said Sharlie, aware that nothing yet would drag her to Carr—and why. Her grandmother would be sure to say (as, indeed, she had done already in a letter), with bad logic and worse justice, that what had happened was "a judgment" upon that woman and her father. She would also ask questions about Julian—and Sharlie did not want to talk about Julian. Least of all to her grandmother.

It was nearly the end of the summer before she summoned up sufficient courage to go. Out on the fens they were already cutting the corn. The potato crop, her grandfather said, was going to be a bumper one again. He didn't seem too pleased

about it. They had had a bumper crop the year before and it hadn't been sold, at least not enough of it to pay for labour and transport. People, said Grandmother Selwyn, were so unpatriotic. They wouldn't "buy British," and you couldn't make them. Sharlie said, "Potatoes were no cheaper last year in London. Nothing's ever cheaper whatever the crops are like. It's the same all round. When there's a glut of fish it's thrown back into the sea rather than that it shall be sold below the ring price. Why doesn't the Government break the food rings?"

They laughed at her, as people always had laughed at her common-sense suggestions about the powers of Parliament and world problems.

"No government dare try," her grandfather said. "Too many vested interests."

"Governments!" snorted Ann Selwyn. "I wonder why we used to make all that fuss about the franchise! As though it mattered!"

They talked of impersonal topics and discussed the local gossip and the latest books for the whole of that first evening, but books were a dangerous corner and brought them suddenly face to face with the one person Sharlie had hoped to keep out of the conversation for a much longer time.

"And how is Mr. Evesham?" Ann asked brightly. "I've been trying to get his last book out of the library for weeks. I'm afraid I shall have to buy it unless (hopefully) you have a copy you can lend me."

Sharlie shook her head. She never lent new books on principle. Both Philip and Julian had taught her the heinousness of such behaviour. People should either buy new books or ask for them at the library. If they hadn't a library subscription they should repair the omission. But making these remarks didn't really help her. Ann persisted.

"Why haven't you brought him to see us this year?"

"He's in Italy, I believe," Sharlie said. "We don't see each other nowadays."

"Have you quarrelled?"

"Oh no."

"Oh, dear, Sharlie, how tiresome you are! He was *so* delightful, and I *did* like his books so much. So different from your father's namby-pamby stuff! Aren't you going to make it up?"

"There isn't anything to make up. It was just a mistake."

"But he seemed just your sort. Just the very man for you! I'd quite made up my mind you were going to marry him."

Sharlie said, "Oh, but he had a wife already."

Her grandmother's face stiffened.

"Really, Shar," she said; "I wouldn't have believed it of you! If he had a wife why were you giving everybody a false impression about your relationship?"

"Were we?"

Sharlie's voice was placatory, but the old lady was not to be put off. She said, "I thought you had more character, Shar. I didn't expect you would have taken after your father in that horrid fashion! Or didn't you know he was married? . . ."

"Oh yes," said Sharlie, "I always knew. He was quite frank."

"Well, I'm glad you've come to your senses now, at any rate. Really, Shar, you've very much upset me. . . . I might have known what would happen with you in that woman's house all these years. A most improper business. I ought never to have consented to it."

It wasn't a very pleasant evening and at ten o'clock, ignoring in a good cause the objections of his sciatic nerve, her grandfather suggested a turn in the garden. Sharlie rose with alacrity, kissed her grandmother and

left her to get herself and her indignation to bed.

Night had put on all her diamonds. A bedizened sky looked down upon Ann Selwyn's garden and upon them as they walked in it. Her lovely ceanothus, the one they call *Gloire de Versailles*, still bloomed beneath the shelter of the old south wall upon which as a child Sharlie had so often swung her long black-stockinged legs. Its pastel-blue was blanched to ivory; it sent forth a faint sweet odour that Sharlie recognised as a part of her very life. Standing beside the lovely bush, sheltered by the old wall from the evening breeze which Sharlie liked and Henry's sciatica did not, they were silent for a long time. But presently Henry said to her, "Sharlie, don't answer if you don't want . . . Weren't you and Evesham in love?"

"I think we called it love," said Sharlie softly.

"Do you feel like telling me anything about it?"

"No. Not now. Some day, perhaps."

He looked at her, saw upon her face that look he knew so well and sighed.

"You were lovers, weren't you?" he tried.

"Yes."

"And is it quite over?"

"Quite."

"Well, I'm sorry."

"Why? We could never have got married."

"All the same, I'm sorry."

"You liked him?"

"Very much. But he was the man for you."

"Do you think so?"

Her voice had gone quite cold and across the darkness was flung the pale banner of a smile Henry Selwyn knew so well, that he had first seen all those years ago when she'd cried a little because she had to go home and he had exhorted her to courage and cheerfulness. "Let us see how nicely

you can smile at us all at lunch . . ." He wondered now just what it was that enigmatic smile was hiding. But he'd never know. He was old and nearing his grave, and he'd never know any more about Sharlie than he'd known about his beloved Alex. He was filled with despair and the anger of an old and baffled man, but neither showed in his voice when he said, "We'd better go in, my dear. Your grandmother will scold me and want to iron me again. A damnable business."

"I expect you ought to diet—live on oranges or something," Sharlie said as she took his arm and turned with him towards the house.

"I'm too old for that. I'll bear what troubles I have."

"Old? You're not old. You wait until you're as old as old Jeremy Bentley, Judy's grandfather. He'll be a hundred and three this year."

"Poor devil!" said Henry Selwyn, who longed, like the rest of us, not for mere longevity but for eternal youth.

They went in.

In bed that night Ann said irritably, "Does that girl mean I'm *never* to have any grandchildren?"

Henry, who wanted to go to sleep, and whose sciatica was making it sufficiently difficult, said, also irritably, "Oh, there's time, my dear. She's not twenty-seven until Christmas."

"But I'm not twenty-seven, Henry. I'm nearly *seventy*-seven. And you . . ."

"All right, don't remind me, don't remind me, for heaven's sake! I've enough things to do that without your keeping me awake half the night to add to 'em."

He made no reply to anything else Ann said and presently she ceased and he supposed she slept and hated her a little because of it. For Henry lay awake in the dark, reflecting

that Ann had only one fault as a wife—she talked too much in bed. Always had. Queer nobody had ever advanced that as ground for a divorce. A damn sight more reasonable than most of the ones they did advance. . . . He began to wonder again what had occurred between Sharlie and that young man of hers, reflected that the young were fools and spoiled their lives for nothing at all and that when they were old and gripped with sciatica or something as plaguey, maybe they'd be sorry.

CHAPTER THREE

ONE evening soon after her arrival Sharlie went along to Cross Farm. It was a long time since she had seen either Beth Blunsdon or Clive and his wife, and she had momentarily forgotten that Mark was there, so that she stared at the tall square-shouldered young man who came towards her down the shining passage towards the front door as if he were somebody she had not seen before. And then, strangely, it was not Mark's name which came to her but that of his father, Frank Norman, and her mind ran back to a day long dead when she had been to tea with Judy and he had seen her afterwards to her bus. It had never struck her in the old days that Mark was particularly like his father, but now in the half-dusk of Beth's shining hall the likeness hung like a pennant and moved her to a strange tenderness towards him which showed in her voice as she said, "You're Mark, aren't you?" And Mark, who hadn't recognised her either, smiled and said as he had said so often years ago, "Oh, of course, you're Sharlie, Judy's friend. Come in. My cousin and his wife are out, but Aunt Beth is in."

She followed him into the familiar sitting-room where Beth, still upright, still with that fine warm colour in her face despite her seventy years, greeted her with the old-time affection.

"We haven't seen you for a long time, my dear," she said. "Come in and sit down. The others will be in soon."

They sat there talking about simple everyday things while the light quite faded and Mark lighted the lamp and drew the curtains. Mark did not contribute much to the conversation, but then, as Sharlie remembered him, he had never

contributed much to any conversation whatsoever. He asked her if she had seen Judy or his mother lately, and how she thought his aunt was looking, and said, in answer to a direct question of hers, that farming in Canada was much more strenuous than in England.

"It's a pity we can't persuade him to stay here and farm with us in Carr," Beth Blunsdon said. And to that, it seemed, Mark had a reply. He said, "But I want to grow wheat, Aunt Beth, and you can't do that in England. England ought to turn herself into a grass-farming country. People may prefer foreign wheat, but they'd prefer English farm produce if they could get it—your butter, certainly," and he smiled at her as if he still remembered how good it had tasted, and as if he regretted that these days it was left to younger hands.

"If we're going to do that we shall need a revolution in farming England," Beth told him.

"Only the kind of revolution, Aunt Beth, that Denmark accomplished successfully in the middle of last century when she saw that foreign wheat was ruining the European market."

"We've grown wheat here ever since I can remember," said Beth, "and I came here in the September of 'eighty-eight."

"Nearly forty years ago," said Sharlie, and waited for Mark to go on with his argument, but he did not and presently Beth said, "All the same, I think you and Clive are right. I expect we shall come to it. But Joe would never have heard of it."

Sharlie smiled, aware that this was Beth's way of saying that now there was no longer any Joe to have his feelings considered, she would have nothing to say against Clive's experiments. Presently Clive and his wife came in. Melody was a tall well-made girl, with a fresh face and pleasant

smile, and Sharlie saw at once that she was going to have a child. Melody herself shortly made a laughing reference to it, adding, "I've been a long while beginning, haven't I? Clive was getting a little worried, wasn't he, mother?"

An entirely unembarrassed Clive looked up from his conversation with Mark to say, "Not in the least," and the smile he gave Melody made Sharlie, to her surprise, queerly happy. She had seen very little of Clive since his marriage, and that comfortable husbandly smile definitely dismissed her from the intimacies that might have been hers. Considered as a wife she had ceased, in Clive's mind, to have any existence at all. She was grateful to Clive for this, for being commonsensical and sensible and not romantic and emotional. She felt she wanted to be done with emotion for the rest of her life.

When she rose to go it was Mark and not Clive who made ready to accompany her. Everybody seemed to take that for granted. He did not talk very much on that occasion or, indeed, upon any other that succeeded it during her stay at Carr. But gradually from the fragments she managed to draw from him, she was able to build up in her mind a picture of his life during the last six years, to see it as a thing of hardship and struggle in a land given over for five months out of the twelve to snow, where at threshing time the stooks often froze as they stood and work went on after dark with no light but that of the moon on the snow.

"You like it?" she asked him once, not quite sure whether she meant farming or Canada. But she saw from Mark's reply that the terms in his mind were synonymous.

"It's what I always wanted to do," he said.

"But often when we get what we want it disappoints us."

"Not when it's a question of work, perhaps."

She was aware that it had not been work she had been

thinking of. She said, "You're lucky to have a job that satisfies you so completely. Few people have."

"Don't you care for yours?"

"Yes, very much. That is to say, I'm grateful to it for occupying so pleasantly so much of my time. You never feel that way about your farming?"

"No," said Mark simply, and then, unexpectedly, "Why didn't you marry Clive?"

"How did you know he asked me? Did he tell you?"

"No—Aunt Beth did."

"Will you be shocked if I say I sometimes wish I had?"

"Not in the least."

"You think marriage is still the best profession for women with no special talents?"

"Yes—but have you no special talents?"

"None. Merely undirected intelligence."

He smiled at her, but said nothing.

Sharlie said, "Obviously, then, I ought to have got married. But all I did was to fall in love with a married man."

"Hard luck!"

Impossible to tell from that laconic phrase whether he knew about Julian or not. She said, "Not that his being married made any difference. . . ." She didn't know why she wanted Mark Norman to know she had had a lover, but she did. She added, "I don't think I'm made for the illicit. If I'd married Clive I should have escaped that, perhaps."

He didn't ask her if she wished she had escaped it and she didn't know. Her feeling for Julian was all mixed up with something else, something she could not talk about and tried not to think of, either. They began to talk of other things.

She got back to town to find that her father had finished his book and had sent it to Anstruther, and a week later that

gentleman said to her, "Have you read this book of your father's? Well, it's extraordinarily good. I'm writing him to-day to say I'm taking it and that I'm going to rush it and get it out this autumn."

"You like it?"

"No, I admire it. In some ways it's a really terrible book, but amazingly well done. It's real. Hasn't he discussed it with you?"

Sharlie smiled.

"No. He's been working on it for two years behind his pot-boilers."

"Well, he's brought it off. It's a queer bit of work with a streak of genius. I can't think what he's been doing all these years—prostituting his talent over that early silver filigree stuff and all these recent bot-boilers. If he can do this, why hasn't he done it before?"

Recognising this as one of the questions that did not require an answer, Sharlie attempted none, but her heart was considerably lightened by these and other remarks of which Charles Anstruther delivered himself at intervals during the day as if the book was somehow on his mind, and with his permission she went home to repeat to her father such parts of them as she thought he would best like to hear.

She found Fanny not yet returned from a bridge party, Miss Young, the poker-faced young woman secretary, gone for the day, and her father sitting alone in the drawing-room with a typewritten manuscript upon his knee. He looked up at her with an unusually amiable smile and as she came in and sat down he said, tapping the manuscript, "Does David send you his masterpieces?"

"Sometimes. Not for a long while now, though. Is that the latest?"

"Yes. I'm inclined to think the young man wants a hiding. By the way, how *old* is David?"

"He'll be seventeen in June. What's his story about?"

"Nothing—after the manner of modern stories."

"Oh!" said Sharlie.

"Well, ostensibly, it's about a holiday party in the Black Forest. To the best of your knowledge, Shar, has the young man ever *been* to the Black Forest?"

"No, but need he have been? For the purposes of writing about it, I mean. After all, other people have been there. There was a novel, I remember, a few years ago, with a Norwegian setting, which the author admitted was founded on nothing more than the geography book."

"Well, it's not only that. The thing's full of emotions he can't have experienced and situations he can't have encountered. Either the young man's a pervert or he's a genius. Unpleasant, either way."

"Doesn't imagination count for anything in a writer?"

"Imagination? This thing's sophisticated—dripping with sophistication! No young man of sixteen ought to know so much about so much."

"Well, I expect he'll grow out of it—or else it's a case of dual personality. There never was any doubt that Dave was going to write, of course. *Somebody* had to inherit your talent."

This seemed to be a thought acceptable to Philip Stratton, who took off his glasses (which he detested wearing and never kept on a second longer than he need) and handed David's story to Sharlie. "Ah, well," he said, "read it and tell me what you think of it. You're nearer to his generation than I am—and David won't mind what you say, anyway."

Keeping the manuscript in her hands, Sharlie said, "Mr. Anstruther told me to-day that he is going to publish *Ashes*."

The expression that came into her father's face was a baffling one. Surprise (that Anstruther should have acquainted her first with the fact?), pleasure, gratification—

these certainly were there, but there was something else, something that Sharlie could not define. She said, "He says it kept him out of his bed, that it has a streak of genius and will cause a sensation." She smiled. "That ought to give you an appetite."

But still the expression on Philip's face continued to baffle her. Still she found it harboured something that had nothing to do with pleasure or gratified vanity or the satisfaction that comes to a writer when something upon which he has spent effort and time, into which he has poured the hope and despair of months of hard work, is praised and approved by one whose opinion is informed and valuable. Almost it seemed to her that his expression was one of malice. Sharlie thought, a little sadly, "I suppose it's an unpleasant book," and reflected that the books which were most highly praised these days usually were.

After a while Philip said, "That's official, is it? Anstruther's definitely taking it?"

"Yes. He's writing to you this evening about it. A personal note, not through the office. He was so very enthusiastic about it he's promised me a bound proof copy directly one is ready."

There was no mistake, this time, about the expression upon Philip's face. Sharlie saw fury there—and the greatest possible anxiety. He said in peremptory tones, "You're *not* to read it in proof. You mustn't dream of it. I won't have it! You must wait until the book's properly out!"

She stared at him, too surprised to speak, and again he said, "You hear? I want your promise. If there's any question of your reading it in proof I shall withdraw it from Ffoliots at once."

Quite staggered by the violence and anger of his voice, which seemed doubly terrible to her after the quiet and reasonableness of the conversation which had led up to it,

Sharlie folded away behind an expression of cold distaste all the pleasure and enthusiasm which Charles Anstruther's opinion had induced in her. She thought, this is the sort of thing which has punctuated all my life. He's quite impossible. He mistrusts and dislikes me so much that he cannot bear me to read his book before it appears in case I shouldn't like it—in case I should spoil his pleasure in it. If he could I believe he would prevent me from reading the book at all. . . . But this reflection caused her hardly any pain, merely inducing in her a kind of weary disgust. She had long ago recognised that her father was absurdly over-sensitive about his work where she was concerned, that he regarded her as unbearably lofty and superior, and had long ceased to be troubled by his attitude.

She said, "Please don't do anything so ridiculous. I wouldn't, of course, dream of reading your book in proof if the idea displeases you."

"It does—intensely," said Philip Stratton.

Into the stiff little silence that followed Fanny came bristling with high spirits and amiability. She'd had a good afternoon, it seemed, and was sorry she was so late. Philip looked at her as if she were some kind of singularly unpleasant insect, putting on his glasses as if the better to inspect her. His cold glance took in her smart attire (no longer black), the smiling good-tempered face with its double chin, each and every one of her too ample curves, the little hat stuck at the back of her head, the unpractical shoes that propped up her little plump feet, the rather hastily-powdered face and unevenly applied lipstick, and rested finally upon the hat.

"You know, my dear Fanny," he said, removing his glasses, "you really are one of the women who ought not to try to look like Queen Elizabeth."

"Queen Elizabeth?" Fanny stared at him.

"Yes, isn't that what women are trying to do with their hats this year?"

"Oh, Phil, don't you think it suits me? I thought it did, rather." Fanny moved aside to get a glimpse of herself in the glass. "I'm sorry I'm so late," she said again, her high spirits a little damped by Philip's insolent inquisition and his remark about her new hat.

"You needn't be," said Philip, and if ever there was hatred upon a human countenance, Sharlie thought, it was there upon Philip's as he rose from his seat, stuffed his glasses into his pocket and favoured Fanny with a stare without them—no less insulting than its predecessor.

"You know, my dear Fanny," he said, "you don't look at all the sort of woman for whom one would commit murder—you really don't."

His tone had nothing whatever to do with the expression on his face. It was quiet and amusing, and suddenly he gave a little laugh and went out of the room.

Left to themselves Fanny and Sharlie stared at each other for a second in blank amazement. Fanny recovered first.

"Whatever's the matter with him?" she said. "Queen Elizabeth, murder! . . . He's been quite amiable, too, the last day or two. *Do* I look so awful, Shar? I know I powdered my face in a hurry when I saw how late it was, but still . . . *Is* it so awful?"

"Of course it isn't. You look all right. I'm afraid it's my fault. I told him Ffoliots are taking his book and that Anstruther was keen on it. But I spoiled it all by saying that Anstruther wanted me to read it and was going to let me have a proof copy."

"Well, I don't see anything in that."

"Well, he did. He got quite excited. I quite forgot that he hates to think I read anything he writes."

"Well, he'd hate it still more if you didn't read it—

like me. But fancy saying that about murder! Really, Shar, you know I sometimes *do* think he's not quite right in his head. Why *should* anybody say a thing like that?"

"Goodness knows!" said Sharlie. She felt thoroughly dispirited and superfluous, and the idea of sitting at the dinner-table with her father so repelled her that she said: "I think I'll ring Judy up and see if she's got time for a theatre or something."

"Ask her here for dinner first, then."

"Father doesn't like Judy."

"He won't be rude to her. He keeps that for us. And if he is Judy won't care."

"Do we?"

"Well, it rather worries me his being like this, I must say. I do like people to be a bit nice to each other, anyway. . . . It makes life so much pleasanter. I can't think what's changed him so much. If you'd known him years ago, before we were married . . ."

"I did."

"Well, you know what I mean. . . . I'm sure there's something the matter with him, Shar. He ought to go to one of those psycho people. . . . Oh, well, there's worse troubles at sea. But ask Judy, anyway. She's good-tempered, and lively, whatever else she isn't."

"All right," said Sharlie, and went away to do it.

Judy came along, bringing with her that downright common-sense air she wore as other women wear an air which is flirtatious, charming, or designedly feminine. But Philip wasn't rude—to Judy or to anybody else. As if that scene before dinner had purged his mood he talked with Judy of things of the day with so much grace and courtesy that Sharlie's heart softened towards him, and she felt absurdly grateful—she didn't know to whom, but fancied it was to Judy. Fanny looked at her once, raising her eyebrows and

giving her that little quizzical smile which meant: Would you *believe* it? Can you *beat* it? or, Do you suppose this is all for Judy? Fanny, who never bore grudges, smiled and played her usual game of contented charming wife to Philip.

Wife to Philip, daughter to Philip. . . . Sharlie sighed. She didn't know about Fanny, but she rather fancied that there was somehow rather more of herself than that. . . .

Two days later Sharlie went into Charles Anstruther's room to come face to face with Julian Evesham. She had known this must happen sometime, but not that her heart would give that wild leap and then seem to fall clean out of her body. She uttered her little conventional greeting, put down the letters she had brought in for Anstruther to sign and went back to her room. Standing by the window, her eyes gazing down into the busy street, she saw only that loved remembered face that had gone very pale, but had smiled at her, and looked not surprised at all (as how should it? He must have expected to see her), but only as if he had come to the end of a dull journey. So he was back in England—and this was going to happen pretty often! Earlier, when she had faced this contingency, nothing had stirred in her. She had believed it would cost her as little as that day six months ago when she had said good-bye, but in that instant when her eyes had rested upon his face she had realised that something she had believed dead was only numbed. It was not going to be possible to continue seeing him. She couldn't risk it. She thought that again and again as she stood there at the window, and the thought was still mounting in her like a threatening tide when the door opened softly, shut again and she turned swiftly to see Julian leaning against it, looking at her across the length of the little room.

"Please go away," she said in a tiny voice.

"Oh, *why?*"

He put out a hand and turned up the electric switch. By

the light of the gas-fire and that from the buildings opposite, he could see her standing there at the window, quite still, her eyes upon him, her hands at her throat. He came swiftly across the room, took her in his arms and involved her in a kiss that was as involuntary and instinctive as the breath they drew. But when it was over she wrenched herself away from him and stood with her face in her hands, most bitterly ashamed. When she raised it he saw how pale she was, that her eyes stared out from puzzled frowning brows and that her mouth trembled.

"Well?" he said.

"Oh, why did you come in?" she cried.

"Because I thought you wanted to see me. Didn't you?"

She gave him no answer to that.

"Shar! *Didn't* you?"

She moved away from the caress in his voice.

"Oh, *please*. . . . It isn't any use. We *can't* go on with this!"

"Why not? You want to."

"I don't—I really don't."

"Oh, Shar!"

She made again that weary, desperate gesture as of one struggling in seas too strong. But when he took her again in his arms the lovely surrendering curve of her body made less than nonsense of her protestations.

"Come out with me to-night," he said, "and we'll talk about it. We'll go where you like. I won't ask you to come to the flat, but we've got to have this out."

"Talking won't help us. We've said everything there is to say."

"Then don't let's talk. Only come and sit somewhere with me, and let me look at you again. Oh, Shar, I'd have sold my soul for the sight of your face any time during the last six months . . ."

She looked at him as a young animal in a trap looks at its captor. She said: "It would be better if you went away and never saw me again!"

"Why shouldn't we meet? I don't ask you for anything else."

She said, bitterly: "It isn't necessary to ask, apparently."

He laughed at that and pulled her up to him, pressing his lips to her throat.

"We've been fools," he said. "Both of us, you for sending me away, I for going. You won't find it so easy to get rid of me this time."

As she stood there with her body curved into his, his lips upon her throat, she knew she had no strength left to fight either him or her own desire. She said, scarcely knowing that she had spoken: "I don't want to get rid of you . . ."

From the first Sharlie felt it to be all wrong. A relationship which had once been a thing to which she delivered herself as one falling upon peace, had become a thing of the senses, something that excited her, but left her cold and disgusted. Of the old relationship there was nothing left—no tranquillity, no enchantment, no sense of security or contentment and, what was much worse, no sense of something permanent, of something made to last. It seemed to her quite impossible, indeed, that she should ever have felt these things about a relationship which she saw now as nothing other than an intrigue, unblest, a little turbulent, a mere physical attraction. She knew that her instincts had betrayed her and sometimes she hated Julian a little for having re-aroused them, and always she saw with an unyielding certainty that the source of her feeling for him had been corrupted. What held her now was something that was to her quite valueless, though not without significance, and however long it lasted it could never, she knew, bring her any real happiness. It did no more than unsettle her, keep her nerves taut and her mind

disturbed. That she did not put an end to it was symptomatic of the limp dishevelled mental state into which she had tumbled headlong, and out of which she could not, as yet, extricate herself. She felt as if she drowned in a morass of muddled emotion and did not care sufficiently at the moment to make any effort to save herself.

A queer and damping exasperation moved continually between them. They did not quarrel, but she resisted with obstinacy and determination his perpetual effort to pretend that everything was as before. What she thought of as his mental dishonesty vaguely annoyed her; she moved restlessly beneath and away from it. Also, Julian himself was too clearly aware that she saw him now as she had seen him six months ago, as the *raison d'être* of the tragedy which still haunted her mind; aware that she never saw him, never spent an evening with him, never gave herself without realising afresh that but for him, but for these things between them, Pen had never died. He believed her to be monstrously wrong, but he saw that the conviction had become a part of her mental equipment and that she despised herself for having succumbed again to something which (as she saw it) had ended long before—and ended so disastrously. By the end of the first month he was aware that it could not last, that his old dream of any acknowledged life together, in England or elsewhere, was a thing of the past. He ceased badgering her, bending all his energies to the getting of whatever there was to get for either of them out of what was left of their relationship.

CHAPTER FOUR

PHILIP'S book was listed for the middle of October, and a week before its appearance Anstruther sent Julian Evesham a proof copy, following the prevalent fashion of securing advance (favourable) verdicts from people whose opinions, for some reason or other, the publishers considered worth having. Julian, who had not much opinion of the criticism of his own day and generation, was, however, not insensitive to the compliment and not unaware that it conveyed an indication of the extent to which he had consolidated his position with his Tudor series of novels, so he settled down to the reading of *Ashes* with the kind of pleasure that helped him temporarily to forget that he did not care for Philip Stratton's work, and that there was every likelihood of his being distinctly bored.

However, he was not bored. Far from it. *Ashes*, he found, impressed him considerably, and his interest grew as he realised that some parts of it at least must be heavily autobiographical. He thought that Stratton had shown a fine dramatic sense in turning the events of his early life to such good purpose, but when he said this to Sharlie, she asked: "Do you mean it's about Fanny and all of us at Edward Street?"

"Yes, a lot of it, but earlier than that. It begins with his first marriage and your mother's death. I must say he seems to me to have been most ingenious over that. He's staged one of the best unsuspected murders I've encountered in fiction. Shouldn't have thought he had it in him!"

The expression on Sharlie's face stopped him abruptly.

"You'd better read it for yourself," he said, and brought

her the proof copy open at the particular chapter.

Remembering her promise to her father, she would not at first look at it, but later, driven by something further Julian said, she took it home and carried it upstairs with her to bed.

And there, in the middle of the night, lying in bed in that familiar little room she had known nearly all her life, Sharlie learned that her father was a murderer—that he had killed her mother as certainly as if he had cut her throat.

She made no attempt to dodge the implications of that chapter which had earned Julian's commendation. She knew, with a shattering certainty of conviction, that it was good and convincing as a piece of writing, for the staggering reason that it was true. She had always felt that the morning of her mother's death was like a scene in a play to which she had come in late—that there was something which she had missed, and which had subtly altered what she had seen. And now the whole thing had been re-enacted before her eyes. There was no shadow of doubt. The thing took shape in her mind, giving shape and substance, also, to so much that had followed. She found it quite impossible to disassociate her father from the central character of his book. It was there, all his life, and much of hers and Fanny's, in *Ashes*, for all to read. His mingled affection, fear and dislike of her, the slow poisoning of the wells of happiness, his disillusion and bitter hopeless cynicism about Fanny, the decline of his trivial pleasant talent, his hope that the war might blunt something within himself which had never quite allowed him to forget. Here was the true explanation of those passages in *Conflict* which had puzzled Shane Mostyn all those years ago. Here was an explanation of everything that had happened in the last twenty years. It was dreadful and unbearable—and inescapably true. But what filled her with frozen horror and drove sleep from her pillow so steadily that eventually she turned on the light and settled down to the final chapters, was

the thought that her father could put it all down like that in black and white for other people to read; could make of it just a book by which he hoped to make money and a fresh, bright bubble of reputation. That seemed to her more horrible than anything else.

When once again she had put out the light, the horror in her mind, she found, had become mixed with many other things. Indignation, surprise, interest—the book was so startlingly alive it illuminated for her the whole path of her existence since the day she had first come to Edward Street. It left nothing out and no pity or generosity had moved even faintly in Philip Stratton as he wrote. *Ashes* was frank and malicious, and the picture of herself no more flattering than that of Fanny—poor Fanny, who would be hurt and puzzled and would see not the distortion but only that fiendish trick of likeness. The cruelty of the book was like cold steel against Sharlie's heart, and even as she wondered why, if he had to do this he must do it in quite this way, she was aware that the book carried the answer. For stamped upon its every page was the impression of something gone rotten at the core and working evilly outwards. Nothing in life was left sweet or wholesome or worth while. All the affection—twisted, querulous, mortified—that was left in Philip Stratton had centred in Pen, whom he drew here as Fanny's daughter with a dreadful unexpected clarity of vision that moved Sharlie to dismayed unwilling admiration. She had thought that she was the only person who had known those things of Pen. . . . In the tragedy assigned to her was the only deviation, so far as Sharlie could see, from what looked like a thorough-going attempt to blazon the whole of their private lives abroad. Yet here, too, he had twisted his knife in Fanny's vitals. His contempt for Fanny, warring perpetually with his passion for her, was the theme of his book—not the act of violence with which it opened—and Sharlie felt

faintly sick at what he made of it, at the slow ruthless exhibition of the worthlessness of the woman for whom he had sold his soul, at the parade of lust and desire which attended it.

As she rose and took herself off to her bath, it was Fanny, she found, with whom she was mainly concerned, with the thought that Fanny would read this book, would learn from it to what depths of degradation her intrigue with Philip had dragged him, and what had happened to all his life because of it. Perhaps because Fanny had always been so kind and good-tempered, because she had so consistently saved her household from the scenes which might otherwise and so easily have disrupted it, or because of that attractive picture Philip drew of her as a young girl when first they had met, Sharlie found herself longing to save Fanny from the truth he was now forcing upon her. Poor Fanny, who had gone so white the other evening when he had told her she wasn't the sort of woman for whom men commit murder, who had looked scared and said she thought he wasn't quite right in his head, who'd lived like the rest of them with a murderer for twenty years without once suspecting the truth, who had borne his neglect and insults with good-natured indifference —she was not the person to whom you told so harsh a truth! There and then was born in Sharlie so fierce a hatred of the intrigue, so passionate a desire after what was open and everyday, that despite the warmth of her bath she felt suddenly cold and shivered violently. What had Fanny and her father ever got out of that old illicit attachment save dissatisfaction on the one hand and wrecked happiness and career on the other? What had she and Julian? . . . She dragged her thoughts away from that back to her father and his book. His intrigue had yielded him that—the best book of his life, which might well bring him fame and fortune, whatever it did to Fanny or anybody else. But not if Sharlie

could help it. She knew that she meant to do her best to persuade him not to publish it.

Philip was amiable that morning at breakfast, and his voice was amiable, too, when he replied to her statement that she would like a word with him before going to the office.

"I'll be in my study," he said, and five minutes later, hatted, coated and gloved, Sharlie walked in and shut the door.

"I've come to tell you," she said at once, "that I've broken my promise and read your book in proof."

The amiability did not disappear from Philip's face, but it cracked a little as if it were something stuck on. He said: "I might have known you would."

"I can explain if you like."

"I don't. Is that what you came to do?"

"No."

"Then to give me your candid opinion of the book, perhaps?"

"No." Sharlie hesitated, then plunged. "Father, you can't mean to publish this book?"

"Of course I mean to publish it. Why else did I write it?"

"Goodness knows! But you can't *possibly* publish it!"

This seemed to amuse Philip considerably.

"And why not?" he asked in dulcet tones.

"It would be too cruel!"

"To whom?"

His voice was still slightly amused, but its unconcern made her suddenly cry out: "Oh, Father! You *must* see! Everybody will know! You can't do a thing like that—to Fanny or yourself!"

"What on earth do you mean?" asked Philip, still apparently amused, still entirely unconcerned as to the drift of the conversation.

Sharlie said: "You can't *want* Fanny to know that you

murdered my mother in order to marry her!"

Philip laughed.

"My dear Shar," he said, "you have a most literal mind. What makes you think *Ashes* is autobiographical?"

"It's obvious."

"Only to you, I think. And, as usual, it doesn't seem to have occurred to you that you may be wrong."

"I'm not wrong," said Sharlie.

"I shan't argue with you."

"But you *will* publish?"

"Of course I shall publish, damn you! What do you think I wrote the book for?"

"To salve your conscience, perhaps."

"Not at all. However, I am glad the book makes so strong an impression upon you. I'm mightily flattered!"

Sharlie burst out: "Father, you can't take that line with me! I'm quite sure that book's true, though I can't *imagine* why you should have written it—except on the same principle that one confesses to a priest. But you *must* see that you can't publish it! Everybody who knows us at all intimately will know that some of it is true and begin to wonder if the chapter about mother is true too. And what about Fanny? You can't mean to let Fanny know you committed murder because of her—a nasty mean little murder for which you couldn't be apprehended even now."

"My dear girl," said Philip, stubbing his cigarette with deliberation, "you're really very amusing. I didn't know you had it in you. But you're worrying yourself quite unduly, I do assure you. In the first place, it's extremely doubtful if Fanny will ever read a line of *Ashes*. She never reads anything—I strongly suspect she's never learnt to read—but even if I'm wrong and she should, at least she won't make your mistake. She'll understand that an author is perfectly justified not only in presenting certain facts in his life, if he so

chooses, but in adding to them or subtracting from them to whatever extent he likes, to improve his story. You're quite sure, of course, that it *is* Fanny's feelings you're so concerned with?"

"There are other people's, certainly, if that's what you mean. My grandparents', for example."

"And your own perhaps?"

Sharlie lifted her head. "I don't care very much, any longer, what you think of me," she said. "Does it occur to you that my grandmother might get an injunction against you?"

"Upon what grounds, if I may ask?"

"Well, you've been very frank about her and her daughter. It might even be held to be libel."

Philip laughed.

"Don't be ridiculous. She'd be laughed out of court. But she wouldn't be such a fool. If she ever reads the book (which, as with Fanny, is highly problematical) she'll say I've a nastier mind even than she thought—and no sense of decency. That's all!"

"Well, that's true, at least," said Sharlie.

"As you will. No arguing about matters of taste, anyway. Well, my dear, here's Miss Young, ten minutes late, as usual. Is there anything else you wish to say to me?"

"No," said Sharlie, "since it would only be a waste of time."

She walked out, and Miss Young walked in with no sign in face or bearing that she had heard her employer's remark. Sharlie envied her—but not for that. She envied her because she was Philip Stratton's secretary, and not his daughter, and because it didn't matter to her in the least that he had done something shameful and failed to be ashamed about it.

Nevertheless, Philip's attitude had not shaken her. She believed more firmly than ever, as she set out for the office,

in the actuality of Philip's story without in the least arriving at any sort of understanding as to why he had written it. How could it have been to hurt Fanny if he was so sure that she would either not read it or put no such personal construction upon it? Or to hurt her grandmother, since much the same answer applied? To hurt *her?* Had she not just assured him that she cared nothing any longer for his opinion of her? Ah, but he had hurt her, none the less, and in nothing more than in the assurance he had given her that that awful deed was no longer matter for conscience or expiation, but only existed in his mind as a basis for a work of fiction, an attempt to secure fame and fortune. Never again, she thought, would she feel for him tenderness or affection or make for him that little twisted mental gesture of regret, of sorrow, at something pushed out of shape, something irretrievably spoiled and marred. She hoped that she might never see him or think of him again. She thought: If he publishes that book I shall hate him. But she knew that he would, that it was not in her power or anyone else's to stop him—and that he must have known that even when he forbade her to read it in proof form.

When Julian rang up during the morning and asked her to lunch with him, she pleaded an excuse. *Ashes*, of course, had done nothing for Julian. It had only made Sharlie more certain than ever that no good could come out of their relationship, that she saw now only as she saw Philip's old-time passion for Fanny. Almost she wished that of Julian, too, she might never think again. Bending over her typewriter that morning, she longed for some Lethean stream in which she might bathe and find forgetfulness. She felt unclean, splashed from head to foot with gutter-filth. Her head ached and her hands trembled so much that her typing was execrable. She wished she could be ill—ill enough to die. But she wouldn't die. One was neither ill of disgust

nor died of it.

Three days later at dinner Fanny referred to *Ashes*.

"Phil gave me an early copy," she said. "Have you read it, Shar? *Most* exciting! I couldn't put it down. I think it's the best thing he's ever done. I can't imagine why he didn't do it before."

Sharlie stared at her, aware that her father's amused glance was upon her.

"Do you really like it?" she inquired.

"Very much indeed. Don't you?"

"No," said Sharlie.

Philip laughed.

"She thinks it's all true, Fan—that I've written an autobiography in the guise of fiction, that the woman frightened to death was Alex, that I am the murdering-philandering husband, that the unpleasant silly second wife is yourself, and that she is the elder daughter, outwardly so self-righteous, but inwardly so true a daughter of her philandering papa."

Fanny laughed, too.

"Oh, Phil, don't talk such nonsense! *Of course* she doesn't believe anything of the sort! *Do* you, Shar? Personally, I think it was a brain-wave to give such ordinary things such a clever twist."

Sharlie stared at her. Had she really not a single qualm? Had she read that scene in the bedroom of the week-end cottage without even the slightest queasiness at the pit of her stomach? And had she really forgotten that so short a while ago Phil had made that remark which had upset her so much? Did no hint of it drift back to her now, create in her mind no uneasy suspicion that what looked like fiction might indeed be fact? Apparently not. Apparently Fanny's mind was like a sieve. She said easily, with that comfortable suggestion of plain common sense peculiarly her own: "After all, novelists can't *always* be thinking of new stories. I don't see why they

shouldn't use the things that happen to them and just touch them up to make them exciting. *Life* isn't exciting, goodness knows! Nothing dramatic ever *happens*, somehow!" And Fanny sighed.

Philip laughed.

"There you are!" he said to Sharlie; "what did I tell you?"

Sharlie said nothing. It was unbelievable. But true, apparently. Nothing would ever make Fanny even suspect that this book was not a work of the imagination at all, and nothing would ever convince Sharlie that it was.

Fanny said uneasily: "What's the matter? What have I said?"

"It's all right," Philip assured her; "you've just been justifying my opinion of your intelligence—that's all," at which remark Fanny looked a little surprised, but decidedly gratified.

The book appeared ten days later and the reviews were certainly all that any publisher could desire. Charles Anstruther, it is true, was a little surprised at the lack of enthusiasm upon the part of the gifted author's daughter, and told her, with considerable satisfaction, that he "expected to live on her father for the next twelve months." But David, writing from school, had enthusiasm enough for twenty. "By Jove," he wrote to Sharlie, "P. A.'s got away with it this time. The ineffable Helen was right. It very nearly *is* all she said it was!"

By the beginning of December the book had sold nearly twenty-five thousand copies and week after week Philip Stratton's name filled half a column of the Sunday *Observer* and *Times*, and was emblazoned, as Julian irreverently remarked, upon the scroll of fame almost exclusively sacred these days to the twinkling little stars of Hollywood. The house in Edward Street awoke suddenly to a new exciting

life, in which Fanny buzzed with boundless energy and delight; and Sharlie to a renewed sense of the gigantic irony of existence. Once again people came streaming through the lofty pleasant rooms, drank cocktails, danced and talked on that floor where all those years ago Fanny had stood laughing with that young man Philip believed to have been her lover. Was that really true? Had Fanny been light, systematically unfaithful, caring not very much for any man, but diffusing her favours, flattering and being flattered, displaying her "rotten taste in men," and covering all with her large and easy air of a finely human toleration? What did it matter, anyway? What did anything matter? Life was futile and stupid, wasteful, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

To these evenings came once or twice a ghost from the past—Shane Mostyn, spending a brief holiday in London with his wife, another ghost, lovely as Sharlie remembered her, but serene and untroubled as she did not remember her. And when Shane said in her hearing to Julian: "We thought you were coming out to Italy," she shook her head and moved away, leaving Julian to make what explanation he chose, and thinking how unreal that Italian idea had already become. Everything, these days, was unreal, save the disgust which had her by the throat, to which not only the spectacle of her father's middle-aged passion for Fanny (resurrected and invested with a new lease of life since her easy acceptance of *Ashes*, and apt to become a little too obvious after these party evenings), but her own physical feeling for Julian, that tore everlastingly at her coldness and disapproval, were contributing factors. Her father, convinced as she was of his guilt, had become abhorrent to her. Beneath the tide of her assurance of his infamy, every much-tried and filial impulse she had ever had towards him had been washed away. It was not that she was swayed by any sentimental memories of her mother. It was not even the fact that her end had been

hastened by her father's dastardly but surely unpremeditated act, but rather that he had made it a matter of business, had turned his baseness and meanness into a money-and-reputation-making scheme—had lied about them, laughed at her charges and talked glibly of matters of taste. She hated him—an unvarying emotion that caused her to see him not as someone demoralised by the yielding to a sudden horrible temptation (as she would have done had he confessed his crime or written of it as fact), but as a monster whose natural instincts were perverted or atrophied. He had become the murderer type. He could murder and forget—could regret only that the murder had brought him something less than he had expected. It was horrible, revolting, outside nature.

When she said these things to Julian he said mildly comforting things, and things that were exasperating and not mildly so at all. What proof had she that that so excellently described murder *was* a fact, after all? None—save a childish memory that had puzzled and worried her adult mind. Really, she did seem, on that score, Julian intimated, to be giving herself a bad time over nothing. Well then, over very little. *Again*, his voice seemed to say aggrievedly. First, that business with poor Pen, now this with her father. What, he seemed mutely to inquire, had happened to that equable, balanced, self-contained Sharlie he had known for so long? Gone, gone, she told herself, reading his thought and wildly and vainly searching for some of the old happy peace of mind, the long procession of busy, uneventful days lighted briefly by what she had believed an ideal passion, a fundamental sympathy. The world had narrowed to the dimensions of a cell where no light ever came and no mercy, no loving human kindness, where people laughed at their own cruel acts and forgot them, and thought her just a little mad. . . .

Even Judy, who took Julian's point of view, believed that Sharlie had nothing really to "go" upon, thought it ridiculous

to base so much upon so little, and had not believed that Sharlie could be so melodramatic. To Judy, as to Julian, it seemed much more probable that Philip Stratton had been making ingenious use of circumstances than that he was one of the people who could commit a murder and spend the rest of his life as if he had done nothing of the sort. "If he were the murderer type, as you suggest," Judy said, "he'd have murdered Fanny ages ago, and tried his hand at dispatching you, too. After all, a man couldn't get away with a murder as easily and successfully as all that and not want to keep his hand in . . ." Sharlie considered this a piece of painful levity, and regarded her friend with something approaching dismay, wondering why she had ever expected Judy, hard-headed, sensible creature that she was, to re-act to *Ashes* as she had done. She listened in silence as Judy declared that Philip Stratton was just an ordinary selfish average man she'd never actively liked or disliked, and that Sharlie was merely absurdly morbid over the whole thing. Oh, she agreed that the thing wasn't in good taste, but it was done often enough, and she quoted a whole string of people, to Sharlie's amazement, who were reputed to do this sort of thing in every book they wrote, and she quoted Julian in support of her contention. Shar, she said further, had never got over the shock of Pen's death, and never would until she went away for a complete change of scene. She suggested that she got some extra leave at Christmas and went down to Carr. "The place agrees with you," she said, "and you could take Julian, couldn't you?"

"No," said Sharlie, with an air of finality, at which Judy opened her eyes and shrugged her shoulders. "Well, I don't see why not," she remarked. "You always used. Do the grandparents now disapprove?"

"They believe we no longer see each other," said Sharlie, suddenly aware that it wasn't of her grandparents she was thinking.

"Oh, well." Again Judy shrugged her straight, trim shoulders. "You're damn difficult to advise, my dear."

"I don't want advice."

"Well, I'm going to give you some. It's this. You can't go on like this, unless you want a complete breakdown—and a lot of good that'll do you. If you won't go to Carr with Julian for a month or two, won't go off with him and make a life of your own somewhere or other, drop the whole thing and clear out. Your family's no use to you—never has been—and what on earth possessed you to come back to it after you'd once got away, heaven only knows. Clear out again—and marry the first decent man who asks you. Marriage and a baby every year for a bit's what you want, Charlotte Stratton. It's about the only thing that'll bring you to your senses and get rid of this absurd bee in your bonnet about murdering fathers. . . . And now, if you want to damn me, you can begin."

"I don't," said Sharlie.

"All right. But for goodness' sake, do *something*, anything. Make up your mind. . . . Well, I must be off. I've got a laparotomy op. in an hour's time at the Clinic."

And Judy took herself off.

Philip Stratton's sudden determination to let the Edward Street house and go off to the South of France to avoid the bitter English weather Sharlie welcomed with a feeling of deep if silent relief until she saw that it would have the effect of throwing her into Julian's arms, and from this she shied away in a panic so surprising that she was forced to stand and consider it. Perhaps Judy was right, and she was heading for a breakdown. Perhaps she ought to follow her advice and put an end to things, go away, start again, endeavour to forget. . . . She was aware that her head ached these days far too often, and that she slept badly, and knew that it was as

much the strain of her new relationship with Julian as misery over her conviction concerning her father that was responsible. For the two things seemed inseparably bound together. Since reading *Ashes* she had relegated her relationship with Julian to a plane which it had cost her too much to maintain, since her feeling for him remained on the physical side as strong, as compelling as ever. But something obstinate in her, something shocked, repelled and averted, forbade her to yield to it. She saw it now not alone as a thing which, judged by its results, was already condemned, but as something illicit, forbidden—and whatever her body had to say about it, with all her mind and intelligence she wanted none of it. She saw herself too clearly (perhaps with the assistance of that portrait in *Ashes*) as her father's daughter—the self-righteous, but secretly self-indulgent female—who found high-sounding terms for the same questionable conduct as had brought him to disaster. The thought of herself moved by such passion and bodily hunger as moved Philip even now, growing fat and coarse and well on the way to his sixtieth birthday, brought her to a fierce and withering contempt of herself that took the flesh from her bones and dragged so persistently at the corners of her mouth that already the youth was slipping out of her face. Fanny looked at her with concern and, like Judy, suggested a holiday "from that old office," and with the same amount of success.

"I wish she would," said Fanny one night to Philip as they reached home after a theatre. "She's quite losing her looks—so absurd at her age! I suppose she's in love with Evesham, after all. That *does* seem a silly affair! It's a thousand pities he can't marry her."

"Not, I think," said Philip sweetly, "for Evesham."

"Oh, Phil, don't be so horrid! I'm sure he *used* to be devoted to her."

"Think so?" said Philip, his eyes upon the expanse of white

bosom Fanny's new frock displayed. "D'you know, that's a damn disgusting dress you've got on, Fan . . ."

"Oh, Phil, I'm sure it isn't."

"No? Well, have a drink."

Fanny shook her head at the proffered whisky.

"You know I hate the stuff."

"Go on. Be friendly!"

"All right," said Fanny, aware that the conversation about Sharlie was finished, and that already Philip had had more than sufficient to drink. She sipped at the whisky she detested with a gingerly air and wished that Philip did not always feel amorous when she had on a new frock. His sudden embrace, she was aware, spelt danger to it. She wondered idly as she submitted to it, if Shar and Evesham had really "gone all the way" (really, you couldn't believe it of Shar!), and why it had fallen down, and what a pity it really was that he couldn't marry her. Philip, she thought, was all wrong about Sharlie. She was really very kind and human, even if she was a little *comme il faut*—and, of course, she *was* highfalutin even about men, which was, Fanny considered, quite absurd. She laughed and ceased to bother so very much about protecting her frock.

Just before Fanny's arrangements were complete, Sharlie suddenly gave up her job, withstood all Julian's arguments and went off to Carr. Fanny, emerging for a moment from a sea of frocks and hats, was flattered to think her advice had been taken and Sharlie did not contradict her. She had the feeling that she was saying good-bye for the last time to everything that had belonged to her old life and to everybody in it, and save when she thought of Judy or of David she hoped she was. Judy she would not think too much about, but David was a different matter. He didn't want her, for one thing; he wanted nobody very much. He was, she rather fancied, all the things her father had once hated her for being,

self-sufficient, self-contained, an amused and scornful spectator at the feast of life—but David wasn't scornful. David liked people or liked, perhaps, to watch their queer antics. He took them as he found them. He didn't care what they did. Life and people would interest David for years and years, maybe for the whole span of his existence. He wouldn't miss her—and, in any case, he had long been lost to her. There was nothing for her at Edward Street any longer. She was glad to go.

As she sat in the train that bore her north that bitter January day of 'twenty-nine, she had the sense of having embarked upon something that was irrevocable, of having done something that was motivated by nothing anybody had ever suggested she should do. Fanny and Judy were alike both out of this. Something deeper than advice or even her own desire or volition went to this. It was more, even, than an act of self-preservation. She did not understand it, but as the train dashed on through the white and wintry country, it seemed to her that she had left behind not all the world she had ever known, but some strange phantom sphere to which she had never belonged, in which she had never really had a place, and that now she was about to achieve something somewhere that was real—some world in which she would begin to live, where she would find a place of her own. She was no longer hurrying away from something but, rather, journeying to it. Something that had nothing to do with Carr and the odd intervals of life she had lived there. Carr, too, was a thing of the past.

Outside, over the bare and wintry landscape, the sun was setting in a red ball. The sky looked full of snow. It would certainly freeze at night, and Ann Selwyn would be worrying about her rose bushes and covering the buds of her magnolias. Sharlie sighed, settled herself more comfortably in her corner, shut her eyes and presently fell asleep.

CHAPTER FIVE

At Carr, in the year of the Great Frost, Sharlie found that the fame of her father's book was not unduly disturbing anybody. Her grandmother said: "I haven't read a book of your father's these ten years or more, and I see no reason at my age why I should begin again." Her grandfather said: "My novel-reading days are over." Nobody, she found, cared in the least what *Ashes* was about, and although she breathed a sigh of relief, she was staggered by what she thought of so often as her father's astuteness, and made angry because he was so right in all his easy assumptions, because he was so *safe*. He had nothing to fear, no hint even of unpleasantness, from anybody. Nothing to fear either any longer from his own conscience, for he had ceased to have one. The way of the transgressor was *not* hard. On the contrary. . . .

At Cross Farm, too, the concern with contemporary fiction and with Philip Stratton's position in the ranks of its writers was singularly remote. Melody's baby was now several months old. It was a boy and Melody said laughingly: "Of *course* it's a boy; I know my duty as a farmer's wife," but Clive, eyeing young Joseph with a casual eye, said he was not so sure about it—that by the time the young hopeful was grown up there'd be nothing left to farm and that he'd find himself sitting on an office stool, like as not, or standing at a counter counting out other people's money. Clive had relinquished in desperation a goodly part of his wheat-growing activities which he saw as the quickest way to the bankruptcy court, and Mark had agreed with him. But the summer of twenty-eight had not been kind to his new experiments; he had suffered severe losses over his cows and

was now involved in his first difficult experiments with the newly-invented out-of-doors mechanical milking contrivances, from which, at the moment, he hoped for nothing very much save the saving of labour—an unpopular enough move, as he was well enough aware, in the countryside. Mark said that Cross Farm was no longer a farm at all but only a factory—which was the fate he believed awaited farms all over the country; and though he was not interested in factories, and bored by dairy-farming, this did not prevent him from rising at four each bitter morning and going out into the wintry fields in the piercing cold and helping Clive to coax stubborn cows to submit gracefully to the new arrangement. Some of them refused and to the end of their days had to be milked by hand, but gradually the thing began to work, and Clive became less an object of local fun and remained merely unpopular, because the new system had entailed the dismissal of so many men. They would, said Clive calmly, have been dismissed anyway, for the simple reason that he could not afford to keep them. Cross Farm had always been noted for its milk and butter, and in future there would be more of it. That was all, save that he'd got to find a wider clientèle. No use talking about it. Beth, despite her feeling for the waving cornfields, and now that Joe was no longer there to command her loyalty, applauded Clive's decision, and told Sharlie that his experiments reminded her of those days when she was a girl and had watched her father's unpopular struggles with tractors and engines and listened to his neighbours' gibes.

Sharlie spent a good deal of her time at the farm, helping Melody with her butter-making and with young Joe, and finding in these things a satisfaction and contentment that did not wholly surprise her. She sometimes wondered what it would have been like to have married Clive—to have borne his child, to be living here as Melody lived now, calling Beth

"mother," and receiving Clive's intimate friendly smile when he came in to his midday meal which she had cooked, hearing the casual farm talk, listening to his recitals of successes, failures, fresh custom or rebuffs, and even riding out with him at times in the motor-van when he set forth in search of fresh customers. Sharlie thought of her grandmother's face and wanted to laugh—the first time she had been really amused about anything for a long, long while. Though things had changed a good deal since those old days when she had been a child and an intimate of the farm homestead, there was still a fairly broad line drawn between those who rented farms and those who owned them, except in matters of blood sports, which didn't count here, for Ann Selwyn had always detested and taken no part in them. Sharlie thought, still with amusement, If I'd married Clive she'd have *given* us the farm to save her face! and did not understand in the least what the old lady was driving at when she said one day: "Do you think Mark Norman would sell his land in Canada and buy a farm here instead?" They had, Sharlie knew, two now standing idle and untenanted on their land. Nobody wanted them. But Henry knew what Ann meant, and he fixed his old eyes on Sharlie, and wondered if she had even begun to be aware that Mark Norman admired her.

She hadn't. That he should walk home with her on those evenings he was about when she started back, she took for granted. As a visitor, undeterred by household responsibilities, by mother, wife or child, he was obviously the person to squire her on the dark lonely country roads. Not that Sharlie would have minded them. She liked the space and peace of the quiet nights, and had some of the capacity of the cat for seeing in the dark. All the same, she began to enjoy Mark's company and found pleasure in getting him to talk of his Canadian experiences, entirely unaware of the fact

that he had spoken of them to hardly anybody else. He talked well, once you could get him to begin and had, she could see, a passionate attachment to the rough life he had lived out there in a land that seemed to her churlish and undesirable, even though it was a relief to talk about something so unlike anything she had ever known or experienced. Mark, running away from an emotional entanglement, could not, she thought, have had much time to remember it in this country, where Nature exacted her just dues with compound interest, where you went five or six miles to replenish your larder or to buy a postage stamp, where the nearest town was the best part of twenty miles away, where you did everything for yourself if you were a bachelor, coming home from a hard day's work on the prairie to make your own bed and cook your own meals. If you weren't married, Mark told her, you lived in a bachelor shanty as he and Harry had done until Harry had married. Life was easier for a man with a wife, but not for the wife. Henriette Dubois, marrying Harry Blunsdon, had all the work to do for him, for Mark and for two hired men. (Let Melody, fussing blithely around her one chick, making beds and butter, and helping her mother-in-law with the cooking, reflect upon that!) She washed, cooked (by wood-firing, too!), baked the household bread, drew up the household water from the well, walked five or six miles for her weekly groceries and bore two children in the space of three and a half years. He told her how he had ridden off that first time in a snowstorm to get the doctor, but how the second child had been born during the day, when they were all at work and Henriette had been there alone with a girl recently acquired to assist her during her pregnancy. Sharlie did not think he liked Henriette very much, but of his admiration there could be no doubt.

Sharlie was surprised to find herself envying Henriette those very hardships which Mark recounted as one who

thought the Canadian farmstead no place for a woman. To be so utterly occupied, to have no time to let mental states distract or control your life, to be in the midst of this tussle with Nature, to know yourself a part of it, seemed to her a truly enviable state. Sharlie had no pity to waste on Henriette Blunsdon. She got Mark to talk of her. What was she like? How old? How had Harry met her?—and the rest.

Mark's picture of Henriette was not very detailed. She was a French-Canadian girl, he said, and Harry had first seen her when she came up from Winnipeg to visit a brother who was farming a half-section near-by—the same brother, Sharlie supposed, whom she'd been so anxious to introduce later into their own farm, and in whose favour Mark had ultimately resigned. She was, he said, small and neatly-made, as hard as nails, as close-fisted as a monkey with nuts, with a tongue as sharp as a knife (Sharlie suspected that she had used it too often upon Mark!), and with more physical courage than he'd ever met in a woman before. Harry thought the world of her, and laughed at the sharp things she said, but Mark, Sharlie felt, had been uncomfortable with them, especially when they were directed, as she divined they frequently were, at him, the usurper. So he'd given in, had bought a half-section (some three hundred-odd acres), which had already been ploughed, in partnership with one of Harry's hired men, and was leaving him to what Mark called his "bloomin' family party."

She tried to get him to talk of New York, in which he had spent some time on the way home—and, as he alleged, a small fortune. But New York, Sharlie suspected, like Henriette Blunsdon, Mark had never properly looked at. He had carried away an impression of great heights and winking lights, of colour and noise and pulsating life, but what he remembered was the waterfront, with its tall ships arrived from all parts of the world, their masts standing up against the sky. He'd spent most of his evenings down there, he told

Sharlie—not at the theatres or speakeasies—watching the stars come out, the lamps coming alight on the tall masts of the ships, the water curling below and the silence dropping. . . .

He told her, too, about his journey to Canada nearly six years ago, and how disappointed he'd been (for he'd chosen the wrong part of the year and the harvest was in) not to see the vast expanses of yellow corn that had allured his eye from the London posters and seduced his mind from boyhood's days. But mostly he talked of the plough that never ceased to delight him, and of the joy of seeing virgin soil under crop. It was man's struggle with nature at its most impressive and satisfying. To make something grow where nothing ever grew before, the unfading untiring miracle—that, she saw, was Mark's passion as it had been his grandfather's before him. At least, whatever else he had not achieved, he had secured the job in life he wanted.

Ann Selwyn did not, Sharlie knew, altogether approve of Mark Norman, who could leave his own country and fuss with another. It was her own word. There was plenty of ploughing to be done at home—of one sort or another. Going to Canada was just throwing up the sponge, leaving British agriculture to go down-hill unchecked. She didn't approve, either, of Clive's experiments at Cross Farm, and thought that corn should be grown there now as it had been grown for so many more years than she cared to count.

"I don't believe it's ploughing that attracts him in Canada at all," she said, looking hard at Sharlie. "It's some girl he's found there."

"There aren't many where Mark is," said Sharlie quietly.

"You seem to know a lot about it," said Ann Selwyn, but Sharlie was not to be drawn.

How close her friendship with Mark had become she did not realise until three weeks before he was due to sail, when he went up to London to book his passage and spend a week

with his mother and Judy. Left then to Clive and Melody, taken up with young Joe and their other intimate concerns, with Beth Blunsdon taken up with them too, and with the claims of Carr House and its old people, Sharlie was conscious that she missed that something strangely warming and comforting which had surprisingly come into her life. That it was Mark she missed did not occur to her, though it was true. She missed, consciously at least, something they had shared, some ideal of life tacitly agreed, something friendly and unobtrusive. She did not even wonder if what her grandmother said was true—that there was a girl Mark cared for in Canada and to whom he was anxious to return. She only knew that when he'd gone there'd be a gap, that she would be sorry. Sorry and a little envious. Her thoughts of Mark went no further, no deeper.

Judy's letter, telling her that Julian had gone to Ireland to see his wife, who was ill, came like a communication from another world—a world with which she had nothing to do. So did Fanny's hastily-scrawled and highly-coloured post-cards from the French Riviera and her letter announcing their departure to Hollywood, where Philip was to have his book filmed. With each succeeding day the past seemed to slip a little farther away. It was impossible that anything that had ever belonged to it could ever again move her to happiness or despair. The only emotion of which, these days, she was conscious was that of faint wistful envy of the life to which in a few short weeks Mark Norman would be returning.

She was at the farm the evening he got back, and as usual when she rose to go he made ready to accompany her. The great frost had broken and the evening was warmer than one had come to believe it could ever be again. The moon was nearly full, and Mark and Sharlie found themselves converting into a stroll a journey which in the recent bitter weather they had tended to make a very sharp walk. As they went, he told

her what he had been doing in town, and about the *Pirandello* play to which Judy had dragged him, and which that young woman had urged him to say she was on no account to miss, for "it was too good to stay on very long." She thought Sharlie ought soon to come back to London. Or did she mean to stagnate in the country for ever?

Did she? Sharlie didn't know. It struck her suddenly that Carr had, after all, been no more than the refuge it had somehow always been. Nothing had happened, no hint had been vouchsafed her of that other world in which, that day in the train, it had seemed she was to find her own predestinate place. There wasn't one, of course. She had been wrought-up that day, a little *exaltée*—the result of the strain of the past few months and her decision to cut adrift. It was a mood. It meant nothing.

As they walked along she began to wonder what she was going, after all, to do with her life. It didn't seem very much to matter. She might as well stop here where, at least, life was clean and wholesome, and where, presently, the spring would come with mild, soft weather, nights like the one in which she now walked so thoughtfully at Mark's side, and all the friendly gallant things that would spring to life in Ann Selwyn's garden. . . . There never was any reason, that Sharlie could see, why anyone should spend the spring in London unless one was obliged. She decided to stay where she was until the spring festival was over. She would give *Pirandello* a miss, and Judy could take a holiday and come down to Carr. . . .

She listened to what Mark had to say about *Pirandello* (which was not very much), and what Judy had had to say about it, which was a good deal, and at the end she said: "How *is* Judy?"

"As well as ever. Very busy. It's queer she should like doctoring, somehow."

Sharlie thought that rather unintelligent of Mark.

"But her mother always wanted to be a doctor, so did her father—and her aunt *is* one. I don't see that it's any queerer than that you should take after your grandfather and want to farm."

Mark said that it was queer *anybody* should want to be a doctor.

"Well, they don't make much of a living out of me, I'm afraid," she said; "I'm tough."

"Are you?" Mark turned his head and rested his eyes upon her face. "You don't *look* tough, you know."

"I am. I've never been ill in my life."

"Haven't you?" He looked at her with a smile which dissipated Sharlie's faint irritation at his interrogative mood. Mark so seldom adopted this conversational trick and she did not know him well enough to realise that he only did it when he was feeling nervous. In any case, it wouldn't have occurred to her that Mark was nervous or that he had been trying ever since they left the farm to say what he now brought out.

"By the way, I met a friend of yours the other day. . . . I'd arranged to meet Judy somewhere for tea, and I found them there together when I arrived. He was just off to Ireland."

The colour rushed into Sharlie's face. It was too dark for Mark to see that, but the silence that fell between them was like a curtain. After a while Mark said: "Are you still in love with him, Shar?"

She was so surprised she found herself speaking the truth.

"Yes. In that way, I'll never be in love again as long as I live. I'm so much in love with him I've run away. I thought I was running away from a lot of other things, but it was that chiefly." Until that moment she had not known that.

Mark said quietly: "I was afraid it was."

Oblivious to the implications of this, Sharlie pursued her own line of thought. "I suppose Judy despises me, doesn't she?" she asked.

"No, I'm sure she doesn't."

"I despise myself."

"I shouldn't do that," said Mark gently.

"Doesn't Judy understand that it's *really* over this time—done with?"

"I think she does. But do you?"

Sharlie looked at him. She couldn't see the drift of his questions, of his interest. "What has Judy told you?" she asked him.

"Not very much. Enough."

"About Pen?"

"A little."

"And father? Well, do *you* think I'm wrong, too?"

Mark ignored the challenge of that. He said, and his voice was still very gentle: "Does it matter, my child? It's how you feel about it that matters—not what other people feel you should feel. Things that are wrong to us—to you—may very well be right for them. Don't we always have to decide between right and wrong for ourselves?"

"Yes, but if we decide a thing's wrong we ought to stick to it. I haven't. I've never done anything but shilly-shally. I've never had the courage to be myself. The best I can manage now is—to run away."

"Don't let it worry you too much. I know how you feel about it. I ran away, too, once—but not quite early enough. . . . Even when I was most miserable I knew it was the only thing—for me."

Sharlie looked at him.

"You got over it? You don't—mind, any longer?"

"No. I didn't know that, for certain, until last week . . ."

"When you saw her again?"

Mark nodded.

"It was like meeting someone I'd known in another world. . . . I suppose it must have been three parts imagination—all that old feeling, I mean."

Sharlie said: "Oh, that's comforting," and was silent for a long while. Suddenly Mark stopped, took her arm and turned her round to face him. Just at that moment the moon freed herself from imprisoning clouds and shone forth clear and white, showing him Sharlie's set unhappy face with its frowning brows from beneath which her moody eyes looked out and up at him.

"Sharlie, do you remember my telling you years ago that we had something in common?"

Sharlie shook her head.

"Well, I did. It was the first time I saw you after you'd failed your matric. Ten years ago, at least. Do you remember now?"

"I think I do. You were there with Greta, and we were all talking about the things Maud Norman had been lecturing about in Central Europe."

"That was it. . . . Does it strike you that we've something else in common beside our mutual inability to take our examination fences with a flourish?"

"I don't know. Have we? What is it?"

"That we don't spell the little word 'love' with quite so large a capital letter as do some people."

Beneath her puzzled frowning brows her eyes looked up at him questioningly. The expression on his face touched her and surprised her. She said: "I don't know. I used to think that the capital letter was all wrong, somehow—until I fell in love. And that seems to have prevented me from knowing anything quite certainly ever since. . . . Perhaps I was in love with love. Was that it?"

"Perhaps that's it with most of us."

"I might have gone on like that for ever, and never minded all the other things, about Julian's wife I mean, and never being able to get married or have legitimate children. . . . I don't know. But that awful business with Pen sort of woke me up. It all *looked* wrong—even when I let it all start again. . . . I know Judy thinks I'm not sane on the point, but I'll never feel any other way about it as long as I live . . ."

"All right," said Mark, holding her a little closer by the arm, "then I can ask you something I've been wanting to ask you ever since you arrived."

"What is it?" said Sharlie, faintly apprehensive.

"If I were to ask you to come to Canada with me what would you say?"

She stared at him.

"*Are* you asking me?" she said presently.

"Yes. I wish you'd marry me, Shar. I wanted to ask you when you first came here back in the summer, but I didn't think it would be any good. . . . I mean, I didn't think you'd ever consider Canada and I didn't see, anyway, how I could ask you to rough it out there."

"You think differently of me now?"

"I think what I've always thought of you, but I know more about you . . . more of the grown-up Sharlie. I used to like you as a child, I remember. You were so serious-minded and so at sea among that clever family group of ours."

"I suppose I must have had an inferiority complex, even then," she said. "Do you think I should lose it in Canada?"

"You wouldn't have any time to think about it."

She remembered those accounts he had given her of a woman's life in Canada. "Do you think I'd be any good there?" she asked him. "I'd hate to—embarrass you."

"You'd be good at anything you set your hand to, wouldn't you? But I still think there's no reason why you *should* set your hand to anything so difficult—for me!"

"For myself, too, wouldn't it be?" she said, with an inquiring lift of those dark frowning brows.

"I can't urge that."

"But you do think it?"

"I wouldn't ask you if I didn't. I don't invite disaster, my child. But knowing what I know of you now . . ."

"But *what* do you know?" she interrupted him quickly. "That I've been a friend of your sister's all my life—a friend of your family, if you like. That I'm not clever at passing exams, that I'm not clever at anything, not 'charming,' not beautiful, not even very useful . . ."

Mark's smile hung upon the dusk, dividing it. He said: "What a catalogue of negatives!"

"Here is a positive. I have had a lover."

"I know that."

"But you don't know that I went back to him, that all last summer . . ."

"I guessed."

"Did you?" His smile still hung upon the dusk, caressing her face; was answered by her own, shy, fleeting. "That won't happen again," she said, "whether I go with you or stay here. I'd like you to know that, somehow. To that extent, at least, it's over. But doesn't that leave you with rather a lot still to be 'got over'? Aren't you risking rather too much?"

"I'll take that on, if you will. One does get over things, you know. Unless one is entirely lacking in character."

"Is single-mindedness lack of character?"

"Its manifestations may be, mayn't they? It isn't quite sane, surely, to go on for ever longing for the impossible?"

"Did that help you over Greta?"

"I think so. I was very fond of her. She was pretty and attractive and her preference for me was very flattering. I'd have married her like a shot if she'd been available—but she wasn't."

"It sounds so very lukewarm," said Sharlie, laughing softly in the face of the night.

"It wasn't. In those days I'd rather have married Greta than have done anything else in the world. But as it was it was useless. If we'd gone on we'd both have been unhappy."

"She, too, you think?"

"I'd have ended by making her unhappy. . . . I knew that much about myself. It wasn't a question of morals—it was just the way I'm made, I suppose. But time cools our fervours, and life isn't all love-making, and the world not, I think, so very well lost for love."

She smiled again.

"Also, there are a lot of girls in the world . . ."

"I daresay. I can't say that they troubled my peace very much."

"Do *I* trouble it?"

"Considerably."

Unexpectedly touched, she was silent.

"Shar—do you like me a little?"

"More than a little. You're a very likeable person."

"Well—isn't that enough, perhaps, to be going on with?"

He was unaware that with almost the same phrase had his father all those years ago persuaded the redoubtable Eve Bentley to marry him. But Sharlie, as Eve (innocent of lovers and "pasts"), did not, drew away from Mark's tentative embrace.

"But *is* it?" she said. "I'm not in love with you—worse, I'm in love with somebody else, and in spite of everything you've said I can't believe I'll grow out of it. One doesn't feel like that *twice* in one's life, surely?"

Mark laughed. "I'm not so sure," he said. "There's no copyright in feelings. I never expected to care very much for a woman again. I certainly never expected to be as fond of anyone as I am of you. I suppose my state of mind must have

kept me all those years from noticing any other woman. Once you begin to notice, anything may happen."

"You're an encouraging person," she said; "aren't you? Do you *ever* feel depressed—useless?"

"Oh yes. But the state doesn't last. There are always one's hopeful impulses. They seem to spring eternal. . . . Wherever we land in the end, we've had the interest of getting there. That's the point, rather, isn't it? Try it, Shar."

She said, leaning against his arm, feeling its warmth and support, and, too, something that was surely ardour, against her breast:

"I'm so afraid. I'd hate to fail you—and I very well might. You deserve something better than what you'll get in me."

"Do I? But you won't fail."

"But don't you realise I've failed at everything I've attempted so far?"

"You won't fail at this. You've too much courage."

"You really think I've *courage?*"

"And to spare!"

"Amazing person!"

She stared at him, feeling a little breathless, as if she were out in a high wind. It seemed to her suddenly that it was nothing less than the keys of heaven he was offering her. Affection, respect, a new life, a real job in it. . . . Yet the feeling she had for him in that moment was as nearly selfless as any feeling could well be. It held neither passion nor the hope of any personal gain. She was not going to throw herself into marriage as into some Lethean stream, forgetting one man in the embraces of another. The emotional impulse which drew her in that moment to Mark Norman yearned as much toward giving as taking. It had nothing to do with her unsatisfied longing for Julian. Its roots went more deeply, struck down into the very soil of her humanity, and whilst

devoid of bodily ecstasy lighted a flame in her mind, restoring her self-respect, her belief in herself, in the possibility of a life full and running over. Hard and useful work was what she stood most in need of, with no time for idle dreaming, for the indulgence of mental states. Peace and security lay in that direction alone. She had only to move along it.

"Thank you," she said. "I will marry you as soon as you like."

He held her by the shoulders and looked down into her face, very clearly revealed to him by the light of the full, bright moon that again had swung itself free of encircling clouds. He did not kiss her, but she was warmed and heartened by the look she read for a second time that evening upon his face.

Julian's letter arrived the day before that fixed for the wedding. He had written to tell her that his wife was dead, but he made no comment upon any difference he thought it might make to their relationship; he voiced no hope. He did not even ask her to write to him. He left everything, she saw, to her.

The letter shattered her peace, pulled down most of the barricades she had flung up as protection against things remembered and still yearned after. Wrapping herself up, she took her problem out of doors, walking in the white and freezing world, which had come back after the brief warm spell, as if she would never stop—as if once again there was something from which she had to escape. For hours, beneath a cold and windless sky, she wrestled with emotions grown turbulent and like to push her, she saw, out of the new world of peace and endeavour upon whose threshold her feet were already set. More than once she found herself wrestling with a wild insane desire to throw herself down upon the hard frost-bound earth and weep and weep for something that

now could never be—at which she had snatched and so spoiled. That it was spoiled she did not doubt, even though something within her seemed to be dying (and in such pain!) of the knowledge. What difference would marriage make—a mere ceremony? It was too late. By her own act Julian was lost to her. In her heart she had always known it, even when she had let her charmed senses have their way. Mark was right. Things were right for you or they were wrong, and what other people said about them didn't matter.

It was a long while before she could bring herself to turn homewards, and gradually she found that there was something in the cold white loneliness all about her that poured strength into her—that the very indifference of Nature to her noisy woes helped her to set them at defiance, to see that if love were finished she had nobody but herself to thank. By her own act she had poisoned the wells of the happiness she was now relinquishing in such pain. It was she, not Julian, who was responsible, she who had done the snatching; and every detail of that first evening together ran back to stab her. She had taken what she wanted, had found fine phrases to justify that bending of him and all things to her immediate will, and so had shattered all that was lovely and valuable about it. She did not want—*she did not want*—despite her crying heart, what was left. And she would never feel otherwise about it. She knew that, and whether she was right or wrong. She had to begin all over again. But, oh, she thought, *If I the death of Love had planned, I never could have made it half so sure.* The twist of memory was pure anguish.

It seemed to her suddenly that she had frittered away all her life in emotions that were tawdry or futile or both, that eternally she had been at their mercy, for all she did not wear them on her sleeve. She thought wistfully of the little child who had shrunk away from the dark passions of her parents, who had grown up with a dark passion of her own for a

father who did not even like her, who had never even seen her, as she knew now, except as a reminder of his infamy. She thought of the young girl who had been sick with shame at the injustices one group of human beings urged upon another, but who, as she grew older, had never gone out with lance and spear to do battle against them. She had hidden behind her books of poetry, beneath her canopy of burnished words, behind the beauty that walked in Ann Selwyn's garden. She thought of the love she had borne Pen and how it hadn't been deep enough or real enough to hold her back from destruction—and of her love for Julian and into what it had betrayed her. She had taken love as an opiate—all kinds of love—and had not known it; upon its final problem she had but turned her back. Upon how many things in life had she done that? Never once had she tried to make life stand and deliver—she had merely admired other people who did. She had never really been alive—had only stood about on the edges of the lives of other people. Her father's, Fanny's, Pen's, even that of Judy. *Daughter to Philip!* The old half-humorous phrase took on a sudden new significance. She was nothing, nobody, a shadow, just somebody's relation. Soon it would be too late. This chance of holding a pistol at Destiny's head would not come again, perhaps. To turn away now at the instigation of quivering nerves, because of things too sweet to remember, might mean that never, never in this world would she ever come to life at all . . .

That instant of comprehension stayed with her as she set her steps for home. Out there in that lovely wintry world that cared less than nothing for her, it seemed to her presently that she had died and been born again.

Her wedding morning dawned in a world given over still to winter—a foretaste of her new life, it seemed to her, as she stood at the window looking out upon it, her thoughts on the

English spring she would not see. She wondered idly what would have happened before she saw Ann Selwyn's little garden again and all the pageant of the passing months that moved up and down in it. She sighed and pushed her mind out into the future as if it were a little boat, but so great a contentment sat therein it would not go very far, and suddenly she found she was not thinking of the future at all but only of that wise and very tender look upon Mark's face as they had stood there in the moonlight, discovering each other.

It was Judy who came to Liverpool to see her off, and it was Judy who at the last entirely filled her mind. With her arm through her husband's she stood upon the tall deck of the great ship that was to carry her to the other side of the world, and regretted nothing save that Judy would not be there. The tears rolled down her face when the good-byes were over and Judy's sturdy vigorous-looking little figure was growing fainter and fainter as the ship moved down the Mersey. Later, it seemed to her strange that this should have been so—that at the last she should regret nothing and nobody save Judy and leaving her.

Lying in her bed that night Ann Selwyn shed no tears. She had accepted the situation with the philosophy of old age, and with a frankness that belonged to the day and generation she despised, had already balanced the business of losing Sharlie against what she held to be the certainty of becoming a grandmother. Moreover, she did not believe Mark's passion for Canada would last very long, and what, after all, had she seen of Sharlie in recent years? She'd been Philip's daughter for so long—ever since that day he'd come to fetch her as a child. And then this disastrous love affair. . . . At least now she was married and there'd be no more nonsense about a man who had a wife already. Thank God at any rate for that! She liked

everything about Mark Norman save his desire to live at the other end of the world, but Ann, who believed in husbands and wives and not in lovers and love, thought it just as well that Sharlie should be out of harm's way for a time. Hard work and a couple of children would soon bring her to her senses. Things might be worse. There was much fine nonsense talked about love . . . She said that suddenly to Henry, who stirred in his first waking doze and said, "Eh? What say, my dear?"

"I said there's much fine nonsense talked about love," said Ann.

"No doubt, my dear, no doubt," said Henry, less because he agreed than because he wanted to go to sleep. His sciatica made that difficult enough without a dose of Ann's midnight philosophy. He hoped there wasn't going to be much of it. He didn't want to talk of Sharlie. Bad enough to reflect that most likely he'd never see her again. He was glad she'd married Mark. He was a good chap and would make her happy, even out there in that barbarous place to which they were now on their way. He did not talk much, for one thing. He'd not keep his wife awake at night with his conversation. But love? Henry knew nothing about love, save that people let it spoil their lives. . . . He'd never know what it had done to Sharlie. She'd said once that some day she might tell him about it, but she hadn't—she'd gone off with it all bottled up inside her, after her fashion. Henry sighed. He was old and in pain and life had gone so quickly. . . . He wanted nothing any longer save not to have that damnable blunt knife sticking into him, and to be allowed to go to sleep. . .

Chelsea—Headley Down, Hants.
April, 1932—*February*, 1933.

THE END