SATURNINE

BY

RAYNER HEPPENSTALL

LONDON

SECKER AND WARBURG

1943
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND DISCLAIMER

FRAGMENTS OF THIS NARRATIVE HAVE APPEARED
in Harper’s Bazaar, Kingdom Come, The New English Weekly and
Partisan Review. It is fiction. Outside pp. 130–134, all the
characters are imaginary, and no further reference is made to a
living or recently deceased person except Messrs. L. N. Fowler
of Ludgate Circus, Dr. Pearson of the Middlesex Hospital, the
Grand Duke Cyril of Russia, Lifar, de Basil, Balanchine, Nijinsky,
Legat and Diaghilev of the Russian ballet, Lawrence of Arabia and
D. H. Lawrence, Duke Ellington, the late Canon H. R. L. Sheppard,
Jessie Matthews and Sonnie Hale, Isobel Baillie and Anna Wick-
ham, Lady Astor, Henry Moore and Ben Nicholson, Gabo, Miró
and Georges Bernanos, Gordon Craig, Heifetz and Rudolf Steiner,
a number of all-in wrestlers and Joe E. Brown, Clark Gable and
the Chinese naval attaché, Marshal Pétain, M. Stalin and Mr.
Winston Churchill, the late Mr. Neville Chamberlain, the
Hangman and the reigning house of this realm.

SATURNINE by Rayner Heppenstall
This First Edition is limited to 1,650 copies,
of which 1,600 copies are for sale in the
United Kingdom.
Erratum: p. 5, line 3, for “pp. 130-134” read
“pp. 124-128.”
PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

SAM THORPE DIED IN OCTOBER, 1938. HIS DEATH would more properly have befitted some distinguished student of the eighteenth century. As the poet Gray had prophesied of himself, Sam Thorpe died of an apoplexy and was found fallen out of bed, with his head in a chamber-pot.

This death terminated my brief career as a builder and a man of business. Sam Thorpe had taken me into partnership for two main reasons. In the first place, Margaret my wife was the daughter of his elder brother. In the second place, I was in his eyes a man of taste and discernment, and Sam Thorpe had conceived the idea that money could now be made out of taste and discernment more easily than out of plain building, for in this field there was too much competition. Frobisher and Thorpe, Ltd., was founded to appeal to that small body of well-to-do opinion which had begun to rebel against pebble-dashed ribbon development and the Tudor villa. In the prospectus which I drew up, we proudly declared that Frobisher and Thorpe, Ltd., would have nothing to do with uncontrolled debasement of the English countryside, that we were no mere business house, but took our call to building seriously and would strive in our own way to create the beautiful.

I had never been allowed much control over our finances, and when Sam Thorpe died I was forced to declare myself a bankrupt. This was in many ways a glamorous and interesting condition. Money has always frightened and delighted me. It has seemed at times far more exotic than Arabia. My career as a part of Frobisher and Thorpe, Ltd., had been a piece of wholly improbable adventure. But the court proceedings were soon over. Sam Thorpe’s posthumous creditors took their one and sixpence in the pound. And then I was depressed to find myself again in that condition of poverty from which, it seemed to me, I ought never to have emerged.

Such as it is, my sense of humour failed me. I began to feel the old, corroding anxiety. Margaret had the bravery to go out and find herself a typing job at two pounds ten a week. I did nothing. I had arranged some time before to spend a fortnight in Somerset with a friend who is lucky and tough enough to have made money in
films. He drove me down there to his farm. For a fortnight, I stood about in wet grass at agricultural sales, drank cider, poked around Stonehenge and the beauty spots of Somerset. It must have been the 27th of November when I was driven back to London. At any rate, it was Sunday. At three o'clock on Monday morning, I was awakened by what appeared to be a ball of red-hot metal embedded in my back, a little to the left side and possibly an inch above the waist.

I staggered out of bed, cursing. My reaction to physical pain had always been characterised by impatience, and to-night or rather this morning I excelled myself. So did the pain, I must admit. It was intense enough to send me downstairs with diarrhoea and then to drag me up to the bathroom again to vomit. It went on for three-quarters of an hour, during which I groaned, raved and kicked the furniture over, doubled myself into a fist and strained at the ceiling, drank China tea and swallowed aspirins. When the temperature of the ball of metal had subsided and it was no more than a sullen, droning weight in my back, I returned to bed with a hot-water bottle.

Margaret had wanted to ring up a doctor during the night. At eight o'clock, she was all for getting a doctor on her way to work. I would have none of it, partly because of the expense and partly because of my conviction that a man's diseases were of his own creation and should therefore be of his own curing, a mystical conviction no doubt largely hysterical in origin and bound up with the feelings of guilt by which disease is sometimes attended in early childhood.

The second attack took place on Saturday of the same week, at seven o'clock in the morning. This time, Margaret would not listen to me. I was made to have a doctor. Margaret rang up Richard St. Hilda, who lived in the next road but two, and asked him for the name of his doctor. A few minutes before the doctor arrived, Richard St. Hilda himself came to see me. The doctor, who was a quiet, smiling Jew, prodded my back and my abdomen, made me bend, jotted down my medical history, which was negligible, told me to stay in bed for a day or two and said he was not certain whether I had stony kidneys or a form of muscular rheumatism, but would try me with a diet and a bottle of medicine first and, if I liked, send me to hospital for an X-ray later.

ILLNESS WAS AT THIS POINT A PERFECTLY SATISFACTORY refuge. I particularly enjoyed denying myself red meat and strong drink. Sweetbreads, whiting and grape-fruit purified my consciousness, and I suffered less from anxiety than even before the
collapse of Frobisher and Thorpe, Ltd. I had two occupations. First, I played chess both with Richard St. Hilda and with one of two young men who lived in a state of married bliss across the road and the other of whom lent me his spare overcoat when I was allowed out of the house. In the second place, I studied astrology. Indeed, as I see it in retrospect, this was in the most literal sense the purpose of my illness, that it forced upon me a period of rest in which to study astrology. I had dabbled a little during my business career, but I was not yet able to delineate and judge a horoscope for myself. Now Richard St. Hilda asked me what books I would like from the London Library, and I had him collect me the available works on astrology, especially those which gave the methods of precise mathematical computation. I memorised symbols and categories by writing them out large with a paint-brush on sheets of paper which Margaret then fastened to the wall with drawing-pins. I had her go round in her lunch hour to Messrs. L. N. Fowler of Ludgate Circus to buy me Raphael’s Ephemeris for this and that particular year. I had her and Richard St. Hilda and one or two others who came to see me write home to know the time and place of their birth. I myself wrote to my only surviving relative, my father’s sister, in the West Riding, and she was able to tell me my own birth-time within an hour. When I was out of bed, I used a drawing-pin and a piece of string to draw enormous circles on the wall to either side of the fireplace, and in these I set out my own horoscope and Margaret’s with the symbols coloured in crayon to the colour of each planet and each zodiacal sign. According to the text-book rules, my horoscope was a bad one, full of squares and oppositions, that is to say of planets at angles of 90° and 180° to each other in the zodiacal belt. Particularly ominous was a conjunction of the two malefic planets, Mars and Saturn, in the sign Taurus, with Mars in close opposition to Jupiter. According to a small green book, this configuration betokened the native’s death through falling masonry. I felt a little depressed, but luckily I was still at this moment sceptical of the traditional lore and had in any case heard that in the horoscopes of highly developed souls much may be read in a spiritual sense which to a grosser nature would have physical import.

THE GREAT FROST OF 1938 BEGAN ON DECEMBER 20TH, the date of my first visit to the Middlesex Hospital. It had snowed a little on the previous day, but now the ground was hard and brilliant. More snow was falling. I had not had any third attack,
but the doctor thought it would be a good idea if I had an X-ray, and so did I. I went round to Richard St. Hilda’s flat in my borrowed overcoat and asked him if he would drive me to the hospital and keep me company while I waited my turn for examination. Richard St. Hilda’s flat was luxurious and warm. Two Siamese cats played together on the tasteful carpet. It was Tuesday. I thought it would be interesting for Richard to visit the out-patients’ department of a London hospital and there gaze upon the face of the poor.

After I had taken off my shoes and been weighed and had made water into a bottle, I had my interview with the lady almoner. I told her that I was Alick Frobinsher, married, of Marginal Road, N.W.8, and that I was at the moment unemployed. She thought that I need not pay anything now, but that I would perhaps remember the Middlesex Hospital when I had a job. After that, I was shut in a small room with three dressing-gowns, no heating, a large tram-driver and a little Jewish man who did not like undressing in front of other people. We shivered together there for half an hour, after which the tram-driver and I were called into a room divided by a curtain on either side of which stood a bed covered by one small red blanket. I lay shivering in one bed, the tram-driver in the other. From the other side of the curtain came a murmur of voices discussing the tram-driver’s physique. A hollow, drumming sound was followed by explanation in an authoritative voice that the tram-driver’s chest was in very poor condition.

The authoritative voice said:

‘Wait a minute.’

Youthful Dr. Pearson stepped through the curtain and tapped my chest. I made a very musical sound. Dr. Pearson called his students through the curtain.

‘There,’ he said, ‘that’s something quite different.’

One after another, the students tapped my chest and exchanged appreciative glances.

Dr. Pearson passed an æsthetie’s hand down my breast-bone.

‘Beautiful formation,’ he said.

Everybody trooped back to the other side of the curtain.

Later, students began to come in one at a time and do things to me without anybody watching. Some of them wound about my arm an object like the sleeve of a strait-waistcoat with a clock attached to it. Others pushed sharp instruments into my arm and began to draw out my blood. Eventually, the whole group returned together, and Dr. Pearson set everybody pressing his fingers into the soft of my belly and my back to see if they could find a place
where it hurt, after which I was told to dress and sent back to the
room where I had first had a specimen of my urine taken.

Three hours had passed. I was cold and depressed. A student
unfastened my trousers and began to paint certain of my parts
with a fluid the colour of tropical sunsets.

I asked:
‘What is that for?’
The student said:
‘We need a sterile specimen.’

I never liked having those parts of me roughly handled, even by
young women. Perhaps I had what is called a castration complex.
There were other symptoms of it. For instance, I was afraid of
large dogs and especially of meeting them alone in a country lane,
a fear which has several times kept me from embarking upon a
picaresque existence. At one time, too, I wore my hair long. Most
ominous of all, I was never able to whistle. Also, I had religious
symptoms for a while and would meditate freely upon the cross
and the crown of thorns, the scourging, the speared side and the
nail-torn hands and feet.

‘Excuse me,’ I said. ‘I’m afraid I’m going to pass out.’

The astral body withdrew itself in anguish, and my physical
body fell heavily to the floor, knocking the bottle of sterilised urine
out of the student’s hand.

I returned to consciousness sitting on the floor with the arms of a
particularly attractive nurse about my shoulders.

‘Poor fellow,’ she said. ‘It must have been waiting all that time
in the cold.’

Then one of the most beautiful incidents of my life took place.
This nurse’s charming fingers began to button up my trousers.
They were very gentle upon my flesh, and her voice was gentle.
My trousers were of blue corduroy.

I climbed to my feet and adjusted the clothes about my waist.

The nurse said:
‘Don’t hurry. Sit here until you feel really well.’

She put a chair under me, and when I was sitting on it with my
head pressed down between my knees, she laid her hand on my
shoulder and afterwards stroked my hair.

‘It’s quite late,’ she said. ‘Your friend left a message to say
that he would be at Schmidt’s in Charlotte Street.’

I could have stayed all day, but I thought that perhaps this angel
among women had other courtesies to perform. I went round to
Schmidt’s, where Richard St. Hilda was drinking coffee. He had
eaten turkey, and I had turkey now at his expense. He said that here they served a coffee which I should be allowed to drink because it was caffeine-free, and after the meal he bought a large tin of it from the emporium next door to the restaurant for me to take home.

LIKE MANY OTHER POCKET-BOOKS, MINE HAS always been full of privately interesting scraps of paper. If anybody searched it to-day, he would find visiting cards which I have sometimes passed as my own, a Communist Party card which expired eight years ago, the membership card of an all-in-wrestling club in Kilburn, the time-table for trains between Hinderholme and Manchester, the photograph of a grey seal, a purse calendar published by the British-Israel World Federation, in which is written,

‘Let it ever be remembered that this race was “elected” and redeemed for a great and divine purpose, . . . not to be a menace but a blessing to all people, . . . to stand for “justice and judgment,” God’s instrument in establishing the earth in righteousness,’ and (for years, most proudly treasured of all) a yellow paper summoning me to attend a police court in the direction of Islington to answer charges of being guilty whilst drunk of disorderly behaviour. He would also find this:

THE MIDDLESEX HOSPITAL

PREPARATION FOR

(1) RENAL X-RAY
(2) GALL BLADDER

Take one ounce of Castor Oil or two Vegetable Laxatives on Tuesday, Dec. 20th, night.

Take half-ounce of Castor Oil or two Vegetable Laxatives on Wednesday, Dec. 21st, night.

On morning of examination, take tea, bread and butter only for breakfast.

Come up for X-ray examination at 10.30 a.m. o’clock on Thursday, Dec. 22nd.

Name of Patient, Alick Frobisher.

(Show this slip to Porter in Hall on arrival and he will direct you.)
I chose two Vegetable Laxatives, and on Thursday morning my tripses must have been as pure as those displayed in the windows of a North Country fish-and-chip shop. I remember little of this occasion. I remember sitting in my socks, shoes and a dressing-gown reading ‘Punch’ for 1916 and that the jokes were about sailors on leave courting young women with boas around their necks. I remember that sharp instruments were again pushed into my arm and that I was afraid the whole time lest the X-ray apparatus to which I was strapped should burn something inside me. I remember that the last photograph was omitted and that I was rushed away to make room for a man with red gashes criss-crossing his back in such a manner as to suggest that he had recently flagellated himself with steel wire or fallen backwards through a shop-window. I went to the hospital a third and a fourth time. I saw again the nurse who had stroked my hair and buttoned up my trousers. She was friendly and remembered my name, but she was gone before I had myself sufficiently under control to be capable of asking her out for the evening, and on the day of my last visit she was not in attendance at all. I remember the face of the poor. I remember otherwise pretty young women with running eyes. I remember the old regulars who, having once been given a card, had come here ever since on whatever pretext they could invent for a little gossip and a little excitement. I remember a man with a beard and a stiff white collar who made himself a nuisance because he was terrified of being forgotten and of losing his turn in this waiting crowd of more vigorous people. I remember sullen young men in mufflers whose bitterness had drained the blood from their faces and attacked their vitals. I remember a bedraggled old thing with peroxide hair and a tattered fur coat who truly thought that she ought to be given precedence over these common people and who seized by the arm every nurse who hurried past and demanded in a superlatively genteel voice if the doctor had been fully informed of her presence. I remember the nurses. I loved even those who were plain and had less of themselves to sacrifice.

SO FAR AS I REMEMBER, NOTHING THAT HAPPENED during the parties and jollification of that new year has direct bearing on the story. It may be that I had to be confused for a while by this world’s apparent friendliness, or it may be that I had to have this happy level from which to descend with more dramatic effect. For it was as if everybody I ever knew had decided in one impulse
to come and renew their friendship with me. From Wales, Cornwall and the Ridings of York they came, and each of them brought me at least one new acquaintance, among them a professional photographer who made his living by photographing mortuaries for a refrigeration company and a long-haired, bad-tempered Singhalese with filleted fingers who was starting a highbrow journal in London. On New Year’s Eve I had been given a clean bill of health. I had no stone. It had been no more than a form of muscular rheumatism. My illness was a joke. So was my bankruptcy. Glyn from South Wales told me about his aunt who passed stones every month or two and kept them in a tin which she brought out and displayed to visitors. We drank hard, and everybody paid but me. I was a popular man. For ten days, our flat never contained less than a dozen people except at those moments when all of us were together in a near or distant public house or when some of the party had gone home for the night and others were stretched out sleeping in rows upon the bathroom floor.

Margaret and I had moved into Marginal Road while I was still Frobisher and Thorpe, Ltd. It may have been as a reaction from the harshly new that I had chosen to live in something so old and decrepit, but I do not think so. Crumbling houses give me a sense of fitness. Also, I am afraid of the comfortable and well-to-do. Although at the time I stank with money, I had felt it necessary to preserve the outward appearance of poverty as if by that magical sign I might ward off the reality. There is also the consideration of pure charm. When Margaret and I were first married we had lived near the Gospel Oak in a tall, red-brick house of which the interior walls were all painted a dark, lustrous green and the woodwork an equally dark, ecclesiastical maroon. Below us had lived a policeman and below him an Irish midwife, and both their flats were full of singing birds. There were in that house at least forty canaries, to say nothing of budgerigars, linnets and bullfinches. Marginal Road lacked this obvious romanticism, but it was a finely planned, early-Victorian house built without foundations straight on the clay. It was covered with ivy, and from our top-storey window at the back we looked out upon a row of Lombardy poplars, behind which lay the pinnacles of London churches. Along the whole row, these eaves sheltered not sparrows but pigeons, and a beating of wings caused one frequently to look up from a chair and see the window a Japanese screen full of delicate birds’ heads and broad fan tails. The flat below us remained empty the whole time we were there, and the ground floor and basement gave refuge to
soft, smiling Indians, a tall Jamaican negro and a number of sinister little men in jerseys who stole my books when I was out and were reputed to be Trotskyites. Alas, this flat did not stand up well to that winter's frost when every pipe was frozen and the local plumber became a millionaire overnight. The wind blew up between the blackstained floorboards, and if I held out my hand I felt it marked across with bars of cold air. It was damp, too. Papers lying about curled into a scroll, and the banister left drops of water upon the hand. Marginal Road was in fact condemned. The leases had expired, and each house was now let in separate flats at a cheap weekly rent. It was intended to pull down the whole long street and rebuild it in imitation Georgian. Sam Thorpe indeed had tendered a contract for the job, but it was turned down before he died. One or two of the houses were already being demolished. The main length of Marginal Road was saved first by recurring political crises and then indefinitely by the war, and it stands there to-day, a museum still one third populated, half of its windows broken with a stone by small boys who now live out of London and some of the windows subsequently boarded up.

Despite these indications, despite my horoscope and despite the fact that a ceiling had fallen also at the jade house full of singing birds, nobody was more surprised than I when the ceiling fell at Marginal Road. It was Sunday morning, the 8th or the 15th of January, 1939. Margaret was preparing lunch. I was sitting in my arm-chair, trying to do a funny drawing which I thought I would send to 'Lilliput' or 'Passing Show' if it still existed. There was a sound like that of mice in the wainscotting, but rather louder, as if two rutting mice were having a fight. It grew louder still. It was like hail or dry leaves blown against the window-pane. I looked on all sides and at last over my head and was in time to see a crack open in the ceiling. Nobody was there to admire the athletic feat by which I reached the door in time, but it was considerable.

After lunch, Margaret swept mouse-black powder off the furniture, and I moved furniture into the bathroom. Perhaps a third of the ceiling had fallen. The plaster was heavy and did not crumble in the fingers. A piece of it had dented the wooden arm of the chair in which I had been sitting. We left the plaster and dust upon the floor and locked that room up.

In the morning, I went round to Richard St. Hilda's. It was still very cold, but the snow had thawed. Richard's Siamese kittens were playing with a toy lamb made of wool, which had been put
in a stocking for them on Christmas Eve. Their eyes were running, but they did not seem to mind.

Richard St. Hilda was a very large, beautiful man, with a round blossoming face, thin but lightly waving hair, horn-rimmed glasses and a slow, highly fastidious manner which occasionally crumbled to reveal a grinning schoolboy. He sat in his dressing-gown beside the fire. On the other side of the fire sat another young man, also in his dressing-gown. This young man was dark, slender and exotic, like Serge Lifar. His eyelashes were long, and he was playing with a model aeroplane. Formerly, this young man had suffered from a curious nervous affliction and had spent his time making a collection of ladies' underwear. Three years of Richard St. Hilda's company had cured him of this, and he was now proposing to get married and join the Royal Air Force.

I told Richard about the ceiling.

He said:

'You can always come and live here if you think you'd like it.'

Richard St. Hilda's voice was practically inaudible. It was as if he found words too coarse to express the subtleties of his intention. In time, one developed a fairly accurate sense of what he was saying, but it was not easy for comparative strangers, and if he asked for six lemons in a shop he was as likely as not to be served with four bananas.

After a certain amount of conversation upon general topics, he began to have doubts and said:

'I doubt whether you would like it, you know...'

But it was arranged. I did not feel able to set up house again just now. Margaret would go to live at her sister's in Bayswater. I would come here and live in the basement with the grand piano and the hand-made gramophone. For purely diplomatic reasons, I also insisted on paying ten shillings a week for my keep, so that I should feel less beholden and might thereby avoid the peril of resentful sensations. In a month or two at most, I knew that I should not have ten shillings, but in the meantime it was an investment.

In Marginal Road, we left several hundredweights of dust and plaster upon the floor which I had myself stained black only six months before. The door of that room was locked. Once or twice before we left I opened the door to display the ruin to a visitor, on one occasion to a schoolmaster I had known some years before who also in the meantime had taken up astrology (he attributed the astrological revival to the large number of recent occultations of
Uranus). A fortnight or so after Margaret and I had left, I walked up Marginal Road and saw that there were again curtains in the top-storey windows. People were living there between the floors that I had blackened and the ceiling that I had whitened and another builder’s man lately patched. I fancied these people would not distemper over my horoscope and Margaret’s, for they were very carefully and perhaps even beautifully done. There, I fancy, they stand to-day, one either side of the fireplace, proclaiming to anybody with the knowledge to read them that here lived a tall, Mercurial girl and a man three parts fire, four earth and two water, a man without air, an obsessed man lacking the free, disinterested mind, a son of Cancer and Leo, arrogant, truthful, passionate and afraid.

CHAPTER TWO

AMONG THE NEW ACQUAINTANCES I HAD MADE IN the new year were two who had just come to London from Paris. They were Edgar Voysey and Alfred Fantl. Both were small men turning prematurely bald. Edgar Voysey was American and had private means, blue, solemn eyes, a noble expression on his face and an eloquence which took no account of its audience. Alfred Fantl had no particular nationality and lived on his wits. His mother was French, his birth-place Vienna and his passport Czech. He had been an officer in the Austrian army during the Great War, had led men both into Russia and into Roumania and had not fired a shot. After the Treaty of Versailles, he had begged for his bread in Berlin and had then moved to Paris where he had spent the last twenty years in the company of Americans. He was frail, garrulous, brown-eyed and reputed to have more women by the month than any known man. He had come to London because he wanted a change and because the English were known to have more money than the French, and the tide of Americans was ebbing from Paris. Edgar Voysey had come to London to attend lectures at the Institute of Mystical Science in Natterjack Place and in particular to sit at the feet of a Professor Dr. Unradt whom many considered a greater than Rudolf Steiner.

In January and February, 1939, I spent a good deal of time attending lectures with these two. My other occupations were debating philosophical questions with Richard St. Hilda and dining at the pleasanter London restaurants with him. Like myself, Richard St. Hilda was a man of taste and discernment. One friend
of mine always remembered him as the man who had put ‘Swan Lake’ on the gramophone and then flung open the French windows and stood on the balcony, inhaling the night air. His interest in philosophy was to my mind wrong-headed. Richard had in his time looked at a great many philosophical works and still hoped that one day he would find in one of them a simple formula which contained the whole truth and would thereafter preserve him from intellectual or other effort. I preferred the muddled earnestness of those who attended the Institute of Mystical Science.

On the whole, this life was pleasant. Richard St. Hilda had several amusing friends and more than one amusing way of passing the time. I was intellectually stimulated by Professor Dr. Unradt and his colleagues at the Institute. Margaret was not perpetually to hand, and the occasions on which we did meet had the air of briefer honeymoons. I was, however, continually aware of the attentions of an old Familiar of mine Whom I had for a while thought finally banished. This personage was my Poverty, Whom I had rechristened the Holy Ghost. He would appear suddenly, jogging my elbow and whispering obscenities into my ear. For the moment, He was fairly tactful and did not attempt to blackmail me or disgrace me before my friends, but He made me feel uneasy.

Towards the end of February, Richard took a cottage in Kent for the summer. It was a cottage that I knew. In fact, the owner of the two cottages had been my friend, not his, but Richard St. Hilda had a quite phenomenal capacity for fluttering the hearts of middle-aged ladies and had completely undermined my position. This particular middle-aged lady was the daughter of a High Churchman of the aesthetic period. She had fire-screens, talented children and old-fashioned flowers. Her friends called her Effie. She had been patted on the head by Aubrey Beardsley and might easily have stepped out of a novel by Virginia Woolf. There was a ribbon in her hair and fairies at the bottom of her garden. Most of her money went in the form of allowances to her talented children, and she always let one of her two cottages furnished (furnished in the Edwardian-Bloomsbury taste) for the summer. They were beautiful cottages and had at one time been one house, later divided. In the attic was a great King-post. In the hall was an open fireplace, with a chimney two yards wide.

Richard had taken this cottage for Margaret and myself, so he said. Indeed, his first intention had been to give us a cottage to live in indefinitely.
He and Margaret drove down to Kent on Saturday, March 10th. I promised to follow on Monday or Tuesday. I had, I said, a man to see to-morrow. Margaret and Richard took the Siamese kittens with them in a basket with a wire grill. The names of these kittens were Tit and Nit, Burmese for One and Two. They were very beautiful, but tiresome. The sight and smell of the meat and fish cooked for them, the smells they themselves produced after meals in a peat-box in one corner of the drawing-room, the fact that in cold weather their eyes secreted a phlegm much thicker and brighter in colour than that spat out on the pavements by men going early to work, their frequent vomiting on the carpet, the trouble that had to be taken to enclose them in an air-tight box with a dish of steaming Friar’s Balsam in order to protect them from influenza, all made me feel rather glad that now they would be in the country where they would perhaps lose themselves or be mistaken for rabbits by a gamekeeper.

But my real reason for not going down to the cottage at the same time as Richard and my wife was that I hoped over the week-end to see a young woman whom I had first met at a party given by Richard the week before. Richard St. Hilda’s parties always took a peculiar turn. After a certain amount of gin had been consumed the conversation would become extremely cosmic in a rather sophisticated way. This was very likely Richard’s own doing. He thought, I fancy, that the whole truth might after all be found not in a book of philosophical writing but in the ecstatic utterance of a sophisticated person while drunk. On this particular occasion, Richard had paired me off with this young woman, telling us that we were parallel lines which met at infinity. His grounds for this supposition were that she and I had both grown up in a slum, I in the West Riding of Yorkshire and she in some Canadian city. Afterwards, everybody drove off in two cars to the Café Royal. In the back of one car, I am told that I savaged this young woman. I certainly remember looking up from her and observing that the other car was exactly alongside and that the young woman’s husband, a dentist, was staring through the window at me with murderous eyes. However, the rest of the evening had passed off without incident, and the following day Richard still thought that we ought to get along and meet at infinity.

I pointed out to him the existence of the young woman’s husband, who was a tall, brawny Canadian.

Richard said:
‘That’ll be all right. He’s just a cork who’ll float with the tide.’
So I stayed behind, intending to see this young woman when both Richard and Margaret my wife were fifty miles away. I did not see her. When I rang up, she had gone away for the week. But at the Institute of Mystical Science, that Monday, there was a farewell meeting for its principal, Dr. Leopold Gloss, who was leaving on a lecture tour in the United States. I decided that I would go to this function instead.

Thus was I prepared to receive my first clear insight into the miraculous operations of fate.

I feel I must add here that the young man in Marginal Road whose overcoat I was now wearing had also been at Richard St. Hilda's party and that he also had directed a fragment of cosmic wisdom at me.

Quite without apparent cause, he had suddenly come up to me and said:

'Alick, the past is man's worst enemy. I should like to abolish memory, particularly for you.'

THE INSTITUTE OF MYSTICAL SCIENCE STOOD AT the top of a very tall building in Natterjack Place off Oxford Street. A lift went up as far as the floor below, and then it was necessary to walk up one flight of steps to a top landing where the visitor was confronted by a bewildering succession of swing-doors on violent springs. Between every two swing-doors, receiving knocks from both sides as one door or the other opened, stood little pockets of young people talking mainly about the places they had recently visited. One or two key personages moved incessantly backwards and forwards.

One of these was the oldest student of the Institute, a young man of thirty-four or so, who greeted any stranger to the place by saying to him:

'Sie sind Deutsch?'

If the stranger looked bewildered, shook his head or merely smiled, the oldest student said:

'Donc, vous êtes français?'

The stranger was not French.

'Se habla español?'

Alas, no.

'Parla italiano?'

Oh, dear. Oh, dear.

'Ah, then you must be English. So am I.'
The oldest student, still smiling, would take the stranger by the arm and lead him round, introducing him, asking him every now and then what his name was.

For myself, I had already found a way of disinfecting this monster. On entering, I would slap him on the back with so much cordiality, that for the next five minutes or so he was incapable of foreign languages, by which time I had safely entered into converstaion with somebody else.

Edgar Voysey and Alfred Fantl had not yet arrived. I passed through all the swing-doors into the main room, where elderly ladies were sitting down on some of the hundred or so plain, wooden chairs. The walls of the room were studded with large, singularly shaped picture-frames holding pastels and water-colours which seemed to have been done with a solution of potassium permanganate and from which, upon closer examination, faces stared out with mystically exalted eyes, or formless bodies, wreathed in smoke, stretched out imploring hands. The room also contained a grand piano on which were pieces of wood-carving in the form of ashtrays and flower-vases. Against this piano leaned Professor Dr. Unradt, with a piece of paper in his hand.

Professor Dr. Unradt was Aquarian man. Heavily built, his face was yet the height of refinement. His complexion was pale, his nose pinchedly small, his eyebrows starting upward across his temples. The usual subject of his discourses was history and in particular economic history. For him, gold was ruled by the sun and the vagaries of the gold standard a reflection of the sun’s path through the parts of Heaven. He lived not in years or centuries, but in æons, and yet the detailed information with which his mind was crowded would not have disgraced the historian of a single generation.

For some reason, I had never found it possible to enter into conversation with Professor Dr. Unradt. I regarded him with admiration and fancied him in private an intensely lovable man, but when on two occasions I had begun to speak to him my tongue had faltered.

Now I contented myself with a half-smile and the respectful, rather hushed greeting:

‘Good evening, Professor Dr. Unradt.’

After which, I moved across the room and stared into one of the potash water-colours, portraying the bliss or possibly the sufferings of the dead. These pictures were the work of elderly ladies who would not otherwise have put brush or crayon to paper. I forgave them.
Edgar Voysey and Alfred Fantl arrived. With them was a tall, blonde girl of the English middle class, blushing and contorting her rosebud mouth as she spoke. Her name was Irene. Edgar Voysey went straight up to Professor Dr. Unradt and engaged him in the discussion of some ticklish point connected with the threefold nature of man or perhaps it was the historical importance of Philippe le Bel. Alfred Fantl brought Irene to me.

'Well, how is it, huh? This is Irene,' he said. 'You ought to know her.'

'I'm fine, Freddie,' said I. 'How do you do?'

'Do you come here quite a lot?' said Irene.

The room began to fill up. Voysey, Fantl, Irene and I sat in a row up against the wall. The room became very full, indeed. People were sitting on the floor. Young women were sitting two on a chair. After a while, the door leading to the fire-escape was opened to let in air.

First to speak was Mrs. Verity, the Institute's secretary and, some said, the source of its finances. She lectured on the Akashic records, the angelic hierarchies and the symbolism of Christmas. In collaboration with a young German woman, Fraulein von Stubenau, she also instructed students in the painting of mystical pictures and in a form of dancing. She had rosy cheeks and an effusive friendliness, but it was rumoured that she had been miraculously rejuvenated and that her real age was something quite extraordinary.

Dr. Leopold Gloss then made his farewell speech. He was a tiny, frail man who looked scarcely incarnate. The pulse was visible even in his eyelids, and one felt that at any moment those eyelids would flutter and he would be dead. Strangely, as he spoke, he became fully alive. Towards the end of his discourse, his animation faded completely again. How he would complete a lecture tour in America, I could not imagine.

He was followed by Fraulein von Stubenau, girlishly sincere and in difficulties with the language.

Professor Dr. Unradt came up to the front of the room, and the clearing of throats ceased.

His speech had the tone of a funeral oration. Leopold Gloss, he said, and he, Josef Unradt, had been associated with each other since their days at the University of Vienna. They had worked together in Austria, Germany, Switzerland, Holland and for the last eight years in England.
For most of his auditors to-night, the crucial point of Professor Dr. Unradt’s speech was its conclusion.

He spoke of the mission of the English people.

‘To which to belong,’ he said, ‘I have the honour since to-day.’

Everybody cheered. Their own Professor Dr. Unradt was now a fully naturalised Englishman.

But for me the crucial point was this.

Earlier in his discourse, Professor Dr. Unradt had said:

‘There are now in this room some that I have known before, although it is not known to them.’

While he was saying it, his eye had rested gravely on me.

Now I must be careful to give this remark and its effect on me neither more nor less than their due weight. First, I must say that at the moment its conscious effect on me was not great. At the same time, it may have deeply stirred my unconsciousness, and I must certainly offer this as a possible explanation of what follows.

Before the assembly broke up for refreshments, a thin, steel-bespectacled Jew called Siegmund Laufer played the piano. He played Beethoven’s ‘Appassionata’ Sonata, very fast, and afterwards the ‘Scenes of Childhood’ by Robert Schumann. During this recital, my eye wandered. It lighted successively on two young women, either of whom it would have been pleasant to flirt with. One of them was a pink little thing full of endearing solemnity, a daddy’s girl. The other was a materter creature, a little out of place here, a brunette of perhaps twenty-eight. I made up my mind that, when the music was over, I would attach myself to this young woman if possible, and if not, to the other. The music finished. Two or three girls and the oldest student of the Institute came round with lemonade, mint tea, little plates of biscuits and a tray on which to put money for these things at the rate of twopence for each item. People got up and moved about. I got up and moved about. Alfred Fantl was not allowed to get up and move about. Edgar Voysey began talking to him about the threefold nature of man or possibly Philippe le Bel. I went for a breath of air on the roof outside the door leading to the fire-escape, and then I came back and began manoeuvring for the chance to approach one or other of my two young women. A young man who had been talking to the more attractive of the two, the materter woman, turned away. She was free. I seized a spare cup of mint tea from somebody’s tray and made across the room to offer it to her. At that moment, I saw ‘Thea’. All other young women disappeared from my thoughts, and I spilt at least half of my cup of mint tea upon the floor. I was transfixed.
Thea' was standing by herself, but I could not for the life of me have approached her.

Instead, I had to go round looking for Irene and stuttering at her:

'I say, there's a girl. Over there. I want to talk to her, and I daren't. Get into conversation with her, please. Then I'll come up, and you can introduce me.'

Irene grinned.

'Please,' I said. 'I'll do anything for you. By the time I'm capable again, she'll be talking to somebody else.'

I gibbered.

'Watch me,' said Irene.

She walked across to 'Thea', said that it had been a lovely day, but terribly cold for the time of year, and asked her if she came here quite a lot. I circled round them like a dog circling round someone who has just threatened to kick it, and then I approached. 'Thea' had seemed to chafe a little at Irene's conversation, but she was sympathetic towards me, and I found myself talking to her without difficulty. She was Viennese and had been a dancer, but had given up dancing. She had been in Vienna when the Germans marched in and had, in fact, left Austria only last June.

'It must have broken your heart,' I said.

'No,' said she. 'There was very little of Austria left, before that.'

Her voice was sensitive, tranquil, heady, her English good. She had studied dancing for a while in London with the great Russian teacher, Legat. I had known him fairly well. We talked about him.

People were going. The room was less full than it had been five minutes ago. 'Thea' thought she must get her clothes. I waited. When she came in sight again, I asked her to come out and drink coffee somewhere.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I'm with somebody else.'

Inwardly, I collapsed.

I waited for Edgar Voysey, Freddie Fantl and Irene. 'Thea' was standing three yards away from me, also waiting. A young man in a large black hat joined her, and they went out. As she passed me, 'Thea' wished me good night in a friendly, shy voice and I believe (but it was not easy to be certain in the rather poor light between so many swing-doors) blushed.

Fantl, Voysey and Irene assembled, and the four of us went out to a small restaurant.

That is the whole incident, recounted as sharply and circumstantially as I can do it.
What I have omitted is not circumstantial, but essential. It is this. As Professor Dr. Unracht knew that he and I were not strangers, so I knew that 'Thea' and I were not strangers. This knowledge had risen up in me slowly and with perfect certainty as I talked to her. Moreover, I knew in what relation we had previously stood to each other, that she had been in some way subordinate to me and that I had used her cruelly.

ALFRED FANTL AND EDGAR VOYSEY WERE NOT trivial people. They were characters from a comedy, but they were not trivial. I was not so sure of Irene, so I kept my mouth shut.

Except that I said:

'I must see that girl again. I have to go down to Kent this week. If any of you meet her again, please, please make it plain that I must see her.'

It was Freddie Fantl who christened her 'Thea'.

Irene was certain that 'Thea' had said she lived in the same house as Siegmund Laufer, the pianist.

Freddie said that she was not his type. She was too ethereal.

He said:

'I know the type, huh? It is very common in Vienna.'

We left it at that. Edgar Voysey went on talking. He talked about the seven cultural, the seven geological and the seven astronomical epochs. We separated, and I went back to Richard St. Hilda's flat in St. John's Wood.

I tried hard not to accept my knowledge, for it was already painful to me.

I said:

'There are perfectly reasonable explanations for your feeling. This girl is attractive, extremely attractive. She moves like a dream, and I could myself imagine that the legs and the perfectly conical breasts had been turned in a lathe. A thought concerning reincarnation had been inserted into your mind, and you attached to it the next intense feeling which presented itself. This phantasy of having met the beloved in a former life is a common one in cases of romantic love. You were jaded and stale. Since you married, you have experienced no particularly intense feeling with regard to any young woman. Latent intensities gathered to a head to-night because of the unusualness of the occasion and because, as I have already observed, this girl is by the most ordinary standards out of the ordinary.'
I said:
‘Even if this wholly rational explanation does not satisfy you, there is still the possibility of true affinities of a more generalised kind. Perhaps this is in fact the ideal woman. Astrologically, for instance, it may be that your natures are exactly compatible. Did you by chance observe the young man in whose company this girl went away? He was not unlike you.’

I said:
‘Her pallor, that alone was sufficient to draw to a focus your images. Professor Dr. Unradt, Dr. Gloss and Professor Laufer all display this same pallor, a spiritual and not a physically sickly complexion. This, combined with the undoubted grace and, if I may say so, the unambiguous maturity of her body, fired your imagination.’

But it was no good. I knew what I knew.

I sat up late and wrote the following at about four o’clock in the morning:

To Prof. Siegmund Laufer,
c/o The Institute of Mystical Science,
Natterjack Place, W.1.

Dear Professor Laufer,

After your recital last night, I was in conversation with a young woman who, I feel certain, said that she lived in the same house as yourself. I have something I wish to send her, but I omitted to discover her name or (with certainty) her address. She was Austrian and had left Vienna in June of last year. Herself formerly a dancer, she would remember that we talked about the Russian teacher, Legat (what I am anxious to send her are, in fact, some drawings done by Legat during his last illness). She was rather pretty, blonde, of medium height, dressed in a blue, flowered dress, and of a pale complexion.

I enclose a note addressed to this inconnue. If someone answering to the description does indeed live in your house, perhaps you would be so kind as to give her this note.

In conclusion, may I give myself the pleasure of thanking you for your playing last night and of saying how much I admired it.

Yours sincerely,

Alick Frobisher.
For two, three and four days I waited for a reply, and then with a leaden heart I packed up a few things and travelled down to Kent. I could do no more. 'Thea' did not attend regularly at the Institute of Mystical Science. If she were there again, Alfred Fantl, Edgar Voysey or Irene would speak to her for me. I did not think she would be there again. I think I can even say that I knew she would not be there again.

CHAPTER THREE

EFFIE'S TWO COTTAGES STOOD IN DIRECT LINE WITH the Druids' telepathic way across England. I do not know how this fact had been established. There were Druids' stones quite near, but I do not know what monument in the opposite direction was communicated with. Even if Effie's cottages stood in a geometrically straight line, as the crow flies, between two druidical sites, it is still not established, so far as I know, that telepathic communication takes the same flight as a crow and not, for instance, one of Professor Einstein's bent lines. However, this was the explanation advanced for the presence of so many ghosts in such a small house. They were as it might be frozen here by the power of the Druids' thought.

In our cottage, there were three ghosts. The first was an ordinary Poltergeist, which lived on the landing and knocked over lamps, furniture and so forth. The second was De Quincey. It had come to Effie's bed-side one night, announced itself by name and implored Effie to stroke its hair. The third was half man, half beast.

When I went down to Kent on March 17th, I was in too apathetic a frame of mind to be even politely interested in Effie's ghosts, and certainly I never asked which ghost belonged to the room in which Margaret and I slept.

It was during the first week after I arrived. That is to say, about March 22nd.

I awoke with a feeling of oppressive dread. My eyes knew immediately in which direction to turn. At the foot of my bed were glinting eyes embedded in a round, black object rather larger than a man's head. This may have been the entire creature or only that part of it which was visible above the foot of my bed, I cannot be certain. It was vaguely unclean and, I could imagine, covered with hair like that of a rather threadbare black retriever dog. I was afraid, but not paralysed.
Margaret had not awakened. I called to her. Her bed was against the opposite wall, and the reading-lamp was on her bedside table. I asked her if she saw anything and then told her to put the light on. Margaret saw nothing, and I saw nothing now.

When the light was again turned off, I laid my head on the pillow and prepared to go to sleep immediately. I was still afraid. Mainly, it was the uncleanness of the creature which affected me, and my fear was the fear that I should have experienced if I had known there was a rat in the room, the fear that it might gnaw my face.

The following day, Richard did in fact advance the theory that the apparition had been that of the King rat which appears only once in a hundred years.

It was, however, in this room that the ghost spoken of as half man, half beast, existed. This, as I say, I did not know at the time. Now I learned too that Effie was not the only one who had seen this particular apparition in this room. The wife of one of her talented children had slept here and had also seen it and had experienced a precisely similar emotion, and this young woman, now living in a house only half a mile away, was a hard-boiled musician whose life consisted for the most part in managing a husband no less full of whimsies than his mother.

Everybody laughed at Effie’s ghosts, even those who had seen them. I myself laughed at this one.

Richard St. Hilda murmured something or other to the effect that the Druids must have been telling each other dirty stories.

My secret thought was this:
‘There is more evil in me than I knew.’

FOR A DAY OR TWO LONGER, I KEPT THE THOUGHT of ‘Thea’ at bay.

I drove around with Richard St. Hilda, drinking, playing darts, making friends with both gentry and folk and listening to their dull, rustic conversations. Richard and I continued to debate philosophical questions. It frequently seemed as if Richard thought that I knew the truth and would not tell it to him, but his occupation lay in undermining whatever convictions I may have had for the reason that he had none at all.

In the country, Tit and Nit were charming. Awful smells and disgusting articles of food do not matter in the country. Tit and
Nit played among the shrubs and the smaller plants, their white and brown bodies in sinuous movement, their cries like the sound of sea-gulls or distant lambs in this thin air. Logs were kept in a small tub by the fire. Tit, the male, developed a taste for sitting in this tub. He looked very pretty sitting in it, as if he had been posed for a photograph.

The first flowers appeared, in the garden a pink almond, scylla and a yellow dorumicum, in the woods a few primroses on very short stems.

Margaret was happy. She liked trees, flowers, dumb animals and nature and had always chafed a little at London.

There were beauty spots and places of historical interest. Effie and her daughter-in-law gave a party together. A partition between the two cottages was opened. Effie put her grey hair in ringlets and tied a vermilion ribbon about it. People came from London. Afterwards, everybody went round to the daughter-in-law's house where she and Effie's talented son played piano duets, including some of the latter's own compositions. These two held advanced opinions about music and thought that Beethoven, for instance, was very dull and that Brahms, Wagner and Tschaikowsky were not composers at all. They admired Duke Ellington and the less familiar Viennese waltzes. Mozart they were still just able to listen to. They served a claret cup in bread-bins.

At six o'clock of an evening, Margaret, Richard and I went round to the other cottage and listened to the news on Effie's wireless. After the six o'clock news, Richard and I walked up the road to the Hoppers' Arms.

The thought of 'Thea' closed in upon me.

1 The erstwhile male. In February, both cats had been doctored. They went to the vet's on Saturday afternoon, came back on Sunday afternoon with their fur wet and smelling of anaesthetic and in the evening were playing hard again. I must take advantage of this footnote to record, too, that during these weeks in Kent Tit also saw a ghost. He was sleeping in his basket by the fire. Quite suddenly he awoke and turned his eyes to the window. Margaret was in bed. Richard and I were up late, talking. Tit paced the room in every direction and growled like a dog, his red-glinting, blue eyes turned the whole time towards the window. This went on for twenty minutes or more. Richard turned the light out. Neither of us saw anything, but Tit went on staring. I stroked him and found that he was in a sweat. It was more frightening than seeing a ghost oneself. Even Effie tried to explain this away. What she called 'a rough man' had returned to the neighbourhood. He was a notable frightener of young girls and had even on one occasion sent the tough daughter-in-law screaming back to the house. Effie thought that perhaps this 'rough man' was on the prowl in her garden and that Tit had heard and possibly seen him. Thus do sexual phantasies take precedence over ghostly ones in a fluttering lady's mind.
I shut out everything else. This image had a finer, more brilliant colour than any that had previously existed in my mind. I have found that erotic images can be of four kinds. First, the despairing images which the adolescent forms of women rather older than himself. These are frankly obscene and tend to degenerate into the grotesque. Second, the first love images. These are intrinsically obscene because they attribute to the beloved object qualities which do not exist. Third, the desire images of the adult. These are without any trace of obscenity because they are strictly purposive. In the imperfectly adult, they may degenerate into one of the first two kinds, but in themselves they constitute the normal series of images cast up during a course of action. Fourth, the limit of possibility images. There is a biological scale of values, and the adult male is capable of recognising in a particular female his erotic superior. He cannot fail to regard her as desirable, but there is no despairing quality in his image of her, for his character is sufficiently well tuned to permit him at the outset to shut off the flow of emotion towards an impossible object. My image of ‘Thea’ was none of these four. It was more vital, and I do not think there are words for it. The nearest I can approach to describing my emotion in the face of it is to say that it was like æsthetic emotion intensified. It was as if a man should regard a picture, read a poem or contemplate a beautiful action and find in it so much revelation of his own life that he cried aloud. His cry would be composed only in part of pure wonder. The rest would be intolerable anguish because he saw the form of his life exhibited with a definition which he in his actual life-time would not be able so much as to indicate. Thereafter, he would become a saint or a drunkard or else die quickly.

But this music is pitched higher than I want it to be at the moment. I must continue with the demonstrable facts.

The weather was still cold, and no doubt the cottages were damp. I again caught a chill. This is understatement. I took so much cold on the stomach that I could not use food at all. My bowels turned to water. The muscles of my back began to ache again, and my neck was stiff. Catarrh threatened to choke me. My head, my limbs and my genitals ached.

I said:
‘This is the planet Saturn which has me in its grip.’

I said:
‘This is the death to which my whole life tended. I must accept the full implications of what I know. Never have I subscribed to any doctrine because it gratified, comforted or exalted me. I
must now subscribe to a doctrine which is my death. In this life-time, I did not reach a sufficient level of development to be vouchsafed complete knowledge of past lives, but 'Thea' was shown to me, and I was permitted to know that it was a wrong done to her which had drifted like sand into the delicate machinery of my fate. I cannot make amends to her directly. That is not permitted. Even to see her a second time is not permitted. Nothing is now permitted except to die in full knowledge and with full consent. Now the planet Saturn will slowly chill me to death.'

THE CONCLUSION OF THIS PHASE WAS EXTREMELY bewildering. Even now I do not know whether I was hallucinated or whether this incident did in fact take place. Certainly, there was a profound suggestion of uncleanness to disturb my consciousness. The apparition had been unclean. Tit and Nit had worms. They would be seen dragging themselves across the carpet by the front paws, trying to ease the irritation of their little fundamentals. More grotesque and disturbing still, the chief affliction from which Effie suffered, despite her ringlets and ribbons, her open windows, her old-fashioned flowers and the fairies at the bottom of her garden, was piles. However it may be, I have the distinct visual impression of myself waking in the night with an acute nausea. My throat gaped, and out of my mouth came a large worm and lay wriggling upon the pillow. That such incidents do take place, I know. Later, I examined several books of reference and discovered that among the many species of worm which infest man there is one which lives in his large intestine and does occasionally escape at night through the nose or mouth. It is called the roundworm, and its eggs are swallowed from a bad water-supply or with cress grown in foul water. My visual memory further shows me looking distractedly about the room for a piece of paper, terribly anxious to be rid of this creature before Margaret awoke. I found a piece of paper from a cigarette packet, inserted it beneath the off-white, ringless worm, opened the window, dropped worm and paper out into the garden and went to the bathroom to gargle and smoke a cigarette. The following day, I left my bed, walked into Tonbridge and bought myself a vermifuge from some chemist's shop. Hallucinatory or real, there was no repetition of the incident. Indeed, I suddenly became well, and resolved that I would have nothing more to do with reincarnation or for that matter with any form of supernatural life, come what might.
RICHARD ST. HILDA TOOK GREAT PLEASURE IN THE company of sailors. One of his private treasures was a sailor’s cap. It lay in a drawer at the flat in St. John’s Wood along with photographs of handsome young negroes, and on the wall of the dining-room was a line-drawing of a French sailor-boy with a pouting mouth. Chatham was not very far away from our part of Kent, and while I lay in bed wrestling with the planet Saturn, Richard had been to Chatham twice. There he had located the public houses in which sailors dance, sing and in general live the romantic, carefree life that we have come to expect of sailors, and in one of these he had made the acquaintance of a young sailor called Bill. After paying for a great many drinks, he had driven Bill out along the landward wall of the docks and drawn the car up against the kerb.

Bill had said, rather bitterly:
‘Well, I suppose this is your big moment.’

Richard’s way of putting it was:
‘Here I thought that I had picked up a sailor, and I found myself confronted with a subtle, complex personality.’

Bill had recently married. A girl in Folkestone had got herself in the family way by him, and he had been induced to make an honest woman of her. He did not very much like the sailor’s life. He was happier in the dance-halls of Folkestone. He was fond of the girl whom he had married and who was now about to make him a father, but he did not like being tied to her either.

Richard said:
‘I shall buy him out of the navy. Then I will get a small boat, and we shall sail round the Greek islands.’

I saw Bill twice. I also saw his wife. Margaret and I drove to Folkestone with Richard, and the five of us went to a dance-hall together. There was a sixth person, another sailor with very wicked, shifty eyes. Bill’s wife was extremely handsome. She had the nobility of countenance and manner that working-class beauty presents during the last two years before it is finally conquered by housework, child-bearing, neighbourly quarrels, anxiety and the dreary environment. She was very anxious to please. When I said that she must let me know the time of her child’s birth and I would cast its horoscope, her tilted face turned towards the verge of tears. I danced with her, very careful not to jolt her great belly.

Later, Bill and the wicked sailor came to the cottage and were fed on eggs and bacon. In a fortnight, Richard’s romantic phantasy
was exhausted. He saw no more of Bill and dreamed no more of the Greek islands. Instead, he reverted to a previous intention that, when his lease of Effie’s cottage was up, he and I should go to Paris and the South of France for a couple of months.

**DAY BY DAY, THE NEWS ON EFFIE’S WIRELESS BECAME more heavy with foreboding. The wicked sailor informed us that two German submarines had appeared in the Medway.**

**OUR CLOSEST NEIGHBOURS WERE THE ABELLS, WHO lived in the middle of a small orchard adjoining Effie’s garden. This orchard had at one time belonged to Effie, but she had sold it to the Abells (who were her brother, sister-in-law, nephew and niece) at a very low cost, and they had come and built a house in it. Their house was built of rough-hewn timber in the form of a Swiss chalet. Since the orchard was perfectly flat and Swiss chalets are not built on flat ground, the Abells had moved a great deal of earth and had a mound built in the middle of the orchard. The timbers which supported the house in front straddled across the hollow from which the earth for the mound had been taken, and the front windows were therefore on a level with the flat orchard, just as they would have been if the house had been built flat. The house was called Cherry Orchard.**

The four Abells, in order of seniority, were called Herbert, Frances, Eric and Caroline. Including Caroline, who was only fifteen, they were all pictorial artists except Eric who, in the first assertion of his male independence, had learnt to play the flute. For a while, Richard St. Hilda had wondered whether to take Eric also to the Greek islands, but Eric had refused before he was asked. He was in fact a very nice lad and stayed at Cherry Orchard with his parents as little as he could.

Herbert Abell had a stiff, military bearing, an energetic manner and voice and a large, aristocratic nose. At the age of eighteen he had been seduced by an Italian nobleman and taken round the minor courts of Europe as the Italian nobleman’s secretary. He was completely dominated by his wife, who called him Harbutt, but retained a certain interest in things of the flesh.

Frances Abell was a pinched little thing as strong as a horse, and behind pince-nez she concealed the eyes of a stoat.
She yearned for popularity, which she felt was her due, and while a man still thought he was safe in the Mrs. Abell stage, she would say to him:

‘I’m afraid everybody calls me Frankie, you know.’

This was untrue. One or two had been trapped into calling her Frankie to her face, but nobody behind her back called her anything but Frances Abell, severely in full.

At the age of fifteen, Caroline was physically mature and obstinately shy. This was the fault of her mother who still kept her in very brief, childish frocks, so that she had something of the perverse and rather horrible attraction of the principal boy in a pantomime. She was a large, handsome child, with clustering, fair hair and big, golden legs. Her face had the suggestively Jewish nose and short upper lip of a virgin sheep newly dipped. She was presumably born under Aries. I found her disturbing and was rather ashamed of the fact. Margaret said that I had no need to be, for the child was obviously of an age to be desired or she wouldn’t be that shape.

Frances and Harbutt Abell were great lovers of nature. Harbutt told us how during the first March sunshine he had gone out sketching the woods in the morning and, coming to a hollow full of drifted leaves on which the sun lay, had flung himself down among the leaves and remained extended there until lunch-time. The Abells’ first definite attempt on us was when they came round after supper one evening, dressed up in great boots and carrying walking-sticks, and said that they were going out to listen to the nightingale and perhaps we might care to come too. I had met them before, both down here and on two occasions at a concert in London, and I exerted myself to prevent them now acquiring Richard.

I said:

‘I know that these creatures have souls, just as we have. All the same, one is not the Archangel Michael and ought perhaps to refrain from confronting evil beyond one’s powers.’

But it was no good. On Easter Monday, we and the Abells went out picnicking together, and Richard, Margaret and I were being made to play drawing games with coloured chalks. Caroline sat beside me, those wonderful legs extended on the grass, scratching designs on the golden bloom thereof with the stalk of a piece of last year’s corn-stubble. There was a circus at Tonbridge, and the following day everybody went there. On Wednesday, the Abells gave a party, and we played further drawing games.
FOR THE TIME BEING, I HAD EXORCISED ‘THEA’. But a worse devil came in and took her place. I refer to the money devil, my old familiar, the noon-day devil of which the Psalmist speaks. Now it is one of the elementary facts of existence that no man willingly contains a devil. He will try to exteriorise and as it were incarnate it. Thus the German race has tried to incarnate its devil in the Jews. It will no doubt succeed in the end. The Jewish race will in fact become devilish, and then it will destroy Germany. In the meantime, the Germans are unable to drive their scapegoat out into the desert in the manner of antiquity. On the contrary, the more they exteriorise their racial devil, the more desperately they cling to that in which they have tried to incarnate it. As soon as a considerable number of Jews have left the country, they march straight into Poland in search of new Jews, choosing Poland because Poland had more Jewish inhabitants than Germany itself. In the same way, I tried to incarnate my devil in Richard St. Hilda.

There were a number of demonstrable facts to justify the attempt in appearance. For instance, Richard St. Hilda had made several financial promises which he had not kept. I had first met him before the foundation of Frobisher and Thorpe, Ltd., and for the scantiest of reasons he had straightway regarded me as a considerable genius. He already had a painter and felt perhaps that he ought to have a writer, too. When I had married Margaret and Sam Thorpe was offering to take me into partnership, Richard St. Hilda had offered me thirty shillings a week so that I could stay out of the business world and ‘do my own work’. This was the same amount as he gave his painter, but to date he had managed to enjoy my company free. Some intuition told me that, once Frobisher and Thorpe, Ltd., had been rejected, Richard St. Hilda would invoke his overdraft, as he had already several times done when a small sum in ready cash was in question. After the collapse of Frobisher and Thorpe, Ltd., the offer of thirty shillings had been renewed. I still attached no importance to it. It was mentioned from time to time and had in fact been supposed to start from the beginning of March, but at the time of this story it was the case that I had on no occasion received so much as a brown penny from Richard St. Hilda. During January and February,

1 During the period of my Christian upheaval, I had written an essay for one of the more pretentious quarterlies, and Richard St. Hilda had read it. Beyond this, I had done nothing but an occasional book review of the ‘clever’ kind popularised by Mr. Cyril Connolly and a handful of unacceptable poems.
it was I who had paid him ten shillings a week. At this moment, both my wife and I were apparently living at his expense, but if one looked at it in another light one observed that, in Margaret, he had acquired a first-class cook and housekeeper for the price of her and my keep and that he had contrived this by stating in the first place that he was taking a cottage for her and me and that he would visit us only once in a while at the week-end.

All this I could at a normal moment have forgotten. For a short while, I myself had been in a position to help two or three young architects to jobs for which they were unfitted, and I liked the sensation of being a patron of the arts at very little expense to myself. But this was not a normal moment. Apart from anything else, I had just reached the last three pounds of the money I had saved from Sam Thorpe's wreckage. In another ten days, I should be completely penniless and a prey to anything that Richard St. Hilda or another cared to put across me. Richard chose this moment to confuse me with yet another promise. I had not believed any of his former promises. I did not now believe that I should go to Paris and the South of France at his expense. Nevertheless, I had spent fifteen shillings on having my passport renewed.

The Abells helped, of course. Richard was never at his best in the company of other people. Frances Abell made a fuss of him, and he became quite ridiculous. It was no doubt the case that middle-aged ladies were as necessary to him as he to middle-aged ladies, but this silly, strutting fellow that he became irritated me more each day. Irritation would not have mattered greatly, but I was also profoundly depressed.

EASTER MONDAY WAS ON APRIL 10TH. IT WAS ON Wednesday of the following week that I cast the Abells' horoscopes and that Richard St. Hilda exhibited his face without glasses. That was April 19th. On April 18th, 1939, Venus stood in opposition to Neptune, my rising planet. Mercury was stationary and turning on its tracks. The moon came first to the parallel of Saturn and later in the day to the square of Mars, and on the 19th there was first a conjunction with Saturn and, in the early evening, a partial eclipse of the sun followed immediately by the square of Pluto. The following morning, the 20th of April, the sun was in the square of Pluto, and the new moon was moving first towards a conjunction and later towards a parallel with Uranus.

Morning and afternoon of Wednesday, April 19th, were spent in
driving Effie round to see the cherry-blossom, which was already in its full glory and the plum-blossom with it. Richard St. Hilda brought his Leica with him and wandered off among the trees of one great stretch of orchard, taking photographs. We ate our lunch beside a rather smelly pool in which stood an iron bedstead and where, according to Effie, the vipers could be seen swimming at this time of the year. Away to our left, men were spraying the trees, and a cloud of pea-green or turquoise sulphur stood upon the air with a rainbow across it. Effie talked about a place close at hand called the lost field, not because people could never find it but because, however many times it was ploughed, it yielded nothing but a crop of stones. After that, we walked through the woods, and Effie rebuked a woodman for cutting trees with the sap already in them. Richard insisted on us following a fair-haired young man in a white sweater who turned out, at a closer view, to have approximately the features of a gargoyle. It was a hot day.

Richard, Margaret and I walked up to the Hoppers’ Arms at half-past five. The Abells were there, looking at the eclipse of the sun through pieces of smoked glass. Richard St. Hilda and I played our usual three games of darts. Richard won. He had beaten me more and more frequently during the last few weeks, and he began to strut.

I said inwardly:

‘All right. I’ll beat you again when I have money in my pocket.’

The Abells finished with the sun and came inside. They made us play skittles instead of darts. Skittles seemed to me a ridiculous, noisy game, and I had not practised at all. The talented daughter-in-law and her husband came in. They had been gathering cowslips.

After half an hour of skittles, there was conversation. Margaret, Harbutt Abell, Caroline and Effie’s son formed one group. Frances Abell, the daughter-in-law, Richard St. Hilda and I formed the other. Presently, Margaret went back to the cottage to prepare supper. Harbutt Abell took Caroline with him and went too. Effie’s son went. Richard, the daughter-in-law and Frances Abell talked about their personalities, their psychic experiences, their shyness in company and cognate subjects. Apropos I can’t remember what, Richard observed that I knew a little astrology. Frances Abell at once implored me to go round to Cherry Orchard with Richard after supper, and before I knew where I was I had promised that I would if I were paid for the horoscopes.

On the way home, somebody appealed to me for confirmation of an opinion about some aspect of personality.
I said:
‘I’m sorry. I have two pounds ten in my pocket. I exist below
the level of these discussions.’

At supper, Richard thought that I ought to regard Frances Abell
as a person.
I said:
‘That is not my world.’
Richard wanted to know what was my world.
I said:
‘A world of complete lawlessness, a chaos without policemen.
Then I should know how to deal with a middle-class imbecile like
Frances Abell. I should slit her throat and steal her purse.’

Richard St. Hilda ruffled his hair, and his large, sun-bruised face
bore a mixture of frown and boyish grin.
I still bore charitable feelings towards him, for I remember that
I said:
‘I should steal your purse, too. But I wouldn’t slit your throat.’
I decided that I wouldn’t go round to Cherry Orchard after all.
Richard went by himself. Five minutes later, Frances Abell came
through on the telephone and implored me once again to go round.
I cursed and went. I arrived at the Swiss chalet with a little
pile of ephemeredes and astrological reference-books under my
arm.

Astrology led back to personalities. Richard St. Hilda was asked
to take off his glasses, and Frances Abell said that his eyes were very
beautiful. It was at this moment that my devil became fully incarnate
in Richard St. Hilda. I had never seen him without his glasses
before, and it was a revelation. This was the glazed; upper-class
English eye in perfection, the right eyebrow, finely marked, set in a
curve of permanent disdain above the expressionless blue film. This
was Richard St. Hilda, at last. And I had taken him for the amiable
buffoon he wished to seem.
I thought:
‘The face of the poor is well-known. This is the face of the rich,
which deserves to be better known.’

The following morning, I stayed in bed longer than usual. When
I came down, Richard was sunning himself at the door in nothing
but his shoes and a pair of linen trousers. A healthy, bronze sheen
had begun to come upon his plump shoulders and little, puffy dugs
with their few strands of silky hair. A little exercise and hard
living, and he would be a magnificent creature, for he was over
six feet tall.
I thought:

'The sun does not shine upon the rich and the poor, the just and the unjust equally. It is because of his money that Richard sits there enjoying the sun, while I oversleep with misery. That is why his face is plump, ruddy and without a single line, while mine, at the same age, is deeply scored, set hard and very pale. He shuts me out from the light of the sun.'

After my late breakfast, I set myself down to see a clear picture of my own life and what I could now make of it. The status quo was highly unpleasant, only a little less so than the status in quod. After so many years of trying to find myself a place of some kind in the world, here I was reduced to the growing boy's condition of complete helplessness again. Certainly, I must cease to give even a half-credence to Richard St. Hilda's promises. For him, making promises was a part of his private game. As to using some technique myself and flattering, cajoling or blackmailing Richard, that I was temperamentally unable to do. My instinct of self-preservation was strong, but not so strong. I must face the problem directly.

Frances Abell rang up to say that she and Harbutt were going to London for the day, and perhaps Caroline might come and have lunch with us.

'Yes, of course,' said I.

I went out into the garden. There were two lawns, separated by flower-beds and a path. On one of the lawns, Richard St. Hilda was now sitting in a deck-chair, reading (I fancy) Hegel. I began to pace up and down the other lawn.

So far as I could see, there were no possibilities at all. I should no doubt be allowed to join the army, but that thought paralysed me. I was too old for the navy. The marines, perhaps. There I should have a red band round my cap and once in a while a sight of the sea. I did not know whether there was an age limit for the marines, but I fancied not. My colleagues would hate me, but I could perhaps get used to that. I would bear the marines in mind. A waiter, no. I should start trouble with the first customer who insulted me. I could not afford a taxi or a set of paint-brushes, and I was untrained for any of the normal proletarian jobs. I could not even have got a job as an underling in the trade in which I had for a short while been master. I should need a great deal of practice before I could lay a brick.

The harder I thought about it, the more impossible anything became, and I felt that I understood the German cry against encirclement. I developed a phantasy. I thought that henceforward
I would go through the world with a rope about my neck like the Burghers of Calais. If anybody were impolite enough to ask me about it, I would explain that I was herein expressing my true condition and that I expected the moment to come soon when that condition finally worsened beyond endurance, upon which I should simply attach the free end of my rope to a tree or something of the kind and jump. I felt that to appear everywhere costumed in a rope would in some way act as a talisman or phylactery, removing me from anxiety and despair because I had so fully expressed and thus come to the end of these things and because the means of a quick deliverance was so tangibly to hand.

I saw that Caroline had arrived. With a great air of consideration for her years, Richard was greeting her upon the other lawn. Shortly afterwards, Richard began moving in and out of the cottage, carrying things out for lunch on the lawn. I felt a profound hatred for him. I scowled as it were with my whole body, feeling the scowl crease not only my forehead but my bowels and heart.

In the end, Margaret came out, too, carrying a tray. She called to me, as she passed, that lunch was ready. I walked across to the other lawn and greeted Caroline, who was dressed in a white, lilac-flowered dress which took away the golden tint and lent a certain pallor to her large, beautiful limbs. To any question, she answered with a shy but definite monosyllable, so there was no conversation.

Richard went in again to fetch a flagon of cider.

As he came back with it, he said in his blithest tones:

‘I’m afraid there isn’t enough for you, Alick.’

He filled up Caroline’s, his own and Margaret’s glasses and then handed me the flagon. I put it down on the grass beside me. I was quivering with fury.

There was bread, cheese, pickles and a sweet.

The last thing Richard said was:

‘Alick, cut me a piece of bread, will you?’

I was keeping myself under control. I meant to cut this bread. I picked up the bread-board and the knife. The knife slipped out of my fingers. I picked up the knife, and the bread slipped out of my fingers and was rolling about in my lap. I could not hold anything. Richard St. Hilda was grinning at my discomfiture. I must control myself. A sweat came out upon my eyelids. I tried again to make the bread stay on the board while I took the knife in hand to cut it. I dropped everything between my knees. I picked up the loaf. I did not know what to do with it.
PART TWO

CHAPTER FOUR

I WALKED DOWN CHARING X ROAD, AND IN ONE OF the little side-streets near Foyle’s there was a street entertainer. He was a Scotsman, short, dark and brawny, dressed in dirty grey flannels, dirty white plimsolls and a clean white slip which displayed his weather-browned, tattooed arms and bushy, black chest to the best advantage. His act was unusually simplified. The only apparatus was a long rope, which the little Scotsman kept tying in a loose knot, to show us how easily it slipped. Then he turned suddenly brisk. He clapped his hands three times, slipped the loosely knotted rope over his head and invited eight strong men to come out of the audience and have a tug o’ war, with him in the middle of it. They were allowed and indeed encouraged to pull as hard as they could, the only condition being that they must not jerk on the rope.

The little Scotsman’s face turned red, purple and finally black, and then he waved a hand limply to tell his impromptu assistants to stop. By the time he had wiped the foam off his mouth and recovered sufficiently to take up his collection, most of the audience had disappeared, including the eight men. He came round among the rest of us, stroking his neck, which was red and scaly like a turkey’s, and muttering savagely, in broad, sibilant, Clydeside Scots, that if we thought he did this for his own private amusement we were bloody well mistaken.

As a matter of fact, an act as simple and direct as this did get on the halls about three years ago. I think it was in Islington I saw it. The man simply came up to the centre of the stage, with a spotlight on him, and announced that he was now going to fall flat on his face, without in any way using his hands to soften the fall. Every light went out except the spot. The side-drums began to rattle. The man stood to attention with his arms stiffly to his sides. He leaned forward a little. The spotlight changed to green. The drums reached a climax. The man fell flat on his face, just as he had promised. Attendants came in and carried him off. Music began. The lights came on. A compère walked on to announce the next act. And that was all.
Perhaps it was the same man, coming steadily down in the world. And perhaps he had once been a great acrobat or juggler until, through drinking, drugging, love or the death of a partner, he lost his nerve or damaged one of the fingers of a hand.

ISLINGTON IS STILL A BAD PLACE, THE LORD BE praised. It isn’t so long since I saw a man running out of a mews there, with his throat slit from ear to ear. The police find their lives made very difficult in Islington. To see trouble coming is the only good method they have. A policeman came into the Players’ Club not so long ago and advised us to get all the girls away as quickly as possible, for there was a gang of lads outside, all very drunk and getting themselves worked up. I saw one of the girls into a taxi, and she told me next day that the taxi-man had driven her into a side-street near her home, away in West Kensington, and asked her if she were broad-minded.

BUT THIS AND THE FOLLOWING CHAPTER ARE SUP- posed to tell a story of the music-halls, and the main character is a woman whom I have not yet introduced. Albert took me to the Calgary, and there she was.

Albert is a faded old thing with false eyelashes. So many years of grease-paint have pickled him. He is such an old whore, so tough at heart and innured to all life’s tragedies, that nobody else but me dares to be seen around with him. He is full of good humour, however. He says he was fifteen years in a circus and never lost a spangle. If you drive him along a bumpy road and apologise, he says he’s used to bobbing up and down.

He says:
‘I dance on my right leg, I dance on my left, and between the two I earn a living.’

When he’s a little drunk he whoops and cries out:
‘Another port, and I’m anybody’s.’

But that’s just Albert, and the story is about Gertrude Mallinson. I happened to be with Albert. He was going round the halls looking at acts and booking those he liked for a fortnight’s season in Monte Carlo, where he and his friend had once run nude shows for the English and American visitors. We arrived at the Calgary at about twenty past nine, and there was Gertrude Mallinson on the stage.
She had a great turban on and a long blue train spangled with stars and signs of the zodiac. I could have wept. She was waving a long wand with an enormous moon at the end of it, asking people in the audience for their birthdays and telling them what sort of people they were and what their luck would be, pointing out their place in the sun on an illuminated screen which was also covered with stars and the heavenly signs.

When the music struck up and the curtain was coming down, she waved her wand out over the audience and kept on saying:

‘God bless you all, my children. God bless you all...’

She was as fat and pink as a pig at Christmas, and she was weeping for all she was worth, her voice trembling with love towards all those awful, sheepish fools in the audience who couldn't even raise a good clap for her.

For her, for Gertrude Mallinson. The greatest woman who ever trod the earth.

I said to Albert:

‘That’s Gertrude Mallinson.’

Albert looked at his programme and said:

‘Mme Zostchenko, dear.’

I said:

‘She’s Gertrude Mallinson. She’s the greatest woman who ever walked on this God’s earth.’

Albert said:

‘It’s not a very good act, is it? I don’t think I’m going to book it, dear.’

‘All right,’ I said. ‘As Mme Zostchenko she’s not so good, but as Gertrude Mallinson she’s God Almighty. I’m going round to talk to her. You come round when you’ve had an eyeful, and meet us.’

I remembered her when she didn’t have any signs of the zodiac. All she had was whisky to take the spiritual woman out of her and let the elemental forces in. Then she could talk. For she was good, she was wise, and nobody else is either good or wise. Gertrude Mallinson knew from the cradle what life is all about. It was she who put me right about Maimie Joyce. It was she who saved my life that time in Brussels. She was the original Jesus Christ who performed the harrowing of Hell, at least as far as I was concerned. She was Heifetz’s wrist, the giant Panda, Nijinsky’s feet and the prose of Georges Bernanos, as well as being the Virgin Mary and the Queen of Sheba. And to go on the music-halls is the last thing she would ever have thought of, if I knew her.
'HAVE SOME WHISKY,' I SAID. 'HAVE A PINT OF whisky. Take some home and have a bath in it.'

'Have you got any money, Alick lad?'

I said:

'I've got plenty. I'm rich.'

And so I was. I just had five pounds by post from Richard St. Hilda, and it wasn't all gone by a long way.

'Now, listen here, Alick. You're not rich, and you never will be. I'll have a pink gin, and then you can pipe down for a bit.'

'You can't drink pink gin, Gertrude Mallinson. Whisky's what you drink.'

'I drink pink gin now. I've got to look pink, haven't I?'

'No, you've got to come off the music-halls. It's no place for you. Come out of it. Then you can be your own, natural colour again, whisky colour. Listen,' I said. 'I like some things. I like all-in wrestling. The man whose flat I live in says it's degenerate, but I like it. It's a peephole into Hell, and it's nice to look into other people's Hell. But not the music-halls. There are women on the music-halls, and I don't like to see women in Hell.'

'Chivalrous little brute...'

'It's not chivalry,' I said. 'It's just that men create their own Hell. Women don't. When you see a woman living in a Hell of her own, you know some man created it for her and then just wasn't man enough either to pay the rent or to arrange for a removal...'

Albert joined us.

Gertrude Mallinson wanted to know:

'Who's he?'

I said:

'He was fifteen years in a circus and never lost a spangle.'

'I'm an acrobat, dear,' said Albert.

'He's booking acts,' I said.

Gertrude Mallinson said:

'I've got an act he can book.'

'Come off the music-halls,' I said. 'Even Albert doesn't like you on the music-halls.'

'I don't mean me, Alick lad. I know an act Albert'll want to book...'

It was in a little private theatre at a house off the Bayswater Road. There were about twenty people there, and most of them seemed to know each other. Gertrude Mallinson whispered something to a pious-looking old lady at the door, and they let us in.
Now you can believe this or not, just as you please. I find it
difficult to believe myself, when I think of it now.

It was one of those acts in which a conjurer saws a young woman
in two. Albert and I knew all about that act. You have two young
women in the box, and only one of them is shown outside it.

Albert yawned.

He said:

'Your friend's crazy, dear.'

The only thing was that this conjurer didn't have two young
women. When he'd finished sawing, he showed us the inside of
the box, and there was his young woman sawn in two.

Albert was still yawning. He hadn't noticed.

I said:

'Well, what's the explanation?'

Gertrude Mallinson said:

'There isn't any explanation. He just saws them in two. He
has a different young woman every week.'

Somebody screamed and was told to shut up.

Gertrude Mallinson said:

'Come on, we'd better go. You're not supposed to hang about
afterwards. . . .'

CHAPTER FIVE

WHETHER AT HEART I BELIEVE IN NUMEROLOGY,
psychometry, traceries in Egyptian sand, crystal-gazing, palmistry,
examination of entrails, bumps or the Sevenfold Path is more than
I can tell you. But I do most certainly believe in the power of a
woman like Gertrude Mallinson to wring truth out of the practice
of all or any of these arts. If lotus-buds do open between the eyes
or in the throat or the breast or loins at all, then in Gertrude Mal-
linson all are in full bloom, like the Kentish cherry in April. Truth
resides in her. Wisdom and love reside in every vein and vessel
of her body and in every minutest wrinkle of her soul. It has been
so for many, many years. It is no less the case now that she has
perhaps gone out of my life for good than it was at the time of this
reunion of which I am telling you. It was no less the case then,
when she blossomed foolishly upon the music-halls, than it had
been at the time of our first acquaintance, at a time when kings
and royal dukes, great gamblers, great harlots and Labour ministers,
heard the truth babbled upon her whisky-laden breath. And she
is beautiful. She is the most beautiful of all women and all men. Whether she grows too plump and too heavily powdered or too lean and pigmented too much like a sand-preserved princess of the Aztecs or the Egyptians, she is still beautiful. She is like Mme Branchu as the vestal kneeling beside a blue cauldron taller than herself and bound with brass, upon which the flames dance. Or perhaps I can best convey her to you by saying that she combines in her person the beauty both of Isobel Baillie, the singer, and of Anna Wickham, the poet. For those who have any eye, this is already praise of no inferior kind. But Gertrude Mallinson surpasses these and all other beautiful women as the sun a sulphur match or as the taste of moorland honey surpasses the taste of simple sugar from the sugar-beet.

ALL OTHER ELBOWS ARE CONVEX AND GATHER OUTWARD to a dull point or boss, but the elbow which now raised its pint of bitter ale in greeting to me was concave and gathered inward, like a rare apple or the first prize at a show of vegetable marrows, to a fine pin-prick or midge-bite that would have reminded you of Queen Titania’s navel.

Gertrude Mallinson had no theatrical engagement the following week. I saw her nightly, and as the money ran low we reverted to beer together.

It was on Saturday night that she finally opened her heart and talked to me. Curiously enough, she had never been to see all-in wrestling, and I had taken her up Maida Vale to the club there of which I was a member.

THE FIRST FIGHT WAS A PITY-FIGHT, BETWEEN TWO young lads. One of them had a face like Dick Sheppard or the Duke of Windsor, and he was there to appeal to the maternal instincts of the women in the audience. He seemed to be a complete novice, but of course he was game and put up a good show in the first three rounds. Then his opponent began to pull him through a series of Boston Grabs, Indian Deathlocks and scissors on the head, until the lad was crying out with pain and banging his hand on the mat, and a feeble-minded section of the audience was on its feet demanding that the fight be stopped. In the end, both his legs were twisted up with his opponent’s in a complicated leg-lock which the referee and both seconds tried to disentangle for ten minutes without
success. One of the lad’s feet was broken, and he had to be carried off. He was sobbing his heart out, but by this time the audience had become properly acclimatised and tired of its own pity and could be trusted to respond in the correct manner to whatever took place in the succeeding fight.

I hardly remember the second fight. It was between the Iron Duke and somebody I hadn’t seen before, who wasn’t too good. The Duke is a local hero, and I knew his style too well to think of watching him at work upon an inferior opponent. In addition to which, if he will forgive me for saying so, his deeply furrowed brow has always seemed to me to be a little out of place in the wrestling ring. I always feel that he is a deeply intellectual man and that he ought to be occupied with problems of law, religion or statesmanship. I opened my copy of The Weekly Sporting Review, turned to the section headed, ‘With the Grapplers’, and, in the dim light from a great square lamp over the ring, read through all the items of gossip about Bully Pye and ‘Villain’ Jack Pye, Canadian Earl McCready and Bob ‘Legs’ Langevin, Tiger Daula and Rajah Ranji from our Indian Empire, that grand old-timer Douglas Clarke whom I used to watch playing Northern Union Rugby when I was a small boy in my native town. There was a photograph of ‘Man Mountain’ Dean, now doing well in Hollywood, being balanced upon one hand by Joe E. Brown. I was still reading, bemused by the professional, much syncopated, inverted-comma-besprinkled prose of the ‘mat-men’, when Gertrude Mallinson, beside me, drew in her breath and then puffed out her lips in an explosion of annoyance.

‘Oh, just look . . .’

One of the wrestlers for the third fight was already in the ring. He was a popular fighter, and I had better not mention his name because it will seem as if I were holding him up indirectly to opprobrium. His opponent too was just now climbing over the ropes, and it was he whose appearance had caused Gertrude Mallinson to cry out.

She calmed down and said:

‘It’s Joe Passiful, lad. He oughtn’t to be on this job.’

I looked at her and smiled.

‘Any more than you ought to be on the music-halls.’

‘Shut up,’ she said.

Joe Passiful was billed in the programme as ‘Elbow’ Enrico of Italy, and as such I knew him.

‘He’s never been to Italy in his life. . . .’

I could believe that. He was a great, slow, blond creature, rather
like the policeman in an American comedy, and his act was pure
dirt.
The audience had started booing and hissing him before he got
into the ring. He climbed in with a brutal sneer on his face, making
the Fascist salute. The crowd howled at him. He made as if to
jump down from the ring again and attack the crowd. One or two
of the young men stood up and put up their fists and told him to
come along, then. He beat his chest, narrowed his eyes, sat down
in his corner and emptied his water-bottle in one draught.

As the fight went on I could see that Gertrude Mallinson was
really suffering, and it was hardly to be wondered at, if 'Elbow'
Enrico was indeed Joe Passiful and a friend of hers. No man suffers
such pure indignity as the 'dirty' wrestler, who is at one and the
same time getting hurt in the ring and insulted by a hooting mob
and who knows that wrestling audiences will tire of him far more
quickly than they tire of those whose act is 'clean'. I knew that it
would be tactless to suggest going out while the fight was on, but
that is what I wanted to do. One of the least pleasant features of
being a 'dirty' wrestler is that you've got to be really dirty some of
the time. And Joe Passiful did everything. He kneed his popular
opponent in the groin, gouged his eyes, twisted his ears, threw him
by the hair, bit him. On the other hand, when his opponent tortured
Joe Passiful, the audience cheered the roof off.

One woman kept screaming out:
'Let him die . . .'
Everybody else shouted:
'Swing him . . .'
Or:
'Break it off, and give us a bit.'
Gertrude Mallinson pressed her head down and kept muttering
into her vast bosom:
'Oh, the things they've made you do, Joe. The things they've
made you do, lad . . .'

His opponent began to get the upper hand, for the 'dirty' wrestler
is not allowed to win. He got Joe Passiful in a combined arm-lock
and back press and tickled him until he roared, then knuckled him,
behind the ears, pounded his fat, wobbling paunch, pulled out the
hair on his chest. The audience went crazy with joy. There was
a fall, and when his opponent got up Joe Passiful lay on his back,
gasping.

'Let him die,' screamed the woman somewhere at the rear of
the hall.
Gertrude Mallinson said:

'I won't murder that woman. I won't . . .'

A moment later, and the fight was over in an uproar. Joe Passiful got up and started appealing to the audience, making the Fascist salute at them as they cat-called and jeered at him. Then he lost his temper, picked up the referee, a small, tough man, flung him out into the audience, picked up the saw-dust tray from his corner and chased his popular opponent round the ring, banging him over the head with it until he dropped and then bursting into tears, leaping over the ropes and, with a last swipe at the referee who was just climbing back, running off to the dressing-rooms amid a demonstration from the crowd that looked the fury of a lynch-mob or a small country that has just declared war.

The lights went up.

Gertrude Mallinson sat beside me looking completely dazed for a moment and then shook her head violently several times and smiled.

She said:

'I think I'll go and have a talk with Joe . . .'

The first fight after the interval was a lovely fight between Jim Anderson and I forget whom, but it wasn't Jack Dale. I think the finest wrestling-match I ever did see was between Jim Anderson and Jack Dale of Brixton, but to-night the young Scotsman had another opponent. It was a clean, swift fight from beginning to end. There was plenty of forearm hitting, butting and catapulting oneself off the ropes with both feet forward, but for the most part it was pure throwing and holding, with two healthy young bodies giving out all they had at the highest possible speed.

At the beginning of the last fight, Gertrude Mallinson came back, bringing Joe Passiful with her. They both sat beside me for a moment or two, and then in the penumbra somebody noticed that it was 'Elbow' Enrico and started hissing at him and muttering insults. Joe Passiful coughed.

He said:

'I better go. Else the boss'll have at me for sittin' front of the house, and I got to be paid. I got to fight to-morrow afternoon, and I want to sleep. I better not wait. This is my lodgings. Mostly I'm in of a morning.'

He gave Gertrude Mallinson a card and pushed his way out. He was panting, hopelessly out of condition even by ordinary, non-athletic standards. Gertrude Mallinson clung to his hand for a moment and smiled up at him as if he was Clark Gable and she just Betty Smith of Wimbledon.
BUT WHAT WE TALKED ABOUT AFTER THE FIGHT IS
the important thing. It was a large, bright public house, with a
glitter of tinted bottles and silver that made a man feel his drinking
was a noble occupation. Gertrude Mallinson’s broad face, with
its pallor, its occasional rosiness, its uncovered bronze hair and its
distinctly nacreous eyes, turned here and there in the light. Her
large, blushing arm tilted to the same light a glass vessel in which
the ale bubbled and rolled with its concealed bitterness and salt
for the deeper places of the stomach. The cat of the house came
and jumped up on her knee. It was a large, Persian eunuch, with
lemon eyes and a luxurious, greenish grey coat. At the first touch
of Gertrude Mallinson’s fingers it blinked its eyes, and its head
fell sleepily down into her lap. It purred and went on purring,
its purring interrupted only for a second every now and
then, during which it must have fallen briefly asleep with
contentment.

I said:
‘Cats don’t purr except when human beings stroke them, do
they?’
‘I shouldn’t think so.’
‘And yet,’ I said, ‘purring is a very highly specialised develop-
ment in cats, wouldn’t you say?’
‘I suppose . . .’
‘Then the body of a cat is largely created for the purpose of
responding to man’s caresses. The cat’s association with man was
decreed from the beginning.’

Gertrude Mallinson said:
‘But is man’s lack of independence, the complete interdepend-
ence of man and other creatures, new to you?’

And it was at this point that I learned that I was not alone in my
recent phantasies of uncleanness.

Gertrude Mallinson said:
‘The earth-worm we know is necessary to the soil, its irrigation
and fertility. Without it man would starve. But I also remember
that when I was a little girl in Leeds my parents had a book of
etiquette and information called Jack’s Reference Book. In there
I discovered that forty-seven species of worms are known to infest
man himself. The commonest of these were indeed solely created
for man or by man, for they infest only him and do not reach maturity
at all unless man gives them access to his body. The tape-worm in
its immature condition lives in the muscles of the pig and only
achieves the condition of maturity when the pig’s flesh, in an under-
cooked state, is consumed by a human being. The tape-worm then develops four suckers in its head, attaches itself by these to the intestinal wall and remains stationary there in the small intestine, a creature of anything from five to twelve feet in length, absorbing into itself the nourishment with which it is bathed by an increasingly hungry host. The thread-worm reaches man by way of his drinking-water or water-cress and inhabits his large intestine in great numbers, occasionally escaping singly through the anus at night, a white, capillary creature about half an inch long. The round-worm lives in small numbers in the small intestine. It is like an earth-worm in size and shape, but of a dirty white colour and devoid of rings. Like the thread-worm it comes from water-cress and water. Occasionally it escapes through the mouth or nose, and only when this happens can the animal’s presence be diagnosed.

It is sometimes necessary to make stupid remarks in order to keep a conversation moving at the right tempo. I made a remark more appropriate to Richard.

I said:

‘Well, when you’re dead, I mean, you’re all worms....’

Gertrude Mallinson continued:

‘I wanted some conception of sin which would embrace the creation by man of this filth in his own body. I even wrote to a priest about it. The utmost he could say was that after all the worm, like man, was a creature of God, that St. Peter had been warned definitely against calling any creature unclean and that theologians had since the foundation of the Church discussed without finally solving it the problem of evil, which he must therefore presume to be beyond the natural power of man’s intelligence. My mother was the practical one. She said: Now have you got worms, or haven’t you? I had to admit that, so far as I knew, I hadn’t. Well, then, my mother said, would I be so good as to hold my tongue....’

And then the core of the matter:

‘... But I suppose that people with the proper feeling for worms are the people I’m looking for, Alick lad. And Joe Passiful’s one of them. Joe Passiful is a saint....’

‘Wait a minute,’ I said. ‘The people you’re looking for...?’

‘... Now don’t start trying to make me commit myself, Alick. Leave it at that. Do you talk about the poem you’re writing, before you’ve completed the first stanza? No, of course not. Neither shall I. But I’ll tell you what possible sainthood means. It means kissing the dust, not because you’ve been bidden to do so but kissing
it with a loving, passionate kiss. Not for display and not out of panic anxiety, but with a quiet, passionate and compassionate love, with all due patience and humility. Listen. We’ve mentioned worms. It isn’t necessary to go so far as worms. Consider merely that everyone stinks of excrement and putrefaction. That goes for you and me, for the Prime Minister and the Hangman, for the Queen of England, the little princesses and the Queen Mother, for all the war-lords of Europe and for the girls at the Russian Ballet. Let them bathe and powder themselves all day long, and still if you stick your nose in the appropriate place you’ll catch the familiar whiff of excrement and putrefaction. Even your beautiful wife, lad. What did you say her name was? Margaret? A pretty name. It means a pearl. But it goes for her too. . . .

Gertrude Mallinson’s face grew deeply pink and moist. She put her pint of bitter ale down on the counter, seized my hand and looked at me with babbling mouth and eyes about to secrete tears.

‘. . . Don’t mind me,’ she said. ‘I always weep. I’m old-fashioned about young husbands.’

She blew her nose, and her face was so softened that I expected to see that her nose had been left in the handkerchief. The cat in her lap adjusted itself to the upheaval, purred half-heartedly for a second or two and then fell asleep again.

Gertrude Mallinson continued:

‘The salt taste and the smells of lust and perspiration are as strong in Cleopatra’s bed as the ghost of a rose is. And the little girl in Hounslow or Tooting Bec, who won’t be kissed under the mistletoe, who is so pure that she falls ill with shame once a month, if you lick her sufficiently hard she rubs the skin off your tongue. With her, too, if you stick your nose in the appropriate place, you get a whiff of organic matter reverting to its mineral state. Now, St. Augustine and Dean Swift thought of all this and thought it a reason for hating and belittling mankind. I think it is a reason for being in love with excrement and putrefaction. It is a reason for choosing out, among all mankind, those who stink unashamedly, for consorting with lepers, thieves and whores, for choosing to be accounted scum. Scum, the rest of the world would say. The cream, say I. The élite. For you will have noticed that scum and cream both rise to the surface, leaving the clear, unfortifying, too easily digested common fluid behind. And here in this world the scum or the cream of mankind are those who suffer and rejoice, the idle, fecund and gay, those who cause the well-washed and well-
fed to turn away with a finger to their nose. A man is worthless until he has touched rock bottom. He is worth only a little if, having once touched it, he then recoils in anxious haste or struggles against adversity. A man should make rock bottom his abiding-place, his nest. He should live continually in a desert, with the taste of sand in his mouth. It will give him a thirst.'

I said:

'The other day, in Charing X Road, I saw a man being strangled publicly for a few pence.'

'A Scotsman?'

'Yes,' I said. 'His neck was as red and scaly as a turkey's with continual strangulation.'

'I know him,' said Gertrude Mallinson. 'It's Johnny Watt, and he's an awful swine. All he wants to do is show off his muscles. His wife left him.'

'So he won't do,' I said.

'No, he won't do. Now Joe Passiful... You will see the difference... Joe feels that he has no right to existence. When I first knew him he was a policeman. He got sacked for giving money to people he was supposed to run in, and as soon as he got sacked he left me because he didn't want me to be at the expense of his keep. He left me, and Heaven knows what he did before he took to letting himself be twisted up in a boxing ring. My little Joey. The things he does, and all the time he's paralysed with fear. He smells of fear, as you or I might smell of drink. If he's out shopping he avoids the time of day when little boys are playing in the street, but all the dogs bark at him, because they smell the fear, and make him drop his parcels and come home with the wrong change.'

'And what about Albert?'

Gertrude Mallinson said:

'I don't know Albert well enough yet, lad. He's got a nice, pink aura, but I don't know where he's got to with it. And besides, you know, it's rather up to him. Your wife, now...'

'Ah, yes.'

'... I must meet her soon, Alick. But ring Albert up. I want to take him to Paradies's again.'

'Where you took us ten days ago, off the Bayswater Road?'

'Yes, there.'

'As a matter of fact,' I said, 'Albert was rather bored.'

'I know, lad. But Paradies will be on his own to-night.'

'Is he the conjurer?'

53
'No, he owns the house, and the little private theatre's just one of his amusements. Albert'll adore him. He's just the thing for Albert.'

PARADIES HIMSELF LET US IN. HE WAS A TALL, distinguished gentleman with a white moustache. His clothes were excellently cut to reveal a chest enormously out of proportion to the rest of him and a waist ridiculously fine. As he turned to lead the way upstairs I noticed something sticking out through his coat, which might have been a dagger in his back or merely a handle to wind him up with. He took us into a large room full of rare works of art, but untidy, dusty and musty beyond belief, and served us with sherry and seed-cake.

After suitable introductions and a little polite conversation, Gertrude Mallinson said, in a tiny coaxing voice that was not her voice at all:

'Would you like to show us your shoe-shop?'

Paradies coughed modestly and said that if we really wanted to see it, he would be very pleased. We all made appropriate noises and were led down into the basement, where there were hundreds of pairs of high-heeled shoes, riding boots with spurs, silver and brass fitted strappings of all kinds hanging on the walls and a collection of riding and other whips from every part of the world. Paradies suggested modestly that we might care to try some of the shoes on and encouraged us to walk about in them. Albert was the only one who entered into the spirit of the thing. He pranced about, clicked his heels together and sprang in the air. Paradies watched him with approval, if not, indeed, with excitement, and would most certainly have joined in Albert's antics had not his position as host constrained him to preserve a mean between the various behaviour of his guests. He did, however, put on a very fine pair of high-heeled riding boots of undressed yellow leather.

Gertrude Mallinson, in the same little, coaxing voice, said to him:

'And now would you perhaps play the organ for us?'

Again we went upstairs. I insisted on taking off the shoes I had put on, but Albert and Paradies only laced theirs the tighter and became more and more flushed and excited, and Gertrude Mallinson kept on her pair of multi-coloured Russian boots out of pure amiability. The organ was a full-sized instrument built into the largest of the rooms, which I had seen before as the theatre. Paradies
played it merrily, and Albert danced. The tone of the organ was superb, and Albert’s impromptu choreography was fully worthy of it. In the end, Albert began to pull down curtains and hangings from the wall, taking off his coat and trousers and draping himself in the curtains and hangings, which looked as if they might be most expensive and rare. After a while, we all went back to the first room and had more sherry and seed-cake.

Gertrude Mallinson put on a wicked, secretive look and said:
‘But would you like to show us the little animal now?’
Paradies was confused. He blushed, coughed and giggled a little, but his eyes shone.

He said:
‘Would you really like to see it?’

He seemed particularly shy of Albert, now. But eventually he showed us the little animal. It was encircled, every half inch or so, with a fine, gold ring, and each ring was studded with every kind of precious stones and had an elaborate, pendent medallion.

In order to keep the conversation flowing, I told Paradies that among the Indians of Patagonia a ring of mule’s hair is so bound upon the neck that the hairs project forward, while the Dyaks of Borneo, the glans having been flattened between two boards for several days, pierce it with a bamboo skewer and keep the passage thus bored open with a pigeon quill until the time comes to substitute the ampanlan of copper, silver or gold with its pair of revolving balls. He was extremely interested and thanked me with genuine feeling for the information. We stayed thus in conversation for a few minutes longer, and then Gertrude Mallinson went downstairs to put on her own shoes again, and she and I took our leave, leaving a happy, manifestly rejuvenated Albert behind with Paradies. Gertrude Mallinson told me that Paradies was really a most highly distinguished gentleman and a personal friend of several members of the Court Circle if not, indeed, of the Royal Family itself. I asked her about the instrument projecting from Paradies’s back, and she said that she had forgotten to make him show me this, but it was the handle of a powerful steel corselet which Paradies tightened up a little each day. His waist was reputed to be already the smallest in the world.

WE SPENT THE REST OF THE NIGHT WANDERING. At a little night-club we saw three very beautiful girls dancing with three young men in plus fours, with three little, damp moustaches.
On the Victoria Embankment we heard a lovers' quarrel that was like a Cockney scene in a B.B.C. vaudeville programme and as moving as if it had taken place in real life. In Hyde Park and in the Bloomsbury squares, trenches dug hastily during the crisis of the previous year reflected the fitful light of the moon.

I said:
‘Can bitterness be obstructed? ’
I said:
‘Is there no excusable wrath? ’
I said:
‘I committed three months ago an act of violence. ’
And then I told Gertrude Mallinson about Richard St. Hilda.
I said:
‘It was not my act. The world and a great many stars conspired to rob me of the power of free movement at a time when my forehead was creased with resentment and humiliation. ’
I said:
‘I hit this man because there was nothing else that I was able to do. Everything dropped out of my hands. I could not hold a loaf of bread, and so I threw it at this man and knocked his glasses off. That immediately seemed to me to be such a stupid thing to do that I was forced to hit him. I hit him very hard. I hit him disgustingly hard. But all the time I was wanting somebody or something to stop me. If my wife had not presently come and tugged at my arm, I should have turned and implored her to do so. And when it was all over, I wept as I have never wept in my life. ’
There was a pause.
‘Why have you told me this, lad? ’
I said:
‘Perhaps I am afraid of the consequences. ’
‘The...? ’
‘Oh, not the immediate consequences,’ I said. ‘Richard St. Hilda has a scar over his eye. I “marked him for life”. But we are still friends. He passes it off as a joke and did so from the beginning, as soon as the doctor had stitched him and the concussion had worn off. As a matter of fact,’ I said, ‘I think he rather enjoyed it. Enjoyed the exciting scene. Enjoyed behaving well. Enjoyed having his forehead bathed by Effie. Enjoyed the fuss made by neighbours. Enjoyed putting about an alibi to the effect that he had been kicked by a horse. And I still live in his flat, and when I have no cigarettes he gives me a little money to buy some. It isn’t that,’ I said. ‘It’s the process started or prematurely concluded
in my own life. In what way shall I have to answer for the act? What are the obscure depths that it should have revealed and failed to?"

Gertrude Mallinson said:
"This man has forgiven you. Have you forgiven him?"
I said:
"I don't know."
I said:
"No, I don't think I have. I don't think he wants me to forgive him. I think he plays on my feeling of remorse. I was angry with him at first because he broke promises to me, and he has broken other promises since then, as if he were tempting me to hit him again. At this very moment, he is in the South of France with a young boy for whom he cares very little. When he gives me money, he gives me as little as possible so that it won't be long before I want more, and when I am without a cigarette he pretends not to notice the fact, perhaps for a whole day..."

I told Gertrude Mallinson all this. I tried to tell her about 'Thea', but I did not get a chance, because she was more interested in the fact that I had a wife. I think she must have known that what I meant to say about 'Thea' was worthless. I was going to parade myself as a person uncommonly sensitive to his fate.

After returning from Kent and again taking up my abode at Richard St. Hilda's flat, I had in fact twice thought that I should see 'Thea'. There had been a further social evening at the Institute of Mystical Science, and there had been a demonstration of dancing by Fraulein von Stubenau's pupils at a hall in North London. I had intended to go to both these functions, and I had felt with certainty that 'Thea' would be there. In both cases, just as I was about to set off, friends had called and I had found myself inescapably involved in an evening's hard drinking. I knew that 'Thea' had been at the social evening. Edgar Voysey and Alfred Fantl had been there, and they had seen her.

'I didn't like the people she was with, you know. A typically disreputable refugee group,' Fantl had said, and he had held back from speaking to 'Thea', as he had promised he would if ever he saw her again.

I was going to recount this incident as a further example of fate's finger meddling with me, but I was not given a hearing.

As to my horoscope and its indications of danger from falling masonry, I did not try to mention it. At this time, that fear had receded into the back of my mind, and when I observed it I was a
little ashamed, as one is of the fear of pain or of animals or of any irrational fear.

A little before dawn, we turned into the Lyons’ Corner House in Piccadilly. It was full of middle-aged men who looked as washed out as the fading moon outside. Some were taking breakfast with the young or less young women in whose beds they had but recently disported themselves. Others were simply taking breakfast. None of them spoke.

Dawn over London on a Sunday morning. The streets were bare, the pavements as comfortless as dirty ice. A wan light shone out of the sky, only half removing the shadows of a dusty Saturday. A priest hurried in at the door of St. Mary’s Church in Soho Square. Gertrude Mallinson was performing all next week, twice nightly, in Rotherham and the following week in Sheffield. I felt something not unlike desperation at parting from her again. Her great mouth plastered encouraging, moist kisses upon my face. I watched her turn and go towards her ’bus stop in Charing X Road. She had no corset, and the stuff of her light summer coat clung electrically to the massive, adorable geography of her bottom. I turned and walked off in the direction of Oxford Circus, where one takes the 53 ’bus for St. John’s Wood and West Hampstead.

CHAPTER SIX

I DO NOT KNOW WHETHER I SHOULD PUT IT DOWN to pleasurable anticipation or to the benign influence of Gertrude Mallinson. At any rate, during the fortnight which preceded the outbreak of war I was in good spirits and full of extreme sanity, if I may speak of sanity as extreme.

Margaret was staying with a former benefactress of mine at a large house in one of the more genteel districts of Surrey, and she was due to return on a Saturday which proved to be the day before our declaration of war. Richard St. Hilda was in the French Pyrenees, on the point of turning east towards the Côte d’Azur. I was alone in his flat, except for the woman who came in each day to cook my breakfast and clean up. And except for the two Siamese. As I had explained to Richard when he was driving off to Dover, at other times I would not for the world have cooked Tit and Nit their food, but when I was in charge it was different. I performed one or two other simple duties, such as mowing the grass each week. At moments, I was full of resentment and even of hatred,
because I felt that I should have been in the Pyrenees, too, and not cooped up in London through the dusty months.

I remember writing to someone at this time, to refuse an invitation, and saying:

‘I am inclined to welcome the prospect of war, and this sets me apart from my friends, who dread it. Destitution is worse than war, and, for some, war is a remedy against destitution.’

And at one moment I rang up a recruiting office and demanded to know the age limit for marines. They were still taking nobody over twenty-three, and so I was preserved from that folly.

On Friday, September 1st, I felt so pleased with life that I walked down into Maida Vale in the morning and took a 16 bus to the Marble Arch. It was a hot day with an immaculately blue sky. I took a boat out on the Serpentine and fell into an ecstasy of contentment. The birds sang. The trees whispered together. The girls loitered in their coloured dresses. I returned home before lunch and sat in Richard St. Hilda’s drawing-room, with the balcony windows blissfully open. My attention was attracted by the cry of a child, a rare sound in that neighbourhood, for the women of St. John’s Wood are sterile, chemical blondes, who drink gin in the saloon bar. I turned to the French windows, and it was a Chinese baby in the next garden, with black eyes and blue hair. A Chinese woman in black satin trousers and white tunic came out to comfort the child. I was ready to weep with pleasure.

In point of fact, our neighbours were the Chinese naval attaché and his family. I do not know whether China has a navy, but at this time certainly she had a naval attaché, and he lived next door.

At his front gate, there always stood a large black Ford bearing its C.D. disc and containing a pale-faced English chauffeur who read penny dreadfuls all day long. Earlier in the summer, I had been disturbed one afternoon by the sounds of a fowl in distress. I went to the window, and there in the neighbouring garden, tethered by one leg to the balcony post, was a Rhode Island Red hen. Tit and Nit were stalking her. Subsequently, I had several times seen poultrymen delivering a live hen at the front door, sometimes a Rhode Island Red and sometimes a light Sussex or a White Wyandotte. I have no explanation to offer, unless it be that Chinese who wish to eat poultry are commanded either to kill it themselves with appropriate ritual or to eat it alive. It may have been that the
attaché’s family wished to adopt the English custom of keeping pets, but I have heard that the Chinese eat new-born mice alive, picking them up by the tail, dipping them in a pot of honey and swallowing them whole.

I was deeply moved by the sight of the Chinese baby. For one thing, before she went to Surrey, Margaret had wondered if she were not in the family way herself. I had dismissed this as a rather painful joke, but now it came back to me as reality, and I even wished for a moment that it might be true. Babies were in fact becoming intensely dramatic. Not only did one cast horoscopes for the moment of their first cry, but that very morning the Germans had invaded Poland, and when I went out for a drink before lunch there were headings in the newspapers to the effect that Hitler was bombing every baby he could find.

The following day, Margaret returned to London, looking very pretty. I met her at Baker Street.

She said:
‘Darling, there is going to be a war, isn’t there?’

I told her there was. All the astrologers had failed to notice it, but that was because they were looking at their charts instead of at the sky. The charts do not bother their heads about closeness to the earth. Mars stood in the evening sky like a young sun, closer to the earth than he had been for Heaven knows how many years.

Margaret said:
‘In that case, darling, hadn’t I better come and live at Richard’s? I know he’ll let me, if you will.’

And then she told me:
‘Darling, I am in the family way. . . .’

RICHARD ST. HILDA HAD REACHED VENCE WHEN the war broke out. Also living in Vence now was Edgar Voysey, who had deserted the astral plane in order to paint, and the two young men who had lived opposite Margaret and myself in Marginal Road and one of whom had lent me an overcoat and made oracular utterances to me at Richard’s party in the spring, not to mention a woman famous for her motion pictures in silhouette and an elderly pioneer in the photography of pure light. Richard took his friend to the pornographic cinemas in Cannes and Nice, drank apéritifs, sun-bathed and conversed with sailors. The end of August arrived, and the natives of Vence began to look suspiciously upon their harmless English and American visitors. Poland was invaded.
That same day, gentlemen from the deuxième bureau called and took them all off to prison. A few questions would have been all, but the elderly photographer had started to learn French, and in his possession was a note-book containing phrases in French and English. The local schoolmaster was called in to give expert evidence. Richard St. Hilda and the rest were released, but advised to return home at once.

Edgar Voysey decided to stay behind and attach himself to the American Red Cross. The others drove across France for three days and saw nothing but horses, thousands upon thousands of them, and reached London on Wednesday morning, September 6th.

I was lying on the divan in his drawing-room when Richard came in. There had been an air-raid warning during the night, and I was sleepy. Margaret was out at work. She had a temporary job in the accounts department of a publishing house.

Richard had not changed, except that he was very sunburnt. He had brought me several interesting works of philosophy to read. He seemed in perfect health, and I found myself very pleased to see him again, contrary to my expectations.

Some days passed. The weather continued good. It began to seem evident that the Germans had no intention of inaugurating the end of the world by bombing London to a powder. The cinemas and theatres re-opened. Beautiful, illustrated war papers began to appear. The evening sky was full of silvery balloons, looking at times like a still from some film of a Martian invasion and at other times, when they were going up on a windy day, like a stampede of enormous, plunging cows. The absence of electric lighting revealed new beauties in London at night, and in a night breeze the balloons cables sang distantly and sounded, until you had traced the sound to its source, like a music of the spheres. The world was changing slowly but demonstrably and, so far as the natural senses were able to tell, changing not for the worse.

HERE I MUST TURN BACK. MY PERSONAL LIFE appeared to have become reasonable, but the appearance was illusory. Three circumstances still disturbed me.¹ I have mentioned one of them, the fact that on two occasions I had thought to see 'Thea' and had been unaccountably prevented.

¹ And now I also remember writing to someone at this time and saying:

'This war has come too late. I was maimed by the last three years of peace and do not think that I can now be healed by a war.'
Possibly more disturbing was the fact that during four whole months, from April to August, I had done precisely nothing. I am by nature a lazy but I am not an inactive man, and even now, when I look back upon those four months, my scalp tingles. I must have spent the bulk of those months rotting in an armchair, while madness rooted busily in the motionless soul. When I think of this inaction, it is as if one had turned to his mirror and found that he no longer cast any reflection in it.

A third circumstance takes me back to the period immediately after I had struck Richard St. Hilda. I must recount it in detail.

As I have said, Richard bore the situation well. He stood up, a great column of a man, topping six feet, with the blood arching out over his brows like a waterfall, and said, with a dignity and calm that were almost excessive:

'Margaret, look after Caroline, please.'

He then walked steadily to the house, holding a table napkin to his face.

I sat down on a white-painted bench, trembling furiously and, I am sure, white to the lips. At the end of perhaps two minutes, I also was sufficiently recovered to go indoors. I remember that, as I passed where he had been sitting, I picked up Richard's glasses, which had been knocked off by the loaf of bread before I hit him.

I went to the drawing-room and sat huddled and immobile in my usual chair. Overhead, a tap was running in the bathroom. Presently, I heard Richard come downstairs and take up the telephone in the hall. He telephoned to three doctors, but could get none of them. He went round to Effie's cottage.

Margaret came in. She stood for a moment, as if to give me the opportunity of speaking to her if I wished to. I said nothing, and she went out.

As soon as she had gone, the very substance of my lungs began to tremble, and before I knew it I was sobbing with a vehemence of which I should not have believed myself capable. Had anyone been within hearing, he must have supposed it a wounded lion roaring.

When this fit was over, I heard a car arrive and saw Effie's doctor pass the window.

Some time later, Effie appeared outside the window, in a large, haymaker's hat. There was Japanese glass tinkling at the window.
Effie gave Margaret a note from Richard and waited for a reply. The note said:

'Dear Alick,

'I would like to hear from you before I venture to return to the other cottage. I am frankly afraid lest this lunch-time's incident should be repeated. If you feel so inclined, please go away. If you don't, please let Effie bring me some form of reply. I am lying down for a while and shall probably stay where I am until after supper, when I expect to be recovered.—Ever,

'RICHARD.'

Effie also told Margaret, and Margaret told me, that Richard had had two or three stitches and was suffering from concussion. I went round to where Richard languidly reclined on Effie's lace-covered divan and dumbly pleaded disorder of the psyche, holding Richard's wrist instead of his hand as if the wrist were less compromising.

The next thing was that Frances and Herbert Abell, who had been up to London for the day, came to the door, on what pretext I forget. At any rate, they were on the scent. They pretended not to have seen Caroline since their return.

During the week or so which elapsed between this occasion and our return to London, the Abells never in fact rested for a moment. Richard, as I have said, invented for the benefit of the village an alibi to the effect that a horse had kicked him, and he and I presented an aspect of unbroken friendship to the world, but the Abells tried desperately to keep as it were the bad blood on the boil. They succeeded to the extent of keeping Effie in a great state of nerves and of inducing her to invite Ernst Landy, the psychologist, down from London, but he only stayed for tea and told us stories of Alpine holidays. At moments, I very nearly ran amok again and hit everybody.

Our neighbours speculated. Richard himself brought me reports of their speculation.

Frances Abell said:

'It was jealousy, of course. You'll notice he went for the eyes, and you'll remember that the evening before we'd been admiring Richard's eyes.'

Herbert Abell thought it must have to do with Caroline.

Effie said:

'Poor Alick. He's so full of blind hatred.'
Then on the morning of our departure, Richard did not take the trouble to go round to Cherry Orchard to say good-bye to the Abells. Frances and Harbutt came round as Margaret, Richard, Tit, Nit and I were packing ourselves and our luggage into Richard’s car. Frances Abell’s morning face was heavily made up, and the rodent’s eyes behind her glasses were full of loneliness. Harbutt was hearty as ever, but with a failing conviction. Eric was playing his flute in the house. Caroline, with her wonderful, peach-bloom legs, was not to be seen.

Something in my face told Richard that the presence of the Abells worried me and that I was still hating them.

Frances Abell said to me:
‘Are you feeling better now, Alick dear?’
No doubt I flushed.
Richard said, quite openly:
‘Don’t mind them, Alick. You’re alive, and they’re dead.’

Frances Abell’s face seemed to consist of nothing but the rice-powder on it. Herbert Abell’s distinguished heartiness froze. As Richard drove away, I looked back, and the Abells were two pillars of salt that would have crumbled beneath a light blow with the palms of the hands. Unseen by Richard and Margaret, I crossed myself.

THE FIRST THING THAT RICHARD ST. HILDA DID on his return from France was to send Tit and Nit to a house in Dorsetshire. I have not seen them since, but I gather that Tit, as often happens with emasculated tom-cats, became dropitical. Then Richard set about coping with the war. It had come as a surprise to him, and he felt that he ought to do something about it, if only to prevent it doing something about him. He ran about to the Red Cross and St. John’s, to recruiting offices of the various services, to A.R.P. and A.F.S. centres and to the headquarters of the Peace Pledge Union, to investigate possibilities. One thing, he said, he would not do. He would not take anybody’s life. I suggested that he should go easy for a week or two and let the war seep as it were into his consciousness and then see how he felt about it, but at the end of four days Richard had come to the end of his enthusiasm for immediate action and would spend most of the day lying on the divan, ruffling his hair and expressing the many degrees of perplexity upon his plump, gentle face.

At eleven o’clock on a fine morning towards the end of September,
he was lying thus. I am unable to give the exact date. What
follows so confused me that I forgot to note it down at the
time.

In his disputation over the many issues involved in war, Richard
tended to branch off into metaphysics and by way of metaphysics
would arrive at personalities. He had always been deeply interested
in the motives for human behaviour, and now that the occasion was
safely past he frequently referred to my hitting him in Kent, in the
hope of seeing to the bottom of the whole situation.

On this particular morning, I was inclined to be jocular. There
were in Richard St. Hilda’s drawing-room four large pictures by
the painter to whom Richard gave thirty shillings a week. One of
these was a portrait of Richard. It depicted him leaning very
grandly against an ornate mantelpiece, looking every inch a patron
of the arts. At one point, I had suggested that we ought to put a
piece of sticking plaster over the right eye of this portrait. Now I
thought that perhaps, since the permanent extent of the scar was
known, we might paint in a little scar.

It was all very jolly.

Again Richard indicated his interest in the motives for my act of
violence.

‘Perhaps,’ he said, ‘it would help me to understand this
war. . . .’

I said:

‘It might help me, if I knew. But I’ll tell you what I was thinking
before I got up this morning. I was thinking what an anti-climax
it was when I did hit you, and then I went on to wonder if perhaps
there were such things as climaxes at all. . . .’

‘I’ve always rather wondered,’ said Richard.

I said:

‘. . . To hear people talk, you would think that climaxes were
very common, that in fact everything had a climax. It is wishful
thinking. People would like something to come to a resounding
conclusion and remove them henceforward from the awful con-
tinuity of time. It is part of the death wish. The Victorian novel-
reader believed marriage a climax to love. We know better. How
banal is the last half-movement of any symphony, compared with
what preceded. Before the end, one has passed on to something
else. Even in the embraces of the bed, I personally find that
at the very peak of the act I am thinking that, when this is
over, it will be some little while before I am able to start
again. . . .’
Alas, even for Richard, this was not the ultimate, binding truth. The war and his place in it were real perplexities to him, and he was not quite happy. He grinned and lay on the divan with ruffled hair, gazing through his glasses at a ceiling in which there was no crack.

I thought coffee might be nice. I went downstairs to the kitchen, to ask for some to be made. The daily help had already left. I made the coffee myself.

Here I must ask the reader to consider a phenomenon connected with sight. So far as I know, everybody finds that an object will at one time appear larger or smaller than it does at another. This variation in one’s estimate of size increases when the object is a human person, who can affect one by his own mood too. In health and manifesting vitality, his stature appears heightened. When he is tired or depressed, he shrinks visibly.

I offer this reflection in order that the reader may better appreciate my first reactions to the episode which I am now about to relate.

When I came upstairs again with the coffee, Richard St. Hilda was or appeared to be asleep. Moreover, he was or appeared to be smaller in size than he had been ten minutes ago.

My first thought invoked the phenomenon upon which I have commented above. In the case of Richard St. Hilda, this phenomenon was at all times particularly striking. A large man with an impressive presence and with the blooming, skin-bursting vitality of a milkmaid and perhaps the signs of a blood pressure to come in later life, he was optical illusion incarnate. When tiredness or depression withdrew him as it were within the limits of his skin, the diminution was considerable.

This was my first thought. My second was of a story which my uncle Nathan Haigh used to tell and which had given me bad dreams in my childhood.

Uncle Nathan, who came from the depths of the Hinder Valley and talked broad even by our reckoning, used to tell the story as something which had recently happened to himself.

He would say:

‘Didn’t Beulah tell you? Ay, on Saturday afternoon, ’olf a dozen on us went round fro’ t’ mill to gate Alfred Schofield ligged out. Well, now, Alfred had always been a little man, and he’d gate sick of a wasting disease, and he’d shrunk. Nay, I’ve never seen a man so shrunk. He’d shrunk to about that size. . . .’
Nathan Haigh held out his hands to indicate something about two feet long.

'... Onyroad, as I were saying, th' 'olf dozen on us went round fro' t' mill to gate Alfred ligged out. When we'd finished and were coming out o' t' bedroom, his missus yells up t' steps. She says, 'Here, yo'. Shut yon door, will you? T' cat's had him out on t' landing twice. . . .'"

At this point everybody had laughed, except me. I shuddered.

I thought of this story now, as I stood there with a tray of coffee in my hands and considered Richard's apparent decrease in stature. I smiled. I put the tray down and poured out the coffee. I took one cup to Richard and touched his shoulder.

'Wake up,' I said. 'Here's coffee.'

Richard did not awake.
I put his coffee back on the tray and shook him.
Still he showed no sign of life.

'Playful, aren't you?' I said.

Eventually, I yielded to the incipient panic. I went round the corner to the house of the doctor who had attended my pains in the back. He was out. I returned to the flat.

This time there was no mistake. Richard had diminished to a size for which no degree of optical illusion could account. He had not wrinkled. He was still ruddy and smooth. He lay as he was before, his hair ruffled. Most extraordinary fact of all, his clothes still fitted him. But in stature he was a dwarf, a mannikin.

I thought:

'Whatever happens next, I shall be held responsible.'

I thought:

'He is not shrinking visibly before my eyes. It is only when I am out of the room that he shrinks. I must not leave him again. I must find a priest or a doctor, but when I go out now I must take Richard with me.'

The thought that a priest would do as well as a doctor prompted me to wonder if perhaps some form of sacramental treatment by myself might not prevent the state of things from deteriorating still further before I had secured outside help.

I thought:

'How lucky it is that I have always kept a missal to hand.'

I turned to the shelf on which I knew the missal was. What might have happened had it not been in the same room, I do not know. My eyes were turned away from Richard for no longer.
than a few seconds, and yet, when I turned to him again, he was fully three inches smaller. I found the text for ministry to the dying.

'Extreme unction,' I thought, 'may fix him at his present size.'

There was no oil in the room. I tried to remember the exact spot in the dining-room where the salad oil stood. I flew out of the room, plunged down the steps three at a time, seized the bottle and flung myself upstairs again. Richard had lost perhaps an inch.

I loosened his clothes, uncorked the bottle of oil, dipped in my finger and anointed Richard's eyes.

I read out:

'Through this holy unction and through His most loving mercy, may the Lord pardon thee whatever wrong thou hast done by seeing. Amen.'

I tipped the bottle up on the first two finger-tips of my right hand and dabbed behind Richard's ears.

I read out:

'Through this holy unction and through His most loving mercy, may the Lord pardon thee whatever wrong thou hast done by hearing. Amen.'

This was all wrong. According to the stage directions at the top, I ought to have a table covered with a white cloth and a dish on it containing cotton wool divided into seven distinct pellets, in order to wipe the anointed places. I ought to have some bread to purify my fingers. There ought to be a lighted candle, holy water and a crucifix. I ought to be wearing a surplice and a violet stole.

I dabbed Richard's nostrils with my finger-tips.

This time I remembered to do it in the form of a cross.

I read out:

'Through this holy unction and through His most loving mercy, may the Lord pardon thee whatever wrong thou hast done by smelling. Amen.'

Also, I ought to have begun with certain prayers, a confession, penitential psalms and a litany. But I felt that if I did everything properly I might be too late. There was no time to waste. I must get Richard as it were sealed up.

I took my fingers from the mouth of the bottle and touched his closed lips.

'... The Lord pardon thee whatever wrong thou hast done by taste and speech. Amen.'
A cross on the back of each of Richard's hands.
'... Whatever wrong thou hast done by touch...' His feet. But I dared not delay to take his shoes off.
'... Whatever wrong thou hast done by walking...'
The last thing I had better do properly. I unfastened Richard's fly-buttons and touched him warily about the loins.
I read out:
'Through this holy unction and through His most loving mercy, may the Lord pardon thee whatever wrong thou hast done by the irregular motions of the flesh. Amen.'
There was a good deal more. I could not omit all of it. I picked out the last prayer but one.
I read:
'Look down, we beseech Thee, O Lord, on Thy servant Richard St. Hilda, bowed down by the weakness of his body, and revive the soul which Thou hast created, so that being amended by chastisement he may feel that he is made whole by Thy remedy. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.'
I closed the missal.
I thought:
'I will now turn my head away and count ten.'
I did so. The sacrament was effective. When I turned back to Richard, he had not shrunk any further.
'Now,' I thought, 'I must wrap him up in the divan spread and take him to a doctor.'
I put my hands under Richard St. Hilda's shoulders and knees and lifted him up. Immediately, he dropped away to a powder so fine that my gasp of astonishment scattered him widely over the room, and he was no longer distinguishable from the motes of dust which all this while had been dancing in the sunlight from the window.
A sweat broke out upon my face and hands. I wrung my hands together in anguish.
I said:
'Oh, dear. Oh, dear.'
I hugged my shoulders and rocked from side to side. I chewed my top lip and then my bottom lip. I was bleeding between the toes. I shook myself and lit a cigarette. I tip-toed to the outer door and opened it. I paused and looked out. I walked into the street and then along the street, quickening my pace.
CHAPTER SEVEN

TO WALK BY NIGHT. I CANNOT KNOW WHAT REMINISCENCE is provoked in other people by this phrase. To some, I fancy, who have little experience of solitude, it conjures up nothing unless it be that banality the moonlight excursion of lovers. To me and surely to a great many, it implies whatever lies deepest and most jealously guarded in their lives. It means hunger, homelessness and total frustration of the will. It means the piteous trade of a whore. It means restlessness at the full moon, when dogs bay and the lunatic cries aloud from the window of his room.

Above all, it means proximity to the divine.

But I need not go on. In those who understand, I have already touched the hidden spring. In those who do not, there is no apparatus for words to call into operation. I need only say that on the day of which I am writing I walked I know not where until the night came, that all night I was lost to myself and that the morning, when it came, was like no other morning.

On the previous day, although it had been in my mind to look for a doctor or a priest, I had in fact made no search. Now, in the chill of the morning, I found myself by a church. I went in.

Before a gilded arc, a tiny ball of light hovered. There were cage gates of heavy brass and of chromium-plated steel. A doll in purple sat askew upon a cupboard top, her black hair surmounted by an enormous crown set with pieces of coloured glass. It was three years since I had been in such a place.

I walked up the near aisle and looked at the cards hung upon the confessional boxes. None of them bore the name of any priest I knew or had heard of. I thought that somebody was there, behind each heavy, green curtain, but I knew that all these were discreet men who would not disturb me. I walked in front of the altar, curtsied and walked down the farther aisle. Here, too, the names on the confessional boxes were strange to me, although a Belgian name, Father van Deem, stirred up memories of SS. Michael and Gudula in Brussels. I wondered what church this was and in what city.

In the shadows, a young and an old woman were praying near one of the boxes. A priest in his cassock strode across the church, a surplice over his arm, and went in. I turned away.

I went towards the vestry. Two young priests were just inside
the door, the one robing the other, tying a great cord round and round him.

I said:

‘Excuse me. Is Father Tavener here now?’

The priest half-robed turned his shoulders heavily muffled with the pale gaberdine.

‘Tavener?’

The other said:

‘Aelfric, I suppose.’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Aelfric Tavener.’

The priest stopping to knot a cord said:

‘He never was at this church, except for the Easter sermon.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said.

I turned to go away.

‘If you can wait,’ said the priest, ‘Father Aspic will be here. He’s a pal of Father Tavener’s and could tell you where to find him.’

I did not wish to wait, but I thought it would be impolite not to. Indeed, I became very nervous at the thought of meeting a strange priest. I could not think what I should say to him. As a matter of fact, I did not know Father Tavener, except by name. I had asked for him because his was the first priest’s name that came into my head, and I had known perfectly well that he would not be there. I could of course say that it was a slip of the tongue and that I had really meant Father B——, whom I did know.

I stood uncomfortably by the vestry door and waited. Father Aspic came. I was glad that I had waited. Father Aspic was evidently a saint, and I knew at once that I could tell my story to him. He was very old and small. A white hood fell about his sunken temples. His eyes were blue and short-sighted, and a lorgnette hung beside the rosary upon his monk’s robe. His nose was thick and fastidious, and there was very little blood in his face.

Of the two young priests, one, now fully robed, had gone away to celebrate mass in a caged chapel. The other retired into the vestry and closed the door. Father Aspic put his hand upon my shoulder and walked down the aisle with me.

I told him nothing. He led me to the door and pointed out the direction in which, he said, lay Father Tavener’s church.

I asked him:

‘Am I in London?’

Father Aspic showed no sign of surprise.

He said:

‘Yes, my son.’
He did not even ask me:
‘Have you come far?’
He said:
‘Are you a Catholic?’
I lied:
‘Yes, Father.’
He knew that I was lying. I could tell that he knew.
I said:
‘No, but I’m under instruction.’
I turned my red, guilty face to the morning sunlight falling upon London.
Father Aspic lifted up the crucifix on his rosary and kissed it.
‘The world is very beautiful,’ he said.
I had told him nothing, but meeting him had comforted me. I stood upon the steps of the church and looked out upon London, with the sun rising. I turned to Father Aspic, to thank him for his kindness. He was not there. Perhaps he never had been there. Certainly, had I invented him, Father Aspic is a name that I might have given him.

IN THE AFTERNOON, I WALKED ON HAMPSTEAD Heath. The grass was damp. I think it was the same afternoon, but I am not certain. I walked to the top of Parliament Hill and looked across to Highgate and out towards London. St. Paul’s was clearly visible, and so I thought was the Tower of London. I talked with a man flying kites. He had four large, variously coloured kites with him and flew them expertly. An assistant, a hungry-looking man no doubt hired in the street for this purpose, kept one kite flying, while the expert brought in or sent up another. He tended the kites very carefully. Each, when it was done with, he rolled up in yellow oilskin.

I walked through Ken Wood and saw a jay. Eventually, I reached the Vale of Health.

After that, I was at a tea-party. I think it was in the Vale of Health. It was a rather genteel tea-party, and I do not know whether I had called on some old acquaintance or whether I had been invited home by some stranger with whom I had entered into conversation, for instance the kite-flier.

By now, I had begun to enjoy my wanderings for their own sake. I was no longer searching. Or perhaps I was searching, but did not know for what. All I knew was that I must not go back to the
flat in St. John’s Wood. Every now and then, I had a moment of panic, as if I had forgotten something of extreme importance.

I walked into town and found myself in Oxford Street, just round the corner from Natterjack Place, where the Institute of Mystical Science stood.

At the outbreak of war, a circular had been sent round to the effect that lectures at the Institute would be discontinued, though informal discussion groups would be formed at the private addresses of the various lecturers. (Now that I think of it, perhaps the tea-party that afternoon had been at one of these addresses. Mrs. Verity, I knew, lived in Hampstead.) Also, I had rather tended to hold aloof from these people, because of ‘Thea’. Now I thought that I would look into the building. Mrs. Verity or Dr. Gloss might still have a room there. The main door was open. I went up to the top floor in the lift. I went into the lecture hall. The chairs, the piano and the permanganate-of-potash paintings were still there, but there was no sign of human life. I took the lift down again and walked away.

For some reason, my attention was attracted by a shop window. Perhaps it was the Burmese Gem shop, attracting me by its name and by the varied brilliance of its wares. Certainly it contained a mirror.

I stared into this shop window and felt extraordinarily happy. And then I turned round suddenly. I had felt behind me the presence of somebody in great anguish of spirit. I turned and saw a man with his jacket collar up and drying mud on his shoes. Our eyes met for a second, and then the man turned on his heel and walked away, his hands in his trousers pockets. I felt impelled to follow him.

It was already fairly dark, and at one point I thought I had lost him. I caught up with him in a side-street unfamiliar to me.

There was an archway leading to some yard or mews that lay completely in darkness. The other side of the arch was a closed shop and, above it, offices or a warehouse. On this side, light and a murmur of voices came out to us through a pseudo-antique, oak door, a leaded window with galleon inset in coloured glass and leaded lights over the door. In the archway itself was another door, and just outside it, in the shadow, were two men with musical instruments, a mandoline and a guitar. The door opened, and a group of young men and a girl came out, the girl laughing loudly, her head thrown back, a bag of pea-nuts and a handkerchief in her hand, the young men joking as it appeared savagely under their
breath, their hands thrust deep in their trousers pockets, their heads forward. As the door swung to behind them, one of the musicians pushed his foot in to keep it from shutting completely. Both the musicians were sallow and had dark, greasy hair.

As the man I was following stepped forward, one of the musicians stopped playing, held out a cap and said:

'Thank you, sir.'

The man I was following looked at the musicians, peering into their cynically cheerful, vaguely dirty faces. The one who had stopped playing, the one with the mandoline, coughed and then ignored him, pushed his cap on his head and started strumming again. My man stood close to the two of them for a moment longer, opened his mouth to ask them a question, was about to turn and go away and then at last moved up to the door in the archway, pushed it open and went in. I followed.

People turned to look at him, people standing in groups, talking and drinking. He held back, but in a moment everybody had looked away again. He went up to the counter and pulled himself on to an empty stool. There were rows of brightly labelled bottles, some of them inverted, with little taps on the nozzle and little tin cups hanging down from the taps. Above the picture rail were squares of tartan cloth framed in varnished wood beading. Below these and filling in the wall space behind the rows of bottles was a single great mirror, and in the mirror, now, the face of the man I was following, a face intelligent and mobile but here and there setting in excessively definite lines, the pale, submarine eyes tremulous, hurt and withdrawn, the fair, partly bleaching hair untidy, the outline of cheek and jaw a little rough, shaved perhaps yesterday.

A very handsome girl with unusually high colouring stood opposite him, on the other side of the counter, her hands on the counter, her head tipped over to one side.

She said:

'Good evening, sir.'

'Good evening...'

He looked between the bottles and into the mirror. He noticed evidently that his jacket collar was turned up and set it right. He looked across the heads of the people near him and into the brightly lit corners of the room.

The girl was still there.

She said:

'Can I get you anything, sir?'
He looked at her, wrinkled his nose and half smiled. There was a glass on the counter beside him. He put his fingers to it and lifted it up. A face turned and stared up at him, a plump, pink little face with a small moustache and thin hair brushed straight back. My man put the glass down and pointed to it with one finger.

'What's this?'
'Scotch ale, sir.'
'Is it good?'
'It's the best, sir.'
'Give me some of that.'

The girl took a glass from under the counter and drew up his ale, tugging at one of four black, silver-bound handles that stood between her and him. He spread his fingers out on the wood of the counter, pressing down on them until they must have hurt, then sighed and looked about him with a great deal less restraint.

But even now it was as if he did not quite understand. The girl put his glass of ale in front of him. He took a sip of it, held it up above the level of his eyes and looked through it at the fine, sparkling texture of the under surface.

The girl said:
'Four and a half, dear.'

The little, pink face was looking up at him with interest again, a hand pointing to his side pocket, all the fingers of another hand held up and then the first hand knocking its thumb down, the face exchanging a look with the girl behind the counter and its mouth saying very carefully and distortedly, with a gesture of both hands:
'Money. Baksheesh. Ar-jong. The glass of beer costs fourpence-halfpenny. Four and a half pence.'

The man I was following felt in his pocket and pulled out first a penny and then a florin. He put them both on the counter, took a single gulp of his ale, swung himself off the stool and pushed his way to the door.

The hectically coloured girl was calling out:
'Your change, dearie...'

But he stepped out into the archway and let the door swing to behind him. I followed. The two musicians, the guitarist and the mandoline player, had gone. My man stood a moment in the shadow of the arch, staring into the deeper obscurity of the mews or yard to his right, chewing his top lip. He shrugged his shoulders, put up his jacket collar again, thrust his hands into his pockets and turned out into the street. He looked worried. Rather hungry,
too. In the street was a costermonger’s barrow. He seemed to think he would buy some fruit to eat out here and began to feel for a coin in his pocket, but some vague anxiety stopped him. He looked down at his feet, saw that his shoes were caked with pale, dry mud, frowned, his lips parting, sighed, shook his head and tried to smile but failed. Turning a corner, he had the lights and the traffic of a main road about two hundred yards away in front of him. He took another turning. To his left were two restaurants side by side and then a further block of warehouses, offices or whatever they were. There was some traffic even in this side street, a taxi, a private car, two girls in shorts racing each other on bicycles. He passed a German-Swiss delicatessen shop, the unlighted window full of extraordinarily varied sausages and dusty bottles of wine, then a smaller café. Through the window, half-curtained with lace, I saw men with their hats pushed back on their heads, playing a game with wooden discs and a dice-box. I thought it was called either backgammon or tric-trac, possibly both.

It was a warm, dry evening. I could not think why the man’s jacket collar was turned up, but he kept it up all the same.

At the next corner was a newsagent’s shop. It was closed. Turning the corner, we had the distant blaze of a main road in front of us once again. The man I was following stopped and looked about him. Outside the newsagent’s shop were torn placards, each pinned to a separate board and propped against the grimy stonework. They were pre-war posters which had never been taken down. KING AND QUEEN IN ATLANTIC DRAMA. ROYAL TOUR TO CANADA DAILY REPORT. ALLIANCE WELL RECEIVED IN TURKEY. AXIS TURNED DOWN BY JAPAN AND FRANCO. They were meaningless and distant enough to be reassuring. BLACK-OUT FOR ALL LONDON. My man again managed the half of a smile. Another placard apparently startled him for a moment. SOHO MURDER CASE DISCLOSURES. He looked away and looked at it again. It can have told him nothing, but a sweat broke out on his top lip. SOHO KILLING. MAN QUESTIONED. He breathed in quickly and stared across the street, squinting as it were into the huddled shadows of his own mind. But he knew already that this was only a pretence. There was no clue for him in this.

Coming towards him now was a tall, thin negro, flat-footed, with hands swinging loose, a big, curly-brimmed hat on the side of his head. The negro, too, was reassuring, being totally alien and remote. My man smiled at the negro and spoke.
He said:

‘Is this Soho?’

‘Yeah, sure.’

The negro said it like any English boy who has been to American films. The voice was not like any of the voices that negroes are supposed to have. That made the man I was following smile all the more.

‘Thanks,’ he said.

‘That’s O.K.’

The negro walked on, the large, flat feet turned in.

Then something was happening, and the man with mud-caked shoes and his jacket collar turned up was afraid. Two cars were hesitating round the corner, one grey and one blue. I heard the occupants of the two cars consulting with each other, shouting through the noise of clutches holding their engines hard.

A woman’s voice was calling out to somebody by name:

‘Alick. Alick . . .’

The man’s first impulse was to run up and see what it was, see if he could help. A lovers’ quarrel, a drunken lark involving a girl, possibly a genuine crime. He might be useful. Then fear warned him again to turn away. He turned at once and marched off towards the distant main road, his heart beginning to pump hard.

The thought pulsed in his head:

‘I don’t want to get mixed up in anything. I must go away. I’ve got to keep clear of things.’

He strode out as fast as he could. There was no thought in his head, except that he must get away.

But the two cars were following him, were alongside, were pulling up two or three yards in front of him. People were getting out of them and banging the doors, from the grey car a woman and a large young man with a scar over one eye, from the other a police inspector and a constable. The man I was following strode on. He meant to ignore them. They stood in his path.

The woman kept saying:

‘Alick, darling. Alick . . .’

It was to him that she was saying it. He must have seen that she was handsome, rather tall, and that she had tears in her eyes, but he strode on.

He said, with his eyes now looking straight in front of him:

‘I’m sorry. There must be some confusion.’

He tried to get past, but the two policemen barred his way.
The inspector said:
‘Now be reasonable, sir. You’re only...’
He did not hear any more. His head went round faster and faster, until his body could do nothing but follow it. His shoulders swung round, and one foot crossed over the other. He toppled heavily in the gutter, knocking off the police-constable’s helmet as he went down.
PART THREE

CHAPTER EIGHT

ON NOVEMBER 9TH, 1939, I RECEIVED FROM A FIRM of solicitors a communication to the effect that recently come to hand were certain assets of Frobisher and Thorpe, Ltd., which had not been in a position to be declared at the time of Sam Thorpe's demise and my bankruptcy, and that, after deducting an appropriate charge, they proposed to hand these assets over to me. They would be pleased if I would accept payment in a series of instalments, as they were themselves temporarily embarrassed by war conditions. In short, I possessed several hundred pounds, of which I was able to touch fifty at once, with further cheques for twenty pounds reaching me on the first of each month for at least two years to come. I did not enquire into the source of this income nor question in detail its extent.

The effect on my state of mind was powerful and instantaneous. I recaptured my belief in the existence of free will. Indeed, I began to practise the exercise of free will. I took a taxi where formerly I would have taken a 'bus. I shaved every day and enjoyed frequent baths. I ordered myself a suit of clothes from a range of tweeds which I had always admired at a distance. I became voluble in society. I made new friends and visited or entertained friends whom I had for some time past neglected. I rose earlier in the morning. I went to theatres, parties and dances.

Looking further for a new way of occupying my time, the first expensive object I observed lying about in Richard St. Hilda's flat was a Leica camera. It had accompanied Richard on expeditions to Switzerland and more recently to the Pyrenees and the Côte d'Azur. With it Richard had photographed cherry-trees blossoming in Kent. It had been used by young actor friends to photograph their colleagues and by the subsidised painter to record his frequently rather large paintings in more portable form. To me it was an expensive object, and not until now had I felt that I had the right to make use of it.
THE ART OF PHOTOGRAPHY IS VERY SIMPLE. IT consists in exposing a piece of chemically sensitised machinery in the neighbourhood of almost anything, though by preference certain portions of the selected area should be darker and others lighter than the rest, a condition far from difficult to fulfil. The image thus produced is then enlarged, and the photographer will select a portion of the enlarged image for further reproduction. This he will do with the intention of securing a printed area over which dark and light patches are evenly and pleasantly distributed or, in the more ambitious language of a school of modern painters, an area in which is apparent the play of spatial relationships and the harmony of masses of tone. The photographer is further able to interfere with the printed image by scratching or making black marks on the film, by striking a match while the film is being developed, by under-printing and over-developing images in which small patches of perfect black appear or by superimposing a negative and a positive film to make his print. Suppose, for example, that he has originally exposed his machine in the neighbourhood of a human face. By scratching and making black marks, he may remove pimples, warts, moles and superfluous hair. By striking a match, he may outline the image with a thick black line, an effect known as solarisation and considered by many to be highly artistic, and indeed, if he does not presently blow the match out, the whole printed area will turn out uniformly grey or reveal a chin, a nose and possibly a bumpy forehead disembodied and afloat upon a sea of oil. The under-printing and over-developing produce high-key prints, etherealising the face thus treated, while superimposition of a negative and a positive film result in the illusion of a bas-relief. I learned these tricks of the art from Aloysius Smith. As a matter of fact, I never employed any of them myself. I contented myself with exposing film in suitable neighbourhoods.

I thought that female nudes were perhaps suitable for a beginner. The war rendered liable to suspicion anyone observed taking photographs in the open air, and the neighbourhood of female nudes would, I thought, remain agreeable to the photographer even when, as might happen, his interest in the art itself momentarily flagged.

My first victim was the wife of a professor at Oxford. I cannot imagine what any professor was doing married to this young woman. I was first introduced to her at a lecture of Professor Dr. Unradt’s, to which she had been brought along by Edgar Voysey and Alfred Fantl. I was drawn to her by the expression on her face as she
shook hands, a lingering, passionate expression. I discovered later that it appeared on her face whenever she looked at anything closely, for it was due to short-sightedsness, but it may have been this expression which persuaded the professor at Oxford to extend his hand in marriage. The young woman herself painted, and she removed her clothes for photography with willingness if not indeed with alacrity. Unfortunately she presented several disabilities as a model. At the age of twenty-four or twenty-five, she was already a little pot-bellied. This fact might have been concealed, but not so the resemblance she bore to the Iron Duke (of Maida Vale) in that her nipples were fully three-quarters of an inch long when relaxed. I am sorry to have to comment on so intimate a detail, but it does bear on the story, for without it I might have been contented with her services and not looked elsewhere for a model.

At this juncture, the young man whom Richard St. Hilda had taken with him into the Pyrenees and along the Côte d’Azur and who, perhaps as a result of this experience, was now turning over a new leaf, asked Richard if he might bring with him to dinner one evening a young woman called Pat Mallard. Richard, at this time, was seldom in town, but when he was I found him in a rare good humour. I several times caught him looking at me intently (for him), but when I met his eye he merely ruffled his back hair and grinned at me his slow, rosy grin of incomprehension. He must have decided each time he looked at me that, even if something needed to be done, he was not the man to do it, for he presently took himself off again, staying first with Effie in Kent and moving on from there to some friends in Bristol, leaving behind him vague occasional messages to the effect that he still had a little money if any were really needed. On this particular evening, although we had neither of us seen Pat Mallard or formed any clear impression of her from the young man’s account, Richard decided to express his good humour by conspiring with me that he and I should impersonate each other. That is to say, he would address me as Richard, and I would address him as Alick. I would do the honours as host. We hoped that the young man would quickly see and fall in with our little game, and we trusted to be amused by the reactions of the young woman, who had presumably heard a good deal and formed a definite impression of Richard St. Hilda, if not indeed of me too.

I mention this fact not because our little game had any amusing consequences of its own but because it reveals the attitude of mind which we cultivated towards Pat Mallard even before we had met
her and which therefore must have influenced my later relations with her.

Pat Mallard was a big girl with glasses and a clipped, school-mistress manner of speaking. She lived in the Hampstead Garden Suburb alone with her father, a retired military man, and studied dancing of a daisy-picking variety at one of the numerous schools founded under the influence of Isadora Duncan. Richard’s young man had made her acquaintance at the headquarters of a pacifist group in the West End, and we did not presume from her appearance that his interest in her could be other than that of intellectual comradeship. Richard and I abandoned our little game very quickly and without apologies as though, with a young woman like this, it were hardly worth playing.

Two or three days afterwards, I met Richard’s young man in town. I was looking for a new model. It occurred to me to ask about Pat Mallard. She was strongly built, and her dancing, though it served no other purpose, would have developed just the degree of musculature which looks well under strong lighting.

I said:
‘Do you think Pat might come and pose for me? Do you mind?’

I felt certain she would come if the young man agreed and asked her, for the combination of ripe virginity and an interest in the arts is commonly pleased by a request to denude itself of work-a-day raiment.

The young man agreed.

I said:
‘I should think her figure is rather good, isn’t it?’

The young man said:
‘I should think so.’

Pat Mallard came to the flat in St. John’s Wood on Saturday afternoon. I concentrated what lighting I had in the dining-room downstairs, and Pat undressed in Margaret’s room which was also downstairs.

She said to Margaret:
‘Does your husband want me to take everything off?’

Margaret lent her a dressing-gown, and Pat Mallard came into the dining-room, where I had a hot gas fire going and, drawn across the windows, a print curtain of Vanessa Bell design.

I was deeply moved, when Pat removed the dressing-gown and placed herself against this curtain, to find that her body was beyond criticism and that she posed with a rare sensitiveness. I must attempt to do my feelings justice. Here was a young woman whom
almost anybody would have written off as one of the eternally unloved. Her clothes, her glasses, her way of doing her hair (although it was nice hair), her interests, her manner of speech, all proclaimed the type of young woman of the English middle classes whom parental inhibition, influences at school and afterwards, attitudes of the people she met, had robbed of the capacity to go out of herself into a vivid, painful world. Yet here was this same young woman with her clothes off and her glasses off, doing something which her training allowed her to think worth the trouble. Her body was lovable in the extreme, and her movements were not only sensitive but free, free and lucid beyond the capacity of many a celebrated harlot. She lifted her arms above her head and, poising herself upon the toe of one foot and the ball of the other in a position which her school of dancing had taught her, parted them fastidiously from each other and extended her body in superb profile. Her head lifted and then bowed gracefully upon its column of neck, and even her face had proved itself to be charming. I could have cried.

I remember that I said to Margaret afterwards:

‘If somebody not a fool would only make love to her, what a change there would be.’

Margaret said:

‘Well, darling, there’s always you.’

I said:

‘No. I’m afraid it would be hard work. I should have liked to try, but I really don’t feel that it’s up to me. I haven’t enough energy as it is.’

It was November. Margaret by now was over three months gone and believed that she felt the child stir. She was working for a psychologist, a friend of Ernst Landy’s. She never suggested that I might go to him for advice, nor so far as I know, ever mentioned my recent behaviour to him, and I dare say she was right in this. Every fortnight or so, she went to the Middlesex Hospital for examination and pre-natal care.

THE FOLLOWING WEEK-END, MARGARET WENT OFF to stay in East Anglia with some older woman with whom she was friendly and who, for all I know, may have been a witch. I went away at the same time to stay in Sussex with a rather eminent man of letters who at one time took an interest in my occasional verses. A man of extraordinary personal charm, he and his wife, a talented sculptress in the quasi-abstract mode, invested their successive
homes with unfailing sweetness and light. The present cottage was situated perhaps fifty yards from a quiet road. It was built in the Sussex manner of flinty limestone with nails studded in the mortar and surrounded but not too closely by trees of moderate height. The interior was of a sophistication which in no way conflicted with rustic surroundings. Expanses of white wall were broken up here and there with pictures by Henry Moore, Gabo, Miró, and plaster compositions by Ben Nicholson. The furniture and fittings were in a taste too fine to be of any period in particular, and they too were largely white. Very little of my hostess’s sculpture was displayed. The day was frosty, but the wintry sun shone with remarkable intensity. Carefully prepared food, carefully modulated conversation, lights carefully placed and one other visitor chosen and invited with care were the ingredients of a weekend that would have refreshed the most jaded spirit, even without Nathalie.

I had brought my camera, mainly in order, at my hostess’s request, to photograph her two children, one of whom was very recent, and whom I had not yet seen. After tea, I made two portraits of my rather eminent friend by the light of one reading-lamp and the afterglow of the sunset. His wife was superintending dinner. We exchanged news. Two books were on the way, one in proof and one still under the pen. A series of lectures at one of the northern universities had recently come to an end. They had a refugee girl living in the house, recommended to them by someone still living in Italy.

The black-out curtains were drawn. A pleasant sherry was poured out. The refugee girl had been putting the children to bed. She now appeared. Her name was Nathalie Fröhlich. She was exquisite.

I took her at first for a child of fourteen. She was a Jewess, with a flaunting, Asiatic Jewishness that appeared to come straight from a Palestine of pomegranates and relentless sun, though it had first seen the light in East Prussia and had never travelled farther south than Rome. Her profile was the profile of Egyptian Nefertite and her coarse hair twisted with a violence which had long resisted European coiffure. Nathalie was in fact twenty-two, but her person was slight, her movements and expression naïve, her dress ill-made and worn without vanity, and the development of her figure not more than would be expected in a precocious Mediterranean child of fourteen. Her smile played one a curious trick, which reminded me of the leaping of the dancer Nijinsky. Nijinsky’s elevation was
such that, when he leaped, he appeared to leap twice, hesitating as it were at the highest point of his first leap and then soaring even beyond that. Nathalie Fröhlich smiled, and then, when it appeared that her smile was complete, a second, more brilliant and altogether spontaneous afterglow would irradiate her face.

Nathalie seated herself not very elegantly in a chair covered with white rexine and, as she stretched forward to take the glass of sherry offered her by her rather eminent employer, exposed above a stocking not tightly enough suspended a length of cool-looking, apricot-coloured thigh which lacked the full rotundity of womanhood. Fourteen or fifteen, I thought, and already disturbing to the senses. I experienced for I hope the first time in my life the sensations of protective tenderness appropriate to an American sugar-daddy or a Dutch uncle.

On Sunday morning, I photographed my hostess’s children in their baths. Twenty copies of the best print were to be her Christmas cards for 1939. A little before lunch, I photographed Nathalie in profile against a patch of sunlit wall across which trailed a single branch of winter jasmine.

I asked her if she were ever in town. She told me that she came up once a week to see friends and to do her shopping. She would be in town on Thursday. We arranged that she should telephone me when she had finished her shopping, and I would arrange some expedition for the evening.

THE HORROR OF THE GRAVE YAWNS MORE NOTICE-ably just after tea on Sunday than at any other time, and on my return from that November week-end in Sussex, Richard St. Hilda’s flat in St. John’s Wood made my hair rise up with its desolation. Margaret would not be home until to-morrow. Nobody had come in this morning to make the beds and tidy up. To stay indoors by myself was quite out of the question. The Unit Theatre was one of the few places in London at which, because of something I had once written, I was still persona grata. I rang up Midge Pettit to find out whether the Ballet Unit were doing a show to-night. They were. I said I would come.

The Ballet Unit and to some extent the Unit Theatre altogether were the creation of Stefi Yefimovitch, a Polish or Russian Jewess who had danced in the corps de ballet for Diaghilev in his decline. When Diaghilev died and his organisation disbanded, the greater number of his dancers either settled down to teaching
or continued to dance as *prime ballerine assolute* at the opera houses of remoter European capitals. As a ballerina, Stefi Yefimovitch would scarcely have satisfied even Brussels, Sofia, Bucharest or Rio de Janeiro, and she did not relish the traditional obscurity of a school. Teach she did, and taught well and energetically, but it was in a theatre of her own. She pestered elderly balletomanes until they gave her not devotion certainly but money, and the money she handed over to a young lover who had fancied himself a playwright for the few but developed under Stefi's tuition into a minor commercial genius and a husband. Stefi let him run the Unit Theatre on Mondays, Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays and matinees to show his own plays and plays of his own taste at a loss, but his real job was to fill the little place on Tuesday, Wednesday and Sunday evenings for the Ballet Unit, into which Stefi Yefimovitch had contrived to assemble intimate talents of the most diverse and vivid kinds and moreover to keep them and make them work together, underpaid for their performances and paying money into the school as pupils. In the result, Stefi Yefimovitch, a woman whose personal talent amounted to very little, became the focus of an artistic life of rare intensity whose appeal was to the discriminating few and which yet produced theatrical profits of a previously unattempted concentration. Her more personally distinguished colleagues and successors despised and courted her. Balanchine, Lifar and de Basil collected her throw-outs. The immature stars of Monte Carlo, Covent Garden and the Metropolitan Opera of New York were off-hand in their manner, but their mothers feared her criticism and even made the girls attend her school as well as Legat's when they were in London.

As with the protagonists of Greek Tragedy, one little flaw in her armour yielded up Stefi Yefimovitch to be the sport of the immortal gods. In her generous fight against the type of true, cosmopolitan ballerina of the big theatres, Stefi Yefimovitch had exaggerated every difference. This had extended even into the realm of politics. Since Russian Ballet elsewhere cultivated an émigré nostalgia and professed allegiance to White Russia and the Grand Duke Cyril, Stefi Yefimovitch openly avowed her sympathy with the Bolshevik Revolution and cultivated the society of the Red Embassy. At the outbreak of war, she was one of the first resident aliens to be interned.

It says much for her inspirational technique that her *pupils*, although they had been made to feel that the artistic as well as the theatrical success of their work depended on her, had not been robbed by Stefi Yefimovitch of personal initiative, and, under the
leadership of a brilliant young choreographer, William Panting, whose greater independence was perhaps due to a working-class origin (he had been a dock-hand, and God only knows how he had found his way to the ballet, unless it were through some enterprising rake who had strolled through dockland and taken a fancy to his looks), the Ballet Unit carried on and was doing some of its best work yet in Stefi Yefimovitch's absence.

I ought to mention that, in the days when I was a regular hanger-on of the ballet world, I had been for almost a year consumed with hopeless passion for Maimie Joyce, an Australian girl who was the Ballet Unit's finest dancer. Midge Pettit, who had come with Maimie Joyce all the way from Adelaide, S.A., and who was now the Ballet Unit's business manager, had been my confidante.

She was the first person I encountered as I entered the dingy little foyer. We did not embrace. I had always made rather a point of not being quite like the other young men.

I said:
'Hello.'
I said:
'How's Maimie?'
I said:
'What am I going to see?'
Midge said:
'You haven't seen William's new ballet, have you? It's rather lovely.'

Anything that Midge Pettit liked was 'rather lovely'. Her vocabulary of disapproval was less exclusive.

At this point, in the old days, Stefi Yefimovitch would have crossed the foyer in the manner of a heroine of nineteenth-century drama doing something secret before a large audience, hesitating and distraught. She would no doubt have seen me the first time, but she would have to make a second entry to greet me. She would have lingered a moment fervently pressing the hand of a fat man and gazing up at him with eyes of agonised search and then turned her head and recognised me with a smile of rapturous astonishment.

'Ah-leeck,' she would have said. 'Hel-lo. Hel-lo. How nice to see you. . . .'

She would not kiss me. I suppose she had given up kissing people because she was so short. If a person did not wish to be kissed and did not put down his face for the purpose, the effect would be humiliating.
And then she would have gone into detailed ecstasies over William Panting's new ballet, her fine intelligence shattering the absurd mannerism and blowing its fragments to the farthest corner of London. I missed her presence.

I said:

'How is she?'

'Terribly unhappy,' said Midge. 'You can guess. We took her some flowers the other day, and William played a portable gramophone and did bits of the new ballet for her there in the cell. It was rather lovely. She'd confess or renounce anything to get out and work again, and nobody'll do a thing for her. All the diplomats are in league with de Basil, and everybody hates her so much. . . .'

Midge Pettit went into the box office and sorted me out a ticket. I exchanged greetings with a few young men and middle-aged women and critics to whom I had once been conscientiously and flattering rude.

I went to my seat.

The music was played on two pianos occupied by a plump young man and a lean young woman. They played Brian Easdale's arrangement of the *Entry of the Queen of Sheba* and followed it with a short piece by Ravel, after which the curtain went up for a ballet by one of Stefi Yefimovitch's lesser talents, a frisky, nostalgic thing in a taste which the advent of war had made seem curiously out of date and insipid. Maimie Joyce was not dancing in this, but Tessa Duveen was. I thought Tessa had quarrelled with the Ballet Unit long ago, but here she was, improved in style and feeling if not in technique. I must remember to find Tessa and be nice to her when I went behind after the show.

The second ballet was one of Panting's older pieces, done at a time when he was experimenting with the idiom of Javanese dance-movements. It was still very satisfying. Then the interval. Then the new ballet, *Le Retour d'Orfée*.

William Panting had this streak of awful solemnity in him, this utter seriousness which normally seems out of place in ballet and indeed is out of place when it is not handled with a self-criticising technique of the most uncompromising narrowness. A Panting ballet, however cosmic its theme, never degenerated into the vague phantasy of the Central European school. William Panting was a mystic, but his mysticism was a mysticism of physical movement. He never required his dancers to use facial contortion in a last desperate effort to express the inexpressible. The choreography
was all. If a part of the stated theme defied expression by strictly choreographical means, then it was rejected out of hand.

*Le Retour d'Orfée* was danced to music by Scriabine. It had obviously been influenced by a reading of Rilke and presented Eurydice not merely as the female principle of teeming life and spiritual inertia but as a shadow of Orpheus's mind lost to him by self-love, turned now to reality by his acceptance of personal death.

That all this represented some personal conflict in Panting's own desperate homosexual loneliness, I do not doubt, but how perfectly managed it was, how totally exteriorised upon the little stage. A ballet without a single cliché or a single end-stopped movement. When a dancer left the stage it was because the interplay of forms, as it were, relinquished him. When a dancer made his entry, it was as though the flow of movement passing from one to another compelled him to come.

I sat entranced. Maimie Joyce's long arms created a perfect harmony and froze it upon the air.

During the applause that followed, I heard a young man behind me observe to his neighbour:

'I must say, I do think Colin's costume was rather fetching.'

I went through the foyer and the print-room to the iron steps which led up to the dressing-rooms.

William Panting was having a row with the fair-haired young man who had just danced his Orpheus to perfection and who now, off the stage, looked undersized and ridiculous.

He was saying:

'Colin, how can you be so horrid?'

Colin tossed back his hair and said:

'I don't care. I don't. It brings out the beast in me, William.'

I wanted to explain to William Panting what I still felt about his work. He was too engrossed in the quarrel. He was friendly for a moment and introduced me to Colin, who touched my hand with his long fingers and nearly broke me off at the elbow, but a moment later the quarrel had been resumed. I gave it up. This world was too full of contrasts for me. I looked for Maimie Joyce's dressing-room.

Maimie's husband was already there. Dear Michael, who was as kind and sensible as Maimie herself and as free of passion. He loved her with an old man's detachment and a boy's attentiveness to detail. It was perfect. The lovely iceberg had found in marriage with this young man a climate totally suited to her. I had tried to blister the lucid slopes.
Maimie said:
'How did you like Orfée?'
'I liked it,' said I. 'I tried to tell William, but he's too busy having a temperament with Colin out in the passage. I can tell you, though . . .'
I said:
'How's neuralgia this winter?'
Maimie's husband said:
'She doesn't have neuralgia since she got married. She nearly had appendicitis, though.'
I said that I myself had not been terribly well lately, but luckily I was not made to go into detail.
The little dressing-room was all mirror, bright light, paper wrapping and cleansing tissues, floating powder, flimsy dresses, wigs, flowers and pinned-up greetings telegrams. Maimie had already got the powder and the grease off her face. She sent us out while she changed her clothes. The passage was narrow and crowded. In another dressing-room, some of the boys were playing a gramophone. They were playing hot music probably to shock each other. A number of admirers and mothers had arrived. Girls were pushing past from one room to another. Everybody was in everybody else's way. Maimie's husband and I went and stood at the top of the iron steps. Tessa Duveen came out of the nearest dressing-room. I had forgotten my intention of seeking her out and making a fuss of her.
'Meanie,' she was saying. 'You wouldn't have let a girl know you were about if I hadn't found out.'
I tried to look hurt and at the same time rather absent-minded.
Tessa smiled.
She said:
'It's awful nice to see you. My, aren't you smart? How ever did you manage to buy a suit like that? Are you going to speak to a girl now she's here?'
I'm afraid Tessa Duveen takes rather a lot of explaining. Her act in public and indeed in private, too, was that of the bad little girl whom nobody understands. Nor was it altogether an act, for she was a bad little girl, and probably nobody in her world understood her except Maimie Joyce and myself. She contended that everybody else hated her.
She had other grievances. That she was not beautiful, for instance. That she was too fat. That she would never be a great dancer. These grievances were all to some extent true, though not sufficiently
true to prevent her from being a little person very pleasant to look at and a character dancer whom any producer would have been glad to have to hand.

But one could describe Tessa Duveen’s surface characteristics at great length, and the total impression would be more and more that she was a spiteful, affected and spoilt child. She was not. Or rather she was, but just the same she was the bravest, most spontaneous, vivid and hard-living girl that I have come across anywhere.

She was short, plump, sensuous and highly coloured, with a variety of styles of coiffure which ended up in a fringe of rusty curls on the forehead, so that she always reminded one of a Renoir girl or a Manet cocotte. When I first knew her, she was sixteen. She fell in love with me (I think, but it is always a little difficult to be sure) at a time when I was hopelessly attached to Maimie Joyce. I kissed her a little, but for the most part I played big brother.

At seventeen, Tessa got herself into a scrape and married a young man as crazy as herself, a fine, wild, hurt boy with very straight flaxen hair which drooped in an enthusiast’s side-lock over his right ear, who poured jugs of beer over her and was conscientiously and tormentedly unfaithful from the beginning. The baby was born months late and showed a perverse desire to be born the wrong way round, but by this time the father had gone off to China to fly an aeroplane against the Japanese. Having lost the use of one hand, he returned and tried to set up home again with Tessa, but he never succeeded for more than a month or so at a time. He hated me and in some of his jealous fits would accuse Tessa of having married him on the strength of a child that was mine.

Tessa Duveen was now twenty-one.
I suddenly felt home-sick for her violent youth.
I said to Maimie’s husband:
‘Look, I’m going. Don’t let Maimie think I’m being rude. I’m coming again next week to take photographs from the wings. In any case, I’m going to ring you up and bring Margaret to supper with you one night.’

I took Tessa’s arm, and we went down the iron steps and out into the dark street. Tessa had changed her clothes, but she had not taken her make-up off. She had lost her tissues, and nobody would lend her any. We went into a little delicatessen and had coffee and a sandwich. The shop was full of every kind of sausage and every kind of bread hanging in rows. Tessa’s made-up face, orange and red, with blue and silver eyelids and long, thick lashes,
had a stimulating unreality beneath this ordinary light. We sat on high stools at the counter, our cramped knees touching. For the first time, I really felt desire for Tessa Duveen. I treasured it. I had often wanted to want her. At times she moved me terribly, but I had never really desired her.

I said: 'Are you coming home with me, Tessa? Nobody's there tonight.'

Tessa made a wry face. Then she sat worrying.

After a while, she said: 'I don't like this place.'

We went out and stumbled through the black-out along a side-street that led into Charing X Road. Tessa held herself close against me. Neither of us spoke. Then Tessa stopped and faced me.

'Alick,' she said. 'No.'

She said:

'You can't take things up where you left them years ago. It would have been nice then. It won't be the same now.'

She pressed herself up to me.

'Oh, Christ,' she said. 'You never did before, and now you want to. It isn't fair. I'm not the same now, and I do want to so much.'

I said nothing. We kissed. We walked on to my 'bus stop at the bottom of Regent Street. Tessa still said she would not come. We argued. We talked until the last 'bus had gone. Tessa said she would come, but I hadn't to blame her if it was a flop. I knew it would be a flop now too, but I was obstinate. The real desire had been talked out of me, but I was trying to make myself believe that it would come back. We took a taxi to St. John's Wood.

I remember Tessa lying with her arms crossed over her breasts. When I smiled and tried to pull her arms away, she would not let me.

She said:

'No, you mustn't look. They're not pretty now. You mustn't look at me at all.'

At the 'bus stop in Regent Street, she had said:

'I daren't go with you. I should be frightened. You see everything. You'd be making love with your mind. You'd be thinking hard all the time and seeing me.'
CHAPTER NINE

IT SEEMS AS IF I WERE TELLING FOUR OR FIVE stories at once, but that is how it was. I can imagine this story divided up between four or five distinct novels. There would be the novel dealing with a business man who crashed and upon whom a hitherto suppressed romanticism thereafter took its revenge, causing him to suffer from delusions and eventually to lose his memory. There would be a novel dealing with the London of before the war and during the Sitzkrieg, its decadent intellectualism, its circles of vice, the disintegration of personality later to be remedied by a national risorgimento. There would be novels of simpler theme, the downfall of an erotophile, the errant husband and wife brought together by the birth of a child. More interesting perhaps than any of these, there would be a highly atmospheric novel dealing with experiences in a half-world of death and rebirth. But in actuality these and other potential themes were inextricable, and I cannot truthfully say what effect attached to what cause or indeed which was cause and which effect. Any attempt at all-embracing consistency would be dishonest (and I believe that it is always so in life and that all novel-writing is dishonest in its degree). I can but play upon the surface and hint at underlying depths wherever I am aware of them.

Nevertheless, I am certain that all things do cohere within a pattern, that anarchy and chaos are conditions not to be found in nature and that, if one were possessed of the necessary technique, the whole of a man and a man's life could be read clearly from a single hair of his head, as some claim to read it in the palm of his hand. Thus I am committed a fortiori to a belief that Pat Mallard and Nathalie Fröhlich cannot be dismissed as trivial incidents in a muddled career. Neither can I altogether ignore Aloysius Smith, although in terms of doing he did little.

I mentioned in my earliest pages 'a professional photographer who made his living by photographing mortuaries for a refrigeration company.' This was Aloysius Smith. At that time, he was only one of a crowd of people whom I had recently met. Now I came into somewhat closer contact with him.

ALOYSIUS SMITH IS AT ONCE THE HAPPIEST AND THE unhappiest of all the men and women I ever met. He is unhappy
in the sense in which animals are unhappy. This was a doctrine taught at the Institute of Mystical Science, that the animals are unhappy and that they are unhappy because this is a world created not for them but for man. I believe that it is a true doctrine. I believe that, as Mrs. Verity and Fraulein von Stubenau used to say, one can read the unhappiness of animals in their faces and in their limited movements and their cries. Man lives more often than not in the condition of despair, but he can, by fulfilling his humanity, supersede it. The animals cannot. Nor, I am convinced, could Aloysius Smith. But, before I further analyse his happy-unhappy life, let me first describe Aloysius Smith superficially and recall the general circumstances of his terrestrial existence.

I first met him in the company of the elder of the two young men who lived opposite Margaret and myself at the house with the detachable ceiling in Marginal Road. I was standing outside the Dominion Theatre in Tottenham Court Road. I had arranged to meet someone there, turned up late and found him gone. A number of excitable young men passed, evidently in the course of a peripatetic party of some kind, and in the dazzle of a pre-war London evening I recognised my little friend from over the road. I was drawn into the group. I no longer care what impression I create in public, but in those days I was rather sensitive, and to be seen in this group caused me no little discomfort, for as the drink went down in one public house after another their excitable voices became more and more shrill, their movements and gestures more like those of mannequins or non-stop lovelies. I was aware of other drinkers tipping their hats back and regarding us with profound hostility. However, the evening passed without incident, and I reached home safely.

Aloysius Smith was one of this group. I was astonished to discover later that he was married to a wife and enjoyed the use of notable talents.

Aloysius is rather tall and big-boned, dark, with straight black hair combed untidily back, and steel-rimmed, very thick glasses behind which swim two eyes of indeterminate colour and startling concentration. He looks foreign and perhaps a little sinister and I doubt not has often been thought to be a spy since the war began, particularly as he always appears to be going about some business of a private and incomprehensible nature. He lives in a top-storey flat in the Vale of Health with his wife and a cat. He makes a fair income not only out of photography but, as his luck takes him, out of book-illustration, architectural and fashion design, handicrafts,
interior decoration, caricature and the erection of air-raid shelters. He paints, carves, collects objets d'art and plays the violin. The most astonishing creations blossom beneath his careless, rather large hands.

That is his happiness, effortless creativity and his fascination with inanimate things. But he is not fully human. He frequents the company of cats because he is more than half a cat himself. He collects musical boxes, Victorian glass, match-box covers, strange headgear, weapons and lengths of oriental stuff partly as a barrier between himself and the world and partly because it is only through the medium of inanimate things that he can make contact with other people. In conversation with him, I have always had the uncomfortable feeling that he was paying no attention to what I said. His extraordinarily polite, attentive and indeed mellifluous way of saying, 'Yes, Alick,' 'No, of course not, Alick,' give colour to this feeling. Yet, if one suddenly puts a question to him to find out whether he has been listening, the answer is there, and it is obvious that his memory retains every word.

His wife's name is Muriel Agnes. She is small and shy. It is easy to win her confidence. I do not think Aloysius makes her at all happy, although she loves him. Indeed, Aloysius Smith's relationship with Muriel Agnes is perhaps the one thing about him which is truly rather than apparently sinister. 'He dominates her, and it is of the very essence of the sinister that other creatures should dominate mankind.

I have occasionally thought that Muriel Agnes was herself not entirely human and that she and Aloysius made an exemplary pair of babes in the wood, little lost animals in a baleful human world, two changelings holding hands in fear of their sad, incomprehensible destiny. But then I have reflected that, as St. Paul and the Christian fathers held, women are of their nature without souls, that they commonly receive a soul from some man and that Muriel Agnes had been shut off more than is common from male, humanising influences.

Interested people have tried to put a narrow interpretation on Aloysius Smith's relationship with his wife. Aloysius once joined in a lively pub-crawl by taxi with Richard St. Hilda, Margaret and myself, the two young men from Marginal Road and a number of other male and female characters. Under the liberating influence of drink he went round kissing all the males in his vicinity. After the party, the two young men from Marginal Road told stories of Aloysius' agony when confronted with the sexual problem before
he married Muriel Agnes, their contention being that he should not have married or indeed had relations with the opposite sex at all. I cannot accept this view. As for that particular alcoholic incident, I find it necessary to point out that, apart from Muriel Agnes, it so happened that all the occupants of the taxi in which Aloysius was riding were males, and I claim that, if repressed desire was displayed in Aloysius’ going round kissing everybody, it was desire of the changeling to enter fully into the human world into which it had been transported. It is true that Muriel Agnes was observed to be agitated by the incident, but it is surely wrong to assume that her agitation was due to a feeling that her husband was betraying the failure of their relationship in public and not to natural compassion with him in a despair which she herself shared. It is true also that a certain nymphomaniac in the party was disgusted by Aloysius’ behaviour and declared her intention of never speaking to him again, but then females who have been sexually over-stimulated become very single-minded and as it were puritanical in reverse.

Let me complete this survey by once again stressing the diversity of Aloysius Smith’s talents and the rather quaint pixeled charm of his top flat in the Vale of Health and by adding that he possesses, in addition to musical-boxes, a cat and a violin, a large number of books, not all of which have been selected for their attractive bindings. I doubt whether Aloysius ever reads them, and if he does I am sure that what the words convey to him is different from what they would convey to you or me. But there it is. Aloysius Smith possesses a library, and a library is said to be of all things the most representative of the human spirit.

I should also add that Muriel Agnes has long wanted to move from the Vale of Health for a very human reason. On several occasions, drawing the curtains apart as she turned out the light to go to bed, she observed in the street below a policeman carrying a large white bundle. Eventually, her curiosity caused her to put on a dressing-gown and run downstairs to find out the meaning of this occurrence. The white bundles were sheets enveloping corpses retrieved from the Vale of Health’s own pond. This upset Muriel Agnes in precisely the same way as it would have upset any young married woman. Also, Muriel Agnes has several times confessed to Margaret in the kitchen that she would like to have a child. Whichever way you look at it, the problem is a difficult one to solve.
IN DECEMBER AND JANUARY I SPENT A LOT OF TIME in Aloysius Smith’s company. I watched him developing film and printing from it. I studied some hundreds of his photographs and lost myself in the little world of his creation. I took him to the Unit Theatre, where he made pictures of Maimie Joyce that will immortalise (for a little while) those long, expressive limbs, and where he met and amused and was amused by Tessa Duveen and protected me from further intimacy with her. More pertinently, I invited him to share my sessions with Pat Mallard, for models other than stereotyped professional ones are not so easily come by and the nude was a territory which until then had largely escaped Aloysius’ attention.

He came to the flat in St. John’s Wood on a Sunday afternoon in December. Margaret had invited both himself and Muriel Agnes to tea and supper. Photography was to occupy the interval between the two, and the rest of the evening was to be purely social. I cannot remember where Richard St. Hilda was at this time, but he was certainly not in London.

Aloysius brought his own lighting apparatus. Hitherto I had worked with lighting of moderate power and had therefore had to confine myself to a limited range of tones, in which the black was to be found only in deep hollows and the white only upon salient features. Aloysius brought bulbs of such brilliance that he could flood every surface with utter, transparent whiteness and yet leave a jet-black line wavering along the ridge of the bone. These bulbs gave off not only light but heat of such intensity that one actually felt (or received the impression that one felt) the waves of both heat and light progressing at their own tempo through the finer meshes of the air and the contained ether. These waves appeared furthermore to produce a musical tone.

It was December and therefore dark very early. How that heavily curtained room appeared from the outside I cannot say, but I imagined that emanation of some sort must surely catch the attention of an alert air-raid warden. Perhaps he would have put it down to the singing of the balloon cables which in those early days sounded to many ears like the music of the spheres and gave rise to many legends of a metropolitan circle of buzzing, invisible ray.

To add to this hypnagagic, hyperaesthetic atmosphere, three finely blown glasses and two bottles of air-conditioned sherry were introduced into the room for the delectation of the two photographers and their model. Sherry was a drink which Colonel Mallard
evidently permitted his daughter, for she showed no signs of nervousness in its presence. I had formerly sat for my portrait to one of Aloysius’ cameras. His method was to bewilder his models and make them laugh while he dodged around them talking quietly and persuasively, deliberately wasting film until the last fixity of expression, the last uneasy tension of a muscle should have disappeared. In combination with the light and heat and the sherry, this method operated with full effect on Pat Mallard.

The most interesting passages in my own photographs are probably those in which a small Aloysius, peering through his Kontax’s view-finder, intruded for a moment upon the field of vision of the lens of my Leica. His own pictures are quite extraordinary. At first he showed a tendency to let me choose every alternate pose, but I told him to ignore me entirely, to do what he liked with the model and the light, and if any desirable effect happened to present itself to my eye I would attempt to record it. I used perhaps a quarter of the film that Aloysius used. Part of the time I spent in plying Pat Mallard with sherry. Aloysius photographed her raising the glass to her lips. He lay on his back and photographed half vertically up mighty columns of leg. He leaped on top of the desk and photographed an upward-looking face with a perspective of body receding down to absurdly diminished feet. He was in every corner of the room at once, so that if he demanded Pat Mallard’s face she did not know in which direction to look. He tossed her bits of drapery and photographed her as she caught them. He handed her a guitar or a Japanese sword or such other properties as I had been able to find, or snatched them away and recorded the turn of a bewildered arm and shoulder. Even visually, woman is inexhaustible in her variety, but that evening every detail of a superb body was, if not made captive, yet momentarily, lyrically acknowledged. The discordant personality of this inhibited girl was caught up and resolved. I believe that Pat Mallard was, between tea and supper on that Sunday evening in December, for the first time in her life, perfectly happy.

Then the lights fused. Aloysius’ high-powered filaments had overstrained the circuit. Aloysius went downstairs, where Margaret and Muriel Agnes were now conspiring by candlelight to produce the supper of the century, to fix the fuse. By the light which flickered behind the mica panels of a slow-burning stove, Pat Mallard put Margaret’s dressing-gown over her shoulders and sat on the arm of a low, comfortable chair. I sat on the other arm.

I do not remember whether it was out of pure friendliness or
from a mild, alcoholic lechery automatically liberated by the sudden darkness, that I put my arm in the first place around Pat Mallard’s waist, or was it her shoulders? In any case, Pat responded, and the large, warm, breathless, vital, sweet-smelling body, barely concealed by Margaret’s dressing-gown even from the sense of touch, was pushing against my thin shirt the tips of two most pleasantly curvetted and resilient breasts, and two heavy, sensitive arms were meeting upon the nape of my neck to fold their hands behind my head.

Pat sighed, and as my tongue went in search of the sherried softness of her mouth, I remember wondering what I had done and what in Heaven’s name I might be letting myself in for.

Aloysius put in a new fuse, and the lights came on. He returned. Pat’s manner was not at all confused, but on the contrary, as a first reaction, rather triumphant. She remembered to ask Aloysius to do a simple portrait of her before he packed up, to use as a Christmas card. Her normal, timid self reasserted itself to insist that this portrait should not let it appear that even her shoulders had been uncovered when it was taken and to remind us both that she must see all our finished prints, to be assured that in none of them was she recognisable to her relatives and friends, before she passed any of them for publication. Then she returned downstairs to dress in Margaret’s room, saying that she really ought to go and see if she could help with the supper.

When I next saw her, she was once more wearing a plain jumper and skirt, and glasses covered her blue, naturally glassy eyes. She was being fussy and helpful with the other two girls, talking liberally in that hard, clipped voice. I believe she laid the table. At the same time, I seem to remember that there was a little more rouge than before upon her lips and that her hair was looking a little nicer.

Later in the evening, when all these visitors had gone, I confessed to Margaret that shortly before supper I had kissed Pat Mallard.

Margaret said:

‘I'm afraid I knew that. It was rather obvious from her behaviour when she came down to help us with the supper. I don’t mind, darling.’

NATHALIE FRÖHLICH CAME TO TOWN AND RANG ME up as she had promised. I dined and wined her that evening and several other evenings after that. Each time, I sent her home a
little tipsy and her stomach a-tingle with the most recherché food that Soho could provide, but otherwise intact.

I am at a loss now to account for my pre-occupation with Nathalie Fröhlich. I remained entirely detached from her. Her dainty, exotic person disturbed my senses, but I have never felt impelled to rob art galleries of any picture there that did the same. In any case, it was obvious that nothing of real interest could occur between us, for there was nothing particularly absurd about Nathalie Fröhlich and no disequilibrium in her life to attach her to a man in my state of mind, or, as I would prefer to have it, a man passing through my phase of a peculiar destiny. I packed her up in the end when she began trying to get me to do favours for her friends. She had me meet a boy who had been to school with her at Posen, a pretty, dark fellow with large ears, who would have appealed to Richard St. Hilda. She wanted me to put him up for a week or two. I refused with a certain feeling of discomfort, knowing that he was being made to suffer for the circumstances under which I met him, for Nathalie Fröhlich's lack of tact. Under other circumstances, I might well have entertained him or at any rate passed him on to some friend, for I had a very tender feeling towards all refugees.

THROUGHOUT MY ADULT LIFE I HAVE MADE A POINT of not observing Christmas. Were I a devout Christian or the citizen of a Christian country, it might be different. But in England Christmas is merely the date on which the bourgeois does penance for his sins. I am not a bourgeois, and therefore I do not feel the need to observe this formal occasion. If I fall momentarily into a bourgeois sin I am as likely as not to expiate it the following day. It is a good thing for people to cultivate a feeling of good will and generosity towards each other, but God help them if they need a national holiday on which to do it. The giving and receiving of presents is one of the sweetest rites in the whole of man's life on this earth, but good people give each other presents all the year round. Christmas in England is the bourgeois saturnalia. The saturnalia was a festival in Rome on which for a week master and slave changed places, thus acknowledging the artificial basis of their relationship. The fête des fous was a similar festival in medieval France. Modern industrial society does not stand on its head in that way even for a week, but at Christmas it does the next best thing. It denies ritually the values on which it is based. The
business man who all the year has been engaged in an effort to
starve out his competitors and employees together with their wives
and children now sends round boxes of cigars and bottles of whisky.
The shop assistant who for three hundred and sixty-three days
has dressed with hopeless decorum and never touched a drop now
wears a paper cap and orders in two or three crates of beer, and
even his wife and his virgin sisters drink port in the belief that it
is English and non-alcoholic wine. Thrift gives place to a display
of generosity. Families divided by pride and divergent interests
re-unite upon a warm hearth. Voices fallen into disuse are now
raised together in comic song. The man who has sternly obeyed
his God's injunction to abhor the arts now listens respectfully to
Handel's 'Messiah', takes his wife and children to the pantomime,
purchases gaudy toys to decorate a Christmas tree and reads aloud
the verses that tumble out of the crackers he pulls and reach him
on greeting cards with every postman's visit. He who has frowned
on kissing now plays postman's knock and hangs in the hall a bunch
of mistletoe. On the second day, even the outcasts, scavengers,
milkmen and errand-boys are acknowledged and poor relations
visited. On the third day, the bourgeois God is once more securely
enthroned. Bourgeois sanity is restored. Thrift, temperance,
graft, malice, exploitation of the helpless and hatred of the senses
load the ship on which contemporary man travels from birth to
what he hopes is death.

This is preparatory to saying that Pat Mallard came again to pose
for me either on the Sunday before or on the Sunday after Christ-
mas, 1939. I cannot remember which of the two Sundays it was,
but only that it occurred during that bleak period at the end of
December when one's friends are normally unavailable because
they have gone away to be present at family reunions. Alfred
Fantl, who also had no place in the life of the English bourgeois,
turned up to supper the same evening. His visit made photography
impossible, for Fantl is not the kind of person to behave well at a
respectable exhibition of the nude. He, Pat and myself went round
to the Flying Dutchman. Margaret, five months gone with child,
would not come. Pat Mallard protested vigorously about the
necessity of staying behind and helping Margaret with supper, but
Margaret made her go with us.
The Flying Dutchman was my local. It stood at the junction
of a little terrace with the main road, and it had been very pleasant
in the first days of the war to sit outside it in the evening sun and
watch the barrage balloons slowly ascending. In winter it was a
rather noisy pub, but not at Christmas, for the only people there at that time were those without families to visit. The landlord was a well-dressed person whom Richard St. Hilda had christened 'the Warthog' because of his facial resemblance to some such beast.

We spoke French. Pat Mallard had spent two years at a convent in Switzerland, and her French was good. Indeed, it was pleasanter to hear her speak French than English, for in French she did not clip her vowels or over-insist on her consonants. Fantl was in high fettle. The ritual of English beer-drinking pleased him at all times, and to-night he was able to drink his beer in French. He related a new and more diverting account of the series of disreputable accidents which had first brought him to England. The black hair on either side of his otherwise bald head stuck up like horns, and his soft brown eyes gleamed with the purest, most tender malice.

Returning to the flat, Pat and I walked with our arms about each other's waists, and in the middle of the street we stopped and nuzzled like horses or pecked each other like amorous birds. Perhaps it was the recalling of her school-days in Switzerland which introduced this new element of freedom into Pat Mallard's behaviour. Perhaps in Lausanne she had walked similarly entwined with a school-friend of her own age and the two had so pecked and nuzzled at each other.

This behaviour evidently upset Fantl, whether because he himself had been running short of women lately or because we made him feel that he was no longer the centre of the picture.

Whatever it was, at the first opportunity he took me on one side and said:

'You want to leave her alone, Alick. She's a half-wit.'

Fantl was rude and sulky at supper and left early.

Pat wanted to call on friends of hers who lived nearby. I walked round with her. We stood facing each other outside their gate. I do not know what goes on in the minds of girls like Pat Mallard, whether they have long brooded on imaginary scenes of love or whether everything comes to them in a flash when they are first stimulated. To-night, Pat behaved like a girl who is used to admiration. When I kissed her, she went limp in my arms as though she had been exacting a similar tribute for years, and this despite her stature which rendered kissing from an erect position a performance that required no little dexterity. Our conversation presently took the turn of discussing future relations in a matter-of-fact way.

I said, very tactfully:

'Pat, are you a virgin?'
Pat said:
'Yes, that's just it. . . .'
Inwardly, I agreed. The whole business was beginning to look like the prelude to a surgical operation.
Pat said:
'There's Margaret, too. I like Margaret, awfully. . . .'
When I left her, it was arranged that Pat Mallard should come to see me at noon on Tuesday.

PROMPTLY AT NOON ON TUESDAY THE BELL RANG, and there was Pat Mallard at the door. She evidently meant business, for she had left her glasses off. I remember, too, that she was wearing Wellington boots, so there must have been snow. She took her Wellingtons off boldly without being invited and moved about the house in the little felt shoes that she wore underneath. I began to feel anxious. I stalled. I talked about the weather. I brought out the last batch of Aloysius' prints and discussed them. I suggested lunch. For the moment, Pat relaxed her grim purpose. She went downstairs to make coffee and a sandwich or two. We lunched. Pat took the plates away and washed them. I played the gramophone. We sat in facing chairs and avoided each other's eyes. At the end of half an hour or so, Pat came and sat at my feet. Her mood was easier now. As she was at this moment, I liked her very much.

I said:
'You'd better go and take your clothes off, anyway.'
I took off my coat, put a spool of film in the camera and fitted up some lighting. Pat returned in Margaret's dressing-gown. I went back to my chair. Pat came and sat once more at my feet. I kissed her. I bent down and untied the cord of Margaret's dressing-gown and exposed the full length of Pat Mallard's body. I pulled the dressing-gown together. Pat turned her head and smiled up at me. We kissed again to hide each other's faces.

That I desired this body is hardly open to question. When I recall now those perfectly formed breasts, that smooth, youthful throat, firm belly and hips and the full splendour of those limbs stretched out before me upon the hearthrug, I can only feel sorry that I did so little about them. I am sorry, and I do not understand it. I caressed those breasts with my hands. My lips pressed upon that throat and upon the open, sighing lips. My hands moved down the eloquent sides and rested upon those thighs which turned
uneasily and barely restrained themselves from quivering. Pat Mallard clung to me with a passion verging on folly. Her sighs were like the breathing of one in terror. Her fingers clutched, fell away and clutched at me again. I made no attempt to fulfil either her desire or my own.

It may be that my true feelings did me credit, though I hesitate to think that anything did me credit at this period. My deepest thought may have been that, once I had given this girl the taste for amorous pleasures, it would be my duty to remain at her disposal until for the time being she wearied, satisfied and at peace with herself, and that this I was in no position to do. It may be so. I should like to think that it was.

I have not calculated the position and aspects of the planet Saturn for that day and hour.

Excited as she was, I made Pat Mallard go into the corner of the room that was lighted and pose for me. I did not keep her there for long, but it was enough to break the violent spell. Pat dressed and went away before Margaret came home from work. Pat Mallard had formed a strong devotion to Margaret at the same time as she had fallen in love with me, but she did not feel able to meet Margaret to-day. She said that she would ring me up on Friday at lunch-time.

WHEN THE TELEPHONE BELL RANG ON FRIDAY, I was finishing a plate of soft herring-foes which I had fried in butter and served up to myself on toast with plenty of lemon and a sprinkling of cayenne pepper.

I went into the kitchen, put my plate in a large enamel bowl and ran cold water over it. I filled the whistling kettle, put the whistle over the spout and lit the gas with a small contraption which connected with the gas supply and emitted a small tongue of flame when I pressed a button in its flank. I then shook about two ounces of coffee into a cream-jug and selected from the plate rack a saucer and my favourite cup, a deep blue one with white rings. The telephone bell stopped ringing as I ignited the second gas-ring and put a saucepan of milk over it.

It started again less than two minutes later and was joined by the whistling kettle. This time it did not go on for long. And I was able to make my coffee, take it upstairs, drink the first cup and light a cigarette before it started for the third time. This time also, it did not go on for long.

I read. I think it was a book by C. F. Ramuz, *Si le Soleil ne*
revenait pas, which Richard St. Hilda had brought me when he came back in a hurry from the Côte d’Azur. If it was not that, it was Jean Giono’s Colline. I then dozed. The telephone bell woke me at twenty minutes to three. This time it rang for at least ten minutes as if the person at the other end had dismissed her (or his) first flurry of disappointment and had determined now to ring confidently, with a long full-throated ring. I let it go on. It being presumed that it was she, Pat Mallard, at the far end of several miles of telephone wire was not a formidable proposition. Fully clothed, wearing her glasses no doubt, her normal daytime self, inept, puzzled, hot and anxious, she had no power to coerce me from a distance. I let the bell ring.

After that steady, ten-minute peal, its morale collapsed. It rang in more and more agitated tones, at ever more erratic intervals. I lay on the divan with my hands clasped behind my head and listened to it, estimating how long it would go on, and in the intervals calculated, with an eye on the clock, how long it would be before it started again.

At four o’clock I made myself tea. At six I went round to the Flying Dutchman. As I closed the door behind me the telephone bell had started ringing again for the fourteenth time in five and a half hours. It rang with the voice of humanity’s endless craving. Brrr-brrr, brrr-brrr. Brrr-brrr, brrr-brrr. I heard it from the street outside. It rang through the empty flat with the voice of humanity’s everlasting frustration. Ping-ping, ping-ping. Ping-ping, ping-ping. Alick Christ went round to the Flying Dutchman and buried his smiles in a pint of Charrington’s bitter.

CHAPTER TEN

A GREAT DEAL OF SNOW FELL, AND THE WEATHER was extremely cold. I stood at the big French windows and watched the garden below me changing. Snow climbed up the boles of the trees and pulled their branches down. It obliterated the division between flower-border, path and lawn. It banked itself up against the walls, first one wall and then, as the wind changed, the other. It turned the small shrubbery at the end of the garden into a dense, septentrional forest, the haunt of red-jawed wolves and sleeping bears.

I became aware of the garden for the first time. Aware of it, that is to say, as a closed space and a separate entity. During the
summer I had sat in it in a deck-chair. I had taken tea and occasionally lunch in it. I had been occasionally enchanted by bursts of blossom and, especially in the autumn twilight, by songs of birds. But these things had taken place, for me, in a generalised foliate region made up of many contingent gardens, in fact of all the gardens lying between the street I lived in and the adjacent terrace in which stood the Flying Dutchman. Now I became aware of the one garden’s separateness. I do not know why. It may be that my thought had lost its power of diffusion and was narrowing down to a purposive narrowness. It may be that Richard St. Hilda’s continued absence allowed me as it were to take possession of what he had left with me.

When there was no more snow to fall, I photographed the garden. I photographed it from the balcony. I went down into it and photographed the detail of bared and now heavily freighted trees. I scattered crumbs outside the window of the dining-room in the basement and lay in wait with my camera on the floor behind the foot of the curtains to photograph birds that came to pick up the crumbs. I thought that when the spring came I would do something with the garden (study in detail the requirements of these four pear-trees, this single walnut, perhaps dig the borders into a different shape and grow something). For the moment I could do nothing but acknowledge its separate existence and photograph it in winter dress.

At the Flying Dutchman I heard many lamenting frozen pipes and many asking the Warthog where on earth they were to find a plumber. Our pipes did not freeze. I ran hot water through them at intervals, and I saw that every room was heated at some time or other whether I needed to use it or not.

I was less successful with myself. I had only one attack of lumbago. I did not really notice it until Margaret had gone to work. Then I found that I could only lie on one side and that when I tried to get up I worked my legs as if on a bicycle without producing any effect from the hips upward. I had to wait until the woman came in to make breakfast and call out to her and get her to come and pull me out of bed. This very soon passed, but I had an ugly chill from top to toe which lasted until the thaw. It may have been this which by association first caused ‘Thea’ to recur to my mind and to linger there.

THIS WAS JANUARY, 1940. THE WAR APPEARED TO be stabilised, if indeed it had not already ended. The only fighting
was in Finland, and that little war pleased everybody. It appeared to be what people thought a war should be, the gallant few resisting an overwhelmingly large enemy who were overpoweringly in the wrong. It pleased us ethically, like the story of David and Goliath. It fitted our school-book view of history, like Salamis and Thermopylae and the Spanish Armada. It was a war in the British tradition with the further advantage that the British did not have to fight it. The newspapers showed groups of sad-looking Russian prisoners and explained that they were illiterate men who did not in the least know what they were fighting for (which is likely enough, for Comrade Stalin could hardly tell them without upsetting the Germans). The news-reels showed us blazing farm-houses, Finns on skis in white cloaks (they did not show us Russians in white cloaks, for it would not do to have both sides looking equally romantic) or Finns taking Turkish baths and then rushing outside and rolling in the snow (the Finns were obviously a clean people like the English and hardy like the Scots). Nothing had happened for years of which we so wholeheartedly approved. The Labour Party, who had for some time hated communists more than they had ever hated Tories, were loudest of all in their denunciations of Comrade Stalin. Athletes and younger sons clamoured to be allowed to go and join in blood-brotherhood with these sport-loving heroes. I heard a smart woman at a sophisticated party declare that she would freely give herself to any Finnish soldier at any time. But this was January, 1940.

I RECEIVED FROM THE INSTITUTE OF MYSTICAL Science a printed card, not black-edged but decorated with oak leaves, announcing that Dr. Leopold Gloss had been translated to another plane and that his physical body would be cremated at Golder’s Green at 11.30 a.m. on January 24th, on the evening of which day there would be a meeting at the Caxton Hall, Vauxhall Bridge Road, Victoria, to which all members and friends of the Institute were cordially invited and at which Professor Dr. Unradt would speak of death, reincarnation and the future of Europe over the urn containing his dead friend’s ashes. The ashes themselves would thenceforward be kept at Mrs. Verity’s flat in Hampstead where they could be visited if due notice were given, until such time as continental traffic were fully restored, when they would be taken first to Vienna and then to Dornach in Switzerland, where they would be scattered to the four winds before the portals of the
Goetheanum at the first international, post-War congress of Rudolf Steiner's surviving pupils and disciples.

This mighty vision pleased me, but I did not attend either the ceremony of cremation or the subsequent thanksgiving. Alfred Fantl went, with Irene. He came round afterwards and reported that 'Thea' had not been there. He described the ceremony at Golder's Green, the bearing of branches of oak and mistletoe by Mrs. Verity, Fraulein von Stubenau, Siegmund Lauffer and Professor Dr. Unradt, the little prayers and a benediction concerning the threefold nature of man and the columns of fire, water and air. Leopold Gloss's eyelids had fluttered once too often. He had gone too long without that effort to give utterance to his message which had from moment to moment brought him so vividly to life. I mourned him, but I did not go to the crematorium.

Fantl was looking very smart. A closely waisted overcoat of fine serge embraced his fragile body. A brown, pork-pie hat with a triangle of kingfisher's feather tucked into the band cast a sophisticated shadow over his soft, clownish brown eyes. He did not tell me how he came to be so rich, and I did not ask.

I did not know that 'Thea' would not be at the crematorium. Indeed, I thought she might be. I do not think that I should have gone had I been certain that she would. Perhaps it was the same feeling which had withheld me from seeing her on a previous occasion, a feeling that when I again saw 'Thea' it must be under marvellous circumstances, that I must not cheaply pursue her as if I were a person with a proposition to make.

THE THAW CAME. THE SNOW TUMBLED FROM THE roof-tops. It slid down from the branches of four pear-trees, a walnut and the others whose names I did not know and eased them and allowed them to return to their former stance. Ice dripped from under the eaves and out of the mortar between the bricks. Over a window in the flat above, a crack opened.

I did not see it for a day or two. While the streets were full of melted snow I did not go out except by taxi. When the last of the slush had run along the gutters into the nearest drain or soaked down into the earth, I went out through the dining-room window and examined the garden. A watering-can and the garden roller had been left out in the snow. They were rusty beyond further usefulness. I looked up at the house. I saw the crack in the
stone ten yards above the balcony windows. The lintel was split diagonally along most of its length.

The virgins who lived in the flat above were away. Richard St. Hilda had never told me the address of his landlady or who was her agent. I did not know Richard's own address at the moment but simply that he was in Bristol. I thought of telephoning all the local agents until I found the right one. I thought of telephoning the district surveyor. I did neither.

IN THE DAYS OF MY GLORY, WHEN I WAS THE JUNIOR partner of Frobishere and Thorpe, Ltd., I had put jobs into the hands of a number of young architects and of painters and sculptors with ideas on interior decoration. It is one of the least dubitable characteristics of human nature that a man will normally come to hate those who have done him favours, especially pecuniary favours. The reason is, I suppose, that in doing a man a favour you have him at a disadvantage and temporarily undermine his pride. Even if he afterwards pays the debt, he feels that you remember this against him and that to the end of his days he will cut a poor figure in your eyes. A few men are proof against this pattern of automatic behaviour. Two or three such, to whom I had at one time given employment for their talents, had refrained from maligning me but on the contrary had developed towards me a certain devotion. They were very young, ardent boys of twenty or so, and they had set me up as a pillar of steadfastness and truth in a reeling world.

Two of these came to see me about this time. Their excuse was that they wished to show me some designs for a theatrical production. Secretly, I fancy, they wanted to know what I thought about the war and what I was proposing to do about it. They came with a third, a friend originally of Richard St. Hilda's, a tall young man, intolerably beautiful in the style of a Babylonian prince. He had now grown a large but threadbare, black beard which ruined his looks. He was a youth of dubious parentage and had been brought up under wealthy patronage in a manner which had robbed him of all independence and all feeling of security. Somebody had recently frightened him with stories of the flora and fauna of the human intestine, and for some time past he had been attempting to save his soul by an expensive course of colonic irrigation.

I did as well as I could. I told the two with talent to take their drawings to the Unit Theatre and show them to William Panting, whom I would ring up in the morning. I told the beautiful one
that war was but an extension of ordinary life and that one acted in it by the same lights. I took all three round to the Flying Dutchman, and there was a great deal of rather precious alcoholic conversation. I do not know whether any of the three went away steadied by my influence. It was strange if they did. With the possible exception of the bearded young man who was not an artist, their disequilibrium was less than mine. They did not know that I was eating my heart out with little fears and, with what is worse, the fear of having fears. They did not know of an incident four months ago which had not yet produced its consequences.

My 'lapse of memory' had been treated with silence, and it was the silence of anticipation, not the discreet silence with which the sound treat invalids and those who are wandering in their minds. Richard St. Hilda's silence may have had a different cause. It may have been his feeling that the story was too brutal, too lacking in ambiguous, delightful overtones to go down well in his conversational style.

I had a dream. In the morning I awoke feeling particularly wretched, but I did not remember a single image from the dream.

I remember only that I was crying out:

'It isn't time yet. I'm not ready to die. I'm not ready....'

After breakfast I found a brick and bits of crumbled mortar lying on the balcony. I went down into the garden and looked up. The crack in the lintel reached from corner to corner. A brick was missing from above the top half. The bottom half was cracking the wood of the window-frame. The virgins upstairs had still not returned. I called in a builder on my own authority, and he fitted some temporary props.

FRANCIS PIAZOLE OF PADUA WAS BORN ON APRIL 3, 1652, at 9.47 p.m., and baptized immediately as he was not expected to live. Nor did he live to be more than three years of age, for on the 7th of March 1655, at about the 20th hour he was drowned in a small quantity of water where chickens were used to drink. It was subsequently observed that at the moment of birth Luna in the radix had the declination of Saturn and the square of Mars, that the ascendant degree had exact parallel declination with Saturn and Luna and that the ascendant and the sign containing Saturn in the 8th house were both of the watery triplicity. When these facts were made known to the father of the child it is said that he shook his fist at the offending planets and with great vehemence invited them to pick on somebody their own size.
RICHARD ST. HILDA JOINED THE NAVY. I FOUND
this very difficult to understand. It is true that sailors fascinated
him, but usually those things which fascinate from a distance are
the last things to which one commits oneself, and Richard St.
Hilda had from the day of his birth developed the most elaborate
defences against ever committing himself to anything. His own
account of the affair was that he foresaw that he could not endure
life in the army, and therefore he joined the navy before the army
could get hold of him, but Richard’s logic had never been of that
simple, energetic variety. However, there it was. Richard St.
Hilda had recruited himself in Bristol and in a few days would
report to the Depot at Chatham.

I met him at Paddington, had lunch with him at Bertorelli’s in
Charlotte St. and helped him across London with his luggage.
Conversation was difficult. Really it was very brave of Richard.
I felt sure that if I said much he would burst into tears, and so
should I.

Presently I had a letter from him.

DEAR ALICK,

H.M.S. Royal Flush.

The above, which sounds like one of Nelson’s frigates or
possibly Blake’s flagship, is really a requisitioned holiday camp
at Noggin-on-Sea. I share a little chalet on the beach with a
young man who spends his evenings writing letters to his wife
by the light of a penny rush. Everything is rather pink.

People really do say, ‘Ay, ay, sir,’ and at an improbable hour
of the morning somebody bangs on the door and calls out,
‘Show a leg,’ or ‘Wakey, wakey, rise and shine.’

Haven’t heard yet when or by what means I’m going to be
made an admiral. I think I’ve just contracted the disease and
that it will take its normal course. I stand easy with the officers.
The class-light gleams in our eyes.

How do I come to be here? Well, the idea of going into
the Navy was suggested to me when I was about thirteen, my
father’s contention being that I should choose an outdoor life.
The present circumstances found me, so to speak, with the
germs of the idea still alive. After some weeks of trying to
puzzle it out for myself, I was brought to a state of mind in
which what I look upon as decision was no longer necessary.

Feeling awfully well. Bless you.

R.
MARGARET CAME HOME FROM HER PSYCHOLOGIST’S one tea-time and announced that she had just fallen off a ’bus at the stop in Baker Street. That was the second time she had fallen in the street and collected a crowd. She was now more than six months gone.

My attitude to the imminent baby was mixed. There were times when I thought that Margaret with a baby would be rather pleasant. There were times when I felt sorry for Margaret because she was going to have a baby and because she was swollen and out of shape and because she looked sometimes so happy and at other times so sad and was obviously thinking about things that only pregnant women think about and because she grew tired easily and suffered continually from heartburn and fell off ’buses. There were times when I hated Margaret for the same reasons, and there were many, many times when I hated the baby. Mostly, I did not think about it at all.

FEBRUARY BROUGHT BLACK WEATHER. ON MONDAY, February 18th, I went in the morning to book seats for a concert at one of the halls in Wigmore Street. On my way back, up the lower part of Baker Street, I called at my photographic dealer’s. It was a misty, fretful day, and the fret was of that curious, shining quality in which, despite the gloom, natural colours stand out with more than common intensity. Paintwork gleamed. Evergreen foliage was of an angry viridian. Upon the pavement, the expectorations of catarrhal business men suggested the presence of turquoise, amber and pea-green opals.

As I came out of my dealer’s and crossed the road, my attention was drawn to a couple arm in arm looking into the window of a cake-shop.

As I passed close to them, the woman, aged about thirty-five, was saying to the man, aged about forty-five:

‘Darling, don’t turn your nose up like that.’

I looked at the man’s nose as I passed and barely restrained myself from open laughter, for if there was a nose in Christendom that could never, under any circumstances whatever, be turned up, that nose was it. It was not one of those arrogant, arched noses with rocking-horse nostrils. Those one could imagine being turned up in a crisis. But this nose resembled
the nose of a sheep in profile, descending in a curve like that of one side of a pear, with no angular salience either at bridge or tip.

In this context, the woman's remark amused me so much that, after walking for twenty yards or so with a broad smile on my face, I had to turn and pretend interest in the contents of another shop-window (a hat-shop) to conceal a fit of giggles and if possible get it under control.

I have always found that the best way to subdue fits of giggles is to concentrate on something very solemn, such as Jesus Christ. The most solemn thing in my life at that moment was 'Thea'. I concentrated on 'Thea'. And I succeeded in conjuring up her features with a clarity that I had not before been able to achieve. 'Thea' was before my eyes, and the odd hysterical mood collapsed.

'Thea' was before my eyes. Or rather, her reflection was. Here, before my eyes, was that heavenly pallor, that soft, pale hair parted so quietly upon the forehead, those quiet infinitely sad features. I have no words left to describe 'Thea' or to describe her effect upon me. I have called one girl 'exquisite' and another 'superb'. I can only call 'Thea' by her name and hope to be understood. 'Thea' was the naked impact of my own life upon me. She was truly to me 'the beauty of the world'. The reflection vanished, and I was left with no more than the picture in my mind's eye. I realised what had happened. 'Thea' had in actuality stood near me, looking into the same shop-window.

I turned. Walking up Baker Street towards the Marylebone Road was that figure of miraculous precision. Stepping forward, one after the other, were those legs in which, above an ankle fine as the fetlock of a deer, the dancer's divided calf-muscle swelled and subsided a little with every step.

Then I clenched my fingers and toes, froze and sweated. I did not look up. With that prevision of fate which afflicts everybody at certain moments, I knew that the instrument of my death was within a second of striking. I knew furthermore from which direction it came, from directly overhead.

Sparrows had loosened a tile from the roof of this building against which I stood. At 10.30 a.m. this tile balanced dangerously upon the gutter's edge. At 10.34 it overbalanced and, corner foremost, descended in a vertical line which terminated above
my right eye at a point corresponding exactly with Richard St. Hilda’s recently incurred scar. This line was as clear in my mind’s eye as the red lines connecting Christ’s wounds to stars and other objects in certain early Italian paintings.

I died instantly and without pain.
IMAGINE IF YOU CAN A WORLD IN WHICH EVERY object is of animal nature. There are rivers, lakes and seas, but these are not the chemical fusion of hydrogen and oxygen in which float particles of every mineral. The land is clothed with trees, flowers and herbs, but these are improperly called 'vegetation'. These rivers, lakes and seas are as fully animal as the fishes and amphibious beasts which live in them. Imagine a diffuse, impalpable and lucid frog-spawn. These trees, flowers and herbs are no more truly vegetable than are birds, insects and arboreal apes and reptiles. The land itself is animal. No veins of coal or mineral ore run through it. It is like yeast. Endless proliferation takes place among the roots of its animal turf, a proliferation not of plant-cells but of ovum and spermatozoon, the budding and extension of a culture of bacilli. Imagine, moreover, that all this is real and yet is not physically discernible to a physical eye.

The effect of a typical landscape in this world is not unlike the effect of certain paintings by the surrealists. That bush will suddenly disclose a staring eye. A cactus growth, which attracts attention by the livid hues in which it is represented, reveals on closer examination features appropriate only to the human form. The vines and liana creepers betray a muscular contraction like that of the painter's intestines.

I stood upon an eminence in the middle of such a landscape. From what I had heard at the Institute of Mystical Science and from my reading of Rudolf Steiner, I recognised it as the spiritual realm of Luna, in which man had lived before he attained his present degree of physical incarnation and inhabited the earth. I leaned against a spur of rock which was truly not rock but the excrescence of a substance resembling horn.

To the ordinary human imagination, it must appear that such a landscape was 'horrible' and 'eerie'. I did not find it so, presumably because I was there by right, by necessity and in a state consonant with its nature. In point of fact, I felt extraordinary happy.

I stooped to trail my fingers in a lucid, animal pool. I was content
as I had not been since as a boy I first sought companionship with woods, grassy banks and streams.

But this spiritual realm of Luna is not the abiding-place of the recently dead. I must presently go away. The restless will awakened within me, and as it did so I became aware of the pain in my head. It grew worse.

I leaned my head against the rock of horn. I stood erect and looked about me. I reeled. The landscape faded slowly from my vision.

A period supervened in which I was almost bereft of consciousness, but not totally. It was as if, translated down from plane to plane of existence, I became momentarily alive to each and was able to form rudimentary nascent impressions. I was chiefly aware of the sensation of movement, a peculiar form of movement. The brief, rushing wind which follows in the wake of a heavy vehicle or drags at the periphery of a circle of shell-blast seemed to travel towards a diminishing centre, and I was drawn with it, not impetuously but with a trance-like slowness in which I was nevertheless aware of jolts, shudders and cross-currents perceptible to the ear-drums and the heart and the root of the stomach.

BEFORE ME ROSE THE PORTALS OF A LARGE BUILDING of brick and white Portland stone. It was the Middlesex Hospital.

I thought:

'This is evidently my spiritual home. I visited this building as a pauper one year ago. My wife will presently take up her residence here in order to be delivered of our offspring. Already she comes to the building each month for pre-natal care (perhaps she is here at this very moment). And now it is the first place which I posthumously revisit.'

A brief panic shook me.

I thought:

'Hell is repetition, and I am drawn again into the orbit of my private history. I am in Hell...'

In the hall, I accosted a young woman in a white overall, possibly one of the almoner's staff.

I said:

'Excuse me. I am looking for my wife. I fancy she's in the pre-natal department. Could you find out for me? Frobisher's the name. Mrs. Alick Frobisher...'

116
The young woman hurried past. Either she did not see me, or she found my appearance distasteful.

I accosted another young woman, a nurse.

I said:

‘Excuse me. I believe they’re operating on me somewhere in the building, but I’m afraid I don’t know where the operating theatre is. . . .’

The nurse also hurried past.

I walked upstairs past seven or eight landings. At the very top of the building I saw a door open and a nurse walk out, go into another room and return with a tray of surgical instruments. I followed her into the operating theatre and stood for a moment leaning against the door. I was breathing heavily after my long climb.

It was a most impressive picture. In the middle lay my chloroformed body upon a table. It was shut off from my physical vision by a group of doctors in white, with masks over their noses and mouths and semi-transparent gloves of red rubber. On the far side of me stood a row of students similarly attired, and behind the doctors, also wearing masks and gloves and with their backs towards me, were the sterile nurses. Nearest to me were the dirty nurses. I recognised the second dirty. She was the nurse who had been so charming to me during my treatment for a non-existent renal stone. I tried to speak to her, but she turned and put a finger to her lips. I ignored her injunction and addressed the group.

I said:

‘Look here, all of you. I don’t like to interfere in matters relating to the medical profession for which I have such a high regard, but you’re wasting your time. Can’t you see that the patient is dead? After all, I am in a position to know. . . .’

Nobody paid the slightest attention to what I said. I pushed past the first and second dirties and the sterile nurses and watched one of the doctors extract a long sliver of slate from my forehead, while another swabbed the wound, took the foreign body from his colleague and passed it, together with the swab, to a sterile nurse who in turn passed them on to my little friend, the second dirty. My detachment was extraordinary. For the first time, I observed the expulsion of blood without feeling in the least nauseated or faint. As the group of doctors broke up and the senior sterile nurse took a length of cat-gut to stitch my forehead, I walked out on to the landing and set my foot upon the top stairs.
NOW I STOOD IN A SHADOWY REALM IN THE REMOTER distances of which I was aware of figures both stationary and in movement, though even the stationary figures presented an appearance of movement, for about them drifted a swirl of mist which at times hid them completely from my view and at other times disclosed a part of them, greatly magnified or diminished according to the play of light. I saw a white horseman and other personalities from the apocalypse. I saw lovers coldly and unhappily entwined. I saw huge, solitary figures sitting with their shoulders hunched and their knees hunched up before them and the image of cold horror upon their faces. As I looked upon them, each in turn receded to an infinite distance, as figures sometimes do in a dream or a half-dream and left me at the centre of a loneliness so intense that I turned both sick and dizzy with it and could have cried aloud.

I was alone. And then I was not alone. I was in the presence of a tall, impressive figure whom I recognised immediately. There was no door or gate to be seen, for there was no wall into which a gate or a door might have been let. At most there might have been an illusion of shadowy curtains, a little like some stage setting by Gordon Craig. Yet one knew immediately that this lofty, spectral figure guarded as it were a door. It was not merely that his presence, like a commissionaire’s, was full of majesty, nor was it that he bore any facial resemblance to St. Peter in a painting. Rather was it that one received the direct spiritual apprehension of his function. He was beyond a shadow of doubt that personage whom Mrs. Verity had described as the Guardian of the Threshold.

His function was to prevent the spirit from passing prematurely from one plane or spiritual realm to another. I could not remember which particular realms or planes they were. I rather fancied that at the moment I was in my etheric body, in which case the Guardian of the Threshold would be there to prevent me from passing from the etheric to the astral plane, but I could not be sure.

I was a little worried about this. In a short while I should obviously have to enter into conversation with the Guardian of the Threshold, and I had always found on earth that, however kindly their disposition may be, august personages do not care to have the young address them in a vague state of mind, especially if their guidance is being sought.

Luckily I did not have to open conversation at once. The Guardian of the Threshold was at the moment listening to a thin, ill-looking man with a red beard, dressed in the fashion of the late
'twenties. I walked away to a distance, sat down and tried to collect my thoughts about death and in particular about my own death.

I thought:
'My God, what a predicament death is. This is really final. This is the one scrape out of which nobody can talk his way. No amount of bluff will help a man now. It is too late to clutch at straws or to hope for the last-minute happy inspiration, the timely assistance of an old friend."

The mood changed. I was overcome by a blissful sensation not unlike that which on earth accompanies a deep feeling of gratitude.

I thought:
'Here is peace. Here is an end to all strife, division and anxiety. No longer have I anything to fear. The worst that can befall me has already befallen, and I am still happy. Responsibility and care...

I checked myself. This was not true. I still nourished the seeds of anxiety in my heart. Already I had begun to worry again.

I thought:
'Oh, the unreality of death. I am unchanged.'

But I must concentrate. After death, one lingered for a certain period of time in the vicinity of the physical body. In the next phase, one relived one's earthly life in reverse order. I wondered if I were going to be one of those awful, earth-bound spirits. At the Institute of Mystical Science in Natterjack Place, they used to tell heart-raising stories of what happened to people whose attachment to material things had affected even their etheric nature, so that they continued to haunt (according to the nature of their attachment) homes, brothels, hoarded possessions or public houses. I hoped that none of my vices had eaten so far into me as all that and that there was going to be no initial difficulty about disengaging my etheric body.

I turned my head and perceived that the Guardian of the Threshold was gazing in my direction with a certain stern benignity in which there was nothing forbidding. He had finished with the red-bearded, thin man, who appeared to be stamping away in a fury.

This individual came up to me. His eyes burned with martyrdom, and it seemed to me that he was eaten away inside by some painful malady which interfered with his breathing. Two spots of crimson had appeared upon the cheek-bones of his white face like rouge clumsily applied.

As he spoke, he pressed both hands into his stomach.
This splendid imagery is distasteful to me."

He said:

"Serve the poor. Well and good. But whom are the poor going to serve? John of Patmos answered it. The poor are going to serve themselves and attend to their own self-glorification."

He spat, and there was a thread of blood in the spittle. He strode off. I went up to the Threshold and cleared my throat. The Guardian of the Threshold gazed compassionately after the man's retreating figure.

"An interesting case," he said. "He has been here for thirteen years and nothing that I can say humbles him. A generous, sensitive spirit, but on earth he was one of those who hate falsehood more than they love truth, and his pride is illimitable."

Then he turned to me and smiled.

"I am not sure that you ought to be here," he said. "But I think the general feeling was that you stood in danger of paralysing your will by too much concern with the past."

"I did try to lose my memory," said I.

"That will not do, either," said the Guardian of the Threshold. "Had you succeeded in losing your memory, you would have spent the rest of your life attempting to recapture it. To lose the memory is merely to lose a certain form of connection with the past. It does not destroy the past. A man suffering from amnesia is not a man without a past. You tried, in this as in all else, to destroy not the past but the future. Once you were a man without a past. It was life-times ago. You were a child in the dawn of the world. In striving to recapture the dewy wildness of that time you were striving to destroy all that you have since become. No, your task is to face the future as you are. Your knowledge of the past is precious. You must accept it with gratitude and turn elsewhere. You must neither use the past as a means to shield you from the future, with all its uncertainty. Nor must you strive to destroy the past in order that you may face the future without a burden, formless and impressionable as a column of water."

"Yes, I think I see that. I have been allowing the death-wish to predominate."

"The death-wish. That is a phrase just now current on earth, I believe. It is a misleading phrase. It implies that death is peace, freedom from responsibility."

"Is there no peace, anywhere?"

"There is peace to be found in death, and there is freedom from responsibility. But death alone does not provide them."
‘There is peace also on earth,’ I said.
‘Yes, sometimes in the midst of battle. Sometimes, too, upon
the bed of sickness. Your lack of boldness in life was complicated
by an abnormal apprehension of physical pain. You had suffered
very little, I understand.’
‘Very little,’ I said. ‘I had a virgin’s apprehension of physical
pain. I had kissed him. I knew his form and intention, but I had
never lain with him. I frequently prayed to be relieved of this
virginity.’
‘There is no release from the fear of pain,’ said the Guardian
of the Threshold. ‘Be glad of it. Rejoice that in your lethargy
there is one thing that will never fail to bring you to your feet,
stinging you to life with terror. Physical pain is very kind to the
spirit of man...’

I was about to speak of ‘Thea’. The Guardian of the Threshold
forestalled me.

He said:
‘You received on earth a glimpse into the life before you last
died. A secret of the periodicity of the soul was revealed to you.
It was a privilege granted to few men. Accept it, and be grateful.
‘Thea’ belongs to the past.’
‘But she is alive to-day,’ I cried. ‘Was it not reasonable to wish
to approach more closely to her? Surely, the past and the future
are not separate. In knowing her, perhaps in loving her, could I not
have worked out more carefully my future destiny, and she too?’

The Guardian of the Threshold was silent. An enigmatic smile played upon his lips. The omniscient lustre of those eyes
did not appal me. In the presence of this being, I was fortified.
Even in my perplexity, I felt happy.

I began to wish that I had not died. I wondered. I did not
know how long I had been away, but perhaps on earth they had
not yet buried my physical body. I remembered that dreams of
apparently interminable length take place within a few seconds
of earth-time. Perhaps on earth my body still lay anaesthetised
upon the operating table, and not even the doctors knew that I
were dead. Perhaps it was not yet too late. I wondered how best
to put this matter to the Guardian of the Threshold. Indeed, I
wondered whether to raise it at all. It would be a terrible thing
if I were sent back to earth to find a body already in the throes
of putrefaction.

I said:
‘I have a wife who very soon will bear a child.’
The Guardian of the Threshold raised his celestial eyebrows.
'So,' he said, 'you are not long in regretting the earth.'
'Supposing,' I began, 'that I . . .'
Again the Guardian of the Threshold forestalled me.
He said:
'That does not rest with me. . . .'
I left him discouraged. I attempted once more to concentrate upon immediate necessities. As I did so, I became once more aware of the pain in my head.

A doctrine taught at the Institute of Mystical Science was that after death the soul sought out and attempted to communicate with that person who had been its friend on earth. I did not know whom I could regard as my friend. It might be Richard St. Hilda, but I did not feel that I wanted to see Richard just at the moment. It might be Gertrude Mallinson, but she was too full of riotous life to suit my present mood. One person who occurred to my mind was a man I had not seen or even thought of for a year and a half. It was an old labourer called Sykes. He was responsible for the one truly happy image that I retained from my period of actual work with Sam Thorpe.

At an estate on which we were building in North London, a swarm of bees had settled on a lamp-post. Neither the foreman nor I had the least idea what to do with them. Eventually, a labourer remembered that Old Sykes was a countryman. Old Sykes was fetched. He picked up an empty cement bag and with a whitewash brush brushed the bees into it. The others supposed that the swarm would fetch a tidy price, but old Sykes said that, no, you couldn't sell bees for brass. He would take them to his pub in the evening and find out who wanted a swarm. He would let the man have them for nothing, but he would of course expect to be treated to a considerable number of drinks.

That was the only time I had been in close contact with Old Sykes, but I remembered him with a quite disproportionate warmth. I had made enquiries about him from the foreman and learned that he was a widower living with a widowed daughter and a roomful of canaries and budgerigars. That was all. Why he now recurred to my mind as my possible life's friend, I do not know, unless it was that I had a great need of simplicity.

Thinking thus of the doctrine of the friend, I became aware of the earth and could see it as it were from a great height (I associate my sensation with that of the Blessed Damozel looking out from the gold bar of Heaven). I saw its green fields and the red smudges

122
of its towns, and it was spinning. Its pathos overwhelmed me, and at once the swirling mists closed over the view and I was back in a shadowy realm.

The accusers awaited me. I was aware of them gathering behind my back. I did not turn for a while. I was afraid. Beads of sweat gathered upon my top lip, and my scalp tingled. I turned, expecting to see a hostile, gesticulating crowd with stones or weapons in their hands. Instead, I saw a few, quiet figures, perfectly still or moving very slightly. They were not very close to me, and they were very humble. I knew that I could expect no action from them. They waited with infinite patience for me to accuse myself.

I will not specify here who these accusers were, nor what passed between us. But it was immediately after I had faced them that it dawned on my slow mind what the Guardian of the Threshold’s last words had meant.

‘That does not rest with me. . . .’

I had fancied that he meant that whether I was allowed to return to life or not depended upon a higher authority still. Now I understood. He meant that it depended upon myself. With a cry like that of one emerging from an anaesthetic, I lost consciousness and sped towards my body.

I LAY IN BED. MY WIFE WAS STANDING BESIDE ME. It was damp downstairs. I slept on the divan in the drawing-room. Margaret slept in one of Richard St. Hilda’s twin beds in the next room, at the front of the house. She had come into the drawing-room to ask me if I were all right.

She stooped to smooth my hair and then stood up, leaning her thighs against the side of the divan, her belly resting on the deep red counterpane like a huge, sacred egg on a cushion of quilted satin.

Over this belly, and indeed elsewhere too, clung a thin, rather worn night-dress of pale green silk. It was an object very familiar to me and one of which I was rather fond. How often I had seen it swish and crackle with the electricity from her warm, vital body as Margaret pulled it up over her head in the morning. It was a very old night-dress. Margaret had worn it when we were very poor, and she had had it first when we were very rich. Now it clave to her belly as though it were drawn inward by the life of the child insolently sitting there or perhaps already standing on its head. This belly fascinated me. I was especially taken with the tiny navel
two-thirds of the way up, stretched until it was as small as the navel of a brazilian orange or the point of Gertrude Mallinson’s elbow.

I asked Margaret politely if she would pull the night-dress up about her waist, so that I could press my cheek against the smooth, tepid flesh of the great belly. There was palpable life within. My wife shivered and placed both her hands upon my head. A little later, she bent down as well as she could to kiss me. Her mouth was dry and hot, breathing a breath which came from deeper sources than I was accustomed to.

I WAS AT POLPERRO IN CORNWALL. I STAYED AT A low-beamed guest-house with a stream rushing outside my window and plunging into a tunnel beneath the house’s foundations. The big room was dull of copper jugs, Flemish brass dishes and harness ornaments, coiled rope, witch-balls of crude, stringed glass, ships in bottles and galleons with leathery parchment sails. In the dim lamplight, one or two quiet people crossed this room. They were people who had left their homes in London because these were now haunted for them by the fear of what might one day fall from the sky.

Outside, there was still the long twilight of late February. I walked towards the harbour, bearing left.

Never had I seen a place so female, so closely shut in as this inhabited cleft between two plump hills, opening out at the front into a harbour over which one felt that hands were crossed in modesty. As a place to inhabit in the ordinary way, it was horrible.

I bore left along the crease between the right buttock and thigh, a little above the level at which this mighty, inverted limb plunges into the water.

There were two cottages standing one above the other on the steep hill-side. I climbed up the narrow stone steps past one of them and to the base of the second. A man of perhaps fifty was stooping over a winter hyacinth close by the fence. I saw by his cap that he was not English. His cap was panelled and bore a large, cloth-covered button at the point upon which all the panels converged.

I said:

‘Are you Kokoschka?’

The man had already got up from his contemplation and smiled at me.

‘Yes . . .’
I said:
'I have a letter to you from Marie-Louise von Motesiezky.'
'From whom?'
I repeated the name. Kokoschka took my letter and opened it.
'Ah,' he said. 'From Florizel.'

And a little later:
'Ah, you are the man whose little poem we read. Come in, please. How is Florizel? She was down here with us.'

Kokoschka went in first.

He called out:
'Mom, here is a friend of Florizel. Come, please.'

To me, he said:
'I am sorry, but I did not remember Florizel's patronym.'

Mom was a tall, powerful girl with a fine, brutal face, black hair, heavy black eyebrows and a dark, rather coarse skin. Her voice was deep but not very assured. It came from the back of her throat, generous but a little unsteady. Her English was better than Kokoschka's.

During the conversation, my eyes strayed continually to an easel set up by the window. I had seen none of Kokoschka's paintings. I had seen only a set of Goyesque drawings, in which the terrors of the refugee soul were personified. My eyes were now painfully drawn to the picture half-finished upon the easel, for it was the only picture in sight, but for a number of water-colours laid carelessly upon the mantelpiece and almost completely hidden by a cigarette box. In the picture upon the easel, my eyes met for the first time that strange pallet from which no colour is excluded but out of which the liverish dazzle of pink and turquoise attack first and turn the soul dizzy, faint with disequilibrium.

**AS A YOUNG MAN BEFORE THE LAST WAR, KOKOSCHKA lived in Vienna and devoted most of his time and energy to the theatre. He worked in close collaboration with another young Czech whose name I cannot remember but whom I will call Palanek. Palanek had a great deal of red hair and was a small man, very nervous and unstable.**

One night, he and Kokoschka were drinking together on the terrace of a small café. When they had paid their bill and were in the street, Kokoschka suddenly fell to the ground. He tried to rise to his feet, but he could not. Each time, some inexplicable force dragged him to one side and tumbled him
over upon the moonlit cobbles. Neither of them had drunk very much.

Palanek thought that his friend was pretending to be drunk and became annoyed at what appeared to him to be a childish display and refused to help the two passers-by who in the end carried Kokoschka to a chair in front of another café. When Kokoschka presently recovered and did his utmost to explain the incident, Palanek would not listen but quarrelled with him and went off in a rage. That was the end of their collaboration.

To Kokoschka, the incident was inexplicable. Without apparent reason, his sense of balance had suddenly been disturbed and the force of gravity had acted upon him in a manner without precedent. The incident and the sensations accompanying it were not repeated, but Kokoschka the artist made use of them. At the time, he was engaged upon a picture of a girl looking out from a balcony over a wide valley. This picture had offered problems in perspective which after many trials had begun to seem insoluble. Now they were solved. That inexplicable tumble in the street, that moment at which natural laws had appeared to be miraculously suspended, had solved them. Out of his memory of the incident, Kokoschka evolved, for this and for succeeding pictures, a new form of perspective.

During the last war, Kokoschka served with the Austrian cavalry. In a retreat, his detachment had to swim their horses across a river under heavy shell-fire. There were few survivors. Kokoschka himself received a piece of shrapnel in his skull. One ear-drum was destroyed. It is well-known that the ear-drum controls balance, and when Kokoschka was allowed out of bed he at once tumbled to the hospital floor under influences identical with those which before he had experienced as it were hysterically.

When a man’s ear-drum is destroyed, it normally takes some months to re-educate him in walking straight and with confidence. By reason of his predicted studies in perspective, Kokoschka’s sense of balance was restored perfectly within a fortnight.

Kokoschka told me this and other stories at Polperro in Cornwall on the occasion of our first meeting, and I remember how quickly the thought came to my mind, with mingled panic and delight:

‘Here then is my life’s friend.’

‘... SHE WAS FAIR, PALE AND OF MODERATE height,’ I said. ‘I do not know whether to call her beautiful or pretty. Her face was not haughty as some think a woman’s face
must be to be called beautiful. On the other hand, neither did it display the piquant irregularities, the hint of improvisation characteristic of the pretty woman. It was a gentle face, perfectly composed and a little sad. In the same way her figure and carriage were perfect. Their perfection would unhesitatingly engage the eye. Yet they had nothing about them of that animal pride by which desirable women are commonly recognised. I have said that she was of moderate height. There are legends in Ireland and elsewhere that Christ, alone among mankind, was exactly six feet tall, neither a hair's breadth more nor less. If there is a height which correspondingly represents perfection in womankind, she was of that height, neither a hair's breadth more nor less. She left Vienna in June, 1938, after the German occupation. She was a dancer but had not danced lately. She had stayed in England previously, to study dancing under Nicholas Legat. Her English was very good.'

Kokoschka meditated.

‘She was a little of the sixteenth century, perhaps? A little the Lady of Pollaiuolo?’

‘Yes, I suppose so.’

‘A little too sweet, perhaps?’

‘Ah, no.’

‘Moment,’ said Kokoschka.

He went to the kitchen door and called:

‘Mom. Come, please.’

To me he said:

‘Moment. You shall see.’

Mom entered, lofty, black and powerful. A woman with the strength of ten virgins, submitting her life to the whims of this man’s genius.

‘Mom,’ said Kokoschka, ‘have we the picture I made of Jo and Robert, please?’

Mom demanded further details. These were provided first in German and then in the dialect. Mom went upstairs. Kokoschka fussed about the room we were in, hands fluttering with excitement among his folios. Mom returned with a canvas of medium size. Kokoschka took it from her and set it upon the easel, from which Mom removed the half-finished picture.

‘There, you see,’ said Kokoschka. ‘Their mother was a Dutch woman, but she married and bore these children in Vienna. You see that Robert is like yourself.’

In all Kokoschka’s portraits, the background contains figures,
landscape and symbolical images. Kokoschka will never do a portrait of anybody whom he dislikes or to whom he is indifferent. In the case of strangers to whom he may have taken a fancy, he will ask for photographs of their parents and of themselves and will not begin work until he feels that he understands their history. Childhood scenes and faces of parents are likely to appear in the finished portrait.

In the double portrait now confronting me, the arrangement of the two faces was conventional, the brother’s head set a little higher upon the canvas and in greater depth, protective but leaving to his sister the frontal light. Jo and Robert. They were undoubtedly ‘Thea’ and the young man with whom I had seen her leave the little hall at the top of a building in Natterjack Place. As Kokoschka said, Robert in the portrait bore a marked resemblance to myself, though he too was pale and very fair. The background contained the representation of a large house and bushes of lilac. At the top of broad steps stood a figure who may have been ‘Thea’s’ mother or grandmother in her youth. I did not have time to observe any more, for at that moment Kokoschka had to go and sit down in a fit of giddiness. Mom went to fetch him a glass of water. I stood anxiously by in case I were needed to chafe his hands or perform some other service.

A little later, I said:
‘Then you know this girl.’
Mom said:
‘Her parents were friends of Kokoschka’s.’
She said:
‘Jo and Robert are very lucky. They got their visas and sailed a fortnight ago. They will go to Paraguay.’

I SAT IN THE DINING-CAR OF THE CORNISH RIVIERA. The old head waiter in his brown uniform, gold-rimmed pince-nez, white hair and white, yellow-edged moustache, was engaged at the far end with a group of celebrities. I do not remember who they were. They may have been Jessie Matthews and Sonnie Hale. Or perhaps they were Lady Astor and her friends. There is always a group of celebrities on the Cornish Riviera, and if there is not the old head waiter will tell you stories of celebrities dating back to Lawrence of Arabia. Whoever these particular celebrities may have been they were at the moment the only occupants of the dining-car beside the old head waiter and myself.
It was four o'clock. I had sat here since noon, watching the pink fields of Devonshire, the creeks and estuaries, the woods, hills and streams of Somerset and Hampshire go by. Just now a narrow, disused and overgrown eighteenth-century canal ran alongside the permanent way, but failed to keep up with the train. Five minutes ago, among its reeds and between two hanging willows, I had seen a tall, grey heron standing upon one leg and apparently fast asleep in the failing light. I had treated myself to the only 1929 claret I could find on the diminishing war-time list. I had lingered over a series of coffee-cups and two little glasses of cointreau tasting and smelling of fennel seeds steeped in weak hydrochloric acid. I had dozed and day-dreamed until it was half-past three and the old waiter had asked me if I would care for tea. Now I had tea. I do not like the taste of tea, but am very fond of the sound of spoons rattling against china and the hour of the day at which tea is made and the lucid, fragrant steam rising in the first twilight, more especially when these delights are offered in the dining-car of the Cornish Riviera, than which no pleasanter train runs or has run unless it were the Dunkirk-Bâle Express.

THE TELEPHONE BELL WOKE ME. WHERE THE HEAVY, dark-blue curtains were parted, I saw that a pale sun shone and that the sky was cloudless. I had not moved the telephone to my bedside last night, so to answer it I had to get up. It was Alfred Fantl. He sounded very woeful and said that he could not speak about it over the telephone but would like to come and see me. I thought that perhaps he was cleaned out of money or that the police had been round again to threaten him with internment. I said he was to come immediately. Fantl told me over the telephone that Edgar Voysey, driving his ambulance in France and the Rhineland, had received both the Croix de Guerre and the military medal and that he was now on his way home to America. In the letter-box was a letter from Richard St. Hilda, now in Chatham, which suggested that I might care to sue the hat-shop in Baker Street for pain and anguish. I had just finished breakfast and was sitting in sandals and dressing-gown drinking a last cup of tepid coffee over a gas-fire in the dining-room downstairs when Fantl arrived. He was not in need of money, nor had the police been worrying him. Nor had he ferreted out for me the news about 'Thea'. His trouble was the Czech Legion. Fantl had never been in Czecho-Slovakia, and he could not speak a word of Czech. Moreover, he considered
that the Czechs were a bunch of savages. But he carried a Czecho-
Slovak passport, and the Czech Legion were after him. He had 
therefore reached the painful conclusion that the only way to avoid 
being conscripted among a bunch of savages and half-wits was to 
join the British Army, and the previous day he had visited a re-
cruiting office and volunteered for the Auxiliary Military Pioneer 
Corps, into which he would presently be called. I suggested that 
he could have returned to France and joined the French army, but 
he pointed out to me that French soldiers received only fifty cen-
times a day and that in any case he now regarded himself as an 
Englishman.

Poor Fantl. He was the last man on earth to be a soldier. In 
the last war, he had been for several months a second lieutenant 
in the Austro-Hungarian Imperial Army, but his service had con-
sisted chiefly in consolation of the wives of his superior officers 
and those more perilously engaged in Russia, Rumania or the 
Italian alps. Fantl was very small and frail. I could have lifted 
him under the arms and carried him about as easily as a doll and 
had indeed so carried him to the door on one occasion when he was 
troublesome at a party. I could not see him wielding pick and shovel 
side by side with tough but superannuated reservists and regulars 
with ingrowing toe-nails, Bombay livers and huge, tattooed arms.

I dressed, and we walked out into the garden. This was mani-
festly the first day of spring. In the little shrubbery at the end of 
the garden a flowering almond whose existence I had not suspected 
was already in bloom. I cut out a single branch and set it in a large 
Nanking blue jar on the drawing-room floor so that a pattern of 
thin black stems traced itself upon the wall, holding there a number 
of small, pink rosettes.

CHAPTER TWELVE

AT THE FLYING DUTCHMAN, THEY WANTED TO 
know what I had done to my eye. I told them I had been kicked 
by a horse.

I said:

‘Oh, I’ve been down to the country for a bit. Had a row with 
a horse, you know.’

I said:

‘Been riding in Cornwall. Had a bit of trouble with the farmer’s 
favourite mare.’
I said:

'Oh that. Horse took a dislike to me, you know.'

This increased my credit at the Flying Dutchman. Formerly, they had regarded me as the sort of fellow who is scared of horses.

Not that the Flying Dutchman was a horsey pub. It was a mixed pub. Song-writers, film-men, journalists, music-hall comics and the proprietors of garages were equally welcome. But they did like a man to be active in some way. There was no prudery. Irregularities of every sort were permitted and indeed encouraged, but it was felt that even these could be pursued with a proper heartiness. Virility was encouraged but not de rigueur. Cleanliness, affluence and a good school met with general but not universal approval. Feelings of patriotism had no need to conceal themselves, but they were optional. All in all, the Flying Dutchman was the pleasantest pub in the neighbourhood, and the Warthog had a great many friends. He gave credit, made loans and cashed cheques liberally but judiciously, keeping his eye on the till. He was an extremely well-dressed man, and a ludicrous physique had by no means undermined his self-assurance. He strutted about on short legs, kept his chest jutting a hair's breadth in front of his stomach, and with that great, porcine nose discovered truffles rooting in the air. He wore a red carnation in his carefully pressed lapel. Many young women and others old enough to know better brought their troubles to him and were advised, sometimes generously.

THE WOUND ABOVE MY EYE HAD NOW REACHED THE stage at which it was protected by a mere piece of boracic lint and two parallel strips of pink sticking-plaster. The stitches were out. I was allowed to change the dressing myself. As the last suppurations dried, I was able to observe that the hardening scar ran slantwise, like a piece of white string just beneath the skin, in a line which slightly raised but otherwise simply extended that of the eyebrow itself. I was not at all displeased with the general effect. It had, however, one disconcerting feature. My facial expression was modified, and it was so modified as to bring out resemblances between myself and Richard St. Hilda which in his case the scar had merely accentuated but which in my case were wholly ab origine. I had developed, as it were, a glazed and supercilious eye.

As March developed, the occasional pains in my head vanished and I removed plaster and lint. The scar lost its remaining traces of inflammation. I was changed, but once more complete.
the damp, black soil of the garden thrust up the leaves and flowering stems of tulip and daffodil. The almond tree shed its petals and produced leaf.

A barrage balloon took its ease in the street outside. Eight or ten houses had been requisitioned and demolished at the corner of the street. We expected at least a battery of guns. Now the shadows of war had been reduced to the jovial, silver presence of a balloon and a group of aged men in Air Force uniform who marked out a court on the surface of the road and played shuttlecock.

MARGARET AND RICHARD HAD BOTH KEPT IN TOUCH with Effie. Richard had several times driven down to the cottage in Kent and had stayed there for a while before going to Bristol. Margaret had written once or twice and had visited Effie in a London nursing-home when she had come up for one of her periodical operations.

The news of Frances Abell was that she had gone to Bristol a little before Richard himself, the reason being that Eric wished to register as a conscientious objector and that the Bristol tribunals were said to be the most lenient. It was also rumoured that Harbutt Abell had taken up definitely with a student from his art school and that he and Frances were separated and contemplating divorce.

I was moderately interested in these reports. I had been fond of Effie in the days before Richard St. Hilda had stolen her from me and begun as it were to stage-manage her, and at this distance it was possible to feel pity for Frances Abell. I wondered whether Caroline’s dresses had been let down to cover a little more of those golden limbs. But I did not wish to see any of these people and when towards the end of March the bell rang and I answered the door to find Effie herself on my doorstep, I was unprepared. I warmed to her at once.

She floated in on a cloud of perfume, dressed in a lemon coat and wearing a hat of black, varnished straw not in the least reminiscent either of hay-making or of a garden with hollihocks.

‘Alick dear,’ she said. ‘Your eye.’

I stalled about that. I kissed Effie, took her coat and suggested tea.

Effie was not alone. Elizabeth and Tom were with her. Elizabeth was Effie’s talented daughter. Tom had recently married Elizabeth. I discovered that I was glad to see them too.

Tom was new to me. I had heard of him. When Margaret
went to see Effie in the nursing-home, Effie had told Margaret rather proudly that Elizabeth was living in sin with a young man called Tom, a plant biologist. Effie had obviously encouraged the affair, but I do not think it can be inferred from this that she was a dirty old thing. On the contrary, she wished her daughter to behave properly within the framework of current tradition, and in the circles in which she moved Elizabeth’s virginity really had become a problem, if it were not indeed a definite social liability. I took a fancy to Tom. Like other young scientists, he had developed that slightly pompous scepticism which is in reality the height of superstition, but he was diffident and receptive at heart, and his pale, serious lankiness was by no means devoid of charm. I imagine that he had made up his mind from the start to marry Elizabeth and that he endured the illicit preliminaries out of pure good humour.

Elizabeth herself had improved out of all recognition. When I first knew her, she had worn jade, puce or mustard-coloured stockings and at parties was liable to dance solo in the middle of the room. She had been easily prevailed upon to read narrative poems in which as a child she hid behind curtains in Edwardian drawing-rooms, and at night she heard strange rappings and dreamed dreams of painfully obvious significance, which she would recount at the breakfast table. In fact, she had been a girl in whom virginity was a palpable mistake. The changing of her condition cannot have been easy, and it was very much to Tom’s credit that he had seen how very much worth his pains the operation would be.

Tom and Elizabeth had come to live with Tom’s mother in my neighbourhood. This was at the moment necessary on financial grounds. The professor under whom Tom did his research had promised to put him very shortly on a national plant breeding station. Effie had put on her best town clothes and come to visit them.

Effie talked about these things and about the danger in which Elizabeth’s equally talented brother stood of being called up into the army, about her financial worries and her reluctant attempts to sell or let both cottages in Kent, about her garden (the frost this year had killed her mulberry tree), about local characters, favourite tramps and the behaviour of her ghosts. Then she reverted to my eye.

‘Alick dear,’ she said once more. ‘Your eye.’

I thought Effie deserved a version all to herself. Besides, she had heard the horse one when it was first used as Richard’s alibi, and knew in any case that I did not ride.
I said:

‘It was Richard. The fact that I had marked him for life preyed on both of us. It was all right when we were sober, but after a drink or two I would begin to stare at Richard’s scar, or he would begin to finger it, so that conversation became impossible. In the end, I came to the conclusion that Richard had to do the same to me as I had done to him.’

Effie said:

‘Yes, I think I understand that, Alick dear.’

Elizabeth said:

‘Don’t be such an awful liar, Alick.’

Effie said:

‘But this is so like Alick, Elizabeth dear.’

Tom smiled quietly to himself.

I said:

‘It wasn’t easy to make Richard hit me, as you can imagine. Whatever else you can say about him, he’s terribly good-tempered. I had to get him really drunk one night and then taunt him. He . . .’

Elizabeth said:

‘What did you taunt him with, Alick?’

Effie said:

‘No. This is serious, Elizabeth dear. I can imagine it all so well.’

Tom was obviously on my side.

I said:

‘Eventually . . .’

But at that moment Margaret came in from her psychologist’s. Tom had to be introduced. Effie, Elizabeth and Margaret had to do one of those long, girlish reunions. I hurried downstairs to put the kettle on. I remember how Margaret looked that afternoon, a high colour in her cheeks and carrying the child superbly, her eyes laughing.

JILL WAS AN ORDINARY CAT. SHE WAS A NICE, friendly creature, but unremarkable. Friends who had given up their house asked us if we knew anyone who would take her, and the prolonged absence of Tit and Nit had permitted a colony of mice to establish itself in the basement. So Jill arrived by carrier’s van one afternoon in a wicker cage. She was black and rather small. I lighted the gas-fire in the dining-room, put a saucer of
milk beside it and locked Jill in. An hour later, I went down to see how things were going and found that Jill had drunk the milk and was washing herself, one paw behind her ear. Her initial tendency to pace restlessly to and fro had gone completely and when I fondled her she purred. I allowed her to come upstairs. She sat on the arm of my chair and presently fell asleep.

I mention Jill because she added to the prevailing atmosphere of fertility. She made friends with the black-and-white tom next door and before she had been with us a fortnight had swollen visibly. She became a baggy little cat and ran about the house with a bellyful of kittens swaying from side to side beneath her.

The daffodils bloomed. Margaret filled the house with them. The pear-trees had borne leaf and threatened to do more. New shoots thrust out from the old rose-wood, which I belatedly pruned. Another pink-flowering shrub was out, whose name I did not know.

ON TUESDAY, APRIL 9TH, THE WAR ASCENDED TO NEW heights of unreality. German vessels were sighted in Oslo Fjord, but the shore batteries were ordered not to fire. A single battalion of German troops marched through the streets of Oslo and settled down in the bandstands, where they unpacked their instruments and played before a population which had been told nothing. On the same day, Denmark was occupied without fuss. A naval battle ensued in which British vessels inflicted great losses upon the German navy in Oslo Fjord. Parts of the Norwegian army retired to the hills, where they were presently joined by French, British and Poles. The British force had been assembled in the first place to assist the romantic Finns.

MARGARET WAS STANDING AT THE DOOR WITH HER hand on the light switch.

She said:

'Are you awake, darling?'

I turned over.

'Yes. At least, I think so.'

Margaret said:

'Shall I put the light on, darling?'

'Yes, do.'

Margaret was dressed.
She said:
'I've been having pains every three-quarters of an hour or so.
Do you think I ought to go now?'

It was three o'clock in the morning. This was the first I had been
told. It was now April 13th. Margaret had as usual been to work
at her psychologist's all day yesterday. We had spent a quiet
evening, reading, drinking coffee, playing the gramophone, listening
to the news and sewing. I had been round to the Flying Dutchman.
I put on a dressing-gown and went downstairs to fill the kettle.
I made tea.
Margaret said:
'They're supposed to get worse and closer together.'
'I don't know, I'm sure,' I said.
Margaret said:
'It's not a good time of night for getting a taxi, is it?'

In the end, we both went back to bed. Margaret woke me again
at six.
She said:
'They're getting closer together now.'
I rang up two or three taxi-ranks, but there was nobody there.
Margaret had her little attaché case packed. We drank some more tea.
I said:
'Can you walk a little way till we pick up a taxi?'
'Of course, darling. I'm perfectly all right.'

It was a fresh, clear morning. A taxi passed us in the main road.
I stopped it. We had to go round by the out-patients'. I was
kept waiting for about half an hour. I went upstairs. Margaret
was lying under a blanket in a tiny anteroom. She was the least
bit pale.
I said:
'How are you feeling?'
'Fine, darling.'
I said:
'Good luck, sweet.'
I felt a bit sheepish. I could not think what the correct behaviour
or even the appropriate feelings were. I kissed Margaret.
'I expect they'll start by shaving you,' I said.
'Darling,' said Margaret. 'They've shaved me already. Kiss
me again, darling.'
The nurse went out.
Margaret said:
'Darling, do you love me?'
'Yes,' I said. 'At least, I think so.'

The nurse returned and sent me away.

I said:

'Shall I be able to see her?'

'Perhaps,' said the nurse. 'Ring up this afternoon at four o'clock.'

'Darling,' I said. 'Try and get them to remember the exact time.'

I returned to the flat. It was only a little after seven. The woman would not be in to make my breakfast for another two hours. I rooted in a cupboard under the stairs and found the spade. I began to dig. The daffodils were still in bloom, but I dug round them. The Michaelmas daisies were putting out shoots below the top soil, but I chopped them ruthlessly back to keep room for my own sowing. The sun was hot by breakfast-time. After breakfast, I went on digging. A former friend of Richard St. Hilda's called for something he had left behind. I talked to him in the garden. Presently he went away. I turned over the borders along both sides of the garden and broadened them by two feet. I dug until half-past one. At half-past one I had lost so much by perspiration that a visit to the Flying Dutchman became imperative.

After two pints, my hands had almost ceased shaking, and my power of speech was restored. I informed the Warthog that my child was now on its way, and then I began to eat Scotch eggs and some of the Danish blue cheese which he had laid away before the invasion, and to sip the third pint not with violent physiological need but with enjoyment.

My attention was drawn to two people who were playing the pin-table. At this hour, they were the only people in the saloon bar. They were a girl well under twenty and a man of about forty. Their manner of playing attracted me. They played with reverence. A pin-table is not by nature a highly responsive instrument, especially if it be such a highly mechanised affair of ringing bells and flashing lights as the pin-table which stood in the saloon bar at the Flying Dutchman. But these two played it with sweetness. They were rapt. And indeed, now that I came to observe them, they were a remarkable pair. The man was a thick-set, blond fellow with a broken nose. The girl was, I felt certain, very young indeed. Her figure was fairly well developed, and there was considerable assurance in her manner, yet I felt that she was too young to be allowed by law in a public-house, that she was probably no more than fifteen. I tried to make out her relationship to the man. He
might have been her father, but if he were then they had but newly discovered each other after a long separation. As they were rapt in playing the pin-table, they were also wrapt in each other. The two were in love, and their love was silent and fulfilled so that it was able to go out and be extended to inanimate things and to betray itself in their movements at a pin-table, playing it amorously. The girl was a mere child, and yet the man of forty treated her with deference. The man had lived hard and was brutalised and already in many ways old and weak and vulnerable, and yet the girl laughed with him as though he were the embodiment of ardent youth.

I thought:
‘The man’s face is familiar.’

But I dismissed the thought. People to whom one is strongly attracted appear in a few moments to have been long known.

I listened to the names by which the two called each other.

‘Joey. . . .’

‘Ginny. . . .’


‘Excuse me,’ I said. ‘You don’t happen to be Mr. Passiful, the wrestler . . .?’

I had broken the spell. The happy lover at the pin-table became a man deficient in cunning, a man lacking in self-confidence, a hurt man, caught frolicking in public-houses with a little girl. He was confused. His face sweated. His manner was servile, defiant, cornered. I could have hated myself for blundering upon this idyll. I must restore it. I was not sure that I had enough tact or delicacy, that I had what Gertrude Mallinson herself called ‘the polite soul.’

I said:
‘I’m terribly sorry for interrupting your game, but I thought I remembered seeing you with Gertrude Mallinson.’

‘Yes, that’s right. . . .’

Joe Passiful’s voice was ugly, rattling in his throat.

‘Ginny stood undecided, ready to hate me for Joe’s sake and to fight me with more than Joe’s cunning if need be.

I said:
‘Gertrude Mallinson’s a great woman. . . .’
It was not enough that I admired Gertrude Mallinson. Many admired and hated her out of envy.

I tried another approach.

'Look,' I said. 'I've only known Gertrude Mallinson for two or three years, but I owe her a lot. I met her in Brussels. I spent a lot of time with her just before the war broke out. . . .'

'Ginny asked me:

'What's your name?'

'Alick,' I said. 'Alick Frobisher.'

'I don't remember hearing Mummy speak of you.'

The more I tried to put it across that I was all right, the more I felt like a confidence man, a sponger in public-houses, a man trying to sell something. I don't know what it was that finally broke the ice. I think 'Ginny had enough of her mother's instinct to see that it mattered to me to make myself known. She accepted me first, and Joey accepted me because she did. He was obviously used to taking his cues from 'Ginny as he would have taken them from her mother, trusting their woman's instinct, knowing that they were more reliable than himself in matters which required guile.

I bought drinks. We played the pin-table together. I took down Gertrude Mallinson's present address. The acceptance, now that it had come, was full and complete. I joined in their rapture. I was not the third who make a crowd. There was no exclusion and no constraint. I told the two of them about the child that was coming, and at once it concerned them as deeply as it concerned me.

At closing time, they came round to the flat. We took some bottles in. I hunted round for food. There were pies and sweets that I had not expected.

'That's how it is,' said Joey.

'He means,' said 'Ginny, 'about your wife leaving pastries for you.'

'Yes, that's right,' said Joey. 'It was the last thing she thought of.'

His battered, stupid features were full of light. He rolled his head and sighed. His thick hands, wrapped like a lump of dough about the lager glass I had brought him for his beer, were inhabited by an angel.

'Ginny touched my hands and said:

'Don't worry, Alick. It's natural. It isn't like illness pain.'

The wiser her mood, the more like a mere, dumpy schoolgirl she looked.
I thought:
‘How greatly she is her mother’s child.’

We were all three drinking down lumps in our throats, but the beer we had brought in did not last very long. We began to sober up. Jill walked in. She trotted restlessly from corner to corner, the bag of kittens swaying beneath her. Her look was very purposeful.

‘She’s going to have them to-day or to-morrow,’ said ’Ginny. ‘Let’s make a place for her.’

We tore up newspapers and put them on top of some old flannel in a box and put the box in the cupboard under the stairs, where it was dark. ’Ginny soothed Jill and took her to the box. Jill stayed in the box, purring continuously, perfectly still. ’Ginny put a saucer of milk beside the box. Jill did not touch it. We three parts closed the cupboard door and left Jill inside, purring like a Rolls engine with the throttle down.

It was four o’clock. I rang up the hospital. ’Ginny and Joe Passiflul sat holding their breath. I got through to a nurse in the maternity wards.

The nurse said:
‘Your wife is in labour.’

Slowly, the hair rose up from my scalp.
‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Yes. Thank you.’

The nurse said:
‘Ring again at six.’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Very well. Yes. Thank you. Thank you.’

I put the telephone down. My lips obeyed the injunction to stop quivering. Out of a dry mouth I told Virginia Mallinson and the solemn Joey that there was still nothing.

The door-bell rang. It was Tom and Elizabeth. I told them Margaret was in hospital. ’Ginny and Elizabeth made tea. I felt embarrassed by my company. Tom and Elizabeth were fine young people. They could have made friends with ’Ginny and Joe. But it would have needed an effort on my part. I should have needed to draw them together. I was not just now capable of making the effort. The company of four had to sit there in two camps, wondering about each other. I was the only one in possession of all the information. Only I could give each side the clue it needed. I had not the strength to do it. I began to wish that my guests would go away, and this made me unhappy, because they were all lovely people and to want to be rid of them seemed wicked. I wanted to be left alone, and I felt guilty about it.
At six, nobody had gone. They were all four making difficult conversation. I could have made it easy for them, but I did not. They were trying to meet in a labyrinth. I did not help. I wanted to be left alone.

I went downstairs. The telephone had an extension downstairs. I closed the door of the little downstairs room and tried to empty my heart of confusion. I dialled the number of the hospital.

The nurse said:
‘Is that Mr. Frobisher?’
‘Yes. . . ?’
‘The child is a little girl.’
‘Yes, yes. But my wife?’
‘Your wife is quite well. She is tired.’
‘When can I see her?’
‘Any time between eight and nine.’

Then I sobbed audibly, and tears forced their way into the corners of my eyes. I walked in the garden. I could not think about it all yet. I must first get myself under control, and then I must send my guests away.

I went upstairs.

‘Look,’ I said, ‘I have to ring up the hospital again at six, and I’m feeling rather edgy. . . .’

All four went, and there was no offence. I had Gertrude Mallinson’s address. I said I would make contact over the week-end.

Elizabeth was the least intelligent.

She said:
‘Alick, will you ring us up as soon as you know?’

But Elizabeth felt herself more personally involved than the others. She had made sure during the week that she too was in the family way.

In the evening, I saw Fantl. He was in Bertorelli’s with a girl who looked ill and had one eye larger than the other. He was reporting to a military depot to-morrow. Each of us was too full of himself to communicate much. Fantl wanted to know if he could come round to the hospital with me right away. I told him no. He said he would send in some flowers to-morrow morning, before he went to report. It was miserable, meeting like this and being able to say so little and that in the presence of the girl.

At the hospital, they had put the child in bed with Margaret for me to see. The light was dim, but I could see that Margaret had
put some make-up on her face for me and that her weariness was a happy one. It had not been an easy birth. Margaret was torn a little and had to have stitches put in. They had given her a chloroform mask to hold to her face when the pain grew too bad, and she had gripped the plump, red arm of a nurse for a long while. Margaret herself had kept her eyes on the clock, and when the child first cried it was ten minutes past five.

The child was sleeping. I had been led to suppose that new-born children had malformed heads and features for a day or two, especially after a rather difficult birth. This one had a shapely head, and its features were perfectly formed. The head was covered with fine, red-gold hair. The features already suggested a likeness to myself.

I looked at the child. I looked at Margaret.

Margaret said:

‘Do you like it, darling? It’s rather under weight.’

I looked at the child again. I looked at Margaret. I kissed her. I fled. I did not propose to weep all over the hospital.

When I returned to the flat, Jill was still purring in the cupboard under the stairs. Margaret had beaten her by a quarter of a day. Jill bore her kittens during the night, three black-and-white ones of various marking and one that was all black.

VISITING TIME ON SUNDAY WAS FROM THREE TO FOUR. I called at Gertrude Mallinson’s in the morning, stayed for lunch, went to the hospital and returned to Gertrude Mallinson’s. The new address was off the top end of Tottenham Court Road, one room and a kitchenette over the premises of a razor-blade manufacturer in a small way, who luckily did not work on Sundays. There was running water in the kitchenette, but the rest of the sanitary arrangements were perishing of rust in a cellar where the small manufacturing plant was installed. The flat bore few imprints of Gertrude Mallinson’s personality, and she herself was not at home in it. It was a waiting-room into which she had settled until the train came. The bulk of her furniture and stage properties were in storage. With the few things that were here, she had created a disorder impenetrable to all but the most lucid intelligence. Yet the effect was in no way depressing. Gertrude Mallinson did not need a home or even a background, though none was better able to create both. She was her own stability, her own roof, light and
sanitation. If she did not choose to extend herself into a suitable environment, one did not feel the lack.

Gertrude Mallinson said:
‘I am fallow land.’

And it was enough. Gertrude Mallinson was doing nothing, discovering nothing and drinking nothing. Her appearance proved it. She looked almost commonplace, waiting for the spirit to stir, waiting for the crop to be sown in her.

‘But,’ she said, ‘Joey has come back to me.’
I told Gertrude Mallinson that I had visited other worlds.
She said:
‘I’m sorry, lad.’
I was surprised to hear her say that.
I asked:
‘Why do you say that?’
She looked surprised that I should ask.
‘You don’t want that sort of thing,’ she said. ‘You’re not ready for it, Alick. Are you?’

That was all that was said about other worlds or about any hidden thing. The day was spent in finding a name for my child. At the hospital in the afternoon, I showed Margaret five post-cards that we had covered on both sides with possible names. I wrote them out with my surname following, to see how they looked. After tea we filled three more post-cards, and at eleven o’clock I had still not made up my mind. The calendar did not help. April 13th is the feast of St. Hermenegild. An Italian version of that name, ‘Ermenegilda,’ is given to the heroine of Baron Corvo’s book ‘The Desire and Pursuit of the Whole,’ but I thought it rather cumbersome followed by a surname itself so heavy as ‘Frobisher’. As soon as I got back to the flat in St. John’s Wood and was alone, I decided on ‘Judith’, which did not appear on any of the eight post-cards. I sat up till dawn doing Judy Frobisher’s horoscope. One day I would take the chart to Gertrude Mallinson for her reading. For the present, I made out what I could without help.

The Sun stood in Aries, conjoined with Jupiter upon the cusp of the eighth house and in a fortunate sextile with the Moon. The child ought in physical appearance to favour both her parents, for, like Margaret, she had Virgo rising, but rising with it was Neptune, my planet. Danger came from Mercury in opposition with Neptune and with the ascendant degree and from the square of these to the Moon, hinting at nervous maladies or inflammatory weakness of the lungs. Mars also stood in Gemini at the zenith.
I TOOK DAFFODILS IN TO THE HOSPITAL. I TOOK
daffodils to Gertrude Mallinson (not to decorate her room, for it
was a room that would have resisted decoration, but because I
could think of no other thing to take). I took tulips to the hospital.
I bought a dwarf broom in a pot and took that in too.

The shoots of the roses increased and I trained them against
walls. The pear-trees would be in full blow when Margaret came
out of hospital. I bought seeds of hardy-annual flowers, candytuft
and larkspur, sweet alyssum and mallow, love-in-a-mist, corn-
flower and night-scented stock, mignonette and Collins’s toadflax,
scarlet flax, Shirley poppy, Californian poppy and gypsophila. I
showed the packets to Margaret in hospital and then went back to
St. John’s Wood to rake the soil and sow them.

Jill and her kittens were installed in the dining-room. Three
that were marked like three different maps in black and white fed
lustily. The kitten that was entirely black like its mother was
pushed to one side at feeding-time and did not grow so fast as the
others, but became the most venturesome of the four. I lived my
life to the accompaniment of Jill’s purring.

Against her doctor’s advice but with encouragement from all
the nurses, Margaret fed Judith out of her breast. When I visited
the hospital I did not again see the child and her mother together.
To see the child, I was taken to the door of the common nursery
from which the children were fetched to their mothers only at
feeding-time. On my fourth visit, I found Margaret in tears. Judy
had a cold, had been as it were born with a cold. I hurried home to
examine the position of Saturn in my child’s horoscope, but I found
nothing to the point, and the cold presently dried up.

The crumbling lintel of the flat above met my eyes several times
as I laboured in the garden, but I felt no fear of it even when the
wood of the window-frame itself split and one of the temporary
props staggered out of the vertical.

Margaret was in a ward containing four other recently delivered
women. One of them was a Jewess, and one day a crowd of the
faithful assembled by her bedside to see a robed and bearded Rabbi
exercise circumcision upon the fruit of her womb. This woman
talked in her sleep about Germany and the need for keeping Germans
away from the hospital until she and the little Jewish man-child
were safely out of it.
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I TOOK A TAXI DOWN AND HAD IT WAIT. A LITTLE nurse who had made friends and told Margaret her secrets carried Judith in the lift and across the wide hall and put her into Margaret’s arms in the taxi.

This was my first sight of Judith at close quarters and in full light. Truly, she bore an astonishing likeness to myself.

I thought:

‘Who is she? What is her history? The likeness to myself will pass. A likeness to Margaret will develop and pass. For some time to come, this child will seem to belong to Margaret, to be a part of her. But she is not. She is herself. A child’s body may be the creation of her parents, but no child yet ever inherited a soul.’

I thought:

‘I must bear it in mind if I am one day tempted to assume a right and to make demands upon this Judy Frobishier. It may be that parents have a duty towards their child, but a child has none towards them. A child is born free, and this means free of parenthood.’

Margaret was looking very beautiful. It was as if the delivery had consumed her with its intolerable pain and dissolved away whatever traces of strain or harshness the years of our life together had formed in her.

I did not at once dare to hold Judith in my arms. When I did my fear of dropping her was so great, my feelings of tenderness so grotesquely out of proportion, that anything else remained hidden. Later, I discovered that to hold my daughter in my arms excited me sexually. I do not know whether this is a common experience, for it is not the kind of fact which even to-day is openly discussed. I did compare notes with two recent fathers and elicited from them a similar confession.

Life was reshaped. Every three hours, Margaret unfastened her dress and drew the child’s mouth to the neighbourhood of her breast. Anything else became subsidiary.

At first, Judith did not gain sufficient weight. At this period, the virgin sisters who had long lived noiselessly above ventured into neighbourly prominence, their withered hearts no doubt blossoming helplessly at the sound of a child’s cry. One of them had been a nurse. She said that Margaret was not leaving her child long enough at the breast. Margaret’s psychologist, who turned
up one morning with a pair of scales, confirmed this. They had been wrong at the hospital. There a feed was measured by the clock, but it appeared that children have their own tempo.

A more disturbing feature was that the navel did not heal. Each morning, as Margaret unstitched the web band about Judith's belly, the navel lay open and bled a little.

Margaret's psychologist, himself childless, was most helpful. He appointed himself family physician. I found one comment of his particularly to the point. He said one day that Judith was crying because she felt chaotic. This comment illuminated for me the nature of a child's misery (and I dare say of adult misery, too). I had myself not been capable of imagining causes other than hunger or wind. In consequence, when Judith cried, I felt now that I knew in what tone of voice I must speak to soothe her.

ON MAY 10TH, GERMAN TROOPS INVADED THE LOW countries. German aeroplanes bombed Rotterdam and killed, it was said, a hundred thousand people. A quarter of the Dutch army was also said to have been killed. British and French troops invaded Belgium, but had to be evacuated by sea when the Belgian army cracked. I cannot now recall what impression these events made upon me. I think it must have been slight, though I remember very clearly many of the details that were reported.

My head was full of cotyledons. Wherever I had sown seed, pairs of what I took to be tiny leaves appeared, but Elizabeth's Tom said that they were cotyledons. In damp weather or after watering them, I pored over these tiny vegetable forms, thinning them out and sometimes transplanting trowelfuls of them, until my head contained nothing else. When I closed my eyes, I saw a banner of cotyledons pricked out against a background of black soil.

Animal, human and vegetable growth surrounded me. Even the mineral kingdom exposed itself to my gaze and came to life, for the virgins upstairs had the builder in at last and the stricken lintel was replaced behind a scaffolding. The very stone healed.

Aloysius Smith, who came to photograph Judith but was more interested in Jill's kittens, reported seeing Pat Mallard in a public-house in Soho, with two young men in tow. According to Aloysius, Pat had completely changed. Her clothes, her hair, her lipstick, were fashionable. She gave off glamour and sophistication.

Under an assumed but anagrammatical name, the virgins in the flat above published a book about the adventures of a governess in
a family of lawless sons. Some of their press-cuttings were pushed through my letter-box by mistake.

Judith became very beautiful. Pseudo-smiles, the effect of wind, gave place to smiles proper and then to laughter. Judith kicked her legs all day, chuckled and formed bubbles upon her lips. Yet the likeness to myself persisted. I would look at Judith Frobishier, and it was as if I were looking at myself through the wrong end of a telescope. At times, this threw me into a panic so that I would rush out of the house and round the corner to the Flying Dutchman to pour mild liquor upon the flames.

ON JUNE 15TH I REGISTERED FOR MILITARY SERVICE. Faced with the necessity of stating my profession, I hesitated. What was I? I thought to put 'gentleman', but decided that I did not look the part. 'Bankrupt'? Accurate, but liable to cause prejudice. By what had I kept myself alive for the greater part of my adult life? By faith. Faith and appeal to motherly instinct in the middle-aged. Should I not then write 'gigolo'? Evidently I had no profession. Something entirely outrageous would be best. I might try 'ponce's clerk'. In the end, I was guided by vanity. I put 'author'. I was therefore classified by the cipher '2MM'. Two days after I had registered, Marshall Pétain assumed control of the French government and asked for an armistice. Mr. Churchill, our new Prime Minister, made the gesture of offering to the already defeated French a solemn bond of union with ourselves. For me the bottom had dropped out of the war. France was the only country of which I could ever at any time have conceived myself to be a citizen. When France collapsed, the world had ended. The outside world, that is to say. Throughout May, June and July, my inner world was firm and secure, and its people lived together in a state of natural bliss as though I had already fought and won and lost my war.

IT WAS A VILLAGE HALL OF WOOD AND CORRUGATED iron. Half a dozen young men—all twenty-eight or twenty-nine years old—were already there, sitting on wooden chairs in front of the porch.

One said:
'They're full up.'

But I went inside the porch and pushed open a wooden door
painted plum-colour. A clerk in his shirt-sleeves looked up at me with anguish, half a dozen further young men (on a form in front of him) with dubious grins.

I said:

‘I’m sorry, but I want to ask somebody about something.’

The clerk said:

‘Listen, I want my lunch sometime to-day.’

I went out.

A clerk who was unoccupied had heard me from behind a screen.

He came out.

He said:

‘What is it?’

I said:

‘I have glasses for reading, and I’ve forgotten them. Does it matter?’

The clerk said:

‘I don’t know.’

I said:

‘Well, I thought if it did . . .’

The clerk said:

‘It’s too late to do anything about it now, isn’t it? I should mention the matter to the eye doctor when you go in. He’s the first you come to.’

I went outside and sat on a chair. The other young men were establishing fraternity. I couldn’t be bothered. Others came. One was a good-looking A.R.P. warden with a club foot. A doctor appeared in his car, from the interior of which he brought out a packet of sandwiches. He waved to us as he went in. My bladder was aching. I wondered how long I should have to wait and whether I ought to empty it and trust to it partly filling up again before I went in.

A clerk came out and said:

‘Three married men, please.’

Three who were nearer to the door beat me to it.

Another clerk came out and said:

‘All single men, please.’

Those who looked married all went in. I remarked on this to a man near me. He didn’t see the joke.

Presently we all went in. The place was divided up by asbestos screens. The clerk in the first compartment gave us forms to fill up for our marriage and child allowances. A fat young man with wavy hair and a moustache, who looked like a butcher
and had been the centre of fun and fraternity outside, couldn't understand the form. We all peered over each other's forms to some extent.

A second clerk checked up our particulars and sent us into little cubicles to undress to our coats and trousers. In the next cubicle to me was a Roumanian. He said he came from Cernauti in Bukovina, occupied a few days ago by Soviet troops. The A.R.P. warden was running about stubbing the foot of his short leg against screens and pieces of wood. The urine doctor fetched us to a room at the far end and gave us jam-pots and lager glasses.

Half-way through, I said:

'I'm afraid this isn't going to hold it.'

The urine doctor handed me a pail that I could switch over to.

The young butcher was looking sheepish.

He said:

'I can't go yet, sir.'

The doctor said:

'Go outside and turn the tap on. That might help you.'

The eye doctor wasn't interested in my reading glasses. He only wanted to know how far I could see. I read three lines of letters, and that satisfied him.

He looked at my form and said:

'You're an author, eh?'

I said I was.

'You'll be able to write a book about this,' said the eye doctor. 'There's plenty of material.'

I was passed on to the weight, measurements and distinguishing marks doctor. It was the urine doctor, but now he had finished with urine. He discovered the scar over my right eye, and told a clerk to put down 'small scar over right eye.' This I did resent. It was only noted down in case I became a deserter. I felt a mild claustrophobia.

The joints doctor, who was the chairman of the board, was the first to require total nudity. While I was lying down on a camp bed, the shameful parts doctor came up to him.

'You see, he's quite hairy,' said the joints doctor. 'He can't be a hermaphrodite.'

'He says it does come out occasionally,' said the shameful parts doctor. 'And his voice is normal.'

They giggled.

'Well,' said the shameful parts doctor, 'I've always noticed that the larger the man the smaller the penis.'
It was the Roumanian they were talking about. He was plump, bald-headed and gentle, and at a first glance he had no shameful parts at all. There was a normal mat of hair, but only a small valve nesting in it. The joints doctor probed my stomach and made me stand on one leg.

He also looked at my form and said:
‘Author, yes? What sort of books do you write?’
I invented a number of books.
‘You’ll be able to write about this,’ he said.
‘It’s been done,’ said I.
‘By whom?’
‘Lawrence.’
‘Whom?’
‘D. H. Lawrence. A long chapter called “The Nightmare” in Kangaroo.’
‘I don’t read D. H. Lawrence, but my son does,’ said the joints doctor. ‘Is it good?’
‘A bit overdone,’ I said. ‘He thought it the final insult to human dignity.’
‘Yes,’ said the joints doctor. ‘He was always a bit—er . . .’
‘Touchy?’ I suggested.
‘Yes,’ said the joints doctor. ‘Wasn’t he?’
I said:
‘He was, rather.’
I passed on to the shameful parts doctor. I had to turn my head to one side to cough. That made it seem curiously polite. I touched my toes, and the shameful parts doctor coughed in his turn.
‘All right,’ he said.
The chairman gave each man a last general inspection and filled up his card. I sat in a little cubicle to wait my turn. I was able to inspect the Roumanian a little more closely and to watch other people going round. At any given moment there were only two or perhaps three men completely naked. This fact allowed them to retain a certain individuality. However cursorily studied, they were not just so much meat. It pleased me to see the toughest men unable to stand on one leg, much less to go up on their toes on one leg. Also, I seemed to be one of the only two men who didn’t have ugly little paunches. One man’s paunch stuck out like a small, bracketed ledge and turned him into a marsupial.

The chairman who had also been the joints doctor asked how much exercise I took and whether I felt well in myself.
He filled up my card and said:
‘What did you say the title of your last book was? I must get it.’

He took down the title I invented for him and gave me my card. I was marked Grade One. This pleased me. I dressed and went round to the military officer, who was sitting in a little box quite apart from all the doctors and clerks. He was quite different in temperament, too. The doctors were tall, gentle creatures of a rather fluttering, ineffectual charm. The military officer was squat and bald, a horrid little man in a bow tie. He asked me whether I had ever belonged to the territorials, what languages I spoke besides French, and whether I had any hobbies—‘apart from your writing, of course.’

I went off to the tube station and took a train back to Kilburn Park. I was very pleased indeed to be Grade One and made the same joke to everybody I met during the evening—namely, that I was a perfect specimen of British manhood and that they were sending me in for a beauty competition next week. This is the only kind of joke that is understood in St. John’s Wood. At the Flying Dutchman, the Warthog was limping round with a stick and groaning. This public-house is the meeting-place of the Local Defence Volunteers, and the Warthog had been drilling last night at a barracks, under a sergeant of the Guards who made his men stamp hard. The Warthog had clicked his heels together so smartly that he burst a blood vessel in his ankle. He had been to hospital and was told that he would need a small operation in the groin. The sad thing was that nobody believed him. As soon as his back was turned, the young Irish barman said the Warthog was supposed to be on guard to-night and didn’t like the thought.