A Dragon World

DIGBY
DURRANT

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He said, ' "I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be" . . .'

She said, 'Oh.'

'You think quoting is a party trick. Easy to learn but embarrassing and anti-social. Right?'

'Near enough.'

'Poets are supposed to put our thoughts into words better than we can. We're going to a dull dinner party with nice, third rate people and quite right too, since I'm third rate too, come to that – though I've reason to believe my niceness has been in dispute before now. The quote was just a bit of bracing philosophy to keep us going.'

'I suppose so.'

First rate, third rate, fifth rate. You can move from one to another as easily as a football team moves from the First Division to the Third; only much, much faster. The same team but the luck turns sour. A crested eagle today, a fallen sparrow tomorrow. No wonder we all read horoscopes.

Never mind those old warriors, the Colonel's Lady and Mrs. O'Grady. But mind the frightening sameness of us all. All of us with hearts, kidneys, livers; the same need for air, food, compassion. So it's as well to believe the hairs of our head are numbered and we pass by on the other side at our own soul's peril. Perhaps re-write the Commandments in the Light Of All That's Happened Since.

Find judgements harder. Not necessarily less severe.
Hesitate to call people lightweight, of no account.
Seek out the joke for God's sake.
Pity the upward path of the reformed rake.
Never say 'Morally'.

1

Every evening when Sydney Close came home he went to the bathroom, washed his hands, combed his hair with water, cleaned his nails with an orange stick and polished the lenses and tortoise-shell sides of his spectacles with the silk handkerchief he habitually wore bunched up in his top pocket. When he was dining out, as he was on this particular Tuesday, he had a bath as well. On these nights his wife, Margaret, got the two children a little earlier into the hands of the swarthy *au pair* girl, and rushed into the bathroom to get herself ready before her husband got back. This allowed her to read undisturbed for half an hour or so. It was a great pleasure to her, stealing these solitary half hours and she needed all she could get to keep pace with the reviews she cut out – it was her habit to read them for the second time after she'd read the book in question.

Sydney came into the drawing room and stood with the light from the window shining directly on to his new polished glasses. His skin was as pink as a shrimp though his hair was several shades darker after its dunking.

'Hallo,' he said slowly. Margaret, who was lying on the sofa, smiled and rested her book in her lap.

'Have some sherry,' he went on, 'or do you think Maddox will only have gin or whisky?'

'We'll have to drink sherry. It's all there is. If you're worried about it clashing with the Maddox gin or whisky you'd better not have any.'

'Or have the sherry now and refuse their gin or whisky?'

'That would be harder. Anyhow, of course they have sherry in the house as well.'

'Never mind – we'll have to go in a moment anyway.'

Margaret returned to her book. It was Jung's *Reflections, Memories, and Dreams*. She was reading one of those passages when Jung declares the need for the simple life in a mountainous series of parenthetical and complicated sentences about rocks, streams, and trees. This not only demanded her close attention but underlined the absurdity of Sydney's preoccupation about which drink to have. Soon she closed the book and looked at him as he sat there.

He worked for a firm of publishers called Stantons. His ability lay mostly in a great capacity for detail. If he hadn't been to Eton and Oxford he might have made one of those very exceptional station masters who not only know, but apparently like, the exact time of trains and their connections. Sydney's latent ambitions, though, lay in completely the opposite direction to his role of 'the only man who understands figures in the place'. He hankered to be 'creative'. He wanted to be more closely involved with authors and their books, to be more like the man he was to dine with that night. Maddox's flair lay in picking the winners; encouraging, soothing, needling the authors to provide the steady stream of publishable and profitable words that came through Stantons' brass-lipped letter box. Maddox believed in having a lot of material to choose from because this put the firm in a better bargaining position by avoiding the penalties of being too dependent on too few authors. Somehow this point of view was offensive to Sydney who thought this was *his* kind of thought and that Maddox displayed an inappropriate coarseness, a lack of sensitivity, in placing so exact a financial value on manuscripts.

Sydney noticed Margaret had put down her book but he made no comment, knowing she got a little snappy when asked for an opinion. She preferred, when the book was properly digested, to volunteer one.

'Good day?' she asked with a hint of mockery.

'So-so. How's Bertha?'

'Better today. Last night's visit to the Gaumont with Simone seems to have done the trick – at least temporarily.'

'Good . . . I think I'll have a sherry after all. We needn't leave for another five minutes or so.'

'I'll go and see if Peregrine is in bed.'

. . .

A mile and a half away Sara Maddox was arranging her hair to fall smoothly into a page-boy crop from a clearly defined centre parting. As she did so she was faced by her widely spaced cheek bones and the way they shaped the bottom of her face, from the eyes downwards, into a triangle. She had a wide smile but her teeth weren't quite up to its great charm so she switched it on and off rather quickly, but when doing so she left a little of it behind by pushing up the sides of her mouth at the same time as she closed

her parted lips. Her eyes were grey, deep set, and widely spaced. She was very beautiful and only when she was tired did she have the gaunt, death's-head appearance which so often is the necessary price to pay for this kind of distinctive bone structure. She would be a very formidable looking old lady. Malicious people said her husband, Miles, had married her not so much for her striking looks as because she wore Braemar twin-sets. While this was absurd it did throw some light on her attraction for him. She promised great pleasure because of her looks, and domesticity because of her twin-sets – that at any rate was how the argument ran. Miles, who loved sex but wanted it gentlemanly, seemed to be entranced and continued to be so in the face of some of her implacable obstinacies such as her ill-concealed loathing for all his friends and, even more to the point, an unwillingness to have them to dinner. She preferred to go out and look about her. All this dolling up to serve food she'd been forced to cook was a contradiction in terms. Anyway the Closes bored her. Possibly the other two guests, Daniel Malcolm Donovan and his odd girl friend Janet, would provide more stimulation. He would certainly arrive drunk, or palpably affected anyway, and this, while it angered her in one way, seemed to offer a slight promise of amusement.

On the whole, too, Miles' authors were a charmless lot. Whatever they said or did they paraded a suffocating vanity and were usually sulking or talking and gesticulating like compulsive puppets. Sara thought she had long ago spotted that writers, actors and painters, whatever they said, were very much less interested in her than in themselves and although she couldn't admit this to Miles, because his job was so much bound up with 'arty' people, she preferred the company of orthodox business men who paid her heavy compliments and kept their shrewdness for office hours. The racy, allusive talk of Miles's friends she looked upon as a threat. She didn't understand it and this made her wonder whether they could possibly be laughing at her. In fact they weren't and gave her a much more unstinting admiration than the business men whose critical faculties worked more nimbly than their tongues.

Miles Maddox was in the drawing room watching television and sipping a long whisky and soda. A Siamese cat was sitting on his knee and occasionally clawing it precisely rather than painfully. He wasn't looking too closely at the set as he was preoccupied with the problems he thought might arise from the dinner party

ahead of him. In particular he was worried in case Sydney Close would react badly to Daniel Donovan.

Donovan had once described himself as a 'gaberdined scruff-pot scavenging around Fleet Street, playing the journalistic equivalent of the police informer'. Certainly he appeared to have the trick of knowing how to trace a connection between a story and the right kind of well known person without involving his paper in embarrassing lawsuits or fruitless enquiries from the Press Council. He dealt purely in trivia but it was always new trivia. Then one day he left. There was no particular reason so far as most of his friends could see. His stock was as high as you could reasonably expect in so shifting a game as journalism; in fact, though comparatively young, he was something of a character with the security this usually implies.

He left to write a book. His friends insisted he could have written without leaving Fleet Street but Donovan in a heavily facetious way had stuck to his guns. He said he knew he never would do it unless he did nothing else, and it seemed to give him positive pleasure when his newspaper acquaintances, sneering and jeering, accused him of bottling up a masterpiece ('And I do mean bottling, old boy').

All this fascinated Maddox. It fascinated him to see Donovan – raffish, whoring, drunken, unscrupulous, silly Donovan – coolly cutting himself off from the cosiness of the expense account and the patronage of the fat and rich to sit down day after day and get out a book which he knew was almost certain to be a failure. After all, Donovan knew the agonies of writing. Even though he had only scribbled vulgar paragraphs for the sub-editors to hack around it had never been something he could count on doing easily and yet he had been prepared to take on the ordeal of writing alone and unpraised for as long as six months or a year.

And he'd done it, and the book was finished. Maddox had read it and thought despite many faults, which a good editor could put right, it was publishable, might even have in it the makings of a success. It wouldn't be a very nice success since Donovan had written mostly about the seedy world around Fleet Street pubs and Earls Court Road bed-sitters. It was full of easy, boring cynicism. But Maddox thought Donovan was a natural writer, someone who really liked doing it and who would steadily improve. He calculated he'd found someone with a genuine itch who would build up

a small reputation and make a small income both for himself and for Stantons. Very tentatively Maddox had described his plans to Donovan, hedging all his prophecies with caution, in particular saying he wouldn't consider publishing the book without extensive re-writing and, in parts, extensive re-thinking as well. Donovan had been delighted. All he wanted was the assurance of finally being published with his own name on the cover and nothing between the book in the shop window and his scoffing acquaintances except a pane of sheet glass.

Stantons was a small firm. Word got around. Close became aware another Maddox discovery was in the air. At a Board Meeting held soon after, it became obvious Close wouldn't be contented with his present limited role much longer. Gentle barriers went up. Close didn't suggest Donovan's book was bad – how could he without reading it? – but was it good enough? Was it up to the standard of their really good writers? Was it going to increase the firm's reputation so that already successful authors might consider giving something to Stantons or advise others to do so? Maddox realised he'd played the hand wrongly. He should never have suggested Donovan had only potential talent, nor dwelt so long on his professionalism and reliability – all reporters' qualities. He should, instead, have firmly and categorically said Donovan was one of the biggest gifts he'd come across for years. He might, had the circumstances been different, have done just this. It was a stratagem he'd used successfully in the past. Unfortunately Close knew Donovan and in his mild way he would have dismissed the idea as absurd. He regarded Donovan as, at best, an amusing companion over food and drink and, at worst, as a tedious nonconformist with an uncouth tongue and a way of sneering at everything in sight. It would have been hard for Maddox to have claimed a new and burning talent suddenly brought to light.

Tonight's dinner was to provide Donovan with an opportunity to redeem himself in the eyes of Close. It would help Maddox in the complicated weeks of negotiation that might lie ahead if Close decided to be obstinate. Actually Maddox knew it wouldn't matter much one way or the other if the book wasn't printed, except to Donovan, but he couldn't resist an opportunity to win. Maddox loved to win. It didn't matter if it was golf, pin tables or an argument, he had to compete with everything he had in him. He'd never had a head-on collision with Close in the past though there

had been minor sallies, so this, in itself, added a certain spice and accounted for his preoccupation as he sat looking at the television.

When the bell finally rang Sara was sprawled out in the chair like a man. Only her shoulder blades touched the back of the armchair and her right arm lay with the hand outstretched holding a sherry glass by the rim. By the time Donovan was in the room though, her body was upright and her right arm clasped her knees while her sherry glass was in her left hand. Donovan brought his left hand from behind his back and pushed a yellow rose with a long, untrimmed stem towards her.

'An impulse purchase. Isn't that what the ad men call it? I saw them on a stall at the end of the road.'

'Danny – how very kind of you. I love these shiny dark leaves.'

'Is it going to be a bore to fix?'

'Not at all. We married women, you know.' She reached down by her chair and fished up a small leather bag done up at the neck with cord. It looked like one of those small bags filled with gold that feudal kings were supposed to have thrown to bearers of good tidings. Sara took out a pair of nail scissors and started snipping off the leaves.

'Where's Janet? She did come with you, didn't she?'

'Miles has shown her upstairs to repair the ravages caused by having to meet me in a pub an hour and a half or so before we were due to arrive here. Margaret isn't here yet, obviously?' Sara looked up, interested at some change in his voice and as she did so he placed another rose, identical with hers, on a side table.

Donovan grinned at her.

'It seems a bit silly to give it to her now I've arrived before her. I pictured myself bowing, handing one to her and one to you.'

'Oh, I see. Why don't you pop it in that vase? Then I shall be able to gloat to myself over dinner because I shall be the only one wearing your favour.'

'Yes, that would have been nice. But I'm afraid I can't do that really.'

Janet, a tall, gangly girl with almost white hair, came into the room with Miles.

'Evening, Sara. I see Danny has given you your rose. I had to pinch one of your safety-pins to put mine on. It feels rather conspicuous.'

The rose looked as if it had been thrown at Janet and by force

of suction simply stuck across the front of her dress. It was spread-eagled, some leaves had been left on and the stem was absurdly long. All the trimming Sara had done had been neglected, or only half-heartedly done, by Janet who faced by Sara's mirror in the bedroom and the pots, sprays, and lipsticks flanking it had been unable to find any scissors and so had bitten off part of the stem, wrenched off the leaves in a rather haphazard manner and somehow embedded the rose under a small, gold-coloured safety-pin. All this had been done while Miles lingered around on the landing outside. Nice of him, thought Janet, but a bit silly. She was put out by having to waste time on the rose she would have preferred to have spent on her hair, lips and face.

'I think it's very romantic of Danny,' said Sara.

'Shows what happens when he has a little booze inside him. Brings out the nice side of his nature, doesn't it, Danny?'

'I often give you flowers – drunk or sober.'

'Yes, love, you do.'

Miles reappeared carrying a heavy silver tray with four brimming glasses on it.

'Miles! What extravagance. Champagne cocktails.'

'Cheaper than you might think.'

'You've got one too many glasses.'

'What?'

'Didn't you notice? I'm drinking sherry.'

'They don't clash.'

'Danny will drink two.'

'Certainly.'

'Sorry.'

The bell rang.

'It's the Closes. There goes your extra glass, Danny.'

'A blessing in disguise,' said Janet.

. . .

The Closes had driven quietly across a mile and a half of London encased in a medium-sized, red-leather-upholstered, heavy black saloon of unimpeachable Britishness. Sydney drove through a series of minor roads to avoid traffic and lights. He spent a lot of time thinking out the quickest and quietest routes. They hardly spoke during the drive. The word marriage literally meant joined when you considered the Closes. The join was so immaculate you

couldn't really tell where one started and the other left off. When they were at home together, of course, it was a little different but their public face was large, unmarred, soft, unlined, and smiling. They never interrupted each other for instance. One would take up a sentence when the other left off, after waiting considerately to make sure the other's thought was finished and not just suspended, awaiting further elaboration. They deferred to each other and this was often marked by a dropping of the chin, an inclining of an ear, a tiny upward movement of the lips. Some found this unblemished performance very boring, others very soothing. They were very old for their age as someone, probably Donovan, had once said. Sydney, as he drove, was wondering a little fretfully about Donovan. Was he going to launch a series of forays against him as he'd often done in the past? It pleased Close slightly to know that Donovan was never really satisfied with the effectiveness of these attacks. It was as if Close offered a huge, unmissable target which Donovan nevertheless persisted in missing.

Possibly Donovan would trim his behaviour as he must know, thought Close, his book was under consideration. There could be little point in gratuitously offending anybody from Stantons. Was his book seriously under consideration, though? Either Maddox had surrendered to the coarsest kind of commercialism or else he was genuinely trying to help Donovan whose action in giving up his job Close knew he much admired. Even if Maddox was only interested in sales to the extent of being completely indifferent to quality was he not wrong here too? Was it likely Donovan had enough skill to produce best-sellers? After all it was almost as difficult to be successful as it was to be good. It embarrassed Close to be meeting Donovan tonight. It somehow smacked of false pretences.

'Donovan will be there tonight,' he said.

'Yes, I know. Sara told me on the phone. I haven't seen him lately.'

Margaret also found Donovan rather more than she could manage. His cut-and-thrust way of conducting a conversation, his truculence and rudeness thinly disguised as frankness and a desire to arrive at the truth, made it hard for her to collect her thoughts so that conversation between them usually ended in a knock-out victory for him.

'I quite like Daniel,' she said thoughtfully, 'but he can be very tiresome. It's silly to drink so much. Just a failure to grow up.

And he's too black and white in his judgements. Too definite in what he says.'

'Don't you rather admire that?'

'Yes. Up to a point. But he's too sweeping. That's not growing up either. How old is he?'

'My age. About thirty-four or so.'

'Miles likes him, doesn't he?'

'Seems to.'

Sydney had said nothing to Margaret about the possibility of Stantons publishing Donovan's book. This was partly because he still didn't take it seriously, partly because he liked things to do with his job to be as cut and dried as possible before he discussed them with Margaret whose criticisms were as penetrating as they were remorseless. She, too, he knew would scoff at the idea of Stantons publishing Donovan and he didn't wish to expose himself to doubts he so wholeheartedly shared.

. . .

Janet, despite a couple of drinks at the pub with Donovan and two champagne cocktails, was more preoccupied with her own thoughts than she was with the conversation around her. It was Daniel she was thinking about, furiously and incessantly thinking. Although she knew he had other girl friends she usually saw enough of him to be able to banish them from her thoughts and usually accepted his various explanations as to how he spent his time when he wasn't with her. Lately he'd pleaded his book. Even so he'd spent most week-ends at her flat and about two nights a week as well. Last night though, she'd been on her own when the telephone rang. It was a girl.

'Hallo. Is Daniel there?'

'No – he isn't.'

'Oh, do you know where he is?'

'No. He doesn't really live here you know.'

'Oh, he gave me the number.'

'Did he now?'

'Yes.'

'Who shall I say called?'

'Just say Sandie rang – he'll know.'

'Know who you are?'

'Yes – I think he'll know who I am all right.'

She said it in a rather flat schoolgirl voice. She might almost have followed it up with 'And what's it got to do with you?' Janet thought of the dirty shirts in the bath. Sandie continued talking at the other end.

'You will tell him I rang then?'

'Yes. When I see him.'

'He did give this as his number.'

'I'm sure he did. Now don't you worry. Why, some of the gentlemen who stay here I don't hear from in months. But they always turn up in the end. Like bad pennies you might say.'

'Yes. Are you his landlady then?'

'In a manner of speaking. And now, dearie, you must excuse me if I ring off. I can smell the cabbage coming up the stairs. I was in such a rush I left the kitchen door open. What was the name again? Sandie, wasn't it? That's right. What a pretty name. I once had a cat called Sandie. Always having kittens it was. Well, dearie – Bye bye for now.'

Janet felt a little better when she put down the phone. It would be interesting to hear Sandie's account of it to Daniel. Come to that it would be interesting if Daniel felt obliged to make some comment to her, though she doubted whether he would. Surely it had been extraordinarily stupid of Daniel to give her number to one of his other girl friends. Presently the phone rang again. Again it was a girl's voice.

'Hallo. Hallo. Is Mr. Donovan there?'

'No, he isn't here.'

'Oh well, that's quite likely I suppose.'

'Is it?'

'Is that his landlady?'

'No, it isn't. My name is Janet Redfern.'

'Oh – HALLO. I met you once. In the Salisbury. In St. Martin's Lane. I thought you were in Rhodesia.'

'You thought what?'

'He said you'd been transferred.'

Janet reflected how little people knew about each other. This girl had met her once. Surely she should have realised how utterly ludicrous it was to suppose she could have been transferred to Rhodesia.

'What a silly lie!'

'Yes.'

'You're the second girl who's rung here tonight asking for him.'

'Do you both have rooms in the same house then? Do you take his calls or something?'

'This is my bloody flat.'

'Your flat – how frightfully embarrassing. I say I *am* sorry. He is a bastard, isn't he?'

'Yes.'

'Who is this other girl?'

'Don't know. Says she's called Sandie.'

'Shouldn't have thought he would have enough time.'

'What do you mean?'

'You've probably forgotten my name. Dawn Childs.'

'Yes. I had forgotten it. Thanks.'

'I suppose you're busy most evenings?'

'Well, of course, some evenings I'm never off the telephone. Tonight, for instance, is proving a busy evening.'

'I was wondering whether you would like to meet for a drink. We seem to be tricked into a position when we ought to confide in each other. Anyhow we can't just ring off, can we?'

'I suppose not.'

'I knew about you really. I imagine you'd guessed about me, hadn't you?'

'In a way. Yes.'

They arranged to meet two nights later at the Salisbury again.

'Oh Janet. Bring your diary.'

'What for?'

'Detective work. Check up on the brute.'

'I don't keep a diary.'

'Pity. Never mind. I thought it would make it more fun. See you at the Salisbury then.'

As she sat remembering all this in the Maddox drawing room she was angry with herself as she had been at every other time of the day when the incident came back to her mind. She seemed to have got it all wrong in some way. Several months ago a girl friend – a lumpy, spotty, conventional girl who taught and went for hitch-hiking holidays – in the course of a little advice over the inevitable mug of Nescafé said, 'You have a masculine sense of humour. That's why men like you and why they take you out.'

This had provoked Janet very much. 'Yes, I know,' she said. 'They think of me as a good sort or something. A cross between a

kindly aunt and a lazy, undemanding mistress. But I'm not. I'm a silly girl even if I am twenty-nine years old and showing it. I want to be given useless, expensive presents and cossetted, damn it, cossetted. And I want to get married. Very badly. So I can retire from this awful fight when every new engagement ring on someone else's finger is a blow under the belt – if you see what I mean. And I'll tell you something else. I'll settle for practically anyone. Just so long as I get a man of my own who I can put in his chair at night, feed, spoil, go to bed with and have children by. I don't care if he's bald or fat or fifty just so long as he's mine. And if he *is* fifty and fat and bald he's more likely to stay mine.'

As she listened to the buzz and chatter around her Janet raged inwardly she hadn't said something to Danny in the pub instead of rather grudgingly sipping two Tio Pepes while he drank several large whiskies. I should have had it out with him. Kicked up a scene. Behaved badly – whatever that means. Like Sara Maddox would do. Or Margaret, come to that. But it couldn't happen to them. They're in charge, somehow, and I'm not. Probably never will be.

. . .

Donovan felt slightly absurd for bringing the three roses and either because of this or because the elation he'd felt in the pub had vanished, decided to say nothing about the remaining one which still lay unpartnered on the table. He didn't think Margaret would notice either the rose on the table or, for that matter, that Sara and Janet were each wearing one. Gradually, he forgot all about it. It was Sara, just as they were going into dinner who brought the subject up again.

'Danny – you've forgotten to give Margaret her rose.'

'Heavens, so I have.'

'Wasn't it sweet of him? He brought each of us a rose. Didn't you notice both Janet and I are wearing one?'

'Yes, I did.'

'Didn't you wonder where yours was?'

'I'm sorry, Margaret,' said Danny. 'Let me help you put it on now. Got a pin, Sara?'

'I'm sure I have.'

'I don't think I'll wear it if you don't mind. I'll just carry it with my bag.' Margaret looked embarrassed and yet somehow

expecting this sort of involved, clumsy situation to arise if only because she had found the evening so far strained and out of the ordinary. She looked crossly at Danny, as if he was a child who she disliked but had to treat politely as he belonged to an old friend. Daniel rough-rode her: 'No – of course you can't carry it with your bag. Look, here's a safety pin. Let's pin it on.'

'Really – no,' said Margaret who, past the first shyness of her refusal, was visibly gaining momentum and whose voice was carrying more and more of the authority her husband, for instance, recognised as being more true of her than the diffident, gauche style she so often adopted particularly at the beginning of a dinner party.

'No, I won't wear it. I'll take it home later. I always feel rather absurd wearing flowers. Don't I, Sydney?'

'Absolutely true. She won't wear them even at dances.'

'You're quite right, Margaret,' said Danny. 'It was bad taste on my part to imagine for an instant three girls would simultaneously want to wear identical roses.'

'Not at all. It was very sweet of you, wasn't it,' Sara appealed to Janet. 'Wasn't it?'

'He shouldn't waste his money. He should spend it on his laundry.'

This remark caught Sara off guard. Endlessly good at keeping slight conversation going, and somehow appearing to be much older than she was while she did it, she nevertheless had no ready response to Janet's brutal rejoinder which stripped away the thin veneer of her hostess manner as ruthlessly as later that night the acetate in one of the bottles on her dressing-table would remove her pearl pink nail-varnish. Donovan took the remark in his stride and snorting slightly with feigned laughter, a rather unattractive habit he had after having a few drinks, said, 'I knew Janet was boiling up for some unkind remark. It's my fault for forcing those drinks down her in the pub. You must feed her quickly, Sara, before she washes great heaps of my dirty linen in public.'

'Bloody man, you are,' said Janet, as much taken aback by what she'd said as anyone else.

'I quite agree, Janet, he is a bloody man,' Miles broke in for the first time. 'It's since he's become an author and given everything up for his art. He'll stop shaving soon and start smelling of methylated spirits and all his friends will be embarrassed at the idea of his

coming to call. Still, since he's here we'd better behave civilly towards him. You never know what he might do if we don't humour him. Fortunately he's next to Sara for dinner so we'll put you on the opposite side to him and next to me. I'm not nearly so interesting as he is but I'm much politer. And beside you we'll put Sydney who's even more polite than I am.'

'Thank you very much, Miles. Perhaps I could put my arm through yours and be taken into dinner?'

'Certainly. What if the dining room table is covered with black Formica, the chandelier in the pawn shop and the food all straight from the deep freeze!'

'What indeed!'

. . .

The Maddox dinner party was being held at the height of a great political scandal. It was a time when dinner and cocktail parties went with a swing and the tired summer conversations about holidays in Venice or Ischia were replaced by almost frenzied speculations and the pleasing sensation of a scandal so total it seemed it would end up involving friends and acquaintances as well as practically everyone of any eminence in any public occupation.

Maddox was less interested in it than most of his friends but he knew it would come up and he wanted to dispose of it quickly so that the subject of Donovan's book could somehow be woven into the conversation. For this reason he launched the subject over the Vichyssoise soup. Apart from anything else it was Sara's due. It had been a factor in her grudging acceptance of the whole idea of the dinner party. She was mad to hear anything and everything and never minded hearing the same names and rumours over and over again. It was surprising it hadn't come up before, over the drinks. Donovan made most of the early running for obvious reasons but seemed to have very little to add to the current Fleet Street line. It had been an open secret for months, everyone who was 'anyone' had known the public statements made were lies, only the fear of a libel-suit had restrained open comment.

'Fantastic lie to tell.'

'Oh heavens – everyone lies about affairs,' said Sara. 'It's called discretion.'

'It could be chivalry,' said Sydney. 'Protecting people and so on.'

'He doesn't look very protective to me.'

'I thought he was the man who is always confirming rather savage sentences passed on British troops in Germany.'

'I should think confirming sentences of that sort was rather a rubber-stamp operation. It's all done by the Courts Martial, isn't it?'

'I suppose so, Sydney.'

'An old man I know,' Donovan seemed to be proclaiming, his head tilted back, his eyes fixed apparently on a moulding on the ceiling, 'once stayed with a Home Secretary. There was someone due to be hanged. He had to decide on the final appeal. But he also had to go to a Hunt Ball and he seems to have rushed around the place losing his tie, his braces, his socks, and blamed it all on the worry of not knowing whether to have the chap executed or not. "What shall I do?" he would wail and then fly to his daughter in the way those sort of fathers do. "Cynthia – would you be kind enough to tie my tie?" '

'I suppose he's right in a way. If you ever faced up to the awfulness of that kind of decision you'd never make it at all.'

At this point, Sara, perhaps seeing the conversation slip away from the gossip she had in mind, started gathering up the soup plates amidst a kind of broken, chanted chorus, 'What can I do?', 'Do let me help', 'Let *me* give you a hand'.

Just as in an opera the main character will resist the sung arguments of a trio of friends by suddenly overpowering them with a simple and superbly sung phrase of independence or wilfulness so now did Sara say firmly, 'Really, I'd so much rather do it myself.' The chorus thankfully subsided having performed once again a tiny piece of the ritual of dining out with friends.

The conversation resumed immediately after the last person was served with the next course – a rather grand salmon-coloured fish pie with Vouvray to drink – but it was largely a rehash. If the subject had been different it would have been discarded as worn out. As it was they stirred and stirred away hoping that, as the talk got further away from the moorings of fact, a shameless extra tit-bit of sexual guesswork would emerge. After a while though, Sydney, Janet and Margaret did it with a distaste, a disinterestedness. Miles said nothing at all and so the exchange between the principal players, Donovan and Sara, had to wilt. Perhaps it was this that led to Donovan's attack on Sydney. He was moderately

drunk – at the stage Janet had once described as 'sniffing around for offence'. Had any ministers connived at the Big Lie when it was told?

'It's like the story I just told you,' Donovan looked directly at Sydney, 'about the Home Secretary and how to make difficult decisions. When it became clear a thumping great lie had to be told they all probably sat around drinking brandy and smoking cigars having a tremendous laugh wondering which lie to tell. Can't you hear them? "Come on, Ian. You're supposed to be the brains. Trump something up for us." '

Sydney Close said nothing. Donovan altered his tone. He spoke more slowly and yet more extravagantly, more quietly, yet more menacingly.

'Sydney always looks like a Cabinet Minister to me. As if he's secretly deciding what will be best for us. But he wouldn't be frivolous about it, would you, Sydney?'

'It would depend.'

'On what?'

'Well – I think I would find it hard to decide the question of an execution lightly but deciding which lie to tell might be different – easier I suppose. But I agree with the principle behind what you say, Danny.'

'You do. You do. Really.'

'Yes – I express it differently though. If you make heavy weather of a decision, asking this, that, and the other person, past a certain point you increase the chances of making the wrong decision or no decision at all. That is why older people who are usually more cautious are so bad at making them.'

'You make it all sound very dull. In any case I don't think that was the point I was attempting to make.' Slight, absurd though it had been, the conversation had demonstrated Donovan's dislike for Sydney and brought home to Maddox the difficulties ahead. Tomorrow Sydney would say again, 'Of course, I haven't seen the manuscript so obviously I can't have an opinion.' But that wouldn't conceal the fact the dinner had been a step backwards.

The rest of the dinner passed off quietly. Miles was very sparing with the brandy. There was a smoulder in the air. A feeling of dissatisfaction. Nobody knew what they wanted from the dinner, except Miles of course, but everyone was aware of waste and frustration. They left early. Donovan and Janet for a bus –

Sydney's offer of a lift was refused by Janet's quick reply, 'Terribly nice of you but I'd love to walk a little. I overdid it a bit in the pub before dinner and the air would do me good.'

'Are we going to have a row?'

'No, Danny, we're not. Not tonight.'

'Sorry, anyway.'

'That's all right. That was a silly crack of mine about the laundry. Do you want to come back?'

'Please.'

Sara's earlier good spirits had vanished.

Miles looked at her.

'Not too good.'

'What a bore! I agree with Danny. Sydney makes everything sound such a bore. Is he like that at the office?'

'A bit.'

'Can't think how you stand it.'

A dull dinner party but buried in it the faint spark now to cause a minor conflagration for most of those who were at it.

2

Janet Redfern worked for a travel agency called Groats. It had been founded in the thirties by Leonard, now Sir Leonard, Groat to cater for the spoilt and very rich. The office looked like a Wimpole Street waiting room. Comfortable but austere, the chairs and sofas suggested a hint of the threadbare, though on inspection the silky and chintzy material proved to be strong and unworn. The magazines were current ones, the paintings not G. F. Watts but modern oils of Strand-on-the-Green or fairgrounds. The carpet was thick and fitted. Subtly, the waiting room atmosphere not only reassured customers about the efficiency of the arrangements being made for them but also hinted at their need for a holiday, so it seemed less of an indulgence and more of a precaution.

Sir Leonard's son, Charles, ran the business in a half-hearted way. This was understandable since Groats virtually looked after itself and any efforts Charles made to change or improve things were blocked by his father. As he was an energetic person he spent a lot of time writing plays which he tried to sell to television companies and when he wasn't doing that he was pursuing girls who, almost without exception, rebuffed him. Occasionally he tried to talk his father into trying to modernise the firm. For instance, he wanted Groats to fling their net a bit wider and take advantage of the organised parties swarming in from America itching to be persuaded into a whistle-stop tour of Europe or, for that matter, British parties who wanted to be sent off on only slightly less exhausting trips. His father was very Victorian and pedantic about this. 'We look after travellers, not tourists. There's a difference.'

Wealth had struck Sir Leonard too late so far as Charles was concerned. He had not 'achieved Eton' and so far as the title was concerned, 'You can't boast of your father being a knight. Now if he was a baronet . . .'

Janet thought Sir Leonard was right. If Charles turned Groats into an aggressive business it would mean five or six girls all paid starvation wages, all unsung heroines who would allow themselves to be replaced without warning when necessary. As it was, there was only Janet and her assistant, Judy Brown, Charles occasionally, Sir Leonard, and a succession of dim, pale secretaries. Janet

was paid £1,200 a year and she also received unpredictable and generous presents from 'Sir Len' which were purely a recognition of services rendered and had no strings attached. Charles hated the look of the office. He yearned for the colourful trappings of the travel business. '*Où est le Sacré-Cœur?* The views of that cathedral in Sienna looking as if it were made out of alternate squares of plain and milk chocolate? Why are there no BEA posters telling wives to get their husbands off for a second holiday if they don't want them to fall down in the street with a heart attack. I feel so old in this office, Janet.'

'Perhaps you come in too often.'

Groats was near Beauchamp Place and since it was the nearest populated street Groats often felt they were actually in it. Charles called it Dinky-Posh alley. 'I should like to drive down it very slowly in a rather old-fashioned two-seater with the hood down. In the back I would have a supply of red bricks. As I drove along I would carefully lob a brick into each of their pooty little windows. Can't you imagine all the poodles and miniature dachshunds having their weekly shampoo and getting all the soap in their eyes as the little debs from Stoke-on-Trent screeched with alarm?'

Charles had just finished the end of yet another abortive love affair and was anxious to tell Janet about it.

'I showed her the flat – she wouldn't come before – took her out in my new car, told her a bit about "Sir Len" in a throw-away, boasting way which I've mastered. All no good. Just turned me down. Seemed to think I had a cheek to ask.'

'Do you still like her?'

'Not much.'

'Isn't that rather a relief?'

'Off to pastures new? Suppose so. How's your old lay-about?'

Janet told him. She always told Charles everything for some reason she couldn't understand. Despite his absurdities she thought she recognised a genuine kindness and integrity in him. She knew he kept things to himself and it was a great comfort to her to be able to unburden herself to him instead of some girl friend who might get some vague pleasure out of her misfortunes, or else pass it all on to the next person she met.

'Isn't it about time you packed him in?' he asked.

'You can't pack people in nowadays just for sleeping with other people. It sounds so spinsterish.'

'I don't agree. Why don't you start going round with some other man for a change?'

'I wish I could.'

'Perhaps you ought to have a shot with me.'

'I don't think it would work.'

'Why not?'

'I'm too gone on Danny and I should get guilt pangs if I tried to enjoy myself with more than one man at a time.'

'Would you?'

'Not because of Donovan. Because of me. I'd hate me

Maddox left Sara in bed as usual when he went to the office the morning after their dinner party. He didn't take her any of the coffee he made for himself as she preferred to continue sleeping, though she might be sufficiently awake to smile vaguely when he kissed her forehead. Later on, she had coffee when her char carried it up to her in a specially large cup bought for that precise purpose when she was on her honeymoon. It was big and wide so it could cool quickly and it had two handles, one on either side of the cup so it could be tilted easily. Sara would have liked this ritual to have been accompanied by a few letters which she could slit open with a silver paper-knife, watched possibly by a small sweet dog who would do no more than cock an intelligent ear when the white telephone shrilled for the first of her morning calls. As it was, she got little more than some rather depressing conversation from the char. 'Can I go out to the shops? I've run out of Daz.' 'Do you want some money?' 'Got your purse handy, have you, dear?'

The day after the party Sara lay there thinking of the night before and trying to forget the one or two bleak comments passed by the char. Opposite, two pigeons stalked each other on a high window sill. The guests flitted through her mind. Sydney was a bore and his wife was worse since she combined it with virtue. Janet she actively disliked. Daniel? Danny she wondered about more. She wondered about him and the hard blank stare softened into a more speculative expression. She was glad he had been rude to Sydney.

She remembered afterwards it was exactly at this point the char re-entered the room holding a large bunch of flowers. 'These came.' Sara looked at the ungainly cardiganed woman. 'Is there a card with them?' 'A little white envelope?' 'Yes.' 'I left it on the hall

table.' 'Oh.' 'Do you want it then?' 'Please.' 'Hold on to these then.'

There were two dozen yellow roses, their buds young and almost closed, their leaves dark and shiny green. They were magnificent. The char brought in the envelope. Inside was a card with the name of the flower shop and some carefully written words. 'My sincere apologies for last night. I was very rude and boorish. Even worse was my lack of taste in giving a rose to anyone else but you. Devotedly, Danny.'

Though this note was so unexpected, Sara's surprise was joyous and anticipatory, not in any way wary or concerned. As she would have said two or three years earlier, she was 'tickled'. She lay where she was for a full hour watching the pigeons parading opposite and later when she met the char hoovering the stairs she gave her a wide and friendly smile followed by an apologetic move as she sidled past the roaring machine on her way to the bathroom. The char, who became even more vacant when the Hoover was going full blast, missed all this by-play as she twitched the flex urgently to one side so it wouldn't catch the pink mules as they slipped by. Usually Mrs. Maddox was in the bathroom before she even started on the stairs.

Sara as she lay in her bath savoured again all the thoughts she had enjoyed in bed. Her mind slowly moved from one surmise to another. Men like Danny didn't send flowers just to apologise, did they? It was an opening move. She had to accept or reject it. Could she handle it? Would it be a succession of secret meetings, hand-claspings, emotional words – the kind so highly charged they prohibit physical love if they go on too long? Could she stop it short of total committal? Did she want to? She loved Miles she supposed, but the regularity and straightforwardness of his lovemaking underlined, made clearer to her, how far short she was, and had always been, of complete absorption in it and in him. She didn't exactly know what she had missed but she sensed she had been deprived when she listened to the adventures and dramas of girl friends. She had never cried over a man. Should she have done? What had she missed? And now Miles wanted children and was starting to say so more often. She evaded the question but unconvincingly. The subject lay between them; a firework smouldering slightly, something not to pick up. She supposed she would have children. Everyone did. All one's friends did. A final fling should

perhaps be taken now before the domesticity set in. Would she one day stand talking to someone with a child, dirty and red-faced, tucked under her arm, her hair hastily gathered up in a wispy bun, her face powderless, her lips unsticked? Would it help if she had the memory of a Danny when that happened?

Today, though, she would do nothing.

Today she would enjoy the feeling of a secret. And tomorrow she would see.

Maddox could scarcely avoid seeing Close in the office since their rooms while not adjoining were on the same floor. Nevertheless, sometimes several days went by when their meetings consisted of nothing more than a perfunctory smile or an exchange of a few words as they stood side by side scrubbing their finger nails with a cocoa-coloured brush in the cloakroom. Maddox understandably regarded the dinner of the night before as a reverse and so was anxious to avoid discussing Donovan's novel. He wanted to withhold the manuscript until he could do something more to convince Close of its merits. This, of course, was what he'd hoped to achieve the night before.

When they did meet, in the cloakroom as usual, Close said how much he'd enjoyed the dinner party. Maddox started making spasmodic movements indicating hurry, moving his hands quickly backwards and forwards over the roller-towel, pulling it down to a drier patch with an appearance of irritation, the way he might well behave if he was late for a tiresome appointment. 'Not at all,' he said. 'I'm afraid Donovan was a bit difficult. I wish writers could be a little more like the rest of us.'

Close held his hands in front of him, shaking them slightly to get the water off before he took over Maddox's place at the towel. They were very red and large, and the nails had exact half moons and didn't grow over the top of his finger pads.

'We enjoyed it. After all he is stimulating, isn't he?' Maddox completed his pantomime of a man in a hurry, excused himself and left without Close saying anything specifically about Donovan's manuscript.

Later in the day, though, Maddox was moodily staring at the three lumps of sugar slowly dissolving in the spoonful or so of tea his secretary always slopped into his saucer, when he heard the familiar sound which invariably preceded Close's entry. It was a quick tentative tap followed immediately by the scratch of

Close's nails as he ran them over the frosted glass above the door handle.

'Hallo, Miles. Busy?'

'I should be.'

Close went over to the window and stood with his hands in his pockets, looking at the large clock above the dress shop on the other side of the street.

'I seem to irritate Donovan.'

'Oh, everybody irritates Donovan. He's no worse than some of the ones I have to deal with.'

'I suppose so. I haven't your experience in dealing with them.'

Maddox was surprised at Close's wistful tone. Close's recent attempts to play a larger, more creative role in the business he'd put down to an accountant's determination – in Close's case a very quiet determination it was true – to bend the irrational complications of the publishing business into a disciplined shape. Maddox despised this kind of thinking and felt it was misapplied in the book trade. In any case it didn't fit in with his own preference for intuitive flashes of judgement. He preferred to make out a case afterwards rather than before and to get his way by deliberately parading flair and instinct. He had for some time realised Close represented more of a threat than he first thought. To begin with, Close was a nice man. Also he exuded a technocratic assuredness and Stantons were finding it increasingly difficult to make a profit. Maddox had countered the threatened emergence of Close by a campaign of remarks both casual and formal. 'I leave all the money side to Sydney. I'm really only interested in who the authors are and what they write. We've got to make money, of course. That goes without saying. But the actual financial expertise is something I can't do. Thank God for good old Sydney.' All this Maddox would say with an engaging blend of frankness and modesty and it didn't occur to many how effectively and patronisingly he placed Close's position in the firm as being both essential and menial.

The lumps of sugar were now completely soaked through with tea.

Close didn't let go of the subject.

'You don't think Donovan has a particular dislike of me then?'

'I don't see why.' Maddox was suddenly more confident.

'It was exactly the same when he was in Fleet Street.'

'He's been much ruder to Sara and I than he was to you last night.'

'I'm surprised. I find that rather hard to believe

'Of course we've known him a long time.'

'He often calls, does he?'

'No, not very often. It's just that we've always taken him for granted.'

'Does he drink a lot?'

'I don't think so. Not particularly. You mustn't think because he was drunk last night . . .'

'No – I don't. But most times I've seen him he has been

'People often are at dinner parties especially if they've been killing time over a drink or two beforehand.'

'Yes, I see.'

Throughout, Close's tone had been mild and interested. He wanted to know, yet he wasn't, at least in the *way* he spoke, at all inquisitive nor did he seem to be in any way hostile towards Donovan. Maddox was puzzled when shortly afterwards Close left the room murmuring about a little work he had to tidy up before going home. He still had made no reference to the manuscript. Maddox swivelled his chair round and gazed at the same view as Close had just done. Then he swivelled back, hunched his shoulders and briskly picked up the telephone.

'Could you ask Merge or Fenton if they could pop in for a minute?'

One of the more eccentric members of the Stanton family years ago had decreed the firm should take on trainees and teach them the business, rather as solicitors take on articled clerks for a premium. This had further strained the limited resources of the firm so the custom had been long and thankfully neglected. Recently it had been re-instituted. So Merge and Fenton were recent arrivals at Stantons. Paid starvation wages, implemented by reasonable allowances from their affluent and indulgent parents, and fresh out of public schools, they were allowed to run errands for the more elevated staff of Stantons who were more than happy to put back the clock for Merge and Fenton, turning them into fags again at only slightly less cost to their parents than when they were at school. They shared a terrible little lean-to, partitioned off from

several typists, which was full of tins of Nescafé, shoe polish, torn out photographs of busty strippers, paper back novels and record catalogues.

They were chanting: giving an impromptu imitation of a choir practice.

'And ambition does make their heads to go bald
O bald, bald are the heads of the ambitious
From the paddy fields of Assam comes news of a strange and wonderful new tea
A book is the precious life blood of a master spirit
O scourge them: they that do prowl and live upon the skill of the very young.'

If you applied a little imagination you could see them as characters from the novels of Jeffrey Farnol or Georgette Heyer. With low-crowned hats crammed down on their heads and a good big stock under their chins they brought a whole world of historical and sporting prints vividly to life. If they had lived in those Regency days they would have made their way across muddy fields to watch Jem Belcher stand up to thirty rounds with the great Mendoza, they might have duelled – they would certainly have acted as seconds – in quarrels over women; there would have been midnight dashes to Brighton, saucy-eyed wenches, faithful broken ex-jockeys as manservants, cudgels and fights and, as a background to it all, the luscious green country of the South of England.

Things were duller in the nineteen-sixties for Merge and Fenton. There were, of course, many 'snifters' sneaked together in office hours, trips to the cinema, buying of the mid-day racing edition of the *Evening Standard*, late night drinking of Algerian wine and jargon-packed conversation about pop records 'rampaging through the charts', but both were visited from time to time with a cold despair and they would sit morose in their sordid caboose gazing at the walls.

Fenton had genuine cultural interests that offered solace. He visited art galleries, read voraciously – he was absurdly knowledgeable about minor novelists – and was something of an authority on jazz. He would sit until late at night in the cellars off Oxford Street, his eyes screwed up against the smoke of the cigarette between his lips, his feet tapping away. He drew a little, painted too, and was endlessly inventive in writing articles, jokes, stories and promotion stunts. He dressed raffishly but seedily, wearing

trousers that didn't match his coat, unlike Merge who wore huge knots in his ties, wide-stripey shirts with stiff white collars and black elastic-sided shoes which struck the ground like jackboots.

Maddox's secretary appeared in the doorway.

'Cheers, apes.'

'Cheers.'

'Wotcher, Madge.'

'Mr. Maddox wants one of you to do something for him. Something out of the building, I think.'

'Merge will go. Delighted to in fact.'

'Fenton's your man. Keen on getting on.'

Because it was Fenton who was mildly interested he finally agreed to go, leaving Merge to go back on his own to the flat they shared.

Fenton went running up the back stairs, the steel tips of his shoes making a horrid noise on the uncarpeted stone. He tapped on the outer door of Maddox's office, tapped the top of the towering rubber plant which Maddox had given his secretary last Christmas and finally, mockingly, tapped on Maddox's door itself. Fenton thought of Maddox exactly as Maddox would have wanted. He was someone who 'cared' about books. Maddox, who himself had a capacity for hero worship, was able to arouse the same thing in other people, particularly if they were younger, by his apparent sincerity and fluency, by his willingness to treat nearly everyone as an audience, seeking to charm them with as much fervour as if he was trying to persuade his colleagues on the Board to do something they were loath to do. Just as a professional athlete needs to exercise, if only to prove his muscles are as good as they ever were, so did Maddox need to bewitch people to his will. His good manners were unflagging, even when he was brief and to the point, as he was now when Fenton came into the room.

He had decided to ask an artist he knew called Liz Semple to rough out some designs for the cover of Donovan's novel. He wanted it done overnight so that he could show them to Close before he started to read the book which he didn't think could be put off any longer without guaranteeing Close's implacable opposition. On the other hand if he could contrive to make Close feel at one and the same time he was being consulted about the merits of the cover and that the decision to publish had virtually been made then it would be a powerful step in the right direction. Maddox had

known Liz Semple for a long time and had often put work of this sort her way. Over the years she must have done dozens of covers for Stantons. Maddox explained that he wanted Fenton to deliver the letter rather than it losing a night in the post. Fenton glanced at the address.

'It's not very far from my flat.'

'Splendid. Tell you what, have a cab on me.'

Fenton accepted the two half crowns which represented a total profit as he intended to take a tube the same as he always did. Shortly afterwards, the five shillings turned into a packet of cigarettes and the two evening papers.

Daniel woke up the morning after the Maddox dinner party with a hangover. It wasn't, he decided, one of those really jittery ones that made every tremor of his body feel like a tentative clap of the avenging angel's wings and for this he gave devout thanks while coping tenderly and cautiously with the kind of light and irresponsible afflatus he did have. Janet had left him, still asleep, at about the same time as Miles Maddox a mile and a half away was creeping out without banging the front door. When Daniel did wake up he reviewed the happenings of the night before just as Sara Maddox was to do an hour and a half later. This soon brought about a frown of distaste and he got up quickly, shaved and left the flat. Nevertheless he rapidly recovered his nervous stability and he did what he had often done in the past when he'd behaved poorly the night before. He sent his hostess some flowers. After he'd written the note he changed the order from one dozen to two. Later, in a pub he wondered why he had been so affectionate, so leading in his note. He didn't regret it, indeed he felt a little excited by it. Perhaps something was starting. He allowed his curiosity about Sara to outweigh his long-standing opinion of her as a silly, spoilt and mischievous person. It had been, of course, an impulse like all his actions to do with women. He didn't give more than a perfunctory thought to Miles; there would be time enough for that. He felt very revived by two glasses of Worthington and some cheese sandwiches and this, coupled with sending the flowers, helped him to decide to go through with a dental appointment.

On his way from the pub to the dentist he was struck suddenly by a memory of childhood. Always when he went to the dentist as a

boy, it was after lunch – his father had a theory all people of the same kind of disposition as himself, which he thought Danny was, should do the difficult things of life late in the day rather than early and he accordingly insisted on the appointments always being made in the afternoons. An essential part of the ritual was cleaning his teeth free from the remains of his lunch. His father had painted a vivid picture of what the inside of an unbrushed mouth must look like to a dentist. If this had been so easy to appreciate then how much more true it must be now when, some thirty years later, the interior of his mouth had certainly lost whatever youthful appeal it may have had. Donovan stopped at a chemist and bought a tube of pink toothpaste. He walked along undoing the carton which he presently threw into a dustbin attached to the bottom part of a lamp standard. He then undid the red cap, squeezed out two thirds of a caterpillar's length on to his second finger and rubbed it round his mouth. Stuffing the tube back into his pocket he went through a series of rinsing motions with his mouth feeling the froth and bubble increase.

Foolishly he'd forgotten he had no wash-basin to spit into. He contemplated another row of dustbins – there were three of them together with sliding lids – but it wasn't practical to imagine he could simply spit into one of those. He continued walking, his mouth frothing now to the extent of two tiny red dribbles at either side of his chin. He was finding it slightly hard to breathe. To his dismay he saw a pub acquaintance coming towards him. By moving to the side of the pavement and screwing his face into a look of intense seriousness and preoccupation he could pass by without having to force what would be a ghastly red smile although by now he felt the bubbles of foam must have become more noticeable. As Donovan altered direction to carry out his plan he noticed the acquaintance doing the same as if he were trying to make their encounter more certain. Though this made it harder for Donovan it was still possible to assume his air of eccentric detachment and to pretend he'd noticed no one; in any case pub acquaintances abide by different codes. It would be unforgivable to ignore one of them in the pub but it was by no means *de rigueur* to acknowledge them in the unrelenting daylight, in fact it might be an error of taste to do so.

Even though these encouraging thoughts went through Donovan's head he was at the same time conscious he had not moved as

many compass points away from the possible point of meeting as the enemy had moved towards it and this somehow made it impossible to stride past the man as he'd originally intended. In any case the toothpaste was by now foaming violently. There was more to come, too. His whole mouth was full. He faced two bleak alternatives; to spit out or to swallow. Crisis now overruled any carefully hatched plans. He whipped out his handkerchief and half choking, half expectorating, he flooded it with the nauseating mess in his mouth. Whether the other man thought he had just witnessed a sudden haemorrhage Donovan neither knew nor cared. He could breathe. The pavement ahead was bare of anyone he knew. The humour of the whole thing overcame him and he laughed and grinned away to himself, arriving some ten minutes later at his dentist.

'Had a couple of sandwiches. Tried to clean my teeth. Not very successfully I'm afraid.'

'When you've seen some of the things I've seen inside people's mouths you won't worry about the remains of a couple of cheese sandwiches,' replied the dentist as he inserted his small portable driving-mirror into Donovan's mouth. 'By the way,' he went on, 'what did you mean when you said you *tried* to clean your teeth?'

After making herself a scrap lunch Sara took the car and went shopping. She went to a chemist first and about the time when Miles was staring at the sugar lumps dissolving in his saucer wrapped in his mid-afternoon accidie she spent just over five pounds at a speed considerably above his earning it. She then drove down the Gloucester Road to find the shop where Danny's flowers had come from, parked the car carelessly, looked quickly at the rows of dark green canisters filled with flowers, went in and asked the price per dozen of the yellow roses, smiled and left. She bought herself a copy of a glossy magazine and took it with her to read while she sipped a glass of hot milkless tea with a lemon. She read the magazine very carefully, especially the advertisements.

When Miles got home that night he was pleased at the calm way she greeted him and surprised to find himself talking away about the office while he held a drink she'd mixed for him. An hour or so later they sat facing each other in the small dark dining room and ate lamb cutlets with rosé wine. She went to bed very early and lay

there trying not to fall asleep too soon, relishing, as she had early that morning when the flowers from Danny arrived, a feeling of satiation, of wanting nothing to happen. Miles, too, lay tranquilly in bed an hour or so later soothed by the unexpected domesticity of his evening into an early and untroubled sleep. Increasingly he tended lately to continue the fights of the day a long way into the night. Every set-back, no matter how small, had to be re-assessed. He wanted to win every round as a matter of principle. Yet the satisfaction of a victory never lasted more than a couple of days. This naked competitiveness was concealed from most of his friends by the apparent ease and gaiety of his manner. They didn't guess the ruthlessness and will that lay behind some of his simple and even endearing statements. 'I always have a secret bet with myself when I see two raindrops starting to run down a window as to which will get to the bottom first.'

'How many did he do?'

'Three. Three fillings. In twenty minutes.'

'Injection?'

'Of course.'

Janet didn't like holding the telephone against her head. She didn't like the feeling of all those germs she was sure lurked around the receiver being allowed unimpeded entry into her ear. Once she had been very struck by a lurid magazine cover showing a man shot by a gun concealed inside the receiver which went off as soon as he lifted it.

She doodled with her Biro, blocking in the shamrock on the cover of her Aer Lingus time table. SHAMROCK, she thought. What an excellent description of all Irishmen and one half-Irishman in particular; Danny might justly claim to be only half-Irish but that half had effectively subdued any Saxon elements he might have been granted at birth.

'It's what happened before I went to the dentist I wanted to tell you about,' he went on.

If Janet had heard the toothpaste story later in the day she might have laughed. As it was it didn't have enough humour in it to take her mind off the funereal aspects of Groats' empty reception room.

'I felt like some bloody Kingsley Amis hero,' he finished.

'You are a bit,' she said absently.

'What do you think will happen about my book?'

'I shouldn't think Sydney Close will prove to be a very staunch ally.'

'He's only an accountant, isn't he?'

'I'm not sure.'

'What do you mean you're not sure? He is an accountant, isn't he?'

'Yes. But he may be something else as well. He's one of the directors after all.'

'Yes – Miles seemed very polite to him.'

'Unlike Sara.'

'Unlike Sara.'

'Danny.'

'Yes?'

Janet found herself suddenly interested again.

'What's your book like?'

'I honestly don't know.'

'Why can't I read it?'

'You can.'

'You've been very secretive about it.'

'I'm shy.'

'Think I'll laugh at it?'

'Perhaps.'

'Has anyone seen it?'

'Only at Stantons.'

'Oh well. I'm bound to read it sooner or later.'

'Yes . . . what are you doing tonight?'

'Meeting a girl I know slightly.'

'Who?'

'No one you know.'

'I can't offer to come. I've got one or two things I've got to do.'

'Pity.'

'Well. See you. Thanks for the bed.'

'Anytime. Anytime.'

You couldn't expect a love affair to go on being vivid and fairy-lights. The life went out of things, staleness took over, lovers become sleeping partners. It's been going on too long, too bloody

long, thought Janet. If he gets wounded by a careless bus or someone does laugh at his book he might marry me and show great enthusiasm for having a family, decorating a flat, collecting records, but even that wouldn't last very long and he'd be off with somebody else.

His silence over the book was odd, unlike him. For months it had seemed part of him. He'd carried around a slim, black case full of the bits and pieces he wrote, several Biros, rubbers, pencils and sharpeners. Sometimes, when he was going to type some of the pages he'd scribbled down in longhand, he would carry a small, dirty and old-fashioned typewriter as well. He spent whole days in Janet's flat working at it and there was an over-abundance of filled ash-trays, milk-stained saucepans, and lidless tins of Nescafé waiting for her when she got back home. Janet didn't share Maddox's admiration for Donovan's decision to leave the paper. She thought he had done so in a frivolous moment because he was bored and discontented. He was never short of money in the way most people always are. He had some of his own, his mother was always giving him quite large cheques, to say nothing of his weird but unmistakable ability to make money out of stray deals of one sort or another. Once he borrowed a friend's car, used it to move a flatful of furniture and then charged ten pounds for doing it. He also had a knack for getting himself fed and generally entertained at other people's expense.

It was unlike him though to show the resolution he had shown over the book. It had taken him a year and there were very few days when, so far as Janet could tell, he hadn't spent some time on it. She had been too thorough perhaps in checking her inquisitiveness. She had been frightened he would interpret any enquiries as possessiveness, an attempt at cosiness. When she had first asked him about it he'd replied 'A little brittle and trying to be clever, I'm afraid.'

Danny's book must have remained on Janet's mind. She found herself asking about it rather than anything else when she met Dawn Childs. It was safer ground but she felt that wasn't her motive. After all Dawn's conversation on the telephone made it very clear she didn't regard Danny's infidelities as either unexpected or worrying, merely humorous. Janet decided to take the same

line. Dawn unfortunately didn't take Danny's book any more seriously than his other activities. 'I hardly knew he was writing one. Except he used to stay behind and do a bit of typing from time to time. Not often though. It could have been something for the paper.'

'Were you surprised he left it?'

'Only a question of time I should have thought before they kicked him out, wasn't it?'

They were sitting side by side drinking gin and tonic on high, leather-covered stools and they could see each other in the bright engraved Victorian mirror that faced the bar. As Janet had hoped and anticipated from the telephone call things were easy between them. There wasn't, for the moment at least, any jealousy and the prying was natural, unforced, and illuminated by smiles, jokes and a faint air of bawdiness. Dawn was dark, large-eyed and watchful and her breath smelt slightly. It wasn't hard for Janet to guess how difficult Danny would have found it to exact the same service from Dawn as he did from her. She would want him to pay the restaurant bills for a start, not just the first few times but always. She wouldn't take kindly to paying for his cigarettes or his drinks either and it would be a very rare act of generosity that got her into an apron and armed her with a recipe book. She would be expensive, demanding, taking rather than giving. There was about her though an unmistakable loucheness; it was easy to imagine her in sexual extremes without fear or favour.

Janet had half expected their drink together to go on and turn into an evening out. They might behave as familiar friends almost automatically making another date to meet when they parted. Gradually it became obvious this wouldn't happen. Gently the whole meeting developed into a kind of casual encounter brought about by chance and terminated by tact. They were conventional enough to be shy of a relationship stemming in the first instance from the fact that they both, from time to time, shared the same man. This was more Janet's attitude than Dawn's because she took life that much more seriously and it was related to her inability to take sex promiscuously as Dawn plainly could and did, evidently with the greatest simplicity and pleasure. Faced with the question 'Which would you rather be, a tart or a virgin?' it is likely they would have given diametrically opposite answers.

'Have you met the other girl? The one who would be with him the nights both our diaries were free, as it were?'

'No – I expect there's more than one.'

'Honestly, what does it matter? I couldn't possibly imagine myself living with him full-time even if he suggested it, which he hasn't. And neither could you. Could you?'

'Yes, I think I could.'

'Don't let him find that out.'

'I'm sure he did. Ages ago.'

Dawn Childs looked rather crossly at the mirror opposite and said nothing. She kept silent so long that Janet was starting to fuss around in her bag the way she did when she was about to leave somewhere as if to check once again whether she'd forgotten her front door key. Observing this Dawn, whose expression hadn't sweetened in the meantime, said rather fiercely, 'What do you think of Danny's driving?'

'Pretty awful I suppose. I can't judge as I don't drive myself.'

'It is awful. Bloody terrifyingly awful. Either he's drunk or he's in a filthy temper with a hangover. I don't know which is worse.'

They stood together on the pavement and looked at each other with embarrassment for the first time.

'I'm sorry I didn't bring my diary. It wouldn't have been very revealing anyway. I just use it for telephone numbers.'

'Yes, it's a pity. It might have been rather fun.'

They both started jabbing their hands behind them, simultaneously backing away and firing confused sentences at each other. Eventually Janet walked down the road feeling her face red and hearing the veins in her temples pounding the way they did whenever she got nervous or upset.

Janet sat on the bus going over the conversation she'd had with Dawn and wondering why the subject of Danny's driving should suddenly have come up. It was something she had just taken for granted about him. The first drive she could remember at all clearly had been when he'd taken her down to his parents one week-end shortly after their affair had begun. It had been very relaxing which was odd in itself since she must have been agitated at the idea of meeting his parents who, it was excusable to assume, shared some of Danny's characteristics and these with the added licence which age might have conferred on them could have been a disconcerting prospect.

They had stopped for a drink on the way and over the gin and bitter lemon and shared packet of Smiths Crisps he had told her something about his home. 'Most visitors don't like it. They never really know where they are. They're given a great welcome, a fat drink is pressed into their hands and Mummy and Frances – that's my sister, if you remember – start smiling away in the most encouraging way you can imagine. They're so encouraging that whoever it is responds like mad and says much more than they would normally do meeting someone for the first time. Then after a bit the wretched man suddenly realises he's the only one talking while they – Mummy and Frances, that is – are just looking at him, their eyes glittering away like animated searchlights and all the oh-so-charming smiles wiped off their faces. I saw it happen only a fortnight ago to a perfectly reasonable chap. He noticed them saying nothing, just looking at him, and bit by bit he sort of ran down like an old clock. He ended up, I remember, by patting one of the dogs, "Good old boy. Wha's a matter then? Does he shake hands? Walkies, good boy, walkies." You never saw anything so pitiful in all your life. After a while, of course, when he'd relapsed into a sulky silence they realised they'd been rude to the poor devil so they started talking and smiling all over again. It was rather like that all week-end. He must have felt like someone in a traffic jam, nothing but stopping and starting.'

'Do you mind awfully if we go back to London? I think I've left the gas on.'

'They won't behave like that to you.'

'How do you know?'

'I can't explain really. You're not their kind of target.'

'What about your father?'

'He never says much. You wouldn't with a couple of women like my mother and sister in the house. I don't quite know how I've survived.'

And then, to her surprise, Janet had enjoyed the week-end. The house was shaped like a cube of sugar. The roof was four isosceles triangles and the apex, where they met, was topped by a neat chimney pot. It could easily have fitted into a trim suburban street in Dulwich except for the beautifully designed, spacious garden of coniferous trees and hedges, two long herbaceous borders, a large fir tree, an extensive rockery and beyond these areas of discipline, beyond the pole fences that kept these parts for cultivation and

domestic use, lay the two rough paddocks where Danny's sister had once kept her ponies. It was unbearably cold in the bedrooms and there was only one large drawing room to sit in. Most of the weekend was spent there in front of a very large open fire gazing rather bad-temperedly at the television set while three or four terriers prowled around the room either avoiding or seeking the heat, which at times was quite overpowering as the main fire was supported by two almost equally powerful oil stoves, which blazed away from either end of the room to such effect that when Janet moved away from the open fire to cool down a little she was rapidly forced to move back again as it proved to be cooler in front of it than anywhere else in the room.

Frances was tall and quiet with an air of laziness and arrogance. She was the only one who could read with every appearance of concentration while the television was switched on. Danny's mother, while not living up to Danny's picture of her, was extrovert and domineering, running the house and the people in it with a mixture of charm and drive. Janet was very conscious of her. She was never in the background except for thirty minutes of undignified sleep just after lunch. Then she snorted and snored, her mouth fell open, her aquamarine glasses lay between her large freckled hands and round her legs the dogs weaved with fitful and increasing impatience.

Janet and Danny walked for three hours on the Sunday afternoon. The leafless trees were harsh and black against an unclouded blue sky. They rested once or twice on farm gates and looked at the huge cart marks and the heavy grooves from the tractor wheels which scored their sides like tooth marks. They stood by a dilapidated cottage near to a barn and he held her shoulders and looked at her. He looked at her long enough for it to have been embarrassing if the day and the weather and their mood of contentment and resignation hadn't obliterated all the usual anxieties. Though a shy person, Janet was so confident of the sheer goodwill in the situation she stood there between his arms smiling and unafraid.

'You look very beautiful in this extraordinary light,' he finally said, 'very pale and luminous. Pure.'

He kissed her although he would rather have continued looking at her, treasuring and admiring her, seen, literally, in a new and different light. So clearly the same person and yet with an added ephemeral dimension.

'It'll never be better than this,' he said.

'I know.'

They walked down a line of ash trees separating two ploughed fields. An early moon came out looking like a modern chair design. They touched each other whenever they could. He walked beside her, his arm around her shoulders skipping behind her when the path was too narrow or taking huge strides through the thorn and bush. They saw the lights of the house over a mile away.

'At the moment it would be true if I said to you it's never been like this before.'

'I feel that too.'

'I don't like saying it because I don't see how it can be true for long.'

'Can't you just enjoy it while it is?'

'Yes, I should, shouldn't I? There's nowhere else I'd rather be, nothing else I'd rather be doing – that's a definition of happiness, isn't it?'

'It'll do.'

'Next week, perhaps, when things aren't going so well I shall probably think of you – no, I mean I shall think of you, obviously – but I shall wonder why I can't remember this and you clearly enough to cut out whatever else is happening as ruthlessly as what I'm doing now eliminates everything else.'

'You do worry a lot underneath it all, don't you?'

'I'm still a romantic. And immature in some way. I believe in love and all that and I can't get over the way it won't last.'

'You should have outgrown that by now.'

'You don't mean that, of course, but it's nice of you to say it.'

'You don't have to make vows to me.'

'But I want to, don't you see? I want to buy a ring, announce an engagement and revel in contemplating domestic bliss. And then after a bit I should start behaving as if the shades of the prison house were closing around me. Eyeing all the ones I might have had.'

'Most men hate marriage. I would if I was one. That's why they have all these terrible stag-parties. To pretend nothing is going to change. That after the beer, or whatever it is, there will still be the girls to be crammed into the backs of cars, parents to be outwitted and all the sheer fun of being a bachelor.'

'I don't think of it like that.'

'I shouldn't get married for ages if I was you. Not until you can, in cold blood, think you welcome the prospect of wheeling a pram wearing one of those sweaters that the men for whom only the best will do wear in advertisements.'

'Shall we run back over the fields holding hands and arrive back pink and glowing and radiating happiness?'

'You're so modern.'

'People love Players.'

3

Fenton arrived with Maddox's letter and was let into the second-floor flat of a porticoed house off the Gloucester Road by a scruffy, greasy-haired girl wearing three-quarter-length black boots, a pair of partially bleached blue jeans and spectacles, the frames of which were the colour of glue and strengthened at the hinges by sticking-plaster.

'Hi,' she said.

'Mr. Maddox sent me.'

'Old Madders. Come in. I was expecting you come to think of it. He rang this afternoon. A jacket cover. Only get twenty-five guineas for a book cover, you know.'

He gave her the letter. 'Any friend of Maddox's is a friend of mine,' she snorted. 'Come in for Christ's sake.'

It was a big bed-sitting room with an artist's table standing on two iron legs catching the light through a tall bay-window. Posters and huge grainy photographs of girls were sellotaped to the walls. Five or six black cushions were in a heap on the floor and there was a distinctive smell compounded of tobacco, drink, spilt talcum powder, artists' fixative and cat.

'Cosy, isn't it?' she said. 'Have a drink?'

'No – it's all right.'

'I've got this letter to read. It'll take a minute or so even allowing for the great Maddox efficiency. Plenty of time for you to scoff a glass of this old Algerian wine. It's called Parrot or something.'

'Periquita, actually.'

'Right. Don't the youth grow up fast nowadays?'

Fenton sat on the divan, sipped his wine, eased his back against the wall and relaxed. He realised Maddox's relationship with this strange creature, Liz Semple, didn't go very deep or very far so he wasn't committed to reproducing his office manner with her. Whatever he did, or said, it was unlikely to get back to Maddox. She had a manner that somehow suggested the good-hearted Girl Guide who would always be perfectly and needlessly frank to your face while maintaining a stubborn loyalty to you when you weren't there at all. She finished reading the letter.

'Straightforward,' she said. 'Just a few ideas and a summary of the plot. If he'd sent me the book I'd have spent too long reading it. I expect he guessed that. Who's it by, anyway?'

'Chap called Daniel Donovan.'

'Oh, him. Good God. Him. Him and Maddox. Well.'

'You don't sound as if you liked either of them much.'

'Miles is all right. Used to be very gay and funny. Charming too and very sweet to girls. Protective without being nauseating, if you know what I mean which, come to think of it looking at you, is rather unlikely. He's different since he married that ghastly girl. I don't see him anymore. Not that I ever did all that much anyway. Occasionally, like now, he sends me the odd job. I don't ask a lot of questions and I'm more than willing to fall in with his suggestions. Just as well, really. He's never been much interested in anyone who wasn't unless they were much older or grander.'

'What about Donovan?'

'I don't like writers much. I suppose he is a writer now, isn't he? I've always thought of him as a journalist. A very conventional one at that. I've often wondered whether there were hidden depths to him though, I must admit, ever since he was kind to me once after some frightful dinner party. He took me home and I thought, well what next. And then I was sick. Just fright I suppose. He put me to bed. I mean the lot. Undressed me and everything. Held the basin. Patted me on the head. Then he returned my gloves with a note and then, nicest of all, he didn't tell a soul about it. I knew he hadn't because it never came up even in the most roundabout way. You can always tell, you know.'

'I like Maddox. He's got some life about him.'

'He's very ambitious. Clawed his way up Stantons. He's disposed of a lot of people on the way. He has a way of praising them that is absolutely fatal. Wonderful trick, that. You can't prove it's malevolent, you see. He'll be a megalomaniac one day.'

'Good thing in publishing. They're nearly all dead from the waist up.'

'Oh well – sonny boy. This is your life. Thank God – really him, I mean – I don't have to do the awful things you men have to do to get on.'

'It's not so awful. It's competitive, that's all. Business is business.'

'Daddy tell you that?'

'That's rude.'
'Not really, I promise you.'

Soon after this Fenton left, arranging before he did so to collect the designs on his way to the office next morning. Liz didn't realise her style of conversation was far too abrasive, too brash altogether, for someone whose assumption of sophistication was as superficial as a girl's first attempt to smoke a cigarette through an absurdly long cigarette-holder. She had upset him and the relaxed air he had put on while sitting on the divan sipping her wine vanished, to be replaced by a sulkiness she thought she recognised as the hallmark of the perpetual male adolescent. In fairness to Fenton there was a reason beyond mere pique for his sudden collapse into petulance. It was to do with his father. Any derogatory comment about him no matter how small reminded Fenton, either at an achingly conscious level or a duller subconscious one, of two incidents in his childhood both of them connected with his father, both trivial, both unforgettable. The first had happened when he was at his prep school. He had been out for the day with his parents. During the afternoon his father to amuse him had drawn a steamer, funnels smoking, surrounded by seagulls, making its way across a choppy sea. Fenton had much admired this and taken it back to school in the evening to show to a boy three or four years older than himself who over the past few weeks had shown an unexpected and surprising kindness to him even sometimes going as far as to walk with his arm around his shoulders occasionally. This boy, whose name was Aspinall, had glanced at it while Fenton excitedly ran on, 'Look at those waves. That's just the way waves do look. I bet not many people could draw waves that looked exactly like waves.' Aspinall had laughed. 'Course they could. My kid brother can draw better than that and he's even younger than you are. What rotten luck to have a father that can't draw better than a kid of seven. I shouldn't show it to many other people if I were you, Fenton. Not unless you want to give them a good laugh.'

Later Fenton secretly looked again at his father's drawing. At once he saw it for what it was. A pathetic little daub drawn without skill or taste. He threw it down the lavatory and when he went to bed he couldn't stop crying.

The second incident he remembered happened some years later. It was a harsher hurt because he was older and couldn't throw it off so quickly. He was seventeen and a horrid mixture of a snob and a prig; the kind of snob and prig that only the minor public school turns out, labouring as it does under a much greater inferiority complex than any grammar school because it isn't Winchester or Eton however much it thinks it arrives at a passable imitation by imposing a whole catalogue of meaningless rituals and privileges which somehow to the bemused minds of the Governors gives their institution a tradition and an air of respectability, which they hope will cancel out the accents and unmistakable homeliness of the parents when they come to the school for Prize Givings and Speech Day. It was, in fact, after a Speech Day when Fenton was strolling around with a group of six or seven others that he experienced another shock so similar to the one he'd received ten or more years before. As they swaggered along, hands in pockets exhibiting the kind of lounging boastfulness so much envied by the scurrying 'kids' who, keeping their distance, contrived to suggest they were engaged in some kind of errand for one or other of the group, the conversation was desultory with just enough spitefulness in it to keep it alive. 'Thank God that's over. What a bloody farce. Shan't be here next year, thank Christ. What a shower all these parents are. I say, Fenton, was that terrible looking bastard your father?'

There had been several occasions during the afternoon when Fenton had introduced his father to various boys and they had stood around while he asked a series of embarrassing questions about games and tuck (What's tuck for Christ's sake?') and then, more tentatively, about their girl friends. It had been a bit of an ordeal but surely this was what everyone had to go through? Was Fenton's father any more embarrassing than anybody else's? Weren't all fathers the same except for the way they looked or the clothes they wore? It was a revelation in its way, that casual, piercing comment made carelessly, indifferently by someone who might not even have seen Fenton's father and only said it for something to say.

Now, for some reason no one could ask anything about his father without Fenton getting edgy and erecting defences that so far from being effective only whetted people's appetites to probe deeper and see what lay behind them. However, although Fenton's

immediate reaction to Liz Semple's dig about his father had been vulnerable in revealing so much hurt, he had recovered quickly enough to suggest calling for her designs the next day which not only, in some indefinable way, gave him control over the situation but also was a touch of efficiency and initiative which would appeal to Maddox.

'I hope you didn't have to come miles out of your way,' Liz said.

'No. It's on the way home actually. See you in the morning then. About nine.'

. . .

That night Fenton and Merge went out ten-pin bowling near London Airport and Fenton turned his meeting with Liz Semple into one of his stories. He told it clumsily and haltingly, trying it out to see whether it could be made to stand up to some of his genuine triumphs, like the behaviour of the nurses when he had his appendix out and certain conversations he had had with Chelsea pensioners and West Indians. It went down very well and Liz Semple emerged as a 'terrible girl'. Fenton, unable to describe her conversational style or character, had concentrated on her appearance to put over his new character in his repertoire. 'She had the most awful hair. Greasy as if she'd soaked it in Brylcreem. It hung down in strips. She didn't have any make-up on and the rims of her eyes were all red.'

'Must be a Lizzy. I wonder what Lizzies do to each other. Why don't you suck up to her a bit and see if you can find out?'

'Christ! Are you mad? Suck up to her. I should think she's covered in hair from head to foot.'

'What's that got to do with it? You'll never see it. But I know what you mean.'

Later in bed Fenton was ashamed of this conversation and wondered why so many of the things he said were unpleasant and unrepresentative of what he felt. Somehow a front of toughness had to be maintained. People and things were there for laughing at; they were targets.

Liz Semple opened the door almost immediately when he knocked next morning. 'Dead on time,' she said. 'There – can you hear Housewives Choice? I'm disappointed this week. I had thought it was time for Godfrey Winn but it's only Sam Costa. I'm very keen on the wireless. It's soothing when you're stuck

over a drawing board. Come in and I'll give you a little present to take round to Maddox.' She beckoned him in and picked up a large buff envelope which she gave to him. 'There. Coffee?'

'Sorry – I haven't time.'

'Is Maddox keen on you being in on time?'

'I'm not sure. Others would mind more. Like Close for instance.'

Fenton moved over to the door. He looked trapped, embarrassed, the way people do when they're about to leave someone on a platform and climb on to a train. 'Have a good morning over the drawing board,' he said fatuously.

'Oh, I will,' she said. 'Quite a lot more Housewives Choice to go yet. Then Five To Ten, a bit of a bore, that. Sort of Low Church fairy stories they go in for. I don't suppose you've ever heard one? After that it's Sandy or someone like that at a cinema organ – do you remember a marvellous man called H. Robertson Cleaver, I won't resist the temptation to say, butchering the music? After Sandy there's Music While You Work. Then Morning Story. Then The Dales – that's a repeat of yesterday afternoon's instalment, of course. Every morning they repeat the one from the previous afternoon. Occasionally I hear the same instalment twice, isn't that decadent? Then after that, there's someone like Joe Loss for half an hour. Then Twelve O'Clock Spin. It's David Jacobs today. Old D.J. himself. Now I know damn well you've heard of D.J. I never work beyond the beginning of Listen With Mother if I can help it. Sure you won't have some coffee?'

'No, really. Can't. Thanks awfully, all the same.'

'Look in again and tell me how old Maddox reacts to my designs.'

'He won't tell me. Anyhow he'll ring you up and tell you himself.'

'Yes, I expect he will. Still, drop in if you feel like it. It's on your way home you said.'

Fenton walked briskly up the street muttering to himself what he would later say to Merge. 'Stark-staring bonkers. Right off her trolley. Started telling me about the programmes she listens to on the wireless. She's clean round the bend. Wonder what her designs are like. I'll bet she'll sneak Franklin Engelmann in somehow.'

. . . .

Maddox woke up relaxed and rested and as a further reassurance of life suddenly going his way, Sara unexpectedly appeared in the

kitchen and had a cup of coffee and some toast with him. He didn't bother to close the front door softly but swung it behind him with a satisfying slam as he left.

He was very appreciative of Fenton's efficiency in picking up the designs on his way to the office, merely pausing to wonder why he hadn't suggested this himself. He had taken it for granted Liz would simply appear with them during the day. This very slight coolness, so slight as to cause no more than a quick lowering of his eyelids and a temporary drop in the fluency of his thanks, was noticed by Fenton who was strung up to receive praise and therefore aware of subtleties he would otherwise not have noticed. It was too trivial to mention to Merge but enough to keep him from joining in with the badinage that was a constant feature of the relationship between the trainees and the typists around coffee-time.

Maddox started to rip open the envelope then stopped. It occurred to him Close would feel even more flattered if Liz's designs were looked at for the first time while they were together. It would be an open acknowledgement of Close's active participation in the creative side of the business without in any way committing Maddox to a permanent recognition of it. But even this small trick revealed Maddox's steadily growing anxiety. Close couldn't be laughed off or ignored. He had to be taken into account, reckoned with, defeated. Defeated, that is, by guile. Close would have to be consulted but there was no reason to suppose he would make decisions, or help to make decisions, Maddox wouldn't approve. Close, in spite of his specialist ability, was a simple soul. He could be run. But left out in the cold, his ambitions mocked, he could become a stumbling-block, stopping everything and furthering nothing. It was hard to believe Close would start running before he could walk by urging the firm to print writers purely on his own judgement, but it wasn't impossible.

Maddox rang Close up, asked whether he could come and see him and was suitably non-committal and yet at the same time deferential enough to arouse Close's curiosity. Almost immediately after putting the telephone down he walked to Close's office, knocked on the door, and invited him to examine the contents of Liz Semple's envelope. Close, although he pored dutifully over the material, seemed baffled by what he saw and unable to respond in any way to Maddox's comments and criticisms.

The work Liz had done was excellent. It corresponded exactly

to Maddox's brief but added, as he'd expected, originality. All the designs were done with a dash and an air that made Maddox forget everything else except them and the way they had caught so exactly what he had in mind. He was bound to talk about them to Close with an air of criticism but secretly he was delighted. Close was irritatingly cold and unresponsive to the work. Oddly enough his first real remark, the one remark that came through loud and clear, didn't concern its quality. 'Isn't it rather early to get to the actual "wrapper" stage?'

'Early? Oh, I see what you mean. Yes, perhaps it is. Personally I rather like to get the dust-jacket looked at early. It somehow clears the mind about the book by being a visual shorthand as to what the book is about, if you see what I mean.'

'Clears the mind.'

'Exactly.'

'I don't think it helps me much as–'

'–as you haven't read the book, the manuscript, yet. No, quite. Incidentally, my secretary is getting that for you this morning. From Giles Sharp. He's been reading it. At home, of course.'

'What does Giles think of it?'

'I don't really know yet. He's going to write us a letter about it. I rather think he approves.'

Close fiddled with the designs again, shuffling them backwards and forwards like enormous playing cards. He still looked puzzled, out of his depth.

'It'll be very interesting to read it,' he said. 'I feel even more interested after the other night at your house.'

'I hope you aren't still brooding about that. Danny in that mood is just a bore. Anyone can be at the receiving end. It doesn't matter. Or shouldn't.'

'It does though. I do mind. Not just because he was rude to me. Lots of people have been from time to time. I seem to invite it. I'm worried in case it prejudices me against his book. As you know I don't have much belief in him as a writer. In particular as a writer for Stantons. I think he must be too . . .' he paused briefly, not so much to search for a word, as to stress the one he had chosen, '. . . vulgar,' he finished and looked apologetic for using what he seemed to suggest was an old-fashioned word and in so doing showing two distinct sides to his character within the space of a second, the firm and the courteous.

Maddox decided to ignore the criticism and concentrated instead on the other point. 'I know what you mean,' he said. 'But quite honestly, if you'll excuse what must seem a rather fulsome piece of flattery, I think you're too fair to let anything sway you.'

'I don't,' Close replied unexpectedly. 'I don't,' he repeated. He went on, 'I don't think anyone's that fair. It's true I might compensate for his rudeness by being over-considerate to him and his manuscript but that, properly speaking, wouldn't be fair either, would it?'

'Keeping a better author from being published you mean?'

'That, yes. But fair in an absolute sense too. Fair to him. You can't let him run away with the idea that he is a real writer if he's not. And fair to Stantons – which is more important, to me that is. Sorry – I don't mean you don't care as much about Stantons as I do. I put that badly.'

'Don't give it a thought,' replied Maddox, adopting a deliberate air of rather unconvincing flippancy to cover up his embarrassment. 'I shouldn't worry about it. I'll get the manuscript to you as soon as I can. Just read it and see whether you enjoy it. Forget all about who wrote it or anything like that.'

'Yes, of course,' said Close abstractedly.

'Incidentally,' said Maddox with a slight toughening of expression, 'don't think too much about the possibility of your approving an indifferent manuscript out of a misplaced desire to compensate for not liking Donovan or his works. I've read it, and, as you know, like it, and we still have Sharp's opinion to come.'

'Yes, of course, Miles. I realise all that. I'll try and read it tonight then.'

Maddox left, irritated by the interview but conscious of behaving with restraint throughout it until the last moment when he had perhaps been a little too rough. He went to ask his secretary to get hold of the manuscript and give it to Close.

Maddox had been prepared for Close to introduce a moral line into the question of Donovan's book. His gentle air of rebuke at the dinner party had provided the sort of irritant Maddox had felt time and time again over the years, although this side of Close's character was more marked when he was with his wife. She had a more moral look about her with her strong jaw and heavily marked dark eyebrows than Sydney whose appearance, like his

manner, was depreciatory and apparently nervous. Maddox wondered if Margaret Close was responsible for her husband's attitude to the book. Clearly she disliked Donovan even more than Sydney and would be even more adamant in her disbelief that he could write a book that anyone would bother to read – anyone she knew and respected, that it. Despite his anxieties though, Maddox was fascinated to know what Close would say about Donovan's book and whether he would make it even harder for Maddox to get it published. He would be almost disappointed if Close didn't increase his stake.

. . .

Sara was dressed, made-up, and ready when Donovan's expected call came through about an hour and a half after Maddox had left for the office although there was nothing in her manner over the telephone to suggest it. She allowed a second's worth of surprise to be apparent when Danny told her who it was.

'Did you expect me to call?' he asked.

'Perhaps.'

'You got my flowers?'

'Yes. Lovely. Thank you so much.'

Understandably Donovan, who had woken up in an ebullient mood, was put out by this frigid reception. However this feeling didn't last long; it was rapidly replaced by a warm sensation of laziness, a sensuous pleasure in realising he didn't have to bother. This one was beyond him. Beyond any chance of success and therefore beyond any need for effort. It was almost exhilarating to find the burden of endeavour neatly removed from him before he had even assumed it. The flowers, he thought, were a mistake. They've terrified her. She's afraid she will have to live up to the implicit promises she seemed to suggest at dinner the night before last. The flowers called her bluff. He was about to finish the call when Sara spoke again.

'It was very nice of you.'

'Afraid I was a bit of a bastard the other night. Wanted to apologise.'

'Is that the only reason you sent them? Just to apologise?'

'I think so. Although, let's put it this way. If I'd been rude like that at one of Margaret's dinners – not that she would ever ask me – I wouldn't have felt the urge to send them to her.'

He, then, decided to go through with his original plan after all. 'Are you doing anything at lunch-time?'

'No – I don't think so. Why?'

'Lunch with me?'

'All right.'

They arranged to meet at a restaurant in the Kings Road. It was one of those which get a regular mention in the glossy magazines when they are featuring chic restaurants which offer good value for money. It was called *La Plume de ma Tante* and on fine days you could eat under striped green and white awning. If it was full, which it often was, some of the customers had to eat under the awnings even if it was pouring with rain. The roof, not as makeshift as it looked, didn't leak so much as fail to put a decisive barrier between the tables and the weather. Or at least that's how Donovan described it to Sara as they sat under it sipping vodka martinis, realising as soon as he did so that the remark didn't appeal to her. So little did it catch her fancy she seemed barely able to restrain from asking him to explain what he meant. She ordered *salade nicoise* and an *entrecôte* and he, feebly imitating her as he had done over the vodka, decided to have the same. They talked mostly about the dinner party and agreed in particular on the awfulness of the Closes, though this was not over stressed so much as trotted out to indicate once again the alliance they had formed that night. Eventually when she seemed completely relaxed, though not especially friendly, he asked whether there was any news of his book.

'No idea,' she said, accepting a cigarette. 'Miles doesn't talk much about the office when he gets home.'

'Why? Because he knows he'll bore you or because he doesn't believe in repeating things that are to do with the office?'

'Bit of both I should think.'

'So you have no idea whether they're going to publish it or not,' he persisted, angered in some way.

''Fraid not,' she said. 'Is it very important to you? I mean, of course it's important but is it terribly important?'

'Books however bad they are take a lot of writing, a lot of time. You can't be indifferent about them afterwards. Not even me. Though why I should say that I've no idea since, as you've probably guessed, I'm just as vain as anyone else.'

An insolent waiter wearing a checkered apron and looking like

the kind of hairdresser who teaches young middle aged women the latest dance – moved up to their table with a shifting, sideways, crablike motion –

'Coffee, sir?'

'Let's have it at home,' said Sara unexpectedly.

Donovan agreed, surprised and encouraged by her warmer tone. The meal had proved unexpectedly difficult. Normally Donovan, who was good at this kind of thing, broke the ice at least to the extent of knowing the other person felt a temporary glow of liking towards him. This only happened when he tried, of course. He was more likely to behave as he had at the Maddoxes' dinner party. Today though, he had tried and not for one moment, except when he was asked about his book had he betrayed any of the irritation he might legitimately have felt in the face of her almost absurdly disdainful air. The invitation possibly represented her recognition of this.

She made him coffee, Turkish, put on a record, Bechet, offered him a cigarette, Benson and Hedges Gold Tipped, and sat down in a small, Victorian button-backed chair. 'It's my budding novelist's eye,' he said. 'I feel surrounded like James Bond with agreeable and statusful objects.' He went on hurriedly realising that once again, as when he'd made the comment about the awning at the restaurant, he had stepped into an area she either didn't care for, or didn't understand. 'Most people think a lot of the success of his books are to do with the snobbery of the material things in them. Like lighters, and where your shoes are made and so on,' he rushed to the end of the sentence as quickly as he could and then, rather ludicrously, exclaimed, 'I've been to the dentist since I saw you last.'

'Really – did it hurt?'

'Not much.'

'Good.'

He laughed. She looked at him, a little puzzled.

'Why are you so different from the other night at your dinner party?'

'I never feel quite the same at lunch time as I do in the evening. But I'm sorry if I do seem very different. It was a super lunch and I enjoyed it very much.'

'And thank you for asking me,' he finished her sentence or made it appear he did so. She smiled faintly, demonstrating for

an instant that wide curving, melon-like mouth tipping up at the sides.

'Sara – are you a tease?'

'Thank you for using the shorthand version of an expression that always used to make me cross when I first heard it.'

'Did it?'

'It seemed to always put me, or any other girl it was said about, in the wrong. Just automatically. Just by saying it a man could make a girl feel guilty even if there was no reason for him to assume he had any claim on her in the first place.'

It was astonishing to watch her animation grow. It was like seeing someone come alive when her subject is at last mentioned, as if all the conversation beforehand was outside her realm of knowledge. She spoke up with all the authority of someone who knows her expertise couldn't be challenged, much less faulted. Donovan sipped some coffee and gazed at her over his cup waiting for her to go on, intrigued and pleased. Everything to date, except for the dinner, had been entirely formal, over-correct, over-cautious. It had reminded Donovan, whose critical views on women's magazines were rather extreme, of the article which he'd once cut out to show to Janet. It urged its readers to 'Play the Field', to avoid putting all your emotional eggs in one basket, wait around until Mr. Right came along. One of the methods advocated by the writer for achieving on the one hand an aura of *Noli Me Tangere* ('Look – they actually say that,' Donovan would scream excitedly to Janet; 'those actual words') and on the other, arousing interest was the use of the formal and polite responses of a Jane Austen heroine. One sentence in particular delighted Donovan. 'Many girls think formal politeness puts a man off. Nothing, positively nothing, could be further from the truth. He will respect the reserve you show and will admire you setting a standard that will bring out the best in him. A man likes something, or perhaps we should say somebody, to look up to.'

He considered Sara's last remark and finally, to encourage her to continue, said with a studied thoughtfulness which even Sara, comparatively unused to him, found suspect, 'I see what you mean.' Possibly it was the ponderous insincerity that put her off. Anyway Sara said no more and a long silence took place which was only broken when she got up to put on another record. Plainly Donovan could hardly leave the conversation where it was, in

mid-air. He wanted to know more. He wanted even more than that some indication of what the future held in store, if anything, for him and Sara.

'Do you think it would be best if I went away now and then rang you up again in a day or so?' She looked at him now with an almost comical look, or grimace, of exasperation, 'I don't know. Why?'

'Just because we aren't getting on very well and I thought we would. Obviously I thought we would.'

'So did I.'

'Well – let's not ask ourselves why and get into one of those complicated conversations which would make it impossible for either of us to behave unself-consciously with each other ever again.'

'I don't mind you going away now if you want to. But do ring up again in a day or so as you suggested. I don't see why we shouldn't be friends. That seems a funny thing to say when we've known each other vaguely for years, but you know what I mean.'

Donovan left shortly afterwards, kissing her gently but with slowness and emphasis as if to seal an understanding; an equivocal understanding since the kiss could be the beginning of a tender friendship or the lukewarm foretaste of something more fiery and intense.

Donovan was so depressed by this meeting with Sara he went straight off to the nearest cinema and watched Deborah Kerr in an old film called *The Innocents*. He had always found the cinema a great standby in times of agitation and he concentrated on the screen so hard he probably extracted more pleasure from these neurotic, almost secret, visits than he did from the more routine ones with Janet or Dawn; occasions which were spoilt by the tense condition he usually contrived to get into by the time he got to his seat. He had never taken in his stride the slight frenzy associated with going to the cinema in London; the arguments as to where to go, whether it was worth a trip to the West End to see a film at double the price you would be able to see it in a fortnight or so later at the local, where you should sit, what you should eat, what you should drink (Janet had orange drinks; Dawn liked Hostess Ripple ices), where you should park the car. When he came out he went to the pub and had the kind of satisfying and guiltless drink people enjoy after a round of golf or a taxing day at an

office. But when he went on his own the whole excursion became luxuriously simple and he came out feeling stimulated and rested.

Sara equally depressed and feeling slightly ridiculous for feeling so excited earlier in the day took off all her clothes, mooned about the bedroom, picked up bottles, put them down, trimmed her nails with an emery board, kicked a small pile of loose clothing into a smaller heap, watched the Corporation dust-cart manned by three black men and one white, and finally took her transistor radio downstairs to listen to while she had another bath.

. . .

Donovan rang Janet and asked her out for dinner. His good mood, induced by the cinema, came over the telephone as clearly as his voice. They met in a small Italian coffee-bar and had a cheap meal of veal escallop and red wine. Donovan talked animatedly but inwardly he was puzzled. Apart from anything else treating two girls to meals in the same day was very unusual. At the back of his mind, too, lay something pleasurable and reassuring. Sometimes there would be a pause as Janet watched the couple sitting outside at an umbrella-shaded table. They were eating cheesecake with fluffy expresso coffees, the two London evening papers lay crumpled on the table in front of them. While she stared at them Donovan, just as an inquisitive and early arrival at a theatre audience sometimes lifts up the curtain to see what lies behind, would try to look beyond the gentle haze in which he was enrapt to examine the full memory of his strange and inconclusive meeting with Sara. Most of the time she had been so cool, so disengaged, so demonstratively bored and then, perhaps to soothe away the astringency she had imposed on the conversation, she had sent forth, it seemed, a sudden beam of apparent friendliness when she had asked him back for coffee. Was it a desire for something to happen that made him see this as encouraging? It was some time since he'd finished his novel. Even so something more would happen. He was committed to that and so was she. Wasn't she?

He was very nice to Janet and talked of starting another book. He bestowed charm everywhere. The stout little Italian waitress was at first pleased and overcome but towards the end of the meal she sulked as if she suspected his excessive smiling, pleasing-and-thank-youing was some form of mockery laid on for the benefit

of the girl he had with him. Janet noticed this but Donovan didn't. He talked a lot.

'The other day I sat down and read *Middlemarch*. I'd always resisted it. It seemed such a school book. But it's marvellous. I mean really marvellous. It's so modern. I learnt a bit off by heart. Can you bear it?' Donovan quoted: 'Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress. Her hand and wrist were so finely formed that she could wear sleeves not less bare of style than those in which the Blessed Virgin appeared to Italian painters: and her profile as well as her stature and bearing seemed to gain the more dignity from her plain garments, which by the side of provincial fashion gave her the impressiveness of a fine quotation from the Bible,—or from one of our elder poets,—in a paragraph of today's newspaper.' He looked at her. Janet felt tired.

'There you are. It's from the opening paragraph. I know another start to a novel. See if you can guess it. "Mr. Utterson was a man of a rugged countenance, that was never lighted by a smile . . ." '

'Please, must you quote any more?'

'You're just bored by what promised to be a pyrotechnical display of Penguin-reader pretension. Thing was, *Middlemarch* got me in a state. Made me feel itchy. Although I shall be livid if Stantons don't publish my book, I know it's no good. It's rotten.'

'Why do you think so?'

'I'm too unsure of myself. I daren't be simple. It's all spoilt by trying to be "clever". It's because I'm frightened of being laughed at by the publisher, or my friends if they ever get a chance to read it. It's harder to laugh at bright sort of writing about adultery and things like that. People can complain it's tiresome but that's not too bad. It's when they sneer at you for being sincere the knife goes in. When they say how wet you are. Rather like being laughed at for saying your prayers in front of everybody. And yet that's the only sort of book I'd like to write. But it's very hard for me to do it because I don't know what to be sincere about. Morally I'm no more advanced than the kind of man who says be nice and charitable to people and animals and do what the hell you like providing you don't actually mean to hurt anyone.'

'Did you finish *Middlemarch*?'

'Yes.'

'When do you start your new one then?'

'Soon.'

'Are you going to wait until Stantons decide about the one you've done already?'

'I don't know.'

But at that moment Donovan did come to a crazy decision about it. He made a resolution. If anything came of Sara he would start before Stantons' decision. He didn't bother to analyse what he precisely meant by anything coming of Sara and in the same pleasantly hazy way as he had conducted the whole evening he postponed thinking about this until later. One proviso he did make simultaneously with the resolution. It would have nothing to do necessarily with Sara becoming his lover. If that happened it would presumably mean he had arrived at a special and magical relationship but he had an instinct it wasn't going to be like that. Whatever happened between him and Sara was going to be different or it was going to be nothing. It was on that difference he would base his decision.

He took Janet off for a drink to the nearest pub and like nearly everyone else in the pub they discussed the current scandal and the latest crop of rumours. It was very gay. All the tables had discarded copies of the evening papers as they had in the restaurant they'd just left – every edition provided the fuel that kept half London going. Janet noticed on the front pages the harassed, pock-marked face of the public quarry as he almost modestly elbowed his way through a crowd to the front door of his house. But the stories had gone miles away from him already. Others, friends and acquaintances, were being pushed into the murky limelight and the fires were being built for another and easier victim. It was clear someone would have to pay. There was too much ridicule to go unpunished. It was too big now.

Janet bought them both brandy. She insisted. She was touched by Donovan's expansiveness and largesse. She had never thought of him as mean, rather the reverse, but he hadn't bought her dinner for some while it seemed. It almost removed the ache of remembering her conversation with Dawn Childs. At the time the meeting with her had been carried off in such a light-hearted way, Dawn making the running with her implacable toughness and cynicism, Janet had found it shaming to admit how differently she felt from Danny's more resolute bedfellow. No certain knowledge of Danny's infidelities altered her feeling of committal to him any more than

her suspicions had done so. She was caught and she was obliged to keep silent about what she knew. If she reproached him he would go. Only her lightness, her apparent insouciance, kept him coming back to her. And that was why he loved her, she believed. For she knew he did. He did love her and no amount of going after other girls made any difference to this. Nor would it be altered if he married someone else or went off officially with someone else, nor if she did. That was how it was. Danny touched her glass with his, patted her knee as if he had an instinct about what she was feeling.

'Do you think all this sexual scandal is stimulating people to make love more often? Like some kind of Spanish Fly? Perhaps the birth-rate is going to leap up next spring?'

. . .

In taking out two girls to comparatively expensive meals in the course of one day Donovan, on one level, was doing the same as other Londoners who, anxious though many were to restrain their waistlines and freeze their overdrafts, found restaurants and pubs the nearest they could get to the ringside seats the spectacle demanded.

It was like the Blitz. That legend. Strangers talked to each other.

'You can't have crumpet on the side and play the public man making speeches about the good of the country.'

'Dirty beast.'

'We've all got things to hush up. Don't be so hard on the poor devil.'

'It's only human nature.'

'Dunkirk seems a long time ago.'

4

Close took the manuscript of Donovan's novel home with him. Though he felt as if he had secured a prize too long and too wilfully withheld from him he was afraid now the time had come whether he could estimate the book's worth properly. He was tired too, with a sense of anti-climax, an awareness of having behaved ridiculously in his efforts to assume a role traditionally and more suitably sustained by Maddox. He realised now what was involved. The ineptness and procrastination he'd shown when Maddox had produced the designs for the book jacket was as distasteful and clear-cut to him as it must have been to Maddox.

When he got home he found, as he often had in the past, Margaret's tough, scoffing commonsense – a louder echo of his own judgement? – blew his anxieties away leaving him tranquil and eager to start on the manuscript. Margaret, too, was tremendously interested. Although consistently contemptuous of Donovan's pretensions she looked forward to identifying people and places she knew, to verifying her own opinion of Donovan's irritating, adolescent personality; his book would expose him far more than even his behaviour. No gossip or speculation could do so much. She would see him without his clothes. She would *see* him; the acquaintance of the novelist is a merciless voyeur.

'You'll finish it before you go to bed,' she said. 'It's not very long, is it?' He understood from this he was to leave the manuscript with her when he went off to the office in the morning. He read twenty pages before dinner, drank two glasses of sherry and smoked one tipped cigarette. After dinner he read straight through until nearly midnight. When he finished he stood looking out at the street lights through the undrawn curtains: Margaret had gone to bed. Sydney Close's first thought was a simple one. He hadn't been bored. Not once had he had to square his shoulders, as it were, grit his teeth and positively attack the pages on his lap. There had been no lulls. No tiresome passages of meaningless description; everything was related to the people the book was about. It abounded in dialogue, it skipped along. And Close was surprised. Though he would have denied it, Close had an attitude towards books that was partly his own and partly Margaret's. He felt they

should, in places at least, be harder work to read than Donovan's had been. The very fact he had found it so easy was almost a reflection on the book; it must be facile. It took him back to the days when with about ten or twelve other boys he crowded around a mistress at his prep school while she read John Buchan aloud. He had been unaware of anything but the book, totally and completely absorbed in it. Occasionally it had happened to him again, this feeling of being lost in somebody else's world. At the cinema or theatre or sometimes just listening. He hadn't experienced this, except very fleetingly on a holiday, when he was reading. Indeed it was one of the reasons Margaret made him feel inferior. Her complete concentration on her book – her seriousness about it – was a standing reproach to his own failure, to be unaware of what else was going on around him when he was supposed to be reading. But tonight it had happened again. A feeling of gratitude came over him. He owed Donovan something. Donovan of all people had given him a small taste of freedom from himself. Perhaps it was the peculiar circumstances of reading the manuscript that had so won him over rather than the writing itself. After all he had never had to judge a book as part of his job before. Anything to do with his job shut out everything else. Close drew the curtains, banished the garish light from the hideous street lights, their tops the heads of dinosaurs, their stems a grey prehistoric colour to match.

He would sleep on the book, think about it again in the morning. It was certainly readable, he repeated to himself as he drank a glass of milk out of the fridge. He remembered one of Maddox's dictums, 'Mark it out of ten for readability before doing anything else at all. Then pass on to the details of what it's about, whether it's well written, fashionable and so on.' He'd told this to Margaret. 'Miles is so glib,' she'd said. She would be against the book for the very reasons Maddox would be in its favour. It was scarcely worth her while to read it. She would expect Sydney to be against it. Was he? Was he to be against something he guessed Maddox was right about? If he condemned it he would be condemning a profit – or so it seemed. How could such an animal as a literary accountant exist? His accountancy was so professional and his literary judgement so amateur, so cautious, so frightened, so unsure. Close writhed as the complexity of the problem, imagined briefly earlier in the evening, became apparent. Confidence was the charm he needed to ward off the dangers ahead. Would Margaret supply this

as she had before that evening? Could she blow some wind into his sail? Give him more than an aesthetic or intellectual opinion? Give him this, yes, but tempered with a business appreciation. Would she see he couldn't reject a book on its quality if he was convinced of its worth as a financial investment or would she insist on a purer kind of integrity, one that was unrelated to money?

Sydney remembered, disloyally it seemed to him, a tiny incident. She had been saying over a table how iniquitous it was she paid her char a mere four and six an hour. Another girl there had mocked her, 'What's there to feel guilty about? Just be glad. I have to pay five shillings and a whacking big bus fare for her every day as well.' Margaret, undeterred and apparently indifferent to this – indifferent with a dash of indulgence – continued to discuss in a sort of gentle wailing way the 'guilt' she felt about it. Like someone stirring a dying fire with a poker, thought Sydney at the time. (Was it at the time? Certainly it had crossed his mind as an apt description when he was going over the evening in bed later that night.) The other girl, discomfited possibly at the cool air of moral superiority Margaret had adopted, cut in with unexpected firmness. 'If you mind so much why don't you raise her wages and pay her six shillings an hour instead? I warn you if you do though, I'll give you another guilt feeling for putting up the market price and making it harder for people like me to afford one at all.'

Sydney found he was soothed by this girl's sturdy commonsense. Perhaps he was going through a stage when Margaret's glacial standards were proving unusually arduous and he longed for the whiff of commercial reality which this girl unexpectedly provided. It had seemed at the time, and seemed even more so now, to have been a telling incident marking clearly a dividing line between them.

After drinking his coffee next morning Sydney Close went upstairs to see Margaret who was washing and dressing his second son, John.

'I've left the manuscript on the desk.'

He looked at his son, an untidy mess of clothes which he was striving to keep that way as part of his daily struggle against his mother. Sydney was an affectionate but undemonstrative man. He liked to watch whenever Margaret or Bertha played with the children but made no effort to join in; he only kissed them at night because it was expected of him. As it was, Margaret would often

have to remind him to do so and the way she reminded him was more often than not a reproof. Margaret looked up with surprise when he suddenly laid his hand on the top of the boy's head. The boy stopped fidgeting and stood stock still. It looked like a benediction in modern dress – Sydney grave and conferring. A religious picture by Stanley Spencer. The religious aspect was heightened by the boy's absolute stillness; he had been quietened by a miracle. And then a faint change of expression suggested he was almost overburdened by the unmoving weight of Sydney's hand. Probably the quiet would have been broken by the child once more relapsing into his early morning turbulence if Sydney hadn't quickly ruffled the boy's hair, kissed his wife on the forehead and gone downstairs. As he left he heard Margaret's voice, parodying exasperation as she often did, 'John – do keep still.'

Travelling on the tube train Sydney gazed at the duckboard pattern of the floor and wondered, as he'd often done before, why some men had to wear drab, overlong mackintoshes whatever the weather. And then it seemed to him he was a mackintosh man himself and would no doubt have worn one in just the same perpetual and dispirited way if he had been exposed to a different kind of upbringing. Invariably though, he carried a small black suitcase. (Merge and Fenton claimed he carried his masonic regalia in it and had Sydney known this it would have partly confirmed the accuracy of his new self description – a mackintosh man.)

It was seven stops from Holland Park Avenue to Tottenham Court Road. He walked slowly through to Covent Garden. Sydney hadn't become a changed man because he'd read a book but he was more agitated than he thought he would be at the new set of problems he had brought upon himself by his insistence on playing a more creative role at Stantons. He had forced his way into foreign territory, Maddox-land, and he couldn't turn back. The way behind him was barred, he was locked out by his own stubbornness, his determination not to be relegated continually to a role he now saw as both drab and laborious. Perhaps he had sensed something of Maddox's successful campaign of mild denigration and this had been the spur. Maddox's charm was formidable but even so as time went by his ambition was steadily revealed in everything he did. Even the charm was of that dangerous sort that when used seemed to be uniformly successful but which left in its wake a suspicion of insincerity. People didn't know where they were with

Maddox. Yet now Sydney felt, as he'd felt so often in the past, outwitted. Outwitted not so much by Maddox's direct action but by his own silliness is not recognising the dangers of tampering with Maddox who, it seemed, could cause things to happen when opposed in any way. For instance, Stantons' readers who disagreed with his evaluation of a book ceased to be readers within a short space of time. When they went though, it seemed to be their own doing. It was their idea they should give up and Maddox, who usually was the first person they went to, was invariably polite and wore a look of puzzlement as he gently tried to dissuade them from their decision. They remained firm but left wondering if they had not been a little foolish to give up a congenial *pourboire* as Maddox often called it. Now Sydney was trespassing. Would he have to pay for his intrusion? Would the poacher go down? Or could he hold his own? Survival seemed unlikely, now that Sydney faced up to what he had done. A whim, reinforced by a kind of firmness – almost a petulance – had become a test of ability. He would have to match Maddox's expertise. How? What with?

When Sydney got to the office he took up a file on his desk which his secretary had left. It turned out to be about some new negotiations Stantons were having with one of their American authors. It was a case Sydney found absorbing as it dealt with the new percentage being asked as a result of the man's increasing popularity both in his own country and in Europe. Sydney had been in touch with him for some months and despite the great courtesy both correspondents showed to each other this file which contained various points of view from other people in the firm, revealed Stantons would soon have to make a decision that might well cause the author to take his work elsewhere. Sydney started to read some of the latest letters again and looked up with an expression of slight impatience when the door opened after about ten minutes and Maddox came into the room. This preoccupation with the problem in front of him gave Close an air of authority and detachment which for at least the first part of the interview lent him an unexpected advantage. Maddox had started talking about Donovan's manuscript before Close was aware of Maddox's intention in coming to see him.

Close conducted the conversation as if he had been spared any of the doubts which had haunted him on his way to the office and

before he'd gone to sleep the night before. Maddox was disconcerted not only by Close's calm, almost indifference, but also by the prick of envy he felt when he observed how completely wrapped up in his work Close had been. It must have been the tranquillity brought about by this concentration that encouraged Close to tell a thumping lie within seconds of Maddox's arrival in his office. He explained he hadn't quite finished the manuscript and so thought it would be unfair and unrealistic to comment on the book until he had. He said this with a curiously absurd, almost mock-deprecatory look down at his desk giving as he did so a fleeting impression of a chorus girl lowering long, false eyelashes as she ogled some fat business man sitting at a table on the edge of a night-club floor. Maddox though forced to agree with Close's judgement did so with a plain hint of exasperation at his pomposity and formality. Close was not after all being asked to offer an opinion on a difficult case in Chancery; he was merely being asked about a possible new but unmistakably minor novelist who might make a little money for the firm and a little notoriety or fame for himself. Rather abruptly Maddox asked if he'd enjoyed the book so far.

'Yes, I think so. A little glib, perhaps.'

'Glib?'

'Oh – facile.'

'Facile?'

'Need I say more?' Close broke in rather quickly sensing Maddox was about to take him up.

'Of course not. Just one question. If it was a book you bought or borrowed from a library would you look forward to finishing it tonight?'

'If I'd bought it I certainly would because I only buy books I know I'm going to like but I don't think this would be the kind of book I would buy. If I'd got it from the library – yes, I think I would quite look forward to it. Not enough to stop me going to the pictures or put me off a TV programme I wanted to watch.'

'Not many books would.'

'No – more's the pity.'

Maddox, who'd been looking out of the window, jangling his change as usual looked crossly over his shoulder at Close. He said nothing for a moment or so then gesturing at the file on Close's desk remarked without much appearance of interest, 'How's that Elvaston business coming along?'

'You haven't been in on it for a bit have you? His agent's terms are really very steep. Absurdly so.'

'One of our best writers though, don't you think?'

'Yes, maybe . . .'

'Maybe?'

'Of course he's very gifted. But if other writers discover what terms Elvaston forced out of us we might have a positive barrage of grumbles to contend with.'

'We can't afford to lose people like Elvaston, I'm sure. Still this is your province, not mine. If the firm can't afford him, that's that.'

As he was leaving Maddox turned in the doorway. 'Anyway, Donovan won't cost us very much. At least not to start with,' he waved lightly and left.

Sydney Close sat looking at the closed door. His problem could not have been more trimly illustrated for him. As neat and precise as a diagram on a blackboard. The temporary alleviation his concentration on Elvaston had secured for him vanished and he looked down at the file with a weariness which would have been incomprehensible to him a mere five minutes before.

Could he, consistently, think of advising against Elvaston – a writer of true quality – on financial grounds, and against Donovan, an inexpensive investment, on a cultural judgement which by definition he was less qualified to make?

During the next day or two he had to make up his mind about Donovan's book and about his future function in Stantons. He had brought about a test case.

Margaret's opinion would be waiting at home. It would be accompanied by two, possibly under the circumstances three, glasses of Mauzanilla.

5

Sara and Donovan were eavesdropping on a couple sitting very close to them in the restaurant. What they said came out pat as if Donovan had laid on a minor divertissement for his guest.

'I believe I'm on to something in this book I'm working on that will genuinely shake people. I'm tempted to use expressions like "take the lid off", "searing" and so on. Like they do on film posters. But I really feel this is it.'

'A big theme?'

'Yes, very big. Very, very big. As big as I think I can go.'

'About the bomb?'

'Bomb?'

'Cobalt or Domesday or whatever they call it now.'

'What on earth would I want to write about that for?'

'Well, you said . . .'

'No, it's about my divorce of course . . .'

Sara had smiled slightly because Donovan considered it funny. She made no attempt though to match his reaction or search for words to echo it. Danny felt depressed. He looked round for a waiter, wondered whether he could get a taxi, whether he could suggest coffee at her house again. She seemed better on her own ground and her enjoyment of restaurants was more in retrospect than at the time. She demanded to be taken to them as a right, they were her due, but they gave her too little pleasure.

'You seemed an entirely different person at that dinner the other night.'

'I was. I was what Sydney Close calls a hostess. I was trying to be gay. I don't find it comes very easily. Maybe I would if I didn't find people like the Closes very depressing.'

'You like to be entertained?'

'Yes – please.'

'You're quite right. It wasn't very enterprising of me to repeat what I said over lunch the other day.'

'You mean about my being different at the dinner party?'

'Yes.'

'I wondered why it interested you.'

'Because at the dinner party you seemed to hint that we had

something in common. It was in the air and you as well as me put it there.' Her expression softened. Donovan mistakenly took this to be encouragement when in fact it was only a quickening of interest; she wanted to stop being bored.

'I still think we might have "something in common", as you put it.'

'Do you? This is our second lunch and like last time we're making very heavy weather of it. I'm even saying the same things as I did then.'

'That doesn't matter.'

Donovan finally caught a waiter. She put her hand on his arm. 'Let's have it at home again. The coffee, I mean. I make it so much better, don't you think?'

There ought to be a physical sound to go with the instant click of rapport when it comes. So a relaxed Donovan thought to himself as he sat beside her in the cab, his fingers for the first time locked in hers, remembering two other moments when without any warning a difficult or embarrassing situation had been miraculously righted.

He and Janet had started very clumsily and saw each other several times without achieving any understanding until one night when he took her back to the bed-sitter where he was living and said, almost before she had taken her coat off, 'I bought a toothbrush for you today,' and held his breath pretending to busy himself getting glasses out of the cupboard. He heard a movement but she said nothing. When he turned round she was holding her handbag open. She held it towards him tilting it so he could see in. A new toothbrush in a cellophaned carton gleamed up from the usual jumble of combs, pins, and make-up bottles.

The other but very different time had been on a week-end when he had been one of a party who'd gone to stay with the parents of someone he'd known at Oxford. There had been about seven or so other people there, two of whom Danny remembered slightly. For some inexplicable reason it started off with more of the nerve wracking elements of a threatened collision than a lulling, social forty-eight hours. The host, a man of about sixty, seemed to enjoy himself but fatigued everybody else. His talk was a running commentary; mock-humorous, observant, light and nervous, intended, it seemed, to soothe away the dangers of a serious conversation by its butterfly to-and-froing, taking up and discarding subjects with

a complete lack of application, originally charming finally exhausting the guests who anxiously sought to secure a foothold in what was going on.

Somebody, not Donovan, suggested Monopoly. *That* had been the click point. The relief was almost audible. Everyone, it appeared, passionately loved and believed in Monopoly. The weekend became agreeable.

Donovan didn't pass on these reflections to Sara who was gazing blindly at the shops in the Kings Road.

It was only when he was sipping some of the same powerful sweet coffee he realised he wasn't going to do anything. It was, of course, out of the question to start an affair with Miles' wife. It was as simple as that. So simple he couldn't imagine how he'd ever contemplated it. He supposed he could have got away with it. It seemed he could. He felt a moment's fleeting contempt for his unstable progress with Sara; even he should have known, he felt, more of what he wanted instead of allowing them to flounder around, two elderly adolescents with no excuse for gawkiness.

'It won't do, will it?' he said, putting his coffee cup on the mantelpiece.

'You know Miles too well.' A question or a statement? It was so softly said. Donovan looked at her with respect.

'Yes.'

'And if he did persuade them to publish your book as well – '

' – Yes.'

'Those are your points of view. Your reasons. They may not be mine.'

'I'm sure they're not.'

'I think you would take it too seriously. You would wonder how I could do it if I ever started. You would blame me.'

'You think I'm too romantic.'

'Yes.'

'Moral?'

'Yes.'

'And you? You aren't romantic? Or moral?'

'I don't know. I like fun best.'

Donovan laughed. 'You wouldn't think that if you could see yourself at the moment. You don't look very fun-loving.'

She disregarded this. 'Girls like me don't like serious fun. Only fun fun. Perhaps I'm not passionate enough.'

She looked at the newly dusted glass-topped drink table that stood by the side of the sofa and continued to talk.

'Janet likes serious fun. So does Margaret.'

'They're very different.'

'More like each other than either are like me.'

After a pause she suddenly said, 'You ought to marry Janet and stop all this leching around. You'd be much happier. Have children. Mend the boilers. Look at television every night.'

'I'm beginning to see why Miles married you.'

'He was wrong you know. I'm not what he thought I was. Nor what he wants. I sometimes think it can't last much longer.'

'I suppose I must have known that or I wouldn't have asked you out to lunch in the first place.'

'It's all a question of whether I mind missing the boat or whether I get to accept it.'

They parted without any fracture in their new intimacy, pausing for a moment, it seemed, to survey their future in the light of the revelations of the afternoon. 'What will you do?' she asked.

'You may not know it but I think I can confidently say you're looking at the face of the man who will become in the very near future the worst living English novelist. And you?'

'I wish Miles was richer.'

Donovan's elation was neither shallow nor short-lived. 'Resisting temptations is almost the keenest pleasure of all.' He gabbled happily to a surprised Janet that night as once again in the same week he took her out and paid for it. She looked probingly at him and hastily he took the conversation off into some realm of abstract theory and pontification. Janet wondered if Dawn had been seeing him recently and found to her surprise she could bear to think of Dawn and Donovan together without jealousy. Dawn's indifference to Donovan bordered on the callous and this made the situation less inflammable. Remembering the evening with Dawn she looked at Donovan with a protective and indulgent maternalism and her eyes glistened.

'I started my new novel today,' he said towards the end of the meal. 'It's going rather well. Much better than the last one. It seems to be all here inside me. Last time I had to go scratching around like an old hen or like a child at school writing home to his

parents wondering what to put next and sucking a foul-looking pencil.'

Later he questioned her about Groats and she told him about Charles' latest girl friend. 'He offered to buy her a car.'

'That was nice of him.'

'It didn't work anyway. He had to add to it, you see.'

'Add to it?'

'He said, "There's only one snag. I come with the car." '

'That is rather a coarse approach, I suppose.'

'He thinks I should get another job. He says there's no future in a terrible firm like Groats and by the time he gets control from his father I shall be too old to enjoy all the sweeping changes he's going to bring about.'

Later Donovan kissed her with great affection and almost immediately fell asleep beside her in her large brass bed with the red swing ticket reading SOLD hanging from the bed rail.

After his inconclusive talk with Maddox, Close passed an unsatisfactory day at Stantons postponing a final comment on the Elvaston problem and rather crossly dealing with a number of other detailed and boring matters. He got home early and wasn't surprised to find Margaret in the drawing room with a crisp and expectant expression on her face. She had read the manuscript and, of course, hadn't been disappointed. The book, she thought, was terrible. Worse than she had expected. However, she knew this was the opinion she was almost bound to have and so was anxious to dress it up in more respectable clothing. She had always been particularly on her guard against the accusation of prejudice. Very coolly she told Sydney her opinion interlarding her criticism with a little cautious praise. She used no violent words. She didn't say it was trash; the word had occurred to her more than once while she had been reading and she'd once said it out loud. Despite her balanced, sane and constructive sentences, Sydney's expression of weariness didn't alter. He sipped his sherry and gazed at her with a look of mourning and bafflement. His shoulders seemed to cave forward, diminishing his chest and increasing the length of his arms. Margaret realised she wasn't getting through. She got him to talk. He became more animated as he told her of his interview with Maddox, of the Elvaston business. He explained succinctly what

his anxiety was and why he saw in it implications for the future. He did this very well. Finally Margaret said, 'I think you're over-simplifying. Elvaston, and what you decide to do about him, hasn't anything to do with Donovan's book.'

'Not directly, I agree.'

'Not in any way.'

'What is my role? One moment I'm an accountant deciding whether a thing is too much of a financial risk and thinking only of the bare figures. The next I'm trying to assess Donovan's worth as a writer. I can't do both.'

'Why not?'

'They are conflicting.'

'They're not.'

Sydney Close resumed his look of misery and slumped in the chair.

'You're frightened of Maddox,' she said very gently.

'Why do you say that?'

'He makes you feel clumsy. You think he's laughing at you. He makes you feel too much the willing horse. I know that's how you feel because it's how in a way he makes me feel. We're very alike, you and I.'

'Husbands and wives do get to be alike.'

'Yes. Sara is a little like Miles. But she doesn't know it of course. I never know whether it's her or Miles that gives me the feeling I've put my powder on badly. It's a sort of combined ray they direct at me.'

'I don't think you're all that like me.'

'Because I'm talking like this? Too emotional for you? Too irrational?'

'Combined ray!'

'I'm a woman. I'm allowed to say things like that. But I'm only putting in fanciful language the same basic feelings as I think you have. I'm exaggerating them if you like. Not distorting.' Sydney looked out of the window for a moment then got out of his chair.

'I think I'll go and wash.'

She looked at him. He stopped at the door.

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude. I was very interested in what you were saying. Possibly there is something in it. I just remembered I hadn't had a wash since I got in.'

'I know. Let's talk about it again over dinner.'

'Oh yes. We shall have to do that.'

He added 'You're much more sensitive than me.'

Margaret, finding herself in this mood of eloquent frankness and deprived of Close's attention, continued to ponder over what she'd said, and from that to ask herself a question she was so far from answering that she put it to Sydney as they sat together in the dining room crumbling bread at the end of the meal.

'Do you think I'm ambitious for you? Too ambitious? Do I want to push you?'

'What strange conversations we're having tonight.'

'It's relevant.'

'Because you've guessed I'm trying to get out of this new responsibility?'

'Did you ever really want to get involved with this side of publishing? Haven't I over the last year or so put the idea into your head?'

'Well, you're much more literary than I am. Look at the amount you read.'

'That sounds very naïve coming from a publisher. It had a note of wonder in it. It confirms what I was saying.'

'Yes. I see what you mean. But you've always known . . .'

'Yes. I've always known your ability lay on the other side of the fence. But I was anxious to encourage you when you complained you were being kept out of the interesting work at Stantons.'

'Perhaps I did it because I was anxious to have more in common with you.'

'You don't think you were bored?'

'I don't get bored. Or rather I didn't. It's one of my few virtues. I often think *I* am boring though.'

'So you hit on the idea of doing something that would make you feel you were less boring?'

'I shouldn't think so for a moment. That would have been much too clever of me. I really don't know what I thought. It just happened.'

'I wish to God you didn't have such a low opinion of yourself. It's silly.'

They didn't talk much more yet somehow Close knew tomorrow he would tell Maddox he would give him any support he might need and was content to rely on a judgement that had served them all so well in the past. He would hint at a complicity and at a retreat.

He would go back where he belonged. He would not stray again. He would only ask of Maddox a final courtesy. Maddox would emphasise Close's role in the decision to publish Donovan. He would draw attention to a partnership and imply it would continue. A tiny laurel leaf for the defeated Close and a cementing for the future. Both of them happier for it. Margaret, who would never have published Donovan, would understand and think it a small and insignificant reverse in comparison with the larger victory. Close would be happy again. But the next day Close didn't see Maddox. They didn't coincide at their wash-basins. Close thought perhaps he had made Maddox feel too pushing the last time they had talked about Donovan's book and he was keeping out of the way deliberately. He went home to Margaret and they didn't mention Stantons at all as they were entertaining some dull friends Margaret had known at university. 'I don't feel I should just let them slip out of my life.'

Close had been quite right. Maddox had decided against intruding on Close that day. He'd felt once again Close would only be hurried into an adverse decision rather than a favourable one.

. . .

Miles turned on the TV for the news. While he was trying for a clearer picture by moving the aerial from one part of the carpet to another he said to Sara, 'Dick Steel saw you today.'

'Who's he?'

'One of our editors. He recognised you because he's seen you meeting me at the office sometimes.'

'Oh.'

'At the *Escargot*.'

'Yes . . .'

'With someone . . .'

'Yes. Danny Donovan.'

'Danny? Really. Why? Was he worried about wrecking your dinner party the other night?'

'He wanted to know how his book was getting on. He *said* he wanted to make amends for the way he behaved at the dinner party but it was his book he really wanted to know about. I told him I didn't really know and he'd better ask you.'

'How strange. He should have rung me.'

'Yes. He should.'

They looked at the television and saw a tired old man with a droopy moustache, heavy eyelids with strongly marked eyebrows, sharp as eaves, above them, fruity and slow, caught like a tradesman about to commit illegal entry outside his own temporary house in Downing Street.

'Poor bastard.'

Next morning Sara asked Miles for Janet's telephone number.

'You're awake early,' he said, looking at her curiously.

'I didn't sleep very well.'

'Never know her number. Sorry. Ring her at her office. At Groats.'

'She's got a fabulous new dressmaker. Cheap, too.'

'Shouldn't have thought you and she dressed much alike.'

As soon as it was half past nine Sara rang Janet.

'Will you be seeing Danny today?'

'He'll probably ring. I may see him. I saw him last night.'

'Miles was talking to me about his book last night. He thinks everything is going quite well but it may take a bit longer. He asked me to ring you so you could pass on the message. He's very tied up all day. Perhaps Danny could ring him at home about six tonight?'

'Will he be home that early?'

'Yes.'

'If Danny rings I'll tell him.'

This was all Sara could think of to do. The quickest way to get a danger message to Danny. She would receive his call at six, Miles might be home, if so she would hand over the phone having alerted Danny by the way she answered.

. . .

At half past ten Danny rang Stantons and got straight through to Miles.

'How's my book? You'd be surprised how many other publishers would like to get their hands on it.'

'How are you, Danny?'

'I've started on another one. I was telling Janet last night. It's much better. I can tell that already. I'll only let you handle it if you get a move on with this one.'

'Close is reading it.'

'Close can't read.'

'I think he's enjoying it.'

'It must be worse than I think.'

They talked for a while longer. Miles said nothing about Sara's lunch with Donovan. Neither did Donovan.

. . .

An hour or so later bored with his own company and still feeling buoyed up by the renunciatory conclusion to his lunch with Sara the day before Donovan rang up Janet.

'Just been talking to Miles. About my book.'

'Was he in?'

'What do you mean was he in? How else could I have spoken to him? Why shouldn't he be in?'

'Nothing. Nothing. Sorry. What did he say?'

'Very little. They don't like being rung, these publishers. Even when you've known them for years like I've known Miles. Come and have some lunch.'

Before she went out to meet Donovan Janet thought about Sara's phone call. It could have been chance Donovan had succeeded in talking to Maddox. Conferences, meetings, did get cancelled. Wives rarely knew what their husbands did in their offices. A mistake could easily have been made. Did Sara often act as her husband's messenger?

Janet wasn't malicious and when out of her depth, or merely puzzled, she tended to be very orthodox. She faithfully delivered Sara's message to Donovan.

'I wonder why she thought Miles would be tied up all day?' said Donovan casually.

'Probably she wasn't listening properly to what he said.'

'I'd better ring tonight I suppose.'

'Why? You've already talked to him this morning. What would you say you haven't said already?'

'Yes. It might be a bit silly.'

. . .

Very punctually at six Donovan rang Maddox's home. Sara picked up the phone. Miles was home so there was only one course open to her. She answered crisply.

'Oh, Danny – how are you? Did you want to talk to Miles? He's

just here. Thank you once again for that lovely lunch yesterday. Couldn't have been more fun. Here's Miles.'

Donovan said, 'Do you think it would help if I had a private chat with Close? Over a meal or something?' and soon after rang off.

Miles said to Sara, 'He does seem worried doesn't he?'

Sara wasn't sure whether she'd got away with it until Miles mentioned later in the evening Donovan had rung him earlier in the day. Then she knew she hadn't. Donovan, despite the lead Sara had given him on the telephone, realised it would be unwise to refer to his lunch of the previous day as he had said nothing when he rang Stantons and talked to Miles that morning. He hoped by deliberately refraining from doing so he would lull any suspicions Maddox might have. Like Sara he didn't think he'd got away with it.

Janet knew Danny and from the start had been curious about the call Sara had made to her first thing in the morning. Miles knew, and had always known, he loved his wife more than she did him and the sharpened suspicions he always carried around with him as a result of this made him hard to deceive. It was a mess. Suddenly and unfairly, it was a mess and it was made more of one because the matter had gone underground. Things hadn't become sufficiently clear for anyone to attack the mess, clean it up. The matter would fester.

6

'Would you lust after me if I wasn't quite so plain – for my character I mean?'

'You're certainly bloody plain.'

'Oh, Donovan. I bet you say that to all the girls.'

Donovan and Liz Semple were standing together at the bar of the Pomfret Arms. They had met by chance in the street and, like so many people who don't work regular hours for other people, they were happy to postpone whatever vague plan they had to have a drink in each other's company. The Pom-Pom was an ugly pub. The service was appalling because the people behind the bar were both old and truculent. The floor was dirty and uncarpeted. The counters were blackened with wear and age. The pies, sandwiches, and pink frankfurters were eaten with pleasure only by the four or five cab drivers who'd been up since a cheerless and breakfastless dawn. Despite all these things, Donovan liked it because of the small group of men who were always to be found there – at the opposite end from the cab drivers. He called them 'the crashed Balliol men', a phrase he'd picked up from a book and which he had been at the time perhaps rather over-anxious to bestow. They exuded a musty intellectual chic and a faint air of Embassy scandals in far-off Eastern capitals hung about them. In the mornings they drank pints of draught cider; in the evenings, large whiskies. They behaved with a cheery rudeness towards each other, finishing each other's *Times* crosswords without giving offence. Donovan used to say he would one day put the entire resources of Debrett, Burke's *Peerage*, and the *Almanach da Gotha* on to them to see what famous family skeletons they were harbouring in their midst.

Liz Semple didn't like the Pom-Pom. 'It's too Bohemian and I get quite enough of that at home.' They discussed Donovan's book and he was very elated to discover Liz had done some designs for it.

'Looks as if they're going to print it,' she said.

'Hope you're right.' Donovan brooded a moment. 'Do you know they're actually letting Close read it to get his opinion?'

'Close can't read.'

'That's exactly what I said to Miles the other day. My very words.'

'I'm rather impressed about you writing a book.'

'I've started another one. Much better.'

'What do you believe in?'

'What on earth do you mean?'

'What I say. If you write books you must believe in something, for Christ's sake.'

'I'll tell you one thing. If I was to put what you've just said into a book I couldn't type out "for Christ's sake" without wondering whether I was running the risk of incurring eternal torment. I'm still so saturated with school religion I suppose.'

'Perhaps you are religious.'

'It's very hard to be religious in London. But perhaps you're right. When I heard a girl say at a Christmas party last year "Now raise your glass and join me in wishing Happy Birthday to that great guy Jesus" I was genuinely shocked.'

'Then you must believe in something.'

'No.'

'Yes.'

'I believe in the things I don't believe in.'

'That's just clever stuff.'

'So it's just clever stuff.'

'Go on, then. Don't sulk. Tell me.'

'It's rather difficult to think of something just like that. It'll sound silly. Well – I don't believe in families having to love each other just because they're related.'

'Old stuff that. Like women's rights. Ibsen. Shaw. All the oldies.'

'It isn't like women's rights.'

'Tell me what you believe about women. Or rather what you don't believe.'

'I don't believe they believe in love.'

'How very paradoxical of you. Why not?'

'They talk about it too much.'

'That could mean it's important to them. I mean – just to make a naïve comment.'

'It's just a password. Once you've told them you love them enough times they'll do anything. Unless you've got chronic halitosis or you're unusually repulsive in some way. "Do you love me?" they demand just when you're struggling with a zip or some-

thing. "Yes, of course," you reply, red in the face with your exertions or frustrations. "Pass friend. All's well," they say leaning back and sliding down the zip, as if it were coated with olive oil every morning for easier running.'

'Balls!'

'You've a rare gift for lofty argument.'

'You're very old-fashioned. What else don't you believe in?'

'I don't believe in talking such terrible nonsense so early in the morning.'

'Dead right, Danny Boy.'

'I'd forgotten your habit of calling me "Danny Boy". Didn't he murder some old lady in a play by Emlyn Williams?'

'I thought he was an Irish horse who won the Curragh.'

They parted soon afterwards but not before they'd had a few more serious words about Donovan's book. Because Liz had been brought into the business by Miles she might prove to be another ear at Court and Danny, with nothing to do but wait, seized on any chance, however slim, to advance his cause.

'If Miles gets in touch about any more designs I'll let you know.'

'Good. If he did, that would be pretty conclusive wouldn't it?'

'I should think it would be.'

Donovan wrote down her number.

'Do you know you've got the most enormous blackhead on the side of your nose?'

Miles Maddox didn't say anything more to Sara about her lunch with Donovan, though for the next few days he thought of little else. He thought first of all about the dinner party with the Closes and Donovan. For some reason, that seemed the place to start. He remembered how Donovan had brought a rose for each of the girls and how at the time he had been mildly amused by what he took to be a typical Donovan gesture; histrionic and brashly charming. Now, when he thought about it, he wondered whether Donovan's largesse had been a kind of camouflage to conceal a private offering to Sara. This suspicion seemed absurd to Maddox but it led him automatically to another, even more absurd for being spawned by the first. The enormous bowl of roses in the drawing room – had they been bought by Sara? She ordered flowers every week for the

house, and expensive ones at that, but did she ever buy roses? Do girls, even married ones, buy roses for themselves? Don't they wait to be sent them, even when the chances of this happening appear to be remote? There were times when Maddox found his fears grotesque, and times when he found them entirely sensible. He swung between the two. He wasn't free of thinking about it in one form or another. He had no desire to do anything. He could think of nothing which would help. Relations with Sara were deteriorating into the kind of formality which prohibits almost any kind of personal conversation. Breaking the ice meant falling in. Maddox hadn't the nerve to risk losing Sara and he thought Donovan was sufficiently different a person to get her away from him, even if only for a short time.

Sara might get into so tense a condition she would only require the smallest provocation. Maddox couldn't lose her because he knew she would probably want to come back and he wouldn't be able to let her – it would mean losing twice. He couldn't do that. His temper at the office was perfectly equable but abstracted. It became noticeable he didn't throw himself into things with his usual competitive zest. Close discovered this when, tired of waiting for Maddox to talk to him about Donovan's book, he eventually went to have an afternoon cup of tea with him.

'I must admit I did find it very readable. Really, very readable.'

'Yes. It is.'

'As you pointed out the other day, this is very important if a book is to be a commercial success. It can't be *War and Peace* every time. We can't always have jam. We live on bread and butter.'

'Exactly so.'

'Perhaps I am – or was – too influenced by who wrote the book rather than by what he wrote. I confess I've never found Donovan a very sympathetic character. I found it hard to imagine him in the role of a writer.'

'You think we ought to publish it then?'

'Yes. I've come round to your view.'

'Fine. We'll go ahead then.'

There was little Close could add after this. Certainly there was very little he did say and within a very few minutes he was back in his own room, aggrieved and puzzled. 'I've spent all this time wondering what to say. What I should say, that is. He didn't even

seem interested,' he complained to Margaret that night. 'Did he seem to take it as a foregone conclusion you would finally agree with him?' she asked.

'No. Not a trace of that. Just not at all interested.'

'Did you think he was fed up with the whole subject?' she persisted.

'No, not even that.'

'He does get fed up as soon as he's won.'

The day after Miles had first mentioned her lunch with Donovan, Sara had taken the card she'd received with the roses, torn it very thoroughly into pieces and dropped them down the lavatory. She stood looking down at the riot of water she caused by pulling the plug, dusting her hands gently together as she might have done on the completion of a small but dirty household chore.

The whole incident had unnerved her more than she would have believed possible. She was annoyed to discover the inadequacy of her sophistication. Reviewing her life a few days previously in her bath, she had coolly considered the possibility of an affair solely from the enjoyment it might or might not bring her. If it wasn't to be thoroughly pleasurable, thoroughly self-indulgent, she wasn't going to entertain it. Nothing tiresome was to be allowed. It was to be a luxury or it was to be still born. She had felt she only had one thing to lose; complete control over her own comings and goings. She hadn't considered there was a risk of anything other than that. It hadn't occurred to her she could have been found out. Nor, if it had occurred to her, would it have seriously worried her. She could handle Miles. Miles loved her. Now it had happened and she found panic beating inside her like a faster pulse. She'd risked more than she knew and suddenly, when it might be too late, she realised she couldn't count on, couldn't calculate even, her husband's reaction. The coldness in him was a surprise. It had grown more pronounced over the past few months; possibly he had set out to match her long silences, her disinterestedness. It was this apprehension, this new knowledge of him, that provoked her to act too fast. She had arranged for Donovan to ring that night at six and Miles, suspicious already, must have thought the second call had been for Sara and not for him at all. Particularly as Donovan had nothing to add to the previous call he'd made in the morning other than the

palpably insincere suggestion about lunching with Close. Sara found it hard to behave normally but she knew unless she did Miles was going to do something. He wouldn't leave it. One more mistake, like Donovan's phone call, was all it needed. Or did it need anything at all?

Her indifference, her aloofness, her decorativeness, must all remain bone hard. A trace of unusual affection, even a look of anxiety might set the wheels turning. He must not arrive home to find her waiting too obviously. She must not mix him a drink too eagerly or too often. Suppers must often be indolent. Small, supermarket, half chickens, packets of frozen peas, instant coffee, scrappy bits of cheese under the lid.

Sara didn't analyse why she was so frightened nor did she have any idea what Miles might do. Several days passed like figures being fed into a computer.

. . .

Fenton was entertaining Merge and Madge to one of his anecdotes.

'You wouldn't believe how dim this bloody cousin of mine was. We got on this train – my brother was with me – and we didn't know what to do with her. I mean, she was too stupid to read. Even to look out of the window. She just sat there waiting for us to do something. After a bit we played "I spy". We let her choose the object first. "Mineral?" we asked. Long pause. "No," she said. "Vegetable?" A much longer pause. I thought we'd got her on that. Finally she said, "No. Not vegetable." "Animal then?" She looked at us. "It must be," we screamed at her. "It's got to be animal if it isn't mineral or vegetable." "Yes," she said. So we started trying to guess. "How many legs has it got?" "No legs." "A snake of some sort. Or a lizard without legs." Of course in the end we had to give up. "What is it then?" She looked at us, like the great moronic cow she is, and said with a bloody great smile of triumph, "A bunch of daffodils." '

Madge was a bit defensive about this story. She felt Fenton was getting at girls. He reassured her and the conversation turned to the Pick Of The Pops programme. Fenton wasn't as interested as he usually was with this endless topic and some of Merge's guesses and expostulations were lost on him. He was thinking about Liz Semple. Several times since his visit to her with Maddox's letter he had found himself intrigued and stimulated recalling

the flavour of that incongruous half hour. Even his lightning call at nine the following morning had seemed more than just collecting a parcel. Her strangeness, her apparent lack of any self-consciousness, her ugliness, all caused him to speculate on her life. He felt he wanted to know more. For the first time in his life he was interested in a female. She wasn't what he could think of as a girl – partly because of her looks, partly because of her age – nor was she a woman as his mother or his aunts were. He wanted to talk to her, tell her about himself. He even felt a need to find out if she disapproved of him. It was a strange sensation reminding him of those times when he wanted to suck up to some senior boy at school and tried to arrange chance encounters on walks, or between classes. To discover her opinion of him gave the prospect of seeing her again a kind of sting. Her implied criticisms of his two previous visits went deeper because of her sex. All the more did they need to be examined, put right. He would go and see her. Hadn't she asked him to visit her again as he left the other day? At the time it had been almost absurd to contemplate. All he had felt had been anger, remembering the instances of past humiliation and embarrassment she had reminded him of by some of the things she'd said. Perhaps he wanted to revenge himself for this. So intent was he on another visit, and yet so secretive at the same time, he made an excuse to go into Maddox's office and ask if anything more had come of the dust jacket designs Liz had done for Donovan's book; Maddox was known to be indulgent to those who showed enthusiasm.

'Did you see them?'

'No. She'd sealed the envelope down.'

'Better have a look now. They're over there.'

Fenton looked through the designs.

'Like them?'

'It's rather difficult to tell without knowing more about the book. I mean whether they're the right kind of thing or not.'

Maddox looked at him more closely.

'Good, Fenton. The book is about Fleet Street. A bit seamy, to put it mildly. Full of drink and sex and getting out editions on time. That kind of thing. A sort of profitable pot boiler. Not very good but good enough.'

'I didn't think books like that were fashionable anymore. I thought they were considered rather old fashioned.'

'I must have explained it badly. How can newspapers be old-fashioned? And that's what the book is about.'

'No, I suppose they can't be.'

'Anything else?'

'Did you want me to go round to Miss Semple anymore? I mean, for some more designs?'

'No, no thanks. I don't.'

So Fenton went round without a pretext. When she opened the door he regretted it. He'd forgotten how dreadful she looked. Her hair seemed greasier than the last time. She had black pencil marks smudged into her cheeks. Her spectacles were still done up with sticking-plaster – was there more of it than before? – and the smell of artists' fixative seemed to be a part of her as Arpege might be of a mink-coated first-nighter. The wireless was speaking loudly. 'And you aren't such a bad old stick yourself,' a gruff country voice ground out. 'Now, now,' a woman's voice replied with an equally thick accent, 'none of your nonsense, Dan Archer.'

Liz Semple looked at him. 'It's The Archers,' she said.

'Do you listen to them?'

'Don't be such an intellectual snob. Twenty million households can't be wrong to love them.'

'You said to look in again. As you're more or less on the way home for me I thought you wouldn't mind.'

'Mind! I don't mind. I'm flabbergasted.'

The room, like her, seemed more squalid than he remembered but for all that he started to feel at home. He half lay on the divan and, had he wanted to do so, would have put his feet up without wondering whether he should or not. She gave him a gin and tonic and herself a glass of red wine.

'No commissions from Maddox this time.'

'No. I saw what you did for him last time.'

'Like them?'

'Yes.'

Liz remembered her obligations to Donovan.

'What's happened to the book.'

'The one about Fleet Street? Full of drink, sex and editions getting out on time. A profitable pot boiler. Not very good. But good enough . . . that's what Maddox said.'

'Doesn't sound very enthusiastic.'

Fenton sipped his gin and tonic. 'Maddox was in a funny mood.

Sort of snappy somehow. Not like him. He was all right when I went to his office but tense. Like a coiled-up spring.'

'Golly.'

Fenton looked at her suspiciously. Was he to be discomfited again? He put his feet, which by now had crossed themselves neatly on the divan cover, down on the ground.

'Do you do a lot of work like that?'

'You mean as bad as that? Profitable pot boilers as it were?'

'They looked pretty lurid.'

'Did they?'

'Harsh.'

'Loud do you think? Would you describe them as loud?'

'Yes, I would.'

'Well – don't get so unhinged about it. You didn't come here to have a rumpus, did you?'

'Sorry,' said Fenton feeling silly.

Liz's easel, almost covered by small jars of poster paints, stood between two high, uncurtained windows. The flat was so high the view was all sky except when aircraft crossed it, their landing lights getting brighter as it got darker. The noise of these planes drowned the slow-gear driving of cars as they cruised slowly round the square looking for a place to park. In the centre of the square there was a smaller quadrilateral. A garden, swathed by curving sand coloured paths, offered rough wooden benches for sparse comfort and, for the eye, dull green patches of grass, going bald near the base of the plane trees, provided a kind of balm for the women wheeling their prams and the old men gazing at their newspapers. It was common land. Even the height of the trees was democratic. Passers-by could see what was going on inside the garden. It was quite unlike the privacy contrived by the short, thick, evergreen shrubs and hedges that bordered the residents' gardens in the more fashionable squares a mile or so away. For these you had to have a key.

The western side of the square, opposite Liz's flat, was dominated by an ugly Victorian church which squatted, slug-like, indifferent to the sharp spire that stabbed up from its roof, first conferring an elegance and then, remembering its function, finally faithful to its parent, holding up a crucifix, clumsy even at that height, like a 'Halt' sign in the sky.

Fenton looked glumly at all this. Liz stirred with impatience.

'Why did you really come tonight? I'm not all that much on your way home. And even if I was . . . '

Fenton realised it must look as if he had a reason. He remembered how ugly she had looked when he'd first arrived. Had he shown any distaste? Enough for her to notice? Or did she think they could have nothing in common? After all, she was a lot older.

'I didn't have a reason.'

'You mean you just turned up because you suddenly felt like it?'

'Actually, I thought about it quite a lot. It wasn't just an impulse.'

'I suppose I should be flattered. But for some reason I feel obscurely insulted. I feel like the victim of a practical joke. Or rather, I feel I'm about to feel like a victim of a practical joke. Do you do imitations of me for your flat mates?'

'Mate, not mates. There's only one.'

'You mean, you do; do imitations.'

'No, of course I don't do imitations. Or rather I do. But not of you.'

'I'm baffled.'

'Why?'

'You'll be telling me you like me in a minute.'

'That's right I do. You're interesting. I don't know why you're so surprised about it. After all, you were full of invitations when I came last time. I was merely taking you up on one. That's all.'

Fenton, for some reason, felt delighted at the turn the conversation had taken. It was daring in some way. It was like living in London was supposed to be. At least, it was like intellectuals living in London. Also it was comforting to discover, though he hadn't exactly worked this out yet, how vulnerable Liz was and vulnerable in the same way as he was. A piece of criticism would rankle with her. She would find it hard to forget even though she would be good at appearing to treat it as trivial. She might even have been hurt by his strictures on her designs for Donovan's book. Fenton found himself tremendously excited by the rush of curious emotions which, even tangled as they were, added up to a sense of revelation. He was alight with insight, he had peered behind the defences and, almost without a clue it seemed, he'd penetrated to the heart of the fortress. Far from any desire to attack and establish his own position, which had been some of his

original motive, he now felt moved by a knowledge of somebody else, who he'd thought to be stronger, more in possession of her life but who turned out to be weak, at the mercy of the same petty ups and downs as he was himself. For the moment he didn't want to develop the situation by further talk, which might, or might not, lead to a deeper understanding. He wanted to go away and think about her; to turn over, like small pieces of coloured glass, the scraps of knowledge and intuition on which he had started to build so fascinatingly.

'Would you mind if I called in again?'

'Next time you can take me out for a drink at the pub. Even firms as mean as publishers pay you enough to stand me a couple of beers.'

He grinned at her.

'If old Maddox sends me round to get some more designs done by you he gives me the taxi fare . . .'

'Which you promptly spend on cigarettes and take the tube in the ordinary way.'

'Next time I'll spend it on a couple of beers for you instead.'

She looked at him with a sudden gleam it seemed of concentration.

'Seriously. Could you let me know if you have any news about that book?'

'What, the old pot boiler?'

'Yes. The one I did the loud designs for.'

'Why?'

'I know the man who wrote it.'

'Is he your lover?'

'No - you oaf.'

'We have a girl in the office who talks to Merge and me like that. Why are you interested in that book?'

'I know the man who wrote it as I've just said. I know Maddox. I even know you. I'm getting to know more of Stantons. It's a situation of interest.'

'Don't miss next week's thrilling instalment. Did Maddox steal Close's bar of Lux from the executives' wash room?'

'Oh yes. And I know Close too.'

He started off down the stairs. She yelled after him.

'Do Stantons really have an executives' wash room?'

The night Donovan received a letter from Stantons telling him his book was to be published he was in unblemished spirits.

'Today I suddenly thought of a start to a novel, or short story come to that. It's just closing time in a hairdressers in, say, the Fulham Road. Everything is locked up but all the lights are blazing so you can see in from the street. One of the hairdressers is lying back in a chair his hair covered in shampoo. The manicurist – or receptionist if you like – a girl from North London, no, South it would have to be, wouldn't it? – is washing it. The man looks absurd the way one does. His hair is sparse and lies in thin licks. His face is red and his eyes are too. He breathes gaspingly. He is helpless. So she falls in love with him. The maestro of the scissors lies powerless under her hands. His dignity in shreds. She loves him. Could be, couldn't it?'

Janet was rather tired. Donovan's ebullience after receiving the letter had demanded a total response and interest which she didn't seem to be able to muster.

'Have you got the letter on you?'

He handed over an envelope which she noticed had been carefully slit open.

Dear Danny,

I'm sure you'll be pleased to know we've decided to publish. I'm sorry to have been so long about it all. As I told you, Close has been having a look at it and he thinks it might sell well. I'm glad you've started another one.

One of our editors will be in touch with you about some suggestions he wants to make.

Close also tells me he's invited you to play in our annual cricket match. It's rather fun, though the cricket isn't a very high standard. I expect I shall see you there.

Miles.

Janet handed it back. 'Bit formal for a friend.'

'Do you think so?'

'What's this about a cricket match? Can you play cricket?'

'Anyone can play cricket. You're coming with me.'

7

Stantons played their authors at a small village in Surrey. It was a pretty, conventional ground; green, circular and loomed over by beeches and an occasional elm. A ground Englishmen abroad remembered. Wives and girl friends were suitably dressed; faded blazers and caps, worn as jokes, built unexpected barriers between men who thought they knew each other. Maddox had driven down with a placid Sara and they had talked with less constraint, with more friendly familiarity than they had for some time. Maddox captained the Stanton side, though it was usually selected by Close. This arrangement suited Maddox who always regarded the fixture as an 'outing' to bring Stantons and its authors together as informally as possible.

Merge and Fenton were both playing for Stantons. Merge's bowling removed three of the authors within the first half hour. He was an ugly, brutish bowler to watch. He ran about eight paces very fast, swinging his arm over briskly at the last moment and shooting the ball, it seemed, out of his right ear straight at the batsman's instep. Most of his balls barely rose from the ground after landing and hit the wicket after seeming to skid underneath the bat. Occasionally he jumped high in the air and brought his arm over very late, a manœuvre that bounced the ball up at the batsman's head by way of a change. It looked as if all the authors would be out before lunch and with very few runs to their credit.

'May I have your autograph? I could put it next to Wes Hall,' said Fenton to Merge as another batsman walked back to the pavilion. 'I bat better than he does.'

Soon Merge bowled out another and Donovan stood up from his deck-chair.

'A long goodbye to you,' he said to Janet.

Merge's opening ball to Donovan was his first really bad one. It bounced half way down the pitch and Donovan, employing the only shot he knew, swept it over the fielders' heads. It was a six and it made Donovan absurdly confident. He was able to block Merge's next two balls and clump the third without a trace of nerves. The over finished and Merge stood scowling as Fenton commiserated with him.

'Cheeky sod.'

'Never mind, Wes. You'll get him next over.'

When the next over came Merge went to the bowler's crease and waited for Maddox to throw him the ball. Maddox exercised his captain's right to throw the ball at the beginning of each over to the bowler he'd selected and he was, if anything, a little too careful to do this. Merge waited. Maddox came up still holding the ball.

'I think you'd better rest a bit.'

'I'm not tired. Really . . .'

Maddox said something else, and patting him on the shoulder sent Merge back to beside Fenton in the slips. 'What's he playing at?' Fenton was puzzled.

'Wants to make it more of a game by putting himself on,' Merge was now puce with rage.

Maddox, who bowled with a high prancing run to the wicket, his arms hanging loosely by his sides, was an elegant bowler but he lacked bite. He looked better than he was, as it soon appeared when Donovan started to hit him often and hard. More runs came as the other batsman cheered by Donovan's efforts started to hit the ball too. Eventually the sulking Merge was called for again but, by then, Donovan had hit over forty runs and was jubilant, surprised and still undefeated when he met Janet outside the lunch tent.

'I call that very handsome of Miles. Very handsome indeed. A real welcome to Stantons.'

Janet said, 'Why did he want to get you out so badly?'

Sara, cool and smiling, greeted her husband. 'Did you enjoy your bowl, darling?'

Margaret said to Sydney, 'That was very odd. He wanted to be the one who got Donovan out.'

During the afternoon the game dwindled into a draw. The first act had contained all the drama. Merge collected a number of runs in much the same ugly but effective way he'd gained wickets as a bowler. Maddox also recalled his bowling style, batting wristily, with a superficial elegance that scored a few runs for his side. It had not been his day. Janet took little notice of what happened after the morning's play. Too much, it seemed to her, had happened already. All her suspicions were in full cry again. She'd felt something was going on ever since the telephone call Sara had

made to Groats. Danny's subsequent shiftiness had alarmed her but she was reluctant to probe. Their relationship was too fragile. She hadn't felt capable of mentioning Dawn to Donovan. Even less could she contemplate asking Donovan about Sara. Janet believed herself so much taken for granted by Danny she felt it was the only card she had left – to go on being just that. Anything could rock their humdrum boat. Asking pertinent questions could bring about the end of an affair already dull and tarnished with age. At first she said nothing on the drive back. Danny did. Admittedly what he said was fencing, oblique, even absurd, but she'd learnt to respect Danny's apparently incoherent, undisciplined way of going about things. It was one of his great strengths that so few people ever regarded him as much more than an amusing, or not, according to their taste, rough-neck. His opening was typically clumsy.

'I don't think I'll bloody give Stantons my next book.'

'Write it first, mate,' Janet spoke coldly, languidly.

Donovan climbed down. 'Sorry. Have I been a bore about it? I went on rather the other night I remember.'

'Why don't you want Stantons to handle it?'

'They were a bit long-winded and stuffy about this one. If you bang away trying to get someone to open the door it's a bit of an anti-climax when they eventually condescend to do so.'

'Yes,' said Janet in a voice which made Donovan realise how silly his last observation had been. She gave him no help. He tried again.

'Didn't know I was such a marvellous cricketer did you?'

'No, I was quite surprised.'

'Wonder why Maddox put himself on to bowl. That spotty-faced little public school boy would have got me out in no time.'

Janet replied like a cross sister, staring straight ahead of her, uninvolved, unkind. 'It always amuses me about men and games. They pretend it doesn't matter a damn. They left all that behind them when they left school yet as soon as an encounter – would that be a good word? – like today occurs they all get madly competitive and take it absurdly seriously. Probably several animosities will be recharged for the rest of the year as a result of today's amateur, friendly match. Maddox no doubt thought it was rather a joke to bowl at you himself. He knew if he didn't do it quickly that other creature would have got you out in no

time. I'm glad he did. To my warped sense of humour it's frightfully funny for two grown men, who've known each other for years, to be in such a position.'

'He didn't look as if he was doing it for a joke did he?'

'I couldn't really see from where I was.'

'Was he full of fun when we saw him at lunch?'

Janet decided to stop.

'No, as a matter of fact, now you mention it, he wasn't.'

'Well . . .'

'You think he wanted to be the one to get you out?'

'I don't know. Just thought it was odd. You said yourself, the other night, you found his letter a bit formal.'

'Perhaps he had a difficult time with Close about publishing your book.'

'And that made him a bit angry with me, you mean?'

'Could be.'

'I wonder if you're right.'

He sounded more cheerful. His apparent readiness to clutch at so thin an explanation increased her doubts about him and Sara. Yet she was unable to accept Sara in the role of Danny's girl friend. Judging by Donovan's behaviour at her dinner party it seemed an unlikely combination. Sara, rather inadequately disguising a worrying gentility under a veneer of up to date chit-chat, should, by all her own standards, regard Donovan as a rogue elephant, a threat, a person to know and discuss at parties but not someone to have actually in her life; on the doorstep, in the drawing room, someone who knocked and entered as a matter of course, giving an hallo, expecting an automatic welcome, an automatic warmth. Yet now it seemed something even more than all of that was going on under everyone's noses.

At times Janet's interest almost outstripped her resentment. If her most damaging fears were true Danny was in for a rough time. Sara was not Dawn. Neither, to stretch expectations even further, was Miles at all like Donovan. Donovan wouldn't be able to laugh this one off. She suddenly felt a warmth for him. She touched his hand on the steering wheel.

'Why don't you buy me a curry tonight? It's terribly cheap.'

Sara, unlike Janet, enjoyed herself at the cricket match. Particularly during the lunch and tea intervals. Everybody then had behaved as if they were a local dramatic society putting on a play by Somerset Maugham or Frederick Lonsdale. Everything looked so right. The sun shone so, the green was so green, the caps and blazers were faded to dull ketchups, custard-yellow whites. The women wore frocks that gleamed and hats that overshadowed their faces. They held plates of chicken salad and sipped non-vintage champagne teasing the men, asking them whether the unaccustomed exercise had made them stiff and, turning to each other, they pointed to the moth-holes in the men's clothes deprecating them, feigning guilt for leaving them unrepaired. Nearly everyone felt like celebrating. Including Sara. Early in the day she had turned off the current as it were – a habit of hers that made people think she was sillier than she was – and the surprising, odd duel between Miles and Danny was of no more significance to her than an unfamiliar but unexciting sight. She had sat there, in her candy striped dress, the bleached canvas of the deck chair bulging decorously beneath her, smiling at the game without concentration, her lips slightly parted, a wife on light duty. She had ceased to worry whether Miles knew about her lunches with Danny. She had that gift. When she could do nothing about something she rapidly forgot about it. In earlier days Miles had admired this. He said her behaviour under stress reminded him of those best-seller books, which flourished so much in the States, with titles like *How To Put Your Troubles To Bed,* or *101 Ways To Stop Worrying.* In bald, monosyllabic language they exhorted worriers to write down, for example, what was worrying them and then add to that what would be, in their own opinion, the best course to combat these anxieties. That done the sufferer would find his worries would cool down sufficiently to allow life to go on.

Sara did remember, though, to treat Danny to a cool and formal display of mere acquaintanceship which unfortunately, so temporarily off-stride was Miles, only contributed to his growing uneasiness. Her behaviour had seemed unnatural to him, too exaggeratedly polite, too indifferent. Danny had been elated by his unexpected success and so paid little attention to Sara. Instead he chatted happily away to Janet who was, in turn, preoccupied in observing Maddox in case he should give further evidence of the spite she felt had motivated his behaviour on the field.

Margaret, too, watched Miles. She was a suspicious person and had been surprised, as well as interested, by his sudden change of attitude towards Donovan's book. At first she'd put this down to nothing more than a change of mood. Perhaps he'd been angered by Sydney's efforts to increase his influence in the firm and this had taken the form of treating the book, the bone of contention, as too unimportant to be taken seriously; something that could safely be left to Sydney in the new role he was trying to obtain for himself. She had changed her mind after watching the cricket. Maddox had seemed to treat Donovan as an enemy, not as an opponent.

Margaret didn't like the Maddoxes. She had first met them shortly after they had got married. She thought they paraded it; showed it off like jewellery. They held hands ostentatiously. They referred to each other in public. 'I must say I didn't expect to get such a clever old husband.' Or he would say, 'And then Sara said with that splendid frankness of hers . . .' They called each other 'my love'. They craved for foursomes with other likely-looking partnerships. Once at a party Margaret had heard Sara call across to Miles, 'Darling – have you got your lovely Parker pen? I must write down this nice man's address', and down it would go in the small black notebook she carried in her big black handbag. Margaret followed up this meeting and learnt, to her satisfaction, the subsequent dinner party had been a failure and the sudden friendship had lapsed.

Margaret had the clever graduate's austerity when she thought of Sara. Always she would be influenced by her days at Cambridge when she had gone out with men without wearing make-up; cosmetics seemed a fraud after sitting in the library reading Donne. None of her friends wore them. It was dishonest to be loved except for themselves. Margaret and her friends despised their racier contemporaries who had shaken off lacrosse, books, and all the girls they had known at school in one clean sweep. They thought them cheap, worldly; threats to the tranquillity they sometimes achieved in their reading. Anybody can be beautiful, they thought, but it's what's underneath that matters. What they didn't say, but fervently hoped, was for this 'underneath' to be the thing that counted with men. They defended their position the more as they came to doubt this.

Margaret knew Sara and people like her were likely to be more

successful. But now she didn't care. She had been lucky. She was married and if anything was more censorious of frivolity than before. It was almost an attitude, a rule, to be unkempt at home and only perfunctorily decked-up when she went out. Sara had to be her enemy almost out of loyalty to the past. Miles on the other hand was different. Margaret had detected a weakness in him, despite his obvious strength in dealing with Sydney, and this blunted the animosity she had originally felt towards him.

'Have you heard Danny's latest theory about who the man in the mask is?' asked Sydney on the way home.

'Yes, I was there when he told you. It's about the only name I haven't heard so far.'

Just as the car was smoothly climbing the hill to their house she said, hoping to start a conversation that would continue over the drinks before dinner, 'Why has Miles fallen out with Danny?'

'Oh, I don't think he has. Why should he?'

'He has.'

'Might be something about the book I suppose. I think I would have heard if it had been anything serious.'

'You said he'd lost interest in that.'

'He wasn't very concerned about it in our last talk as I told you.'

'Well then . . .'

'If you don't mind me saying so, Miles, I think you made an error putting yourself on to bowl so early this morning. I mean when that other fellow was doing so well. Mind you, horrible looking little beast he was. One of our new ones?'

Humphrey Stanton was a fading *matinée* idol whose interest and role in the firm was purely financial. He took out a good deal of money every year because he had been preceded by an astute and active grandfather. He came in for a short while on most days, presided at Board Meetings, and from time to time aired the opinion Stantons had a duty to publish 'good' books. As a schoolboy at Harrow he had acquired a taste for rattling good yarns. Age hadn't diminished the zest he'd had for these except he required a dash of love and marriage to be added to the plot. He wore a double-breasted grey suit, an old Harrovian tie, a cream silk shirt, a white silk handkerchief in his top pocket, a pair of

light suede shoes; the Panama hat he'd worn all day was on the side table near his pink gin.

He liked Miles so he'd asked him back for a drink after the game. Because he was a selfish man, and a very rude one, he asked no one else. Miles had once returned this liking but discovered he couldn't forgive Stanton's lack of interest in the business which made his praise of Miles more fervent than it was informed. Miles, a connoisseur of praise, only wanted the genuine article.

'The game would have been over by lunch time if I hadn't.' Miles had done his best to circulate this during the day. It had worked. It worked now.

'Yes, you're quite right. After all, who wants to take it seriously? We're all a bit long in the tooth for that kind of nonsense. Except you, of course.'

He gave his light actor's wave at Sara.

'Boys will be boys,' she said and gave him the all-confident soubrette's smile – all teeth and creaking. They paused as if for applause. Miles thought, 'Thank God, we don't have any children.'

Merge and Fenton shot back to London in a fast little car they'd borrowed more in the manner of two subalterns out for a beer and a bash than two hopefuls in the comparatively intellectual trade of publishing. They stopped at a pub, played for ten minutes or so on the one-armed bandit standing red and shiny in the corner and lost. Back at the bar, Merge once more started grumbling about Maddox's decision to put himself on to bowl that morning.

'It robbed Stantons of a decisive victory,' he said, looking red and absurd. You saw his father, and his father's father, and his son to come, and his son's son. Merge stood for the England of the minor public school. The car-cleaning, cap-wearing, draught bitter-drinking, spotty, pestilential Englishman in the making that each generation mistakenly thinks it has seen the last of. Fenton, watching his friend, didn't feel anything beyond a sudden desire to know more people. The feeling stayed with him so, when he got back, he left Merge to go out on his own and collect a few more like-minded souls in one or other of the Chelsea pubs while he took himself round to visit Liz Semple.

He found her putting red ink crosses in the *Radio Times* against the programmes she wanted to hear.

'What do you do that for? You just switch it on and let it run, don't you?'

'There are three different wave-lengths you know.'

'More now.'

'All right. More now. But they don't publish all of them in the old *R.T.*'

'But seriously – do you ever change from one to the other?'

'How can I hear The Archers *and* Book At Bedtime if I don't?'

'And what about all those smashing Bach fugues and Beethoven symphonies that come on the Third after The Archers finish. Mind you, you've got to be quick switching over or you get bogged down in Radio Newsreel. Why don't you get the telly?'

'I look at things all day. It's my ear that needs tuning.'

'You're mad.'

'And what have you been doing?'

'I told you. I've been playing cricket. Stantons versus their Authors.'

'And you call that sane I suppose.'

Probably because it had been a mildly festive day Fenton stayed on drinking and smoking while Liz pottered and chatted. Quite absurdly they were behaving like an established married couple, their behaviour subdued, their curiosity in each other dulled. It seemed most natural to go first to a pub, and after that, to an Indian restaurant. This, it turned out, was the mistake they made. The suggestion had come from Fenton. Normally on a Friday or a Saturday when he went out with Merge and two girls they ended up, raucous, and untidily drunk, in one or other of the numerous curry shops dotted in and around the Kings and Fulham Roads. It was part of a ritual, preceded by several drinks at two or three pubs, followed by various forms of sexual struggle in cars or flats; the length and character depending on the biddability of the girls. Unconsciously Fenton had moved into this pattern as soon as he took Liz into the restaurant and afterwards back at her flat, though normally shy, it didn't embarrass him to put down his glass of acid tasting red wine with exaggerated care and then, like a slow motion film suddenly accelerating, lunge at her as she sat there unsuspectingly beside him on the divan.

'No.'

'Why?'

'Too ugly.'

'What do you mean?'

'I'm too ugly. You'll be angry later.'

'Come on.'

'No. Stick to the totties and dollies. They're more your style.'

'Come on.' Fenton had never slackened his grip which successfully pinioned her arms. All she could do, as he forced his mouth closer to hers, was to wag her head furiously from side to side. Her glasses came off and this provided sufficient diversion for him to kiss her wetly and briefly.

She dug around, retrieved her glasses, and pushed herself off the couch.

'Don't you understand? I'm not used to being mauled around. Even if I'd liked it once I've had to get out of the habit. I'm not used to it. I don't like it.'

'Are you a Lesbian?'

'Good God! Surely your pride isn't that hurt, is it?'

'You're a Lizzie.'

'Shut up.'

'Lizzie. That's what you are, a bloody Lizzie. Lizzie Semple. Must be right.'

'I shall smack your face.'

'Bit of the old violence. Like that do you? Goes with being a Lizzie. So I'm told.'

'You can't be as unbelievably awful as this. Can you?'

'I might hit you back of course. After all, it isn't as if you were a real girl.'

'Guttersnipe.'

'What a very old-fashioned word. As a matter of fact, how old are you, come to that?'

'Would you please go? I think it's superfluous to ask you not to come back.'

'We had an assistant matron at school rather like you.'

'Are you going?'

'No.'

She went to her handbag, opened it and took out her front door key.

'I'm going out. To find a policeman, believe it or not. If you're not out of here by the time I get back with him I think you'll be sorry.'

Fenton looked surprised.

'You're a dangerous child, you see. I can't risk you.'

She left very quickly, walked downstairs and across to the other side of the square where she stood still watching the front door of the house. Soon Fenton came out, looked to left and right, and walked away. He didn't look behind him and she presently re-crossed the square and let herself back into her flat.

8

It was strange, that summer. A joke that went sour. A Whitehall farce in which the punctured hot-water-bottle between the sheets turned out to contain hydrochloric acid, the lodger under the bed was dead, the custard pie full of minced glass. The high hilarity of gossip and speculation, tempered by the inevitable arrest, finally took on the authentic atmosphere of waste, violence and tragedy. People like Donovan – the permanent rebels without causes – felt a certainty in their anger which braced them into criticising such abstractions as Society, Law, the power of the Establishment, in a way quite different from their usual dinner table condemnations.

In a way this new feeling was a factor in Donovan's decision to move into a new flat, at the deep bottom of Worlds End, only a hop, skip and a jump from Lots Road Power Station. Although unrelated to the events of the time, his new novel gathered strength; it sped along intoxicatingly, granting him the rest and satisfaction of a steady five to six hours' work a day. He changed. He moved slower, he spoke less. Janet, who he continued to see two or three times a week, found his old truculence replaced by a kind of drugged and tranced calm that, unfairly, fretted her. Characteristically, and in this, as in so many significant ways, she revealed the difference between her and Margaret Close, someone who superficially she perhaps resembled, she took a light and bantering tone with him. 'They say Normandy peasants, who work from five in the morning until it gets dark, never have a day off in their lives and are as communicative as Trappist monks, live to at least ninety. Is that your ambition, old man?'

'Be quiet,' said Donovan amiably. 'Drink some more of this red slosh. It'll make your jokes that important bit lighter as they might say in one of the ads. Which reminds me. Is Charles Groat still trying to get you to join the ad world along with him?'

Groat had succeeded in persuading his father that the future of the travel business depended on a more vigorous approach to its promotional side and this was best learnt by joining an advertising agency. Without telling his father he suggested Janet did the same. 'It was bad enough handling the Old Man when I was there but it must be a million times worse since I left. How can you bear it?'

Janet, reluctant to upset the cosiness of her job, though she resented it more than appreciated it, shied away from so direct an approach but underneath the wheels were beginning to turn and they turned all the faster as she became more aware of Donovan's increasing independence of the things she felt they shared. He'd never been exactly dependent on her but he had been the one to ask if he might stay the night and when instead the suggestion had come from her, it had always been in response to a silent but unmistakable appeal. Now, more often than not, he kissed, hugged, or patted her good night and walked happily off down the road thinking, she supposed, about what he was going to write on the next day.

She was quite open about it to him. 'I ought to be pleased you're so involved with your book.'

'But you're not. Possessive?'

'Yes.'

'But I'm out of harm's way, aren't I? You don't worry what I'm up to.'

'Like I used to, you mean? I've no right to, have I?'

Once, a long time ago she urged him to leave the newspaper. She spoke against the vulgarity, the tepidity, the shortness of it all. She hated Fleet Street. The awful jokes she had to listen to, as she sat perched on high, resistant beige leather stools waiting for food and Danny to herself, instead of the endless rounds of tasteless drinks never really strong enough to make her forget how much her eyes were smarting from the continual exhaled smoke of Danny and his companions. She'd hated, too, the leisure Fleet Street gave him. She saw available girls in every bar. She couldn't compete handicapped by her nine to half past five day, with an hour for a light ale and sandwich lunch. Now, in theory, he had more time on his hands than ever, since he was responsible to no one. She had ever more reason to be jealous. And she was. The indefensible part, she felt, was being more jealous of his writing than of another girl. It was less natural. Most girls were jealous of other girls, but to be jealous of a book, of work, was a reflection of her own immaturity and inadequacy. In a way, she was more miserable when she sat with him over a dinner now than when she'd sat alone on the top of the bus going home, after her depressing talk with Dawn Childs, remembering with pain the earlier days of her love affair with Danny. Danny knew she was

miserable. He couldn't take it seriously. In the past there had often been good reasons for him to feel remorse. Then he had been wrong. Now he was virtuous. His sympathy for Janet was theoretical.

Janet still hadn't mentioned Sara. Partly she had been afraid, partly she couldn't connect it with the reformed Donovan, as she now, almost scoffingly, regarded him. Something had happened but it was over. Janet stuck to her original opinion. Sara would never have risked Danny even if he had been prepared, at an earlier stage, to risk her. He was too ironical, too critical, and too starkly disrespectable for someone who spent as much time as Sara did, weaving fantasies only a little removed from the dreams of pimply girls who send themselves off to sleep imagining themselves lolling round Cary Grant's swimming pool. Janet had long ago observed, too, from the slightly *grande dame,* patronising manner Sara adopted, that she played a role and was self-conscious most of the time she was with people. Also the clothes Sara wore, the subjects she preferred, the magazines she read, all pointed to someone who needed endless spoiling to compensate for the realities of an ordinary middle-class, London life. She wasn't earthy enough to be tempted by, or for that matter to tempt, Donovan for long.

But perhaps Donovan when he finished his book, relaxed and fulfilled with achievement, would fall deeply and idealistically in love? He would be ready for it then. Whoever met him then would have a quick and easy victory. And whoever it was going to be, it isn't going to be me, thought Janet.

Donovan did ring Sara again. About a fortnight or so after the cricket match. He had been forced to admit to himself, as time went by, that Miles's behaviour had been vindictive and understandably so, though, with the careless self-deception which was one of his strongest shields, Donovan had pretended at first that Miles had been unaware of any intrigue nor, come to that, had there been any intrigue to be aware of. Anyhow, nothing more would be said about it now. It was over. It had been a near thing and it left Donovan feeling ashamed of himself. It had been childish of him to get so close to an ugly situation with a girl who was not only the wife of a man he'd long regarded as a friend but was also

the wife of the one person, the only person, who had tried to get his book published. Only a deep feeling for Sara would have justified such a blatant disregard of his own interest, his own self-respect. He didn't, of course, have any such feeling but Janet had been wrong in believing Donovan shared her own opinions of Sara. But for the folly of the mix-up over the telephones he might well have found resisting temptation only a temporary pleasure and pursued her into a full-blooded love affair. He would never have come to share Janet's opinion of Sara until he had gone much further with her.

Now that he had found a temporary monastery down at the Worlds End it seemed to have been a shameful and absurd incident, although it was, in reality, less out of character than his decision to write with such persistent and increasing seriousness.

He rang Sara to find out whether Maddox had said anything.

'No.'

'You must be relieved.'

'I didn't think he would.'

'He's used to it, perhaps.'

'Whatever do you mean?'

'I can't be the first man, since he married you, who's found you attractive, can I?'

'I should forget about it. It isn't as if anything happened, is it?'

'It might have.'

'It wouldn't have been wise.'

'Perhaps we should meet again.'

'That wouldn't be very wise either.'

'Perhaps you're right. No doubt we shall soon see each other at some function or other. I hope you won't be so off-hand with me as you were at the cricket match.'

'I thought it would be – '

' – don't say wise again, for Christ's sake.'

' – better after what had happened.'

'I think it makes things look more suspicious. As you said, nothing did happen so don't you think you made a bit of a meal of it, treating me with such icy reserve?'

He rang off soon after she said 'How's Janet? I thought she looked charming the other day', but not before he'd asked whether she thought Miles had wanted to bowl him out at the cricket match for personal reasons. As soon as he'd asked this he felt ridiculous.

It was a meaningless question to her. She didn't understand what he meant.

It hadn't, after all, seemed of much interest to Janet either.

'It always amuses me about men and games.'

9

After he'd met the editor Stantons had put on his book Donovan discovered one of the advisers who'd read it was a famous novelist and critic he'd long admired and read, called Nicholas Tench. The editor, anxious to secure the maximum co-operation from Donovan and, less expediently, influenced by Stantons' genuinely parental attitude towards its authors, particularly new ones, brought it about so that Tench, an hospitable as well as a rich man, invited Donovan down for a short week-end at his house in Suffolk. Donovan, who was a little alarmed as well as pleased, needed reassuring. 'One more or less doesn't make any difference to Tench.'

Donovan told Janet, who was very put out at being left alone in London and made all the more angry because it was so obviously what Donovan ought to do and this left her with nothing to fall back on but unreasoning sulks. Donovan pretended to misunderstand this, partly to provoke her into seeking to justify herself, and partly because he was impatient with her increasing possessiveness which was inappropriate considering the blameless, almost professionally dedicated life, he was leading. He was not worried about what Janet might do as a result of his absence at the week-end, a time, he knew, she regarded as shared. He was neither jealous nor interested. This infuriated her. She had no way of getting back at him. The sole result of her being 'difficult' would be his ceasing to see her as often as he did. She raged at the unfairness of it all. 'I'm going out with Charles Groat tomorrow,' she said as he stood in the doorway the night before he was going down to Tench. He looked at her expressionlessly. 'That will be nice. Where's he taking you?' 'We haven't made up our minds. We're just going to see how we feel at the time.' 'That's the best way.'

Next morning, as he drove rather slowly to Suffolk in an inconspicuous hired car, Donovan wondered whether Janet and he would soon part and decided he would do what he could, short of actually telling her, to bring this about. It was an automatic part of his credo that love affairs tapered off into friendliness, leaving behind only a warm and indulgent nostalgia sufficient to allow the occasional drink and dinner together to occur without

embarrassment or enmity. This was a text book theory, a mouldy remnant of chivalry, a cardboard code. It rarely happened that partings were so unruffled as it was unlikely that the girl and he would feel the same degree of detachment at the same time. Nevertheless it was a useful attitude helping to bring about later *rapprochements,* easing the difficulties of unexpected meetings.

Donovan felt some guilt over Janet but it was less than the guilt he'd sometimes felt in the past. Most of his affairs came to an end because there was someone else he preferred and this often ruthless transference of affections had always struck him as one of the savagest hurts people could inflict on each other. No matter how exciting and absorbing the new love was it couldn't remove the guilt and self-reproach he felt at the surgical cutting of his former ties. Even quite casually to leave one girl at a party to go and talk to another was a rehearsal, on a small scale, of this kind of cruelty. He'd inflicted it, he'd suffered it. A condition of playing the game, he flippantly told himself. Janet hasn't a leg to stand on. At least he was leaving her for no one. It had died of its own accord.

. . .

'Lovely place you have here,' remarked Donovan as he stood holding a thin-stemmed sherry glass looking round the drawing room at the numerous heavy oil paintings, pastiches of Constable to a laughable extent, which hung under their small, scroll-shaped lamps waiting, it seemed, for the evening when the switch would be turned on and a dozen or so pictures of England, green and calm, would come to life. Easy chairs abounded. Books in new dust-covers, many of them open, were all over the place. Donovan noticed a pair of spectacles marking the place in a new book of poetry. You wouldn't have to be very perceptive to recognise the occupation of the owner, he thought, feeling the whole thing monstrously over-done and rather absurd. After all, how many books can you want at once and there were noticeable gaps in the shelves; the books weren't scattered around because there was nowhere else to put them.

'It's all right inside, I suppose,' answered Nicholas Tench. 'Outside it's a wilderness. Legend says Capability Brown slept here but he obviously didn't stay here long enough to go into the garden and do much about that.'

'Perhaps he should have been offered a garden bed rather than the usual sort,' snorted a young man with hair the colour of a highly-polished horse brass.

'Ya-as,' brayed Tench insincerely, moving his head back as if his laugh contained halitosis which he was anxious to blow over the speaker's head. Donovan had been struck by how much shorter Tench was than he would have supposed from seeing his photograph on the backs of various books. Something about the way the photograph showed Tench resting his head negligently on his spread palm, had given an illusion of grace and bearing inseparable from height. Actually he was an unusually short man with an extraordinarily-shaped body. His trousers were tightly hitched up by a pair of braces so that the waistband nearly reached his armpits. From the back, though apparently well covered, he appeared to have no shape to his buttocks at all. It was as if a circus clown, worried lest the comic appearance of his trousers was insufficient to arouse the usual laughs, had stuffed a cushion or two inside them. He wore a dull green cardigan done up with leather buttons, a yellow shirt, and a red bow tie. He laughed constantly, and always when he did so, moved his head slowly back as he'd just done after the terrible joke from the man with the brass-coloured hair. He had enormous tombstone teeth and these, with the rather full lips that for short periods covered them, gave him an expression of apparent amiability. But Donovan noticed when he wasn't laughing and just looking, the expression in his eyes was cold, bleak and critical. He started to talk about a new sleeping pill he'd discovered. 'You just go in and ask for it. No prescription or anything like that. You just stick it in your mouth and out you go. Like a light. Which, incidentally, you usually leave burning, it works so fast. The trouble is, you usually wake up with the wretched pill still on your tongue. You go straight off you see. Before you've even had time to dissolve it, much less swallow it.'

Tench held up a small wagging finger to dispel the mild laughter with which Donovan and the young man greeted this story. 'Hark – do I hear our mistress?'

There was a faint scratching at the door which Tench opened to admit two small snorting pug dogs. 'Ah, Horace and Odd Job. Allow me to introduce you. Don't you think that one bears a small resemblance to Odd Job? Goldfinger's man-servant, you remember?'

The two dogs were followed by a dark woman of about forty-five. Donovan noticed her very broad shoulders and large, black, angry eyes, and so wasn't entirely unprepared for the truculent coarseness of her first remark. 'This the lot then?'

'I think Ma's in rather a rage this morning.' The younger man, it seemed, was Tench's son and the dark-haired woman presumably Tench's wife. The son's reaction to his mother's entry was far from placatory either in tone or content, but even so Donovan was completely taken aback and shocked by Mrs. Tench's heated reply. 'Fuck off, you nasty little shit.'

Nicholas Tench seemed delighted with this, surveying the room with the air of an impresario whose favourite act had turned out to be exactly as he'd hoped and forecast.

'You see,' his expression seemed to say, 'she can say things you wouldn't believe. Isn't she ghastly? I mean one would hardly believe it, would one?'

Unfortunately for Tench, if this was the case, the other guests, who were some distance off gathered around the long french windows looking out at the lawn, hadn't heard the exchange between his wife and his son. However, it seemed inevitable there would be a repeat performance before very long.

Donovan wondered if the behaviour of Mrs. Tench could be true. Such a degree of unpleasantness was so unbelievable it made him feel this was a case of a warm heart concealed by a fierce manner. She could be a barmaid, a good trouper. Perhaps she was a 'character'. Nevertheless, Donovan was for the moment completely unnerved and got himself another drink before they went in to lunch.

There was no seating plan, or mild directions from the host or hostess, as to where anyone should go unless Mrs. Tench's muttered aside could have been interpreted as such.

'Put them where you bloody well like but, for Christ's sake, keep that silly little poof away from me.'

The places were laid out, some handsome pieces of silver adorned the table, and in the centre was a blue bowl generously stuffed with flowers, yet something was wrong. For a moment Donovan thought it was the wrong meal though this seemed absurd. A second later he realised why he'd felt this. Each place had been laid for boiled eggs. A small, silver egg-cup held a small white egg, beside it a small silver spoon was laid, beside that on a side plate was a second egg wrapped in a white napkin.

'I nearly gave you kippers.'

'Ma doesn't like cooking in the middle of the day. She'll do better tonight, you'll see.'

'Watch it, Victor.'

'It's true. She's a marvellous cook. But she'll only do it in the evenings. Evenings in the country, that is. Up in London she won't cook at lunch-time or in the evenings.'

Tench sat himself down beside Donovan. 'Try some of this Valpolicella. Curious, I know, but actually it goes very well with boiled eggs. I think there's some milk if you'd prefer it.'

'What do you drink when you have kippers?'

'Same thing. I've never been a one for the white with fish, red with meat school of snobbery. One piece of lore I do subscribe to though – never, if you can help it, drink claret with tomatoes.'

Tench cut open his egg with a firm sideways slice of his knife, peered inside, then dabbed a knob of butter on the yolk having first lifted off the white at the top. This rather protracted dallying with the egg evidently caused his mind to run on food.

'You live in Soho, don't you?'

'No. Why?'

'Funny I thought you did. I was going to ask you where you can get Parmesan cheese in bulk. I can't get it anywhere round here. All our local snob grocer can rise to is tins of *Bisque d'Homard*, quarter bottles of Beaujolais – I ask you, who on earth wants a quarter bottle? – and those awful biscuits that look and taste like side plates.' He paused. 'I have the most appalling time getting him to cut the bacon at three.'

'At three? Why do you like it cut at three, particularly?'

'I like it really thin.'

Donovan, relieved at finding his host's idiosyncrasies didn't extend to specifying a time of day to have his bacon cut, and eased by the general atmosphere of lunacy around him, was about to ask Tench why he'd thought he lived in Soho when Tench holding his second egg poised in his hand spoke again. 'You thought I meant I liked my bacon cut at three o'clock, didn't you? Interesting isn't it? – how we all assume what is obvious to oneself is necessarily obvious to somebody else. You must, if you thought I did like having my bacon cut at a particular time of day, have wondered whether you were sitting next to a madman.'

'Why did you think I lived in Soho?'

'God knows. I'm glad you don't. It's the most awful part of the world. So bogus. Very dated. It's really a thirties and twenties place you know. Now it's just for trippers—like the South of France.'

Donovan gradually sorted out the rest of the guests. At least, their faces started to become familiar. Most of them seemed overwhelmed by the strangeness of the meal and the sullen silence of their hostess. None of them, it appeared, had arrived much before Donovan and this, he thought, might explain their cowed demeanour and the brittleness of their smiles.

Mrs. Tench ate her eggs clumsily, her large knobbly hands shaking uncertainly as she drove her spoon round the side of the shell. She spoke a word or two to the dark girl on her left, who was called Olivia, and not at all to the small bald man named Major Calne, who sat on her right. From time to time she looked with loathing at Victor, seeking an excuse to reopen hostilities, and finally swelling like a grotesque pigeon when a pretext at last presented itself.

'Victor. Are you bloody feeding Odd Job?'

'Just a morsel of water-biscuit. I'm sure one meal a day isn't enough for these small dogs.'

'I suppose you know better than the bloody vet.'

'That vet's so terrified of you he'd say anything.'

Donovan looked with admiration at the awful Victor who seemed not to mind, indeed to relish, these savage duels with his mother. Tench spoke softly in his ear again with the same proprietorial impresario air.

'Quarter neither asked nor given.'

'No, indeed.'

'My second wife, you see.'

'Oh.'

'Adele is my second wife,' continued Tench, anxious to drum the point home. 'She's not really all that much older than Victor. At least she doesn't look it.'

Odd Job put his black and salivating snout back against Victor's knee.

'I'm warning you, Victor.'

'All right, Ma. You win. No more water-biscuit for poor little Odd Job.'

'She hates being called "Ma",' whispered Tench.

'I can imagine,' Donovan whispered out of the side of his mouth, too like a man nervous of putting off the players by interrupting their concentration.

Victor pushed away the snorting dog who retired to a corner of the room where he licked the flagstones, his eyes round and popping, looking at Victor above his endlessly moving tongue.

Mrs. Tench, victorious, resumed her savage spooning of the egg. She only spoke once more.

'I'm off for a kip. Tea around half past four for those who want it. In the library. Dinner any time after eight.'

. . .

It was almost walking weather again. Days started later and finished earlier. The air was cooler, though not yet with the sharpness of autumn. The second crop of roses was nearly over, the antirrhinums and dahlias were bright, and the chrysanthemums, golden and subdued, waited on stage for the pale limelight of autumn to shine on them and on them alone. Donovan sniffed the air and felt himself moved by the delicate blue of the sky, the huge piled up masses of white cloud, a girl's hair dressed for a ball. The hills, bare mostly but sometimes topped by a clump of trees, were polished, billiard-table green.

Donovan had always appreciated the good fortune of liking the country in a hard, practical way. He liked sentimental calendars of Kentish oast houses, or romantic photographs in *Country Life*, but he knew they were nothing more than the fantasies of urban country lovers whose emotions, while no doubt perfectly genuine, were not to do with the country as he understood it. Donovan knew that the country beyond the Green Line bus-stop was cold, brutal, and relentless and his love for it was perhaps better described as a need such as a sailor is supposed to have for the sea. He wasn't particularly good at country things but he understood and sympathised with them. Janet, who was prone to think nearly everyone did what they were least suited for, said so far from aping the part of a London lay-about he would be happier, and more appropriately employed, hedging and ditching, or cycling around the villages; a portly policeman on a sprucely-kept Hercules.

Donovan selected a tall tree some distance off and started to walk towards it shrugging off memories, not cruelly, but as if they

were part of something long ago; remembered, appreciated, but only vaguely to do with the here and now of the sprawling country ahead of him.

Less easy to dismiss was his disillusionment with Nicholas Tench, so long a person he had admired and talked about, quoting parts of his novels, laughing over the characters he'd created. As a person Tench was inconsistent with the picture of the well known writer and critic Donovan had imagined. He was little. He was put upon. He was guilty of a shattering error of taste in marrying the dreadful Adele at an age when he could scarcely plead unworldliness. His conversation was vulgarly modish: bitchy in a conventional stage way without any of the charm or looks that so often go with it. He was ugly, grotesquely rigged out for sideshows. He was greedy, talking the kind of false expertise that betrays the poseur, the limp follower. Only that cold, blank stare so seldom, but so unmistakably, replacing the *bonhomie* gave the game away and revealed something of the observer, lover of the *mot juste*, creator of some of the greatest comic characters of the day. It was a small thing, an unpleasant thing, but there was something about that look that mysteriously persuaded Donovan he wasn't handling counterfeit.

Before he'd left the table, suspicious of Tench's mistake in believing he lived in Soho, Donovan had tried to discover whether Tench knew who he was. Tench spotting this, it seemed, pretended to know even less than he probably did and managed to convey to Donovan he thought he was a writer of historical romances. 'You're fond of old places are you? Bags of atmosphere. The mullion window.'

Donovan had written a piece of trash. He knew that. Even so, it had been hard work, it had been solitary, it had been treated scoffingly by friends and foes alike. Yet somehow it had ended up considered worthy of being published by a reputable firm. Tench had apparently at some point read it, presumably hadn't violently disagreed with Stantons' decision to put it out and so, even allowing for the pressure of work or cynicism inseparable from his character, he should have remembered something about the book and about its author, especially when the author had been invited down for the week-end on the strength of it. No doubt Tench liked to tease.

Donovan made another conscious effort to forget about his book,

Tench, Adele, Victor, Janet, and walked vigorously towards the tree he'd selected. He would tire himself slightly and then gorge himself with tea in the library; he was confident Mrs. Tench wouldn't be there.

. . .

'He's moving out of your orbit?'

Back in London Groat faced Janet across a small table in a trattoria. They had been to a pub and Janet, relaxed by two gin and tonics, started to talk about Danny. It had always been a topic of conversation between them when they had worked together and, in a way, it was the most natural one for either of them to take up when they met again. Groat looked well. He laughed a lot, his eyes shone, lines seemed to have vanished from his face. He tossed back drink abandonedly, welcoming it. He talked little of himself, though clearly he was dying to tell Janet about his new job. Her mood, as he'd spotted immediately, was what his father meant when he used to say about her, 'She needs taking out of herself.' She had explained, with an honesty so transparent even she herself was forced to admire it, how Donovan's new role of sensitive author, preferring to write than to talk, drink, or make love to her, was threatening to put an end to something that now seemed to have lasted for years. Something, for that reason, irreplaceable. Groat disliked Donovan and was, by temperament, unsympathetic to any form of artist. Nevertheless he was stimulated as he recognised there was an opportunity for him in the events she forecast. He believed she was right this time and the end of the affair, so many times spoken of and anticipated by her, was finally in sight.

Janet studied Groat in her turn. Once she had decided to have lunch with him on the Saturday of Donovan's departure she knew it was likely she would accept other invitations from him over the week-end. A cinema, another meal, a meeting in a pub, a drive. Would he do? Would he serve to bridge the gap between Donovan and the next time she fell in love? Could she perhaps fall in love with him? Or was it too late, too often discussed as a joke over their light ale lunches?

'I ought to admire him more.'

'Why?'

'I ought to be pleased he's doing what I always wanted him to

do. Something worthy of him,' she smiled apologetically. 'If you see what I mean.'

'Yes.'

'Funny thing is, when I thought he was starting to have a walk out with Sara Maddox I was angry and hurt and all that, of course, but I didn't feel this absolute sense of defeat I feel now when he's leading an almost blameless existence so far as I can see.'

'What happened to that? To Sara Maddox?'

'No one knows. Nothing presumably. I suppose if he became a success she might allow it to happen. Donovan would start off with practically anyone if they gave him half a chance. The old Donovan, that is,' she added.

Groat looked at her reflectively. Then, as if making an internal decision, he hunched up his shoulders and leaned across the table. There was something protective about this as if he wished to shield her from the other people in the restaurant.

'I heard the Maddoxes are busting up.'

Janet looked puzzled.

'Divorce?'

'So I heard.'

'When?'

'Yesterday. From a girl called Semple. She does free lance work on some of the accounts in my firm. On one of mine, in fact. We got talking. Found we knew some of the same people. She just mentioned it.'

'Christ,' said Janet, who had gone white not from any feeling of personal shock, as Groat thought, but purely because it was her usual reflex action on hearing anything surprising or startling.

He touched her hand. The colour came back into her face and she looked suddenly a lot better than she had during the meal so far. Groat took his hand back from hers and sipped some wine, his eyes big over the rim of the glass.

'You can't imagine how surprised I am,' she said. 'I thought Maddox was far too cagey to let this happen. His career and everything.'

'Doesn't make much difference these days, does it?'

'He thinks it does. He's very stuffy under all that man-of-the-world act.'

Janet cross-questioned Groat at length, trying to assess the likeliness of the story and came to the conclusion it had the ring of

truth about it. Liz Semple was the authentic touch. She did a good deal for Stantons, she knew Maddox, and she wasn't the sort of girl who made up things. She wasn't even likely to speak of them unless they were definite, beyond the realm of gossip.

'I've got to find out more,' said Janet.

. . .

Janet left Charles Groat immediately after lunch and any misgivings she might have had for such apparent brusqueness were quickly put to rest by his comprehending, almost mocking, smile as he left her asking if he could ring her later over the week-end.

'So you can tell me what you find out.'

There were three people, leaving aside the absent Donovan, Janet felt she could ring; Liz Semple, Sara herself, or the Closes. There seemed little point in ringing Liz since Groat had just passed on all she would have to say. To ring Sara would be crass. She dialled the Closes' number and, after the usual guttural reception from the *au pair* girl, heard Margaret's voice, crisp and, as usual, a little impatient at the other end.

'Yes. I think it must be true. Miles told Sydney two or three days ago. Look, I've got the children screaming the place down. They usually save it for Saturdays to be particularly trying. Why don't you come over for a drink in about an hour's time. Sydney will be here.'

'Perhaps he'd rather not talk about it to me.'

'You must think he's an awful stuff-shirt. Underneath it all he likes a good gossip just as much as anyone else. After all, it's not as if this is such a tragedy as all that. I mean, there are no children. Which reminds me . . .'

Janet smiled as she put the receiver down. Margaret was the only person she knew who would have said 'there are' instead of slurring it off as just 'ther're no children'. She would have preferred to have seen Margaret on her own. Had she made that obvious? Margaret, as usual, had taken Janet's mild objection literally.

Why is it, thought Janet, as she sat opposite Sydney later, I get attached to people who I haven't anything in common with, or, for that matter, even like, very much? Sydney must be the most sexless man in London and he's neither clever nor funny, or indeed anything. He's just there. Yet I'm fond of him. I'm used to him. Cosiness is my great problem, she reflected with a sudden, small

gust of inward anger at this familiar conclusion, spilling a little sherry on her skirt. Sydney made a great fuss over this, yet didn't get around to being effective enough to fetch a cloth from the kitchen. He offered a handkerchief, which was too small and too clean for Janet to accept with any intention of using seriously. Fortunately Margaret came into the room and, with the briskness which Janet admired and felt she herself could never achieve, cut through Sydney's twitterings. 'It won't stain. Anyhow it's only a week-end, knock-about skirt isn't it, Janet? Have you told her about Miles yet?'

Sydney, who was as frightened of Janet as he was of most girls, looked at her, his eyes shining hopefully and tried to take advantage of this hint that he and she had been having an intimate talk. 'I haven't had a chance, really. I was just about to.'

There wasn't a great deal to tell. Maddox had come into Close's office, a thing he didn't often do for social reasons, and without preamble announced that he and Sara had decided to part.

'He must have said more than that. Something more.' Sydney sipped his drink. 'How did he say it? Did he seem cut up? Or quite calm?'

Sydney thought for a minute. 'He was a lot calmer than I would have been if I'd been in his place. But then, I'm not a difficult person for him to tell it to. Not like Stanton or some of the others there.'

'Has he told Stanton yet?'

'As a matter of fact, I don't think he has. Do you know, come to think of it, I believe I'm the first person he has told? Isn't that odd?' Sydney seemed pleased at this evidence of favour. 'We've never been very thick with each other. Recently we had a bit of a disagreement. Perhaps you knew. About Danny's book, actually.'

Janet took up the interrogation asking questions she'd presumably asked before. 'Is it all quite settled? I mean, does Sara agree?'

'Oh, yes. I think so. Miles said it was all very amicable.'

'They always are when they start,' said Margaret. 'But, Sydney, didn't you say he seemed worried about the reaction in the firm?'

'A bit. But Miles is in a very secure position, you know. There's no one to touch him. At least, no one has his reputation.'

Janet and Margaret looked at Sydney and then, as if they had simultaneously decided there was no more to be had from him,

implying he had not made the best of his opportunities and given very poor value, they turned to each other.

'Never *much* of a marriage – did you think, Janet?'

'So unlike Miles to risk this kind of thing. Not like him.'

'Unless, of course, there is someone else.'

'He wouldn't, I'm sure.'

'I didn't mean him.'

Janet stopped being aimless, throwing out suggestions hoping from them to strike some revealing seam of truth. Margaret had brought the matter home.

'You think Sara has been having an affair?' She looked at Margaret who looked down quickly at the glass she was cradling in her lap.

'She's a bit more likely to than Miles. That's all I meant.'

Afterwards Janet wondered if she would have, there and then, brought out the whole possibility of Sara and Danny if Sydney hadn't been in the room. Margaret, feeling the need to put things back on a more theoretical plane, to have a more abstract discussion, went on in a slow, measured way. 'Girls like Sara don't – I shouldn't have thought – amicably agree to a divorce unless they've somebody else in mind.'

Janet felt this argument, familiar and irritating though it was, still held good and was, for a moment, silenced as she wondered, as she had so many times before, whether Danny could possibly be involved. Had all the dedication of the past weeks, the different more serious manner, been the corollary of a passionate love affair? Could Sara, brittle, heartless, fashionable and self-seeking to an unusual extent, arouse *serious* feelings in Donovan?

Janet excused herself from having supper with the Closes. She wanted to be alone, to think and then, perhaps, to make another telephone call.

After she left, Margaret looked across at Sydney.

'What do you think?' he asked.

'I think Janet believes it's something to do with Donovan. So does Miles. Did he by any chance say anything to suggest that to you?'

'No.'

'Something did happen there. I'm sure of it. Remember Maddox's sudden loss of interest in Donovan's book? Then that extraordinary behaviour at your cricket match. Seemed so spiteful.'

'You got the wrong end of the stick about that, I'm sure.'

'A duel between bat and ball to decide who should win the fair lady. More sherry, please. Awful how stimulating other people's disasters are,' said Margaret, for a moment sounding like somebody quite different.

. . .

The Close marriage was marriage spelt out in capital letters. The house was large, apparently full of rooms, each room full of the bric-a-brac of family life. There was an impression of servants toiling away somewhere down in the bowels – stoking ancient boilers, chopping up vegetables on long deal tables, playing illicitly with the youngest child of the family who temporarily had thrown off the surveillance of a starchy Nanny. Rough and ready comfort everywhere, except in the drawing room, which was more elegant: the more fragile atmosphere of Children's No Man's Land. Decanters, glass, silver, glittered there. Untouched and quiet, waiting to be pressed into service by the master of the house, a role not easily sustained by Sydney yet a role he couldn't escape, so much did the house impose its Victorian character – a character, incidentally, desired and striven for by Margaret. 'A Northamptonshire Rectory in London,' Danny had once called it. He'd added, 'With a female Rector.'

It was easy to see, thought Janet, why they didn't regard the Maddox marriage as a real one. It was so utterly different from the Close partnership as to be little more than a casual living together; lightly taken up, easily broken off. No bones broken. Fun while it lasted. Just one of those things.

Couldn't this very atmosphere of casualness about the Maddox marriage make it possible for it to break up without the existence of a love affair on either side? They could be just sliding out of it. Putting themselves back on the market as it were. Starting the game again. This speculation reassured Janet who still couldn't believe Donovan had been successful in persuading Sara to be unfaithful to Miles. She would hate to be wrong about that, and this need to know, and quickly, made her change her mind about ringing Liz Semple. Sydney's version of the events had been unsatisfactory, though, no doubt, they reflected accurately enough the shortness and depth of the office conversation between Miles and Sydney. Sydney couldn't embroider. Liz could. Between the

two, plain and fancy, must lie some approximation of the real situation.

. . . .

The last of the golden sun came through the window of Liz Semple's flat and cast a pale light on the lower half of the opposite wall gradually darkening as it slid down on to the wooden floor boards.

The radio talking from a table by the side of the divan, was so surrounded by empty tonic and wine bottles that the effect was of a deserted room at the end of a party with only the speaking wireless to recall the noise and gaiety of a short while before. An interview was taking place.

'And now, answer me a question. Rather a personal one I'm afraid. Which do you prefer; people or flowers?'

'Oh, give me flowers every time. I couldn't bear to write about people. A kind of gossip column. Whereas I don't in the least mind writing a gossip column, if you see what I mean, about flowers.'

'I believe though you have another interest very close to your heart. Am I right?'

'You must mean, I'm sure, Prison Reform.'

'Yes, indeed.'

'Well yes – you are right . . .'

Liz Semple turned off the wireless to answer Janet's phone call. She had been seated at her drawing board, a thin brush in one hand moving slowly across a large foolscap sheet of white cartridge paper, while another brush – thin and black, the twin of the one she was using – she held cross-wise in her mouth. From a distance in the decreasing light, soon to be too little for her to continue to work by, this brush in her mouth appeared to give her a pencil moustache such as might have been worn by a gangster or dancing instructor in a Hollywood film of the thirties.

'Yes. Maddox told me himself. Said he'd told Close and one or two other people at Stantons. Funny isn't it? Sara is an awful girl, though.'

She listened.

'Look, why don't you come round for a bit? We can talk easier. I can't do any more work for the time being. I'm not due to go out for an hour or so and the Radio Newsreel I've just been

listening to, isn't gripping me as it should. Anyhow I haven't seen you for ages.'

When she finished talking Janet put down the telephone and looked round the large room which made up most of the accommodation of her flat. It still bore Donovan's traces. Books he'd read and then, seeking to infect her with the same enthusiasm or condemnation, had passed on to her. Just to look at their covers recalled, if she allowed this to happen, the conversations they'd had and when they'd had them: the time of year, the kind of weather, what she was wearing, what he was wearing, what they did after talking about the book – it all came back with a sharpness she found unendurable. Unendurable because of the difference between then and now, and because what she remembered was, in itself, more magical than anything that had happened since.

Although Janet was now better than she had been, was less vulnerable to every pitch and toss of his mood, less preoccupied with the sheer temperature of her days, still the sight of one of his cast-off jerseys folded across a chair, so personal, heart-rending because more familiar and so more damaging to lose, could cause a flattening weight of melancholy.

Her mood was determined. She wanted to know all there was to know about the Maddox divorce. In particular, of course, she wanted to know what role – if any – Donovan played in it. She couldn't see the old unregenerate Donovan in the part of willing co-respondent, though she supposed the new model would be quite capable of burning any number of boats in the name of a romantic abstraction; looking for a cause he might well settle for a love match with someone else's wife and the cause became more honourable, because more difficult, if the husband in question was an old friend. Sara, though she could hardly have considered Donovan seriously when he was a caricature of the seedy journalist in the making, might be persuaded to think more favourably of a budding novelist. Even so, it seemed very unlikely. Only love was left as a reason for so unlikely a combination and that, after all, could happen to anyone. She had been over the same thoughts so many times. To *know* something would be a release.

She made herself some scrambled eggs and a cup of coffee not because she was hungry but as a protection against the drink Liz was sure to offer her. One of her drawbacks as Donovan's lover had been the weakness of her head, and the awfulness of her

hangovers. At one time he would spend more time during the day sitting in a pub than out of it and she had found this an enormous strain, though on balance she had decided, better than surrendering the field to chance.

Janet admired Liz as so many did, but could only take her in small doses. Liz was too intense, too tiring, too disordered. She was 'too' much in practically every way. This made her someone people boasted of knowing because it made them more interesting, more artistic, more Bohemian, and so served, in some slight way, to counterbalance the stodgy lives most of them led. Liz provided a topic of conversation. She was a small but permanent scandal, not dangerous but sufficient to allow tongue-clucking and head-wagging, though these were invariably followed by 'But she's so nice' and a look of anxious, although contrived, concern. She was popular, but not sought after, part of leisure, someone you took up and listened to when the day's work was done, the children put to bed, the serious matters settled. She helped dinner parties along as much in her absence as in her presence. There was about her character, as she herself recognised, something of the sturdy good sort, the person put upon, the lender not the borrower. At the bottom of it all, unsung by so many of her acquaintance because so little referred to by herself, was her small but unmistakable talent. A talent she had put to sufficiently good use to maintain for herself exactly the kind of life she wanted. She worked very hard, a constant stream of material went out. Here again her manner and reputation stood her in good stead. Liz was employed in the first instance as it seemed obvious she was good, but this was nearly always done out of bravado; what was usually described as a 'calculated risk'. The men who gave her assignments swelled a little with pride to think how liberal, how tolerant, they had been and when the work came in on time, and met the often absurd and trivial disciplines laid down, they were at first surprised and then quite ridiculously pleased with themselves. Over a drink with another man they would push themselves a little deeper in their chairs, stretch out their legs, smoke with care watching the tip of their cigarettes as they blew out a thin, elegant stream of smoke from between their pursed lips and say, 'Had a girl in the other day. Funny sort of creature. Untidy; dirty you might say, almost. But I just had a sort of feeling about her. Can't explain it. So I gave her a little job to do. Nothing much. Wouldn't have

mattered if it had gone wrong. I just wanted to see. Well, it worked. She did it very well. Very well indeed. So we've started pushing a lot more her way. Catalogues, mailing shots, record covers – that sort of thing. Perhaps she'd be useful to you. Of course, she requires a certain amount of handling. I should think she could be very difficult. And she wouldn't give a damn about losing the money. Real artistic temperament and all that kind of thing.'

So sagging businessmen, who never took a risk in their lives, were able to see themselves as shrewd patrons of the arts and this made Liz very popular and surprisingly well-off.

It was the discovery of all this about Liz that made her admired as well as liked by those who had started off thinking about her as an altogether more negligible person. Perhaps it was realising Liz was in some way a serious character that made Janet seek her out now. Perhaps, too, Janet had an inkling of the regard and affection Maddox had for Liz. Unlikely as many would have felt it to be, Maddox would talk to Liz as he would to very few others.

Some people confide more easily in those whose appearance and manner give the impression of unreliability rather than in others who exude the soundness that should make them more suitable. Maddox was one of these. Perhaps all confidences imply a measure of self-criticism, or at least some kind of disruption, and it is easier to talk to someone who seems fallible; on the whole important confidences are not about successes. Maddox told Close the bare facts about his planned divorce but he *talked* to Liz. In doing this he revealed the same flair that had won him so high a reputation as a picker of potential best-sellers and authors. Liz would know instinctively what could or could not be repeated, she would abide by this rigidly in much the same way as a boy will swear not to sneak on a friend. She was safe despite all the appearances to the contrary, and would be a valuable ally in putting forward Maddox's side of the case, although unlikely to get many opportunities to do so as she knew so few of his friends. She was partisan. As she said to Janet on the phone, Sara was 'awful'. At the same time Liz was critical of Maddox's glib, salesman's approach to life; the warmth so thinly covering the insincerity, not fur but fabric.

'Sara has a lot to complain about, no doubt,' Maddox had said. 'And I might make a point or two about her, if pushed. So divorce seems sensible. Civilised. Before there are children – well, I could hardly have children under the circumstances, could I? I mean

to have children merely to keep a marriage together would be a terrible thing to do.' Maddox put over a prepared case. As smooth as toffee, all very reasonable, all very – to use Maddox's word – civilised. When Liz told her this Janet screwed up her nose and looked disdainful. 'I hate that over-used word. It's like relationship, or expressions like "spiritual values".' Liz defended it. 'Civilised' was a word everyone used in times like divorce. It was supposed to have a bolstering effect, to help people behave differently from the way they would like to behave; a reminder of standards at a time when jungle behaviour becomes so much more appealing, even more reasonable. Besides, Maddox was a conventional man and fell readily into the jargon of the day. So the story Maddox told Liz was a dull one. There had been no hint of anything sensational, anything hidden away. There was no mystery. No speculation called for. A cut and dried arrangement had quickly been arrived at and this in itself, if nothing else, made the original marriage seem a waste of time.

Liz, like everyone else, had listened to the ends of numerous love affairs, but never before had the finish been so lacking in colour or excitement. It was in character with all that had gone before, confirming Liz's own convictions about the essential dullness of Miles' and Sara's life together.

All this Liz now passed on to Janet. It took very little time. At the end of it, Janet put down her glass with care, elaborately placing her fingers around the stem, and spoke slowly, her eyes only coming up from looking at her glass when she had nearly finished what she wanted to say. It was a gesture Donovan would have recognised as a signal for her to ask an apparently innocent question but nevertheless one full of importance to her. 'Don't you think it's unlikely Sara would agree to a divorce without having someone else in mind?'

'Yes, I would.'

'But . . .'

'But according to Maddox she hasn't. Or says she hasn't.'

'Yes. I see.'

Then overwhelmingly and surprisingly Janet felt no more desire to cover up, and with this release of feeling was coupled a tremendously strong conviction of finish for herself too. At that moment she knew beyond doubt Donovan and she were at the end. This certainty gave her relief. For the first time in months she seemed

to expel a lungful of air. She blew something out of her. A way of life – a set of values it almost became, so heady did she feel – went out of the window. She had been liberated by a distant war in a different territory. Miles, Sara, Janet, Danny. All bound together in one way or another. Sara and Miles to nobody's great grief or even, come to that, surprise, had separated. Now the whole combination exploded. The kaleidoscope shook. Whatever happened Janet was free at that moment from the past. What she did now would be new. Even if it continued to be Donovan, it would be Donovan in a different way, more her way. Or, at least a way she could positively agree with rather than merely accept.

Perhaps the gross political scandal made it that kind of time. Skins were being sloughed off, it seemed. The country was taking an emetic and had been doing so for the past few months. New attitudes, new disgusts, were being evolved. A liberal permissiveness, that set as many new standards as it broke old, a sort of truth game, was abroad. People wanted to sweep out what was under the carpet, open the cupboards, shake out the clothes. A brand new Liberty Hall was being set up and all were flocking to join without realising the rules and regulations soon to go with it. It was over-dramatic to talk of an end to an era, but to many something was over. In a way it was nothing beyond the steady march of events. Another victory for the watchful meritocrats because the flabbiness of the establishment had been so convincingly demonstrated. Public men were, almost without exception it seemed, suspect. So, therefore, were the institutions they belonged to. Somehow the Church, the Public Schools, the Government, the Law, the Royal Family, had all been contaminated and suffered a reverse. It was a time of questioning, a time when things were not accepted as being what they seemed.

Janet had in a flash considered Donovan and refaced him like a building. So it was easy for the conversation to take a different and more decisive turn and Janet moved with something like gusto to find out what she wanted to know.

'I wondered at one time whether Danny and Sara were having some kind of walk-out,' she said deliberately choosing words which, she hoped, would convey a degree of relaxation sufficient to dispel any fears Liz might have about telling all she knew.

'Donovan knows a fantastic number of people,' Liz murmured assuming an air of indolence.

Not satisfied with this Janet tried again.

'There was some awful business to do with telephones some weeks back. Can't remember the details, really. Anyhow, they seemed to add up to something going on between Sara and Danny. And then there was that mad cricket match – Christ, men!'

Liz remembered the night she had turned Fenton out of her flat. He'd said something about the cricket match at the time that she thought was interesting, but the happenings of that dreadful evening had overlain this, and in any case, she'd never grasped the full significance of the incident though guessing it was of some importance.

'I did hear something about a cricket match. It's not the sort of thing I'm very good at.'

'Nor me. But I was there. As soon as Donovan came in to bat Miles took off a very good bowler, who would have got Danny out as soon as look at him, and put himself on to bowl. And he sort of emanated an aura – sorry, this sounds awful – of hostility.'

Liz snorted.

'Did Miles get him out?'

'No. Donovan knocked him all over the place. But it all seemed so strange at the time. It looked so *personal*.'

'I hope you won't think me unsympathetic but I think that's frightfully funny.'

'So do I – now. Actually not just now. I thought it was funny at the time.'

'It seems a bit far fetched to think Miles trying to bowl him out at cricket is any proof that he thought Sara was having an affair with Danny.'

'Yes, I suppose it does, put like that. It was a detail, a confirmation of what was going on. At least I felt it was. *Surely* Maddox said something more than what you've just told me.'

'Not really. He's a cagey bastard, you know.'

'So people keep saying.'

'All he said was – things had come to a head lately in such a way as to make it obvious what he and Sara should do. I suppose you could say Donovan was the thing that brought it to a head. I don't know. Where is Donovan, by the way?'

'Away.'

'Anyway,' said Liz, changing tack. 'Maddox wouldn't have printed Donovan's book if he thought Danny was after his wife.'

'Of course he would. It would be a point of honour or something equally dotty.'

'Perhaps you're right.'

'Actually, Maddox suddenly lost all interest in Danny's book after having the most dreadful struggle with Sydney Close about it all.'

'Because he found out about Donovan and Sara?'

'Possibly.'

Liz gave them both another drink of the filthy red wine Janet had anticipated, and eaten scrambled eggs to ward off, and looked shyly at the label as she asked, 'Forgive me asking and all, but since you brought all this up . . .' Janet could tell from the facetious, mock-Cockney accent what was coming. Liz could never ask a personal question without some kind of disguise. 'I thought you and Mister Donovan were in the nature of a long-standing walk-out yourselves.'

'It's been going on for a long while. There have always been others. He's never made much effort to conceal them. Why not Sara?'

'Too genteel, respectable, silly. I don't know. Not with Donovan.'

'He's become respectable. He's got some way to go, I agree. He works all day writing. His first book will be out at just about the time he's finished his second.'

'I see. Do you mind?'

'About Sara? Not specially. I suddenly feel it's over now, anyway. Me and Donovan.'

'Ask him about it all then. Should be interesting.'

'Oh, I will.'

When she left Janet realised she wouldn't have gone if the revelation – it felt like a revelation – of where matters stood with Donovan had come to her before she had gone round to Liz rather than while she was there. Of course she would ask Donovan. Nothing easier. Now. Was it even interesting to find out? But she was grateful to Liz. It had been when she was with her, it had happened, this extraordinary liberation. Perhaps it wouldn't have happened elsewhere. Liz could create the right electricity. Things moved when you were with her. Janet decided she would try and see Groat for another meal that evening and tomorrow evening she would telephone Donovan. Telephoning

Groat would be fun, telephoning Donovan would be, too. How different.

The backs of her teeth felt coated and tasted rusty. Would Liz's teeth feel like that? Or were her teeth used to that wine?

Liz had been left with a taste in her mouth, though of a different kind. Remembering the day of the Stanton cricket match had brought back in vivid detail that dreadful night with Fenton.

He had come round the following evening and, like some caricature, like some rustic oaf, had faltered and stuttered his way through a trailing, mumbling apology so abject as to give the irritating effect of a performance rather than a reality. The contrast between it and his equally absurd behaviour on the previous evening heightened Liz's desire to have done with him. She had allowed him in but hadn't offered him a drink. She heard him out. Or rather waited until, like a flat tyre, he made no further noise.

'I'm not tough enough.'

He looked at her uncomprehendingly.

She explained.

'It was all so humiliating. For both of us. I couldn't see you without remembering us struggling on the sofa. Me rushing off for the police. Lurking about watching you leave and slink off round the corner.'

He recovered a little, colour came back into his cheeks, his voice grew stronger.

'I thought it might strike you, when you thought about it, as funny – perhaps.'

'Not bad. Not bad at all. It should have done, I grant you. I would have thought it would have done. But it hasn't worked out like that, and that's all there is to it, don't you agree?'

He left almost immediately. His leave-taking seemed, to her over-sensitive nerves, to smack of the disappointed good fellow who manfully owns up to being in the wrong and is hurt and disappointed to find an apology isn't enough to meet the case.

'I'm sorry,' he repeated.

'All right. Not your fault. No bones broken. Least said soonest mended. All *my* fault really. Rule Britannia. Toodle Pip. Just one of those things and let's call it a day.'

He clattered off down the stairs and, for a moment, it seemed

like his other departures when he'd been almost wafted off the premises on a great cloud of nonsense. He remembered how she'd yelled after him, 'Do the executives at Stantons really have a wash room?' Today she caught something of the same atmosphere when she called down.

'Not a word to Maddox. Cross my heart.'

Fenton left. He decided against telling Merge. But he wanted to see him. Badly. They might go to the pub for a drink or two. Merge was always good for that.

10

At about the time Janet was on her way to visit the Closes and discover all she could about the Maddox divorce Danny was returning from his walk, in time for what he hoped would be an unofficial tea. Mrs. Tench had conveyed she would be absent. The green hills, the wide expanses of apparently uncultivated country, the high, white, fast running clouds and the sheer amount of fresh air he felt in his lungs had all caused Donovan to feel there were compensations about the Tench week-end. There had been so much to look at.

He felt over-aware. When, rounding a corner of a lane, he came across a scrawny, light coloured, mongrel Labrador looking at him with fear and suspicion because of the underweight pheasant in its mouth, Danny found himself turning this, admittedly unusual sight, into significance. His consciousness of the colour of the dog's coat exactly matching the receding, lemon light of day, the increasing darkness of the dark green fields, the servile way the dog immediately dropped his find at the feet of an invisible master and grovelled away; he noticed it all with a sensitivity out of proportion to what he had seen. This dissatisfied him. His new role of author carried with it implications of pretentiousness at the best of times; he was anxious to avoid adding to it. At the same time, for reasons he couldn't explain, he knew to recall this trivial encounter with the dog could, later in the evening, help to offset the awfulness of Mrs. Tench and the household she might be described as running. To remember it would be a little like a harassed tycoon taking a smooth pebble from his pocket and gently rubbing it to relieve his troubled nerves.

Tea was unofficial. Two or three guests stood in the large, modern kitchen, hanging about, uncertain whether to grab a cup and pour some tea from the large pot on one of the 'working surfaces' or whether because this pot belonged to somebody else, or was empty, to make their own. Or, for that matter, to heat up the large percolator of coffee standing on an elaborate American cooker. Also in sight was a half empty jar of apricot jam, some pale butter in a pottery dish, a partially cut loaf of Hovis, a chequered, squat pot of Gentlemen's Relish, at least two jugs full of milk and a

collection of unmatching cups and saucers. There was all this but there was no leadership. The Army man, Major Calne, and the dark girl, Olivia, stood there appearing to be too frightened to make a move in case their host or hostess appeared and reprimanded them for taking too much upon themselves. Donovan boldly tried the tea pot finding it tepid, opened the refrigerator and poured himself a glass of milk, cut off a slice of bread which he spread with some butter and Marmite he discovered and left, complaining he couldn't eat standing up. He was joined shortly afterwards in the small room near the kitchen, where he'd found a table and some chairs, by Olivia and Major Calne who had been, apparently, encouraged by his example to help themselves to some tea. They made a mistake, in Donovan's view, in drinking the stale tea but he supposed anything was better than nothing. The guerilla leader looked about him. Two of his fellow guests were beginning to stir. To complain. To state, by their conduct, it wasn't their fault they were there. There were few places they would like to be less. They would force their hosts to recognise their obligations to them, poor, defenceless wretches trapped miles away from London in a beautiful house without cheer or comfort. Donovan decided his forthright action in pouring out a cup of tea should be backed by words.

'If this goes on, no lunch, and no tea to speak of, I shall be dining out this evening. There must be a Trust House somewhere near and nowadays I hear a lot about the excellence of the wine in our Trust Houses.'

'I like Brown Windsor,' said Major Calne unexpectedly. 'I mean I do. You shouldn't sneer at Trust Houses. All in all, they take a lot of beating.'

'What's a Trust House?' asked Olivia. 'I mean, really. What is it, Bangers?'

Major Calne looked at her. 'You must know what a Trust House is.'

'Look,' said Donovan talking to the Major. 'You don't think a man who has had only a boiled egg washed down with a little – a very little – Italian wine and a rough and ready Marmite sandwich since last night is "sneering" at Trust Houses, do you?'

'A Trust House,' said Major Calne, 'a Trust House is an inn which dispenses food and drink at a moderate price in reasonable conditions and is very English indeed. Beef and Yorkshire pud,

things like that. You must know what a Trust House is,' he repeated himself plaintively.

'I knew all along,' said Olivia liltingly. 'I call them pubs. And,' with a touch of affected nostalgia, 'jolly nice too.'

Calne said nothing but Donovan draining his glass felt things were improving.

Olivia eyed Donovan. 'If you do go off to a Trust House I hope you'll take me with you.'

After some more conversation, Donovan discovered Olivia, whose surname was Greyson, worked as a journalist on one of the women's magazines. She had visited Tench two years ago to write a sickly article about him which he said he liked, and consequently she had become an occasional guest. She was attractive but, at first sight, had about her that kind of almost assumed, professional tiredness Donovan knew so well. To Major Calne, 'Bangers', who had obviously met her before, this jaded air of world weariness represented metropolitan sophistication at its most daunting. Even Donovan wondered how many men ever plucked up enough courage to storm her citadel. However she was knowledgeable about the house and what went on in it and so was able to communicate a surprising amount of gossip while, at the same time, affecting to be too bored to know what she was saying.

'Actually I shouldn't bother to plan a trip to the local pub. I mean Trust House.'

'Go down badly, I daresay.'

'Possibly. But the food here is a lot better. That dreadful woman is an excellent cook.'

Bangers and Danny cheered up at the openness of her description.

'You wouldn't have guessed it from the lunch.'

'She doesn't like lunch. As Victor said. Thinks it makes her fat. Anyway she usually never gets up that early. That's why she was in such a vile temper today.'

Donovan and the Major sat on their wooden chairs, mute and respectful, at her feet. Olivia apparently encouraged by this attentiveness went on, 'There will be the most hideous rows very likely in the course of preparing dinner, but when she's done it will be perfectly all right.'

The alliance was confirmed. The Major, his fears suddenly dismissed, enthusiastically supported Olivia.

'I can support that. About the cooking, I mean,' he said. 'It's absolutely first-class. Last time I dined here I had the most wonderful chocolate mousse with whipped cream, and, to start with – just to start with, not as a main course, mind you – some really delicious lobster vol-au-vent. I can't remember what we had in the middle. The entrée. I never can. I'm so much more interested in the frills as it were. The starters and finishers, if you follow me. I think it was saddle of lamb. I certainly remember having that mint *jelly*, here, quite recently. I do prefer the proper mint sauce . . .' he broke off, afraid he had gone on too long, too confidingly. He looked like a small animal – a vole perhaps – his eyes large and unblinking, his shoulders shrunk and his head lowered. Donovan loved him for his simple greed and began to cheer up at the prospect of the evening ahead.

'What happens after dinner?' he asked Olivia.

'I try and get away as soon as possible. I always feel so bloody tired at week-ends anyway and this place absolutely exhausts me. Quite a relief to get back to London. Generally Mrs. T. likes to play some game, cards usually. Something simple but for money. She makes it fairly plain she thinks her wishes should be respected, if only as a fitting tribute for all the work she's done in the kitchen. Somehow four people find themselves round the table. She insists on four. The real drama of the evening, though, centres around whether or not Victor will be one of four. Old Nick himself does his best to bring this about. You may have noticed he enjoys the scenes they have. God knows why. They are so awful. I suppose that's their fascination. Perhaps old Nick is still scavenging for fresh material for his books. Watch for it at dinner. See how he tries to make sure Victor is one of the four.'

Major Calne hadn't been following this conversation. 'What's a poof?' he suddenly asked. Possibly he thought Olivia, as a journalist, would be *au fait* with the latest expressions. Donovan took no notice of this interruption and continued to question Olivia. 'I suppose the game ends in a terrible row between Mrs. T. and Victor.'

'Often it does,' she agreed. 'But sometimes Mrs. T. gets a bit tiddly and this often has the effect of making her quite surprisingly amiable towards Victor. They make schoolboy jokes together and go on about who made the biggest smell in the lavatory that morning. Or else every remark is treated as a sexual *double*

entendre and they collapse into uncontrollable giggles. To be honest, it's rather embarrassing. I can't stand being giggled at even by children. But it's far more disconcerting when it's grown-ups.'

Donovan, who was rocking backwards and forwards and laughing to himself, suddenly turned to Major Calne with a serious air. 'A poof is a homosexual,' he said. Then he talked to the girl again. 'You *have* cheered me up. Why don't we giggle at them? I mean, do you think we could?'

'No. I couldn't. I just don't happen to find it funny enough. Anyhow I'm too old to go in for giggling at what, I suppose, is still called a country house week-end. Could you call this week-end that? I think I'll go and have an early bath and a lie down. Just talking about this evening has had a depressing effect on me.'

Bangers and Donovan looked at each other after she'd left.

'I say,' whispered the Army man, looking once again like a hunted, woolly quadruped. 'I'm sorry I asked what a poof meant.'

'Don't worry. I'm sure it takes a lot more than that to shock her.'

'I thought they were called "queers".'

'So they are.'

'As well as poofs?'

'Yes. And in certain circles they used to be called "brown-hatters".'

'Yes. I know that one. I think "pansies" is the best word. Sums them up for me. I mean, that's how I feel about them. They are like pansies.'

'I think homosexual is by far the best thing to call them.'

'Is he one?'

'Who? Victor? A homosexual?'

'Yes.'

'I don't know. As a matter of fact, since you ask me, I don't think he's too fussy which he is. Opportunity is all, I should have thought, in the case of our Victor.'

'Was he at Eton?'

'I don't follow the sequence of thought.'

'I just asked.'

Donovan thinking over this conversation, as he strolled round the garden afterwards decided it had been one of those rare occasions when a level of absurdity had been reached usually only

achieved with large quantities of alcohol. It had been a triumph on tea and Marmite. Nevertheless his spirits drooped as, walking soggily over the damp grass, he noticed the sodden, expiring blooms on the rose trees. Why, he wondered, is the autumn so stimulating in London and yet so woebegone in the country. Did autumn need buildings to be at its best? Traffic? In London the parties would be started up, the bookshops would be full of bright new covers, the theatres thronged and fashionable once again. The evenings closed in, yet life expanded. Bustle and gossip became more lively. Love affairs started in November. It was sowing time. Round the corner was Christmas. Only after that did the winter take over. January would be a more fitting time for the dahlias to languish like exhausted coloured plates. In September, the best time for smelling English apples, they were premature, a false alarm.

Donovan felt the air chilling rapidly as the white mist around the tree-tops in the distant fields thickened. He went in to go up to his room. There was something he wanted to add to his novel.

When Donovan came down an hour or so later, he paused at the foot of the stairs to listen to the bursts of laughter and the banging of pots and pans. It augured well, he thought. It was scarcely the atmosphere of tension only relieved by bursts of fury, he'd been led to expect from Olivia's description. All the same he decided to keep out of the way and headed meditatively for the library to enjoy a restful drink with one or another of his fellow guests. Why was it called the library? It contained books but could a room be called a library if it was doing the job of a drawing room as well? Mrs. Tench had described it as the library when she was telling people where to collect for tea. Until then Donovan had thought of it as the drawing room. Had there, in the event, been tea in the library as well as the impromptu affair in the kitchen? By now he was in the room. It was empty. Bottles and glasses were laid out on the table. A log fire burnt enthusiastically in the grate. Donovan poured himself a colossal sherry, pulled a book out of the shelves, and started to read. He was relaxed after his burst of energy in writing a couple more pages for his own book and the difficulty of doing this made him more aware, and more appreciative, of what somebody else had written.

Eventually Donovan tired of sitting by himself and opening

the door listened for sounds from the kitchen. The same riotous and apparently good humoured row was still going on. Mrs. Tench or no Mrs. Tench, Donovan decided to go and see.

The first person he saw was Old Nick himself wearing a blue and white butcher's apron – the top half passing over his flaccid chest like an old-fashioned, drooping bathing costume. He was in excellent spirits.

'Ah, dear boy. Do come in and lend us thine aid. Give us the benefit of your advice. I seem to remember we were talking about food at lunch. Rightly or wrongly, I've got you in my mind as a bit of an expert.' Donovan looked puzzled. 'You are obviously unaware of our predicament. The mistress has taken to her bed. We must expect it at a time like this, I suppose. As a result, license reigns. *Haute Cuisine* in the process of becoming distinctly *basse*.'

Each guest appeared to have a job which they helped along with a large drink standing somewhere within easy reach. Bangers was chopping onions. Olivia, looking much less depressed, was stirring something vigorously in a large, white bowl. Somebody else was peeling potatoes, another making a salad big enough for a huge, wooden bowl on the draining board.

'Omelettes. After a lot of discussion, that's what we settled for. A little ordinary after the meal the mistress planned for our delight. A sort of kabob of diabolical heat washed down with that very severe Greek wine that tastes of turpentine. It wasn't to be. Omelettes, with a possibly less robust wine from somewhere slightly nearer home, is the order of the day. Are you good at the herb? It's an interesting assignment. Vital, yet somehow not servile or too demanding. Yes, herbs is to be your line. A formidable array of coy little pots is to be found nesting in that cupboard. Make free, my dear, make free.'

Though much stimulated by the change in the evening it wasn't until Donovan had drunk one or two glasses of wine and eaten over half his omelette he was able to adjust himself to his host's exasperating way of talking. Queer, or poofish as Bangers might now essay to call it, sharp, observant, cruel, dominating and ultimately very tiring. However after a lengthy shared reminiscence about his Army days with Bangers, which explained how the Major came to be a guest, Tench became quieter and less aggravating. Pouring out some more wine for Donovan he set out

to make himself agreeable. Fortunately, perhaps, this goodwill was obvious or his opening could have had awkward results.

'I gather you're something of a cricketer, Daniel.'

Donovan blushed, Bangers looked pleased, and Olivia raised her eyebrows. Donovan explained he wasn't anything of the sort and was relieved to find his host wasn't interested enough to continue the subject. Olivia, left to her own devices, probably would have extracted more from Tench's casual remark. As it was she did her best. 'You must be awfully brave,' she said cutting into Donovan's denials. 'Why?' he asked curtly. 'Isn't it awfully rough?' 'Rough?' 'Yes.' 'You must be thinking of rugger. You can't describe cricket as rough. It's quite the wrong word.' 'Dangerous?' asked Olivia sweetly. Donovan decided he had better ignore her and hurried to finish his description of the day's cricket with Stantons, stressing the amateur nature of the entire thing and how unseriously everyone took it. Inwardly he was thinking about the strangeness of that day and how it kept cropping up in the most unlikely places. Tench obviously had no ulterior motive. He'd heard nothing to arouse his, hardly ever sleeping, curiosity. It wasn't until later Maddox's name came up giving Donovan his biggest shock since he'd arrived for this bizarre week-end.

'I hear Maddox is getting a divorce.'

Donovan, like so many people, reacted slowly to startling news. The shock numbed his brain and imagination. He had to rest them for some seconds until he felt they could deal with the changed set of circumstances the shock had brought about. Donovan slowly inspected his host's bile green smoking jacket comparing this rather unpleasant garment favourably with the apron he'd worn earlier in the evening. It had several grease spots on it. It was shapeless, too much depended on the solitary velvet covered button, fastening unsatisfactorily beneath his navel, causing the top of his trousers to show, and to betray his protuberant stomach.

'Are you sure about Maddox?' he asked.

'Oh, it's no secret. I rather thought you'd know. Maddox is something of a friend of yours, I believe. Helped you a lot with your book. That kind of thing. Incidentally, I've been thinking about it. Trying to remember it more clearly. Think I've got it now. I suppose it's quite a good picture of Fleet Street, but, frankly, is it worth doing? Fleet Street is one of those important subjects that don't seem to make good novels. They always come

out so seedy. Still, sometimes first novels – is it your first, I think? – have to be what you know about in a very precise way, don't you think? It's not your fault you happen to know about Fleet Street. You had to write about it really, didn't you? Do something better next time.'

'It isn't a question of better. It's what things are – isn't it?'

'Just what I was trying to say, dear boy. Fleet Street isn't of any interest to anyone. Everyone thinks it's awful. You confirm it. No surprise or enjoyment. Everything turns to ashes.'

Donovan, lost and irritated, rather desperately interrupted. 'Are you absolutely sure about the divorce?' he repeated. 'It's important. They *are* friends of mine.'

Tench then explained that his last visit to Stantons had brought him into contact with several people, including Maddox, and all of them had confirmed it. He'd understood there had always been a certain coolness between the Maddoxes, though he didn't himself know Sara very well.

'Thought she was a model. Was she?'

When he found Tench had nothing more significant to add Donovan was anxious to get away to his room. He wanted to think. He wanted to ask himself whether the situation called for any action. He was disturbed. There seemed some danger ahead. The fragile social structure he knew had received a tear. He wanted it repaired. He didn't want this kind of damage done to anyone he knew. Divorce, like people living together, was part of the life he lived in London. It made for amusing conversation and speculation. A lot of people talked of practically nothing else. Yet he minded. Even in so shifting a society as he moved in, some things ought to be stable. Some things ought to be taken for granted. Change breeds change and how many new things are ever better than the old?

Impossible now, for the Maddoxes to give a dinner party like the one Donovan went to earlier in the summer. That rose he'd given to Margaret, Janet and Sara had involved him. It had led to the first lunch with Sara, the first tentative moves towards the final misunderstandings. It had led to the absurdity of the cricket match. Everything had been changing since that dinner. After this shock Donovan took in little of the evening. Even so, he noticed how differently everyone behaved when Mrs. Tench wasn't there. Victor, deprived of his prey, was quiet and sensible to the point

of dullness, showing nothing of his lunch-time malice. Nicholas Tench, similarly deprived, continued to show a penetrating interest in Donovan's affairs, the glitter in his eye when he'd contemplated the joining of his wife and Victor in deadly combat, replaced by an avuncular, nodding serenity. As a palliative to his own disturbance Donovan speculated about Mrs. Tench, his mind instinctively corrupting her name as some kind of inner defence against her frightening behaviour. 'Old Ma Tench', 'Ma Tench', 'The Mistress', even plain 'Tench'; the last satisfactorily making her sound like a nasty nurse with a taste for gin in a gloomy Dickens novel. Earlier in the evening Nicholas Tench had finally put Donovan's mind at rest about his wife's condition.

'She's not used to being pregnant. Knocks her up a bit.'

'I thought she seemed a little out of sorts at lunch,' said Donovan, anxious to chime in with his host's clement mood.

'Did you? As a matter of fact, I think you're not right there. She felt rather well this morning.'

Donovan went to bed as early as he decently could, wishing everyone not only good night but saying goodbye as well. He'd decided to leave early in the morning. He wanted to see Janet and find out more about the Maddox situation. In the general mêlée of getting away from the dinner table, over which they had all rather dispiritedly slumped, Olivia whispered, 'Coward.'

'You're wrong. That's not the reason. I have to get back.'

'Leaver of sinking ships.'

'Would you like to meet in London?'

'Ring me at the mag.'

'Right.'

. . .

Next morning, after a cup of tea and yet more Marmite, this time on toast, Donovan left for London. He noted the tips of the grass were turning yellow, and the trees were thinned of their leaves so the shape of the branches was re-emerging. The wind was blowing, and irritating small spots of rain gave the wipers an opportunity to smear rather than clean the windscreen.

11

'Oh, it's true all right. I got it from Charles Groat, and I've checked it since with the Closes and Liz Semple.'

'You *have* been busy.'

As soon as he'd arrived back in London, Donovan had rung Janet. He'd asked her out for dinner and was at first mildly surprised and then slightly tetchy when she told him she was going out with Groat – 'again'. She had said this with an unfamiliar carelessness that sounded authentic. Janet was aware of this and delighted to find her new attitude remained firm under fire, or if not fire, the first few stray shots. To have been dismissive about an absent Donovan would have been little more than an optimistic acceptance, a defensive move, to make the week-end more pleasant. But to find herself genuinely detached when he, so to speak, was at her elbow was a fresh and exhilarating sensation. She could have clapped her hands. The spell perhaps was genuinely broken. They talked of the Maddox divorce. Janet who had trodden very gently before, as she had been afraid of angering Donovan, now took a line, both crisper and more disinterested.

'I'm sure Miles has been as good as gold. What about Sara? Has she been up to anything?'

'I don't know. I shouldn't think so.'

Was his flat tone assumed? She decided to wait until she saw him. It was easier to detect a lie when you're looking at someone. So, at any rate, she believed. She probed just once more.

'Somebody must have been up to something.'

'I don't see why. Perhaps it's just over. Things do end. Unless things end other things can't start – if you see what I mean.'

She laughed. 'You've been at your writing again. I can always tell.'

'Makes me pompous and obscure you mean? Or just plain pretentious?'

Janet was pleased with this. Donovan's voice had been light, self-mocking. His habitual touchiness had been one of the hazards of knowing him. ('You mean, I look more than my age?') Even this was going. All part of the new Donovan. This Donovan didn't sniff for offence. This was the new, improved version. Shining and

gleaming with chromium plated virtue; white wall tyres of swift sinlessness, finger tip steering would send him straight, keep him straight. Gone was the second hand model full of waywardness and basic mechanical faults; the exhilarating, unexpected starts, the sudden, only-to-be-expected stops. Mr. 1970 had arrived. There was warmth in every room, reliable hot water, and a little money in the bank. Janet felt a pang, a sensation of a tear, a severance. The last leaf of autumn joined the others on the ground.

'What'll you do tonight?'

'Write. I was on to rather a good bit, I think, when I was at the Tenches.'

'Still going well?'

'Yes. I wish I hadn't let Stantons publish the other one. Not that they have yet.'

'What was the Tench visit like?' Her jealousy at his going without her seemed a long while ago. She wanted the phone call to go on for a bit. Absurdly she felt she would feel sad as soon as they hung up.

'Pretty frightful. Awful woman. Like a fish wife. He improved a bit. He was the one who told me about the Maddoxes.' Donovan returned to the subject of his book. 'I suppose it's silly to complain about the first one. I couldn't have started on the second without the first. You can't have one without the other as the old song has it.'

'What old song?'

'Called *Love and Marriage*. "Go together like a horse and carriage", "You can't have one without the other" . . . Perhaps that's why the Maddoxes are packing up.'

After she put the receiver down Janet stood for a moment or so waiting to see what level her mood would settle at. It was going to be all right. Slowly her mind moved from Donovan to Groat. To the evening ahead. To dinner.

She remembered a mad girl at Oxford who had burst into her room one day as she sat gloomily looking at Palgrave, Coleridge, and *Beowulf* side by side on the white painted shelves. 'The bastard's let me down,' she said, raging. Janet, delighted with this sudden invasion and stimulated by the apparent drama, leaned forward concernedly, her forehead corrugating. 'I am sorry.' The girl stormed on. 'The bloody man fixed it all up best part of a month ago.' 'They are awful.' 'So bloody selfish of him.' 'He

means a lot to you, does he?' 'What do you mean?' The girl gazed at Janet crossly. 'I didn't mean to intrude,' Janet said stumblingly. The girl stared mystified. 'Oh Christ, no – HE doesn't mean anything to me. But dinner does.' 'Dinner?' 'He was going to take me out for dinner tonight. I've thought nothing else all week. He was going to that hideously expensive place near Henley. I was to have a huge steak, lashings of wine, avocado, meringues. The lot. He's very rich and frightfully shy so there wouldn't have been any late night struggles over the gear lever, to take the gilt off the gingerbread, if you see what I mean. Now what am I supposed to do? I mean I'm seriously hungry.'

Janet had always admired this, thought the girl was right, and longed to be in the same state of uninvolved greed. Now she felt it coming on. Groat, she thought. Not curry, tonight. Not Chinese either. Red-blooded meat followed by a deep, untroubled sleep. The meal not a bridge, or half-way stage, to a sexual encounter but a wonderful, glowing, promising thing in itself. Janet would have been a little hurt to learn that most men regarded her as an exceptionally hungry girl. Many of them enjoyed the zest she displayed as she dispatched summarily what she had so carefully yet so quickly chosen. Better than most girls she could sum up a menu at a glance, reading it like music to find the central theme. Donovan without realising it nearly always followed her lead.

Janet took up a magazine, turned to pages that dealt with recommended restaurants and waited for Groat to call.

. . .

Maddox, without seeming to parade the news in any way, had told enough people about his divorce for it to be widely known in Stantons. Merge and Fenton seized upon it as a much needed relief from their perpetual discussions about money and the deprivations this imposed upon them. ('It's too expensive to take out new birds. You have to stick to the old faithfuls. They don't mind a bit of cheesecake in a coffee-bar before getting down to it.')

They sat hunched together in their squalid little office. 'Silly bastard,' said Merge and spat on the toe of one of his black elastic-sided boots before applying his new toy, a round brush with a leather strap across it through which he put his hand; it looked like a kind of grooming brush.

'Why?' said Fenton.

'Lovely bit like that.'

'Don't suppose he could help it.'

'He should have given her a baby. Kept her at home like that.'

'I thought she seemed stuck up at the cricket match.'

'Toffee nosed,' Merge agreed.

'Ice maiden.'

'Well – looks as if somebody has turned up to melt her.'

Fenton wished he could have spoken to Liz Semple. She would have filled in the background. Shown him how to look at it properly.

'It's bad for the firm. Maddox getting a divorce like this.'

Fenton remembered Merge's sententiousness on the drive back from the cricket match and how he had criticised Maddox for 'throwing the game away'. Soon, thought Fenton, I shall have to find somewhere else and someone else to live with. I've outgrown Merge. He's such a fool.

The Maddox marriage whimpered rather than banged itself to death. 'What a waste,' was how Miles expressed it to himself as he sat in cabs to and from work, or ceased to listen to a boring lunch-time conversation with one of his colleagues. Since the day of the match, and his own final realisation of their extreme differences as they sat with Stanton in his house drinking summery drinks, the curious atmosphere of their life together had deepened, becoming as bereft of warmth and reality as existence on the moon. They moved and talked like polite zombies. The house itself didn't reveal a hair out of place. There wasn't a trace of fluff on the carpet, the cushions were all plumped, the bathroom towels folded neatly, the front door knocker shining. Magazines were fanned out on tables, their titles half revealed, like a run of cards confidently laid down at the end of a winning hand. The glasses on the drink tray were always clean, the bottles practically full, the ice fresh and cold in its chromium-plated bucket. The dinners were for the most part small portions of rather recherché recipes, meticulously prepared: a world away from the slapdash cottage pies of their earlier days together. They slept in the same bed, untouching, and forbidding. Poles apart, thought Maddox, and finished the thought neatly by remembering one of the first small laws of Physics – like poles repel. They went to the pictures, skimmed

through books. Maddox often stayed late at the office, ringing to say he would get something to eat in the local pub on his way home. The silence of their week-ends was immense, palpable. After a while Maddox was amazed to find himself accepting this strange life, the oddity and unpleasantness of it disguised by the sheer continuance. Even when people came to dinner, or called at week-ends, the greater involvement this threw them into didn't seem to be a strain. These very same people who called were amongst the most surprised when they heard the news of the break-up. It was his realisation that he was accepting an intolerable situation which forced Miles to say something as they sat together, one evening before dinner, sipping their drinks like medicine.

'I suppose we ought to stop this.'

'Oh . . .' she tilted up her head.

'We don't get on, do we?'

'Oh . . .' she still waited for him. He became solemn, more intense, anxious to avoid any misunderstanding of the gravity of what he was trying to say. The exchange between them became faster, more warmed up.

'It's unbearable – in a way.'

'Divorce?'

'I suppose so.'

'It gets hard to pretend.'

'Anyone can make mistakes.'

'Not your fault.'

'Not yours.'

They sat back exhausted, relieved to find the preliminaries over. Maddox continued with more of his usual fluency.

'Wouldn't you rather – really – finish it off nicely?'

'Civilised?'

Briefly he felt the same spasm of irritation Janet was to feel when the word occurred during her conversation with Liz Semple.

'You surprise me sometimes. All right, then, "civilised". If it means both of us will behave – '

' – do the right thing?'

' – better. Yes. Don't let's make a meaty scandal for our friends.'

'Are you afraid of the talk then? Will it harm your job? I don't see why.'

'No – '

' – you've worked it all out.' She sounded petulant.

'I didn't work anything out. Except I had to say something.'

'When do you want to start?'

'Proceedings?'

'. . . yes. Them.'

'I don't know. I'll see Jimmy D.'

'He'll have a fit.'

'He's a lawyer.'

'Been expecting it, you think?'

'Of course not.'

'I'll leave it to you, then?'

'You agree?'

'Is that why you're such a success in your job? Pushing so.'

'It must be the right thing to do. Otherwise we wouldn't be having this conversation, would we?'

'No, we wouldn't I suppose.'

He got up and poured them out another drink. 'We deserve this,' he said and a quick spark of friendliness passed between them, it seemed to Miles. He surprised himself by following this up with a question he hadn't intended to ask so soon, 'Is there anyone else?'

She looked at him for a moment in amusement and astonishment. 'We're carrying on like people in a play. The lines so pat.'

'Is there, though?' he asked again, but his tone was light, bantering almost. Hinting perhaps at the complicity, the cool behaviour he'd suggested beforehand.

'No,' she said, 'there hasn't been. Let's hope there will be – '

' – oh surely.'

'There will be? Yes, I think so. In some ways a divorced girl with no children has the best chance of all. Someone will have to leave,' she finished on a stronger note, catching him on the wrong foot.

'Leave?'

'Leave here.'

'Yes.'

'Who sues who?'

'You sue me, I imagine. Let's leave all that to Jimmy D. I'll see him.'

Their friends would have been surprised at this conversation. There was a flatness, a resignation about it that robbed the situation of the customary drama and upset. Their friends, indeed, had they been there, might well have resented the Maddoxes for not

putting on a better show. Liz Semple, the Closes, some of the people at Stantons, were all to feel this in the time to come. Perhaps Sara felt it, too.

'We couldn't have been more well behaved, could we?'

Sara's acceptance of Maddox's proposal came as no great surprise to Miles after the indifference of the past weeks, particularly since the cricket match, but, at the same time, he realised how unusual it was for a girl to agree with such good grace to the break-up of her marriage when she had no obvious alternative life planned for herself. Through dinner that night he wondered about this. It became easier to understand. Sara's life was empty, emptier than his if it came to that. At least he had a job. Why should she want to go on sitting in her doll's house reading magazines, supervising the incompetent char, getting the laundry ready, being forced to get meals more often than she liked? Now she would have a chance to seek her fortune again. She was attractive; she could charm, when she felt inclined, and was very confident of her power to do so. She would have sufficient money from him. She wouldn't have to work if she didn't wish. For a moment, Miles was angered to see the advantages of their separation from her point of view. He had, man-like, assumed she would resist – at least to begin with – the loss of position, the impoverisation of her social status, the taint of failure, all the more marked, now he'd reassured himself she had no particular man in mind, certainly not Donovan. (He had immediately sensed the complete unimportance of Donovan. Whether there had been anything between them or not, he presumably would never find out. His suspicions about Donovan had almost disappeared; there had been nothing to feed them. Anyhow it didn't matter now.)

Warmed by the wine they had drunk over dinner, Miles tried to say something of this to Sara, adopting the tone of one player talking to another at the completion of a hard fought, but nevertheless sporting, game. Just as he might have said, 'Whatever made you move that knight after I castled?' he now said, 'When did you decide you wouldn't mind a divorce?'

'Tonight. When you mentioned it. I realised – this sounds silly – I was expecting it.'

'You took it very calmly.'

'You surely didn't expect me to have hysterics, did you?'

'A lot of girls would do.'

'It's better for me, too.'

'To be free?'

'Yes. A girl doesn't have to have a permanent man to be happy any more. It's all different now. Girls have their own cars, which they pay for themselves, their own flats which they invite men to for the week-end if they feel like it. They can go into pubs on their own, cinemas, restaurants. Girls used to *have* to get married. There wasn't any other way out. Now they shouldn't get married, unless they positively want children. I don't at the moment. I may never. And that, incidentally, doesn't make me a scarlet woman any more than not liking dogs does.'

'No, of course it doesn't.' Miles wondered why he didn't feel more convinced by this, but he was so taken aback by her decision and determination he could only gaze at her in surprise and it was only later, as he lay beside her tranquilly sleeping body, he realised how different she was from what he imagined. If she had been more like this during their marriage the rupture might never have occurred. In the morning, he left as usual the unstirring mound under the pink sheets thinking as he did so, of how long a gap there was between their usual conversations; from dinner to dinner unless he rang up during the day.

Sara lay awake next morning watching the pigeons pussy-footing along the ledge of the house opposite, occasionally screwing up her eyes to see more clearly through the hazy light hanging in the air like exhaled cigarette smoke. She was remembering her panic earlier in the summer when the muddle over Donovan's telephone calls had alerted Miles' easily awakened suspicions. Miles had seen through her clumsy efforts to mislead him, while she, surprisingly soon afterwards had mysteriously become indifferent to whether he had or not. Even so she marvelled, almost as much as Miles had, at the placid indifference she had – for the most part – felt when confronted by his stark proposal of divorce.

Her earlier efforts to deceive him were little more than the automatic reflex actions of any woman to keep her marriage intact. They were unthinking. An instinctive, rather than a rational, view of the desirability of being married. So now, as she lay there, a warm, slow sensation of euphoria crept over her as she thought of a new and dazzling future in much the same dreamy way

as she would, after reading *Harper's* or *Vogue*, contemplate new clothes, and, from that move on to fantasies of parties full of unattached men with big wrist watches, and thick, dark ungreasy hair one of whom, after an ice-cold drink or two, would escort her to dinner somewhere a million miles away from the stifling bistros of the Fulham Road. Her mind then moved on to admire her bravery, her pioneering spirit. She was to leave the warmth and security of her smart little house, to strike out on her own.

She reached for a small hand mirror and stared at her face, magnified several times by this stern tool of her daily make-up. Once again she worried about her teeth. She stretched her lips into a huge, grimacing smile and gazed into her own eyes to see if they were enough in themselves to distract attention away from the over-filled tombstones that guarded the entrance to her mouth. She put the mirror down. She ought, she thought once again, to be more concerned at the consequences of her talk with Miles. She'd *lose* the house, not just leave it, as it would be impractical to keep it. She'd lose the rank, the role of hostess. She would be less envied, she would be poorer. Poorer? Would she? Surely Miles would give her a reasonable allowance. Or should she, perhaps, call it income? He was quite rich, and generous as well. She wouldn't be too poor then. But richer or poorer, in sickness or in health who was the first new HE going to be? That would require skill, luck and opportunity and, she brooded, looking at the thick, red leather address book on the pie-crust table beside the bed, friends; particularly girl friends. Perhaps after her bath she'd ring some. ('I'm absolutely shattered. You and Miles.') She picked up her hand mirror again. Perhaps she'd ring them tomorrow.

. . .

Margaret Close, who tacked from one point of view to another, enjoying herself very much as she did so, got the nearest. 'Of course she'll do it. She's bored. Wants a bit of novelty.'

. . .

It was ten days after her conversation with Miles about their divorce, on the morning after Donovan returned from the Tench week-end, Sara answered the phone and heard his eager and inquisitive voice.

She had been having an uneasy time. Yet, in a strange way,

things had gone on very much as before, increasing her sensation that the formal suggestion of divorce by Miles was no more than a recognition of what was inevitable and not so much a change as a new phase. Miles apparently felt the same. He hadn't seen his lawyer as he was on holiday, so the practical details hadn't progressed. They waited for his return and went out to dinner more evenings than they stayed at home. It helped to pass the time and the appearance and behaviour of other people gave them something to talk about. They quite enjoyed it.

Donovan, who found it hard to restrain his curiosity or to suppress excitement, ran into a brick wall. 'Oh yes, it's true. No secret. In fact, rather stale buns.' Sara used the dated schoolgirl slang carefully. Somebody else's expression, thought Donovan. Any attempts he might have made to be sympathetic seemed pointless. In any case they had to be on the light side since the combination of circumstances put him into the role of an old suitor whose once unsuccessful passes forced him into a position of anticipation rather than regret at her impending freedom. Rather at a loss he fell back on another invitation to lunch. 'Why not?' she said, 'now.'

'Well – not quite now, I've got something . . .'

'. . . I didn't mean that kind of "now",' she said crossly. He quickly arranged a time and place and rang off.

Sara was disappointed with the call. It hadn't matched the new conception of herself she was trying to bring about. It had been the old Sara talking. Married and a bit seemly, a little severe. Besides Danny was more of a heavyweight than she'd imagined. She hadn't really thought he would succeed in getting his book published. He hadn't appeared to be the kind of person who *succeeded*. It would be interesting to see him. It wouldn't be the same as when she'd done so before. The meaningless lunches with Donovan, which had provoked the inevitable rupture with Miles, or at least played some kind of part, probably small if the truth were known, was neither here nor there. The existence of the proposed divorce altered Donovan in Sara's eyes just as it altered most other things. And, it had to be faced, the girl friends with their ready advice had hardly helped by their disappointingly drab reactions. 'Don't do it,' they urged almost with one voice. 'You may never find another,' they implied, or more worryingly, 'Of course, you're still young; but you're not *so* young.' The imagined secret confidences;

who was around, where could they be found, would they *do* – none of these took place. Everywhere a throwing-up of hands, a sense of appal. It sounded absurd. It was absurd but the brutal fact remained – Donovan was a better possibility than most. Donovan would do for a start, for an encounter. And, presumably, he would be willing. After all, he'd been blamed for something he hadn't done. Why shouldn't he do it now?

. . .

'Was it anything to do with me?'

'In a way, I suppose.'

'I don't see how it could be. It would be so unfair.'

'Would it?'

'Oh, you mean it would be fair in a Biblical sense. To look at a woman with lust in your heart is the same as adultery. That's a bit far-fetched, isn't it?'

Sara hadn't a clear idea of what Danny was talking about so she wiped her mouth carefully with her napkin, looking at him over the top of its stiff, white, triangular edge. He had been abrupt in his manner ever since they'd met. He wasn't exactly rude but less attentive to her than she remembered. Before he had put himself out and, despite the startling things he had said from time to time, his manner of saying them was flattering; he gave the impression he was only talking that way because he was with her. With anyone else he would have been different, either too quiet, or too rude. This time he didn't seem to mind what she thought. He said what he wanted to say and without frills. He might, she thought indignantly, have been talking to another man. She resented all the questions he kept asking about what led up to the final break. It was more of an investigation than a stolen lunch.

'Why are you so worried?'

He looked up sharply.

'I'm not worried so much as curious. I want to know what happened because I seem to be mixed up in this mess in some way.'

'You won't be quoted as co-respondent, you know.'

He paused to rearrange the knife and fork still unused by his plate. He then looked hard at her.

'I hope,' he finally said, 'I hope I'm looking at you in the right way.'

'Whatever do you mean?'

'I was so amazed by what you said. I hoped it showed in my face.'

'About you being a co-respondent?'

'Yes.'

'I only meant you seemed very concerned and I couldn't understand why.'

'You said earlier Miles might think this divorce was something to do with me. That's enough to concern anyone. Particularly as he's getting my rotten book published, and I've known him a long time and I didn't do anything anyway.'

'I think you're being a bit pompous. You didn't used to be.'

He didn't reply and they sat in silence waiting for the second course of their lunch to arrive. Both were acutely aware of having got the wrong kind of occasion on their hands. Sara had come ripe for some gaiety, some titillation, some *progress*. A resumption of what had gone on before in her lunches with Donovan. He, on the other hand, had arrived full of concern. Concern in case he was falsely involved, and concern at the collapse of a marriage of two people he knew. Like most bachelors he was shocked at divorce even when he knew as uniquely as he did in this case, a basic incompatibility existed between the two people. So he was serious, while she was frivolous. Both were surprised at the other. What had never started was finished. The coming divorce, which could have provided the green light, was making it absolutely certain that nothing could now occur between them. Donovan knew this because he'd long ago lost the faint desire he'd felt for her, but she, more vulnerable for the time being, and more in need, was full of resentment at the accuracy of the conversation and the little hope and solace it offered.

Her lipstick shone brightly, so did her patent leather shoes with their small velvet bows nestling together like two ducks under the table. Her hair fell neatly into its two waves on either side of her face, her eyes had been carefully enlarged, and at the beginning of lunch, she had smiled in the most encouraging way even after she realised it was wasted on so barren a situation. She felt the bitter, tearing disappointment of the girl all dressed up with nowhere to go and longed to leave so she could take off all her clothes and put away the humiliation behind her wardrobe door.

It was such a short time ago she had thought herself daring to have lunch with someone so hopelessly unlike what she wanted for

herself. She had done it almost as her mother might have thought it 'such fun' to visit Covent Garden in full evening dress in the early hours of the morning. It seemed now, so hostile did she feel, that her temporary dabbling with him had been an act of condescension on her part. Yet he glared at her across the table and talked to her as if she had been caught stealing someone's pearls.

Donovan was only aware of the difficulty. He sensed the cause but brushed it aside. Although he hadn't known his true purpose when he'd rung her up, he was quite clear about it now. Or, perhaps it had emerged. As what he wanted didn't depend on her approval he didn't alter his tone although, had she known it, his sympathies were aroused and he blamed himself for the way he'd handled the conversation. He continued to do so as he heard himself saying, 'I think I ought to see Miles.'

'What!' She was genuinely surprised.

'There's no point in letting him think the wrong thing any longer. It ought to be cleared up. After all it doesn't involve you in any way, does it?'

'No,' she said, feeling it did but uncertain why.

'Then shall I?'

'He's never mentioned you, you know.'

'Has he mentioned anyone?'

'No. Of course not.'

'Then why do you think he feels I'm involved?'

'You do go on, don't you? That time of the mess up on the telephone. I'm sure he guessed something was up. I know he did. You must know he did.'

'Yes, of course. I was being silly. Sorry. But isn't that all the more reason to tidy it all up now?'

'It won't affect your book, will it?'

'No, of course it won't. That's got nothing to do with it. I don't want to talk to Miles because I'm anxious about this book or any other. I simply don't like something so unnecessary to continue. Much better to come out in the open with it.'

'All right,' she said, not caring.

'Unless you did it. Unless you talked to him.'

'No.'

'No. It should be me. I'd rather.'

The rest of lunch passed off as well as possible under the circumstances until the very end of the meal. He told her about his new

flat, his new book, and then, just before they parted, said once again how sorry he was about the divorce. When he did this she lost the listless look she had worn and rapped out, 'It's not the end of the world. Why you are suddenly behaving like some bloody vicar, I can't imagine. You know Miles and I don't get on and never have. You know, too, if you'd had half a chance you'd have got me in bed like a shot and your dear old chum Miles could lump it, so don't come all this sanctimonious honesty. I shall be perfectly all right. A lot better off than I am now. I won't have to run a house and get meals and talk to that dreary old cow of a char every day of my life. And I'm not even sure I want to get married again all that much either. Babies mean damn all to me as I've tried to tell my poor old man from time to time. You know,' she stopped, struck by a thought that for the first time since they'd met seemed to give her active pleasure. 'You know, you're really rather like Miles.'

'Oh, well,' said Donovan, 'I'm sorry again. You're quite right. I must have sounded – '

' – you sounded like a prig.'

'What an unexpected word for you to use.'

'My father used it about the local teacher in the village where we used to live. I've never bothered to find out what it meant exactly. But it seems to fit you.'

At the time Donovan wasn't very upset by this outburst. He recognised it was his own fault and everything was upside down at the moment. Janet was different. Sara was different. What had happened to *him*?

They parted quickly outside the restaurant scarcely bothering to conceal their joint relief at the prospect of time on their own.

12

Donovan walked back to his flat after his sad and inconclusive lunch with Sara remembering with annoyance that it had fleetingly crossed his mind she would be more available because of her divorce. Whether she had noticed this or not – it had been the briefest of thoughts – didn't alter the fact he had thought it, and it was naïve and vulgar of him. Even so, she'd been far too strait-laced. They had shared something in the past, however little had come of it. This should have helped the lunch, instead it proved a handicap. She was an unstable creature, he thought, but it took a very dull shape. She was never the same. Earlier in the summer she had been totally different. That act at the dinner party when Donovan had quarrelled with Close and gave everyone roses: modish hostess, bitchy superficiality, intended to be stimulating, succeeding in being merely embarrassing. He added a rider. No one could be *merely* embarrassing. To embarrass a dinner party wasn't such a small thing. It required either tough-mindedness or stupidity – a word hard to connect with Sara.

However about her, then, there had been a looseness – 'availability' – which tempted Danny to his own subsequent involvement, their lunches together and his 'proposition'. She had looked at it coolly but with a kindness and candour which had surprised him, causing him to modify his opinion and, at the same time, ruefully, to see the possible consequences of starting a love affair with the wife of a friend. She had made it all more serious, brought it home to him.

Later the panic phone call when she thought Miles had found out more than there was to find out, had revealed her frightened and dismayed; a smaller, more ordinary, animal reaction to a threat.

Then her aloofness at the cricket match, when Donovan had scarcely been 'allowed' to speak to her, had been absurd. 'As if,' muttered Donovan to himself, 'she had *Noli Me Tangere* stitched into her underwear.' Eventually the phone call after the Tench week-end when she had blown neither hot nor cold, leading up to the lunch he'd just so thankfully left.

Had she always been unpredictable? Had living with Miles been

a strain in any way? Changing her? It seemed unlikely, but Miles wasn't without neurotic blemish. His vindictiveness at the cricket match had been unbalanced. His obsession to win everything he undertook was extreme. Did Miles like to win? Or to beat somebody else?

Cutting through the side streets between the Fulham and Kings Road, Donovan remembered an extraordinary story circulated about Miles about a year after he'd left university, and the charm and liveliness was wearing a little thinner, the ambition starting to show through.

The story itself, true or untrue, was revealing of the way people were starting to think of Miles. Stories after all don't have to be true. They have to *fit*. Miles had 'flu very badly. It had kept him in bed for several days. Instead of sending in a medical certificate, or ringing up to say he was ill, Miles pretended to have taken a sudden holiday to go ski-ing. Donovan couldn't remember the details. They didn't matter now. Sara might have reacted against Miles' total committal to his career, seeing it as an insult to her undoubted attractiveness. Perhaps she'd been forced to make Miles realise how lucky he was.

Thinking of the way Sara looked slowed Donovan's normally reasonable pace to a moody crawl. Had he been a child he would have started to kick stones along the pavement scowlingly waiting for something else to happen but determined to maintain an attitude of indifference when it did. Donovan was always unsettled by a rebuff from a girl. He would have to take another one out to dinner that night to salve the wound. His ego would shout for it. Before then he had planned two or three hours writing; the thought was as heavy as Yorkshire pudding to a surfeited man. He knew he would do the work. Probably not very well, but he'd do it. It was one of the changes in him he recognised. The work itself would dissolve away some of the memory of the lunch. Then he would ring – Janet? The thought didn't cheer him. He felt affectionate towards her as he always did. He couldn't imagine not seeing her regularly. But she wouldn't do for tonight. She wasn't new enough. She felt like a relation, a loved, but taken for granted, piece of period furniture. And then Donovan quickened his pace. His shoes struck the pavement more firmly.

He would ring Olivia – the 'girl from the mag'. Should he ring her before working? If she agreed the work would be easier. Also,

if he waited until he'd finished working he might give someone else a chance to get in first. He would ring her now. Something was happening. Sara was beginning to fade. The therapy was beginning to be effective.

When he looked left from his flat window he could see Battersea Power Station, a modern cathedral pouring out incense; to the right, the Lots Road Power Station, a smaller and dirtier building all chimney and throwing smoky muck in the air with none of the ease and insouciance of its big brother higher up the Embankment. In between them the painted barges full of actresses, ex-pilots, and chaps with dull jobs in the City who owned eye-catching dogs and lived for the Sunday morning session at the pub. 'Marvellous view,' they would say gazing out at the Thames. 'Say what you like about those bloody power stations. That smoke they send up gives us those fabulous sunsets in the evening. Red *and* black.'

In front of the window, on a green baize table which his parents had used for bridge parties and which was less rickety than it looked, squatted an old, ugly, reliable Royal typewriter. On one side of it was a neat pile of unused foolscap paper, on the other an equally neat pile of typed sheets with occasional pencilled additions and erasions. Donovan wondered, as he looked down at it, whether a page of his manuscript annotated in his neat, illegible writing would ever appear in a book about him. 'A page of a Daniel Donovan manuscript kindly loaned to the author by Lady Vanessa Frinton.'

A dining room chair, fashioned in strong curved mahogany, struck an odd expensive note and made the red, yellow, and blue cushions appear strident, their vulgar cheerfulness mocked. They were needed, though, to off-set the black and dank divan which hid in the corner beyond the range of the light from the window. That needed bright cushions. The book shelves were full and sparkled with new covers. Six months ago the books would have been dull. Blurred leather, coffee-coloured relics from two idle years at a University, reminders of those curious days when to buy the prescribed books seemed half way to having read and absorbed them. A mauve cyclamen stood on a clumsy Victorian dumb waiter. Beside it an armchair, coarsely covered in red 'rep' almost as strong as the hard wearing blue jeans which ground into it as

Donovan screwed around shifting his position every five minutes as he gorged books, newspapers, drink, food, and conversation. 'A chair always looks sat in after you've been in it,' was his mother's habitual comment.

The telephone was on the floor beside the chair. 'Donovan's world,' said Danny sitting down. He loved telephones. He was always impatient of those who disliked them or were frightened of them. People who used them as if they were unexploded bombs they were holding or else merely to communicate a bald fact, make an arrangement for lunch, check a train time. A telephone should be enjoyed. There probably had to be rules lighting the way to this enjoyment just as the novice gains pleasure when he discovers claret comes in a different shaped bottle from burgundy. Perhaps there was enough material here for an article in one of those nauseating magazines if he could bring some sex into it. That shouldn't be hard. The voice was a very potent factor in sexual failure or success. Freud, Adler, Jung, Jones.

'When I think,' said Donovan aloud studying the typewriter, looking at the sheets of paper, taking in the whole of the room with its good wide windows, 'of that dreadful book they're going to publish and how everyone with any vestige of taste will tear it to pieces, I do really wonder why I wrote it. I had nothing to say. I had no beliefs, though there were signs of finding some as I went along. I had a certain glib facility, as do thousands of others; a degree of cynicism; a vague feeling from my childhood that if I ever did anything I wanted it would be a book. I had gazed in bookshop windows thinking how my name would look on a cover. Occasionally I would drop off to sleep imagining sentences from a review in the Sunday papers; sentences that praised my sensitivity, wit, unflagging invention.' He stopped talking to himself but continued to follow the train of thought.

I know where I went wrong. I thought to publish anything was better than nothing. Even if it was very bad. That was a heresy.

Or was it? That bad book had launched him to himself. As soon as it was finished, the politics of getting Stantons to publish over, he had been fired and fuelled to write a 'real book'. One he could be proud of whatever other people thought. And he would. He *liked* writing now. He liked it. He thought of what he'd written

before he went to sleep, now. He loved to watch the sheets of foolscap mount. He loved the ritual of sharpened pencil, chair rightly placed, shirt opened at the neck, like a navvy. It was turning soil, planting, reaping. Writing was to him, he thought, a need and a function. Why the nonsense about it? All those dull people, Arnold Bennett, Somerset Maugham, the 'pros' who said things like 'Five hundred words a day. No more. Sometimes perhaps a thousand.' They were right. Writing was like plumbing. You had to have it. Somebody had to do it. Him.

Donovan wondered whether the mood of exaltation would outlast his telephone call and get him through the afternoon. A lot of the time it was still a grind. Nice these moments, though, when it felt like a pleasure.

' "Unflagging invention" my fanny.' He pulled the telephone on to his lap. Dialled. Breathed out.

'Danny Donovan here. Don't say you don't remember me. That week-end at the Tenches is only just over and it was so awful I thought even I couldn't fail to stand out as light relief.'

'Of course not.'

'I'll ignore the complete ambiguity of that, merely pausing to add – you did say I could ring you. "At the mag" your very words.'

'Are you drunk?'

She didn't say it nastily. She was rather friendly, disinterested, possibly even a little envious. Donovan didn't notice this.

'No.'

'Sorry.'

'Sound like it?'

'A bit.'

'Well, I'm not.'

'I hope you've rung me up to ask me out to dinner.'

'What?'

She said it again. Donovan was ecstatic. 'What a perfectly marvellous thing to say.'

'You're very easy to please. Shall I go on?'

'Please. You wouldn't believe how you've cheered me up already.'

'I like men's places to eat in.'

'I always get the greedy girls. It's true I attach a great deal of

importance to what food a girl likes. Perhaps that's why they seem to gravitate to me. I have often felt I'm rather absurd about it and before I even get properly into middle age I shall probably spend most of my time thinking or talking about food and drink. I used to loathe people who did. By the way, what do you mean? You like men's places to eat in? Do you mean their flats?'

'No. Perhaps I can explain it another way. In terms of the kind of food.'

'Do.'

'Put a "No" in the box opposite Veal *Cordon Bleu*. Likewise *Sole Véronique* – that is the one with grapes, isn't it? Another "No" against *Boeuf Stroganoff* – '

' – I don't know about – '

' – and against *Vol-au-Vent*.'

'I see.'

'A "Yes" in the box opposite Roast Beef or Steak if you prefer. Also against Shepherd's Pie. Bacon and Eggs. Asparagus. Salmon. Strawberries. Frilly Lamb Cutlets . . .'

'It's becoming increasingly fashionable for girls to admit a keen interest in food. Conversations like this incline me to think the pendulum is swinging too far.'

'You may be right.'

. . .

Afterwards Donovan tried to persuade himself he could forgive himself the idiocy of this conversation because he was *aware* of its idiocy. He sought to define its style. It was after all typical of his type of person. Did it have its origins in the twenties' 'bright young things' slang which, thanks to Waugh and Huxley being read by sixth formers and undergraduates, had always remained dimly in vogue? Fantasy, mock-seriousness over trivialities? A high wall round what you mean but not where you stand? What if all telephone conversations were automatically played back by a tape-recorder as soon as the receiver was replaced? Then a new caution would be born which would quickly destroy all telephone conversation, idiotic or otherwise. Ayes would become ayes. The bald communication Donovan had been earlier deploring would become the order of the day.

Never mind, thought Donovan gleefully, patting his old and arthritic typewriter, sucks boo to Sara and who knows what tonight

may bring? He placed a green cushion on the old mahogany chair, rolled two sheets of rice paper thinness into the machine, sat down, gazed out at the dirty river, the lights starting to shine through the deepening murk, and wondered what to put.

13

Donovan had arranged to meet Olivia in a pub opposite her office which was in a windy alley off Shoe Lane. As he was early he got off at Charing Cross and walked down the Strand which had always been for him a dull and ugly curtain-raiser for Fleet Street. A merely functional thoroughfare, he thought it, providing a link between Whitehall and the newspapers – between one area where things happened, and another where the things that happened were analysed, clothed, and re-presented; made to 'happen' in a more effective way.

With time on his hands though, Donovan actually stopped and looked at the statue of Charles I in the courtyard at Charing Cross, he noticed the Savoy Grill was black, chromium, gleaming, and, though created in the thirties appeared modern in a way fifties and sixties buildings don't – why does Frank Lloyd Wright look so much more modern than Basil Spence? Just behind the Strand, remembered Donovan in his sightseeing mood, was Maiden Lane with red plush Rules, full of greedy men from Covent Garden wearing suits that didn't fit them and opposite the tiny, smoky Catholic Church, Drury Lane not far up the hill, the publishers, the literary agents. And then on the other side that great fat river he'd been watching earlier from his window. What's dull about the Strand? he thought. How dull of him to think it dull. Never to think of it at all in all the time he'd worked in Fleet Street, hurrying to get away or get back. Had he dismissed in the same way many nice and intelligent people simply because he was impatient? At that moment without really thinking about it he turned off the street into a theatre foyer and asked if there were any seats cancelled for the evening's performance.

'We don't have to use them,' he said waving two stall tickets at Olivia in the pub. 'It was just an impulse. You've probably seen it anyway.'

The tickets were for *The Seagull*. She hadn't seen it. She wanted to see it very much. She couldn't believe he'd just walked in and bought the tickets on the off-chance. In the opening round, it seemed, he had hit her a damaging blow over the heart. From then on the evening moved on oiled wheels. They ate a sandwich,

drank some gin and tonic, got to the theatre, sat, watched, drank some more gin and tonic. ('As pink gin is called pink gin this ought to be called blue gin. Look at the colour.' 'It's the quinine in the tonic that makes it look blue.') Then they had dinner somewhere in Soho and after it she turned back as she was going through the door to retrieve her theatre programme from under the chair where it had fallen. Throughout the evening they talked without restraint starting with the Tench week-end.

'A blazing row in the morning after you left which Mrs. Tench, Nicholas and Victor, of course, all very much enjoyed but which made all of us curl up with embarrassment. It's so hard to get used to people rowing. Having to watch them. Is it better if you know them well?'

Donovan was only moderately funny about Chekhov. 'Seeing all those characters all basically talking to themselves reminded me of the few occasions when I've stayed with rather grand people I hardly knew in country houses. If you think it's casual you think it's charming. I usually felt it wasn't. Just rude. Made me feel uncomfortable. Not as bad as the Tenches, I agree. I once did a Chekhov pastiche – '

'– when?'

'I'm making it up now. All the guests are bored, of course. By the way, have you ever reminded yourself the conditions in Russia are often so terrible you can't just get up and leave, like I did from the Tenches for instance. You're stuck. Snow, ice, and total darkness from about half past eleven in the morning. Samovars, whist, gossip, talk of the emergent Russia, the condition of the serfs, the trees, St. Peterburg and so on. Say it's the second scene of the second act. One young middle-aged man unprofitably married to a woman older than himself, is talking to another in much the same position. "I think I'll go outside for a while." "All that darkness . . ." "When we were walking through Maria Lubovknia's farm . . ." "Yes . . ." "I saw a little porker. A little pig?" "Yes." "I-I liked it. Almost – dare I say – loved it." "I saw it too." "Yes?" "I, too, like it." "So." "I would like to accompany you." "I do not think that would be honourable . . ." I can't think of anymore, sorry.'

'It ends in tears?'

'A duel where both miss yet both are stricken with a broken heart.'

Later when they were walking along the Embankment, she said, 'Nicholas Tench has asked me to go to the Stantons' Christmas party.'

'He asks a long way ahead.'

'His wife – to quote him – will be heavily enceinte by then. He needs a pretty companion – which I'm not. Rather flattering, for him to think I need booking up a long way ahead, don't you think?'

'Does she mind? Mrs. T?'

'He asked me in front of her.'

'*Before* she had that terrible row with Victor you mentioned?'

She looked at him. He had been too sharply cynical. There had been a sneer. He guessed this and was about to say something to allay it. He wasn't quick enough.

'I don't remember when he asked me. Before or after the row.' Her tone went flat. Neither rebuking nor impatient but, worse than that, disconnected, the current switched off. Up to then, there had been promise everywhere. The theatre seats had been good ones, the drinks in the interval easy to buy, the conversation light, spontaneous, satisfying.

When they got to her flat, which he'd discovered she shared with two other girls, he asked if he could come in for coffee. 'If you like,' she said. The communal drawing room was empty. She made him some coffee and put on a quiet record.

Donovan felt he couldn't let the whole evening slip away from him.

'You didn't like my suggestion Mrs. Tench rowed with Victor because her husband asked you to the Stanton party?'

'No. Would you?'

'Sorry. But, was it so dreadful? I mean as bad as all that?' he asked diffidently.

'Probably not. I didn't say I *ought* to dislike you saying it I just said I did.'

She looked at him. Evidently thinking he was entitled to more than that, she went on. 'It's the kind of remark people make at the mag all day. Or, at hairdressers' parties in the Kings Road. Cheap, glib, and point-scoring. That's it, point-scoring. Losing no opportunity to show off. To be clever. What's clever anyhow?'

'Well – that disposes of me,' said Donovan surprised to find himself unruffled by this unexpected outburst.

'No. Sorry. Unfair. You do see what I mean though, don't you?'

'Yes. Very much so. It reminds me of my book. That's cheap and point scoring, too. Mind you, it's meant to be. The next one will be so unclever and serious it will bore everyone silly.'

But she wasn't finished yet. 'Tonight was too smooth.'

'It had to come unstuck you mean?'

'Do things always go smoothly the first time you take a girl out?'

'No, nor the second, or third times either.'

He thought of Sara and their lunch again. Olivia changed the record, took a cigarette from an opened packet on the mantelpiece, lit it, tossed the match irritably in the fireplace, and expelled smoke out of her mouth with a contemptuous blowing noise, tilting her head back. Almost as if the smoke in her mouth and lungs was offensive and she wanted to put it away from her.

My God, she's arrogant, thought Donovan, put off, frightened. She was too much. She couldn't be handled. She would gollop him up. His attempts to apologise, to paper over the cracks hadn't mollified her in the slightest. Why should they? He didn't mean them and she spotted that. The evening was too far gone now. Donovan got up to leave. If he stayed things would get worse. She was, though, considerable. 'Not up for bids', the phrase from a forgotten Hollywood film came to his mind. As he was going she said, 'That was all very unexpected, wasn't it? That – quarrel. It was almost a quarrel wasn't it?'

'Almost.'

'I didn't really mean it to be. Rather mouldy of me considering what a super evening you've given me.'

'It doesn't matter. I'd like to ring you up again soon.'

'Please do.'

After going down two or three stairs slowly watched by her from the doorway, he turned round. She looked elegant, and lazy, standing there. She gave an exaggerated wave with her right hand and smiled down at him. Donovan smiled back and said, 'I can't imagine what it would be like to kiss you.'

He waved and ran on down.

14

'We're all such snobs,' said Nicholas Tench and sipped clumsily from a thick-rimmed, off-white cup. 'When you think of the name Una spelt U.N.A. you say to yourself, what a dreadfully common name. Just right for a char. But if you think of Una spelt O.O.N.A.G.H. it becomes very grand. Of course, the Irish are the arch snobs – they call it a respect for breeding as if people were like horses. Terrible race really, much as one loves them. It wasn't the lack of actual potatoes that made the Potato Famine such an ordeal but the lack of illicit booze that's made from them . . . incidentally, Miles, talking of booze, is it absolutely *de rigueur* to drink this quite passable sherry out of tea cups? Do the directors have to prove they can get on with *hoi polloi*? I'm sure that cabinet over there is absolutely stuffed with glass.'

In many ways Stantons' Christmas parties were like everybody else's. The police had been called in one year to clear the building. A secretary returning from the holiday had found her desk drawers full of four-day-old vomit. More enmities began than friendships were cemented. Stiffness, as the early drinks went down expanded into an unreal licence and this, in turn, was followed by the tetchy apathy only otherwise experienced after a champagne reception held in the middle of the afternoon. But there were some differences. Many of the people at the party were not members of Stantons' staff. Authors, literary agents, critics, artists – 'The ground staff who keep the plane flying' as an ex-RAF member of the accounts department had once expressed it. So Donovan and Tench would be at it. And so would Liz Semple. Janet would be there as a guest of Donovan's, and she was bringing Charles Groat as Donovan was to take over Olivia when Tench 'popped awf' to another 'do' before catching an early train back to the country. The regular staff of Stantons liked all these extra people who came and when they compared notes in the train with neighbours or friends they discovered *their* Christmas party was different and therefore better.

For the moment, though, it was limp. Maddox, in common with other senior members of the firm, kept open house, offering drink to anyone who came in.

As time went by, the traffic between the offices increased. It was

still too early for this to have happened so Tench, anxious for this kind of activity, found himself with a small audience consisting of Olivia, Maddox and three silent men who drooped against the walls looking as if they expected to be turned out for being unsuitably dressed. Olivia found herself surprisingly cross to be missing the drinks and people in her own office just to accommodate Tench whose rigid schedule dictated so early a start. It had been her own fault. She had complained in the way people do about office parties and Tench had immediately seized the opportunity to ask her to be his guest. She had agreed. ('I'm sure other people's office parties are much more fun.') She hoped Donovan would arrive soon.

Maddox, like many people, was reasonably tolerant of Tench. Admittedly his value to Stantons played some part in this, but Maddox appreciated excess in others and Tench's unpleasantness, when it occurred, was on a grand scale. It seemed to be a gamble, an open invitation for someone to annihilate him: it was almost vulnerable of Tench to be so impossible. Maddox took up Tench's remark about the cups. The tiny audience relaxed a little, feeling Maddox would protect them.

'You ought to like the novelty, Nick. You're always drinking out of Georgian glass. You've forgotten what an office cup feels like. Have some more passable sherry.' Tench held out his cup.

'A man saw me drinking sherry the other day – merely an acquaintance, he is – and he came across, I mean made a point of it, and asked me whether I knew a sherry was worse for me than a dry martini. Quite mad. I believe he's rather a prominent tycoon. Have you ever noticed what absolute bloody fools – I mean real cretins – the average top business man is?'

'I'm a business man myself. Which is just as well for you.'

'Touché, dear boy, touché . . . is that funny looking boy over there trying to climb behind the radiator? It *is* very cold in here. Even so. Perhaps you should offer him some rum, Miles.'

The audience had grown.

. . .

Fenton and Madge were sitting in the lean-to office watching Merge mixing vodka and tomato juice. Merge did this with an unfestive seriousness shaking the can of tomato juice with scrupulous energy,

slicing the lemon with a new, clean razor-blade, stirring the mixture with a yellow HB pencil, holding the cut glass jug up to the dingy light. This performance grated on Fenton.

'Where's the Worcester Sauce?'

'It doesn't need it.'

'You mean you forgot it.'

Merge said nothing and started filling up the glasses.

'For someone who plans to be one of the up and coming connoisseurs of the age, Merge, I think forgetting the Worcester Sauce is a very bad show. Very bad indeed.'

'Belt up. Mix it yourself if you think you can do it any better.'

'Cut it out in front of Madge, old man. You'll be saying something beginning with "f" soon and then where will we be?'

Madge sipped her drink.

'I don't think Christmas drinks ought to taste of tomato juice. It's like a slimming lunch with a girl friend.'

'Actually, Madge, I agree with you. But Merge here thinks Bloody Marys are smart. Like elastic-sided boots.'

'Why don't you two stop getting at each other? It's supposed to be Christmas, isn't it?'

'You're right,' said Fenton getting up off the floor near the record-player. 'Here's my hand, Merge old chap. Let's forget the past. Let bygones be bygones. Call for a hatchet to be buried.'

'Just drink your bloody drink, mate.'

Merge, though immersed in the anticipation of a prolonged drinking session at minimum cost with 'birds', more or less willing, thrown in for good measure, was deeply wounded by Fenton's barbs. His suspicious nature and close adherence to the code of the games-playing hearty had made him frightened and antagonistic to Fenton and his 'clever' remarks. At the same time he was flattered to be known to be a friend of his. Lately there seemed to Merge to be more and more of the 'clever' remarks and less and less of the joshing, beer-swilling, girl-fancying, ten-pin bowling, kind of life they shared in their early days at Stantons. He realised, dimly, what Fenton had been sharply aware of for some time. Their friendship was an artifical one. It had been brought about by circumstances and not by any genuine compatibility. London life, like an extra strong sun, had quickened the butterflies in the chrysalis and they would soon break out, fly off, separate. Merge sensed something conclusive in Fenton's gibes,

and as he sat there, sipping his drink, he rehearsed what he would say in the pub to another of his friends.

'He's got bloody bumptious, mate. Not that he's got that much to be bumptious about when you get right down to it.'

Fenton put on a record. Merge, his train of thought interrupted, contemplated Madge. However quiet she may appear, he thought, she's bound to have seen some action in her time. She must be nearly twenty-six.

. . . .

Donovan, though he had often been to Stantons, was uncertain of its geography and so he was disconcerted to find he had led Janet to Close's office which, like Maddox's, was very short of people. Unlike Maddox though, Close lacked a Tench. There was nothing to distract attention from the two silent girls, and the four men who stood with them handling their drinks as if they were high explosives ready to go off if they weren't treated with the right kind of gentility. The little fingers of the girls fidgeted, longing to crook themselves as if the glasses were willow patterned tea cups.

But though Close could have done with a Tench to provide some kind of covering fire he had given his party the touch of formality Stantons liked by having Margaret by his side. Curiously enough, her severity of manner subdued the guests in much the same way as Tench's acid exhibitionism had done. They were waiting to be marked out of ten. Donovan turned breezy at the sight of Close. He felt responsible for his immediate happiness. Like a conjurer who had arrived late for a children's party he immediately took steps to calm the distracted parent.

'The top of the morning to one and all. And God Bless Us All, as Tiny Tim would say if he were here. I told Janet she needn't drink sherry. She claims it gives her headaches.'

There was a very Anglican look about the Closes at any time which made it seem likely they would only really approve of their guests drinking sherry but they overlooked – indeed, didn't notice – the slight rudeness of Donovan's remark so grateful were they for the easing of the atmosphere which it produced. The other people in the room stretched their limbs, checked them, found them willing. They moved nearer to each other. They talked. Margaret, pleased to see Janet, found no difficulty in starting a conversation. Close, confronted with Donovan, found it harder.

'Are you pleased about your book being published?'

'Oh yes. Of course. But I gather you didn't think much of it.'

'Well . . .'

'Incidentally, I don't think much of it either.'

At this second, and more confusing comment, Close moved his head back sharply. The light flashed off his spectacles giving a quick impression, a glint of concentration or interest or even anger. But his answer was mild and slightly shifty.

'What do I know about books? I'm only a meagre accountant.'

'Now, now, Sydney.'

'I did make certain points. Yes, points. Not criticisms really. I only asked questions. Maddox soon convinced me.'

'Made you see the error of your ways?'

'I suppose you might say that.' Close looked anxious. Was Danny going to go for him? He wasn't frightened of Danny. He was embarrassed by him and concerned to avoid a scene. Also his diffidence about anything literary had grown since his untimely excursion beyond figures into words during the summer. Margaret felt no such timidity and was always ready for a tussle with Donovan. As Close was toying with the idea of bringing her into the conversation Donovan either relented or got bored.

'How's Maddox?'

'Rather quiet. Must upset him not having Sara with him this morning. Margaret and I were just talking about it.'

'Why this morning particularly?'

Sydney looked at Margaret and made a waving gesture with his left hand which Donovan was quick enough to realise was an attempt to convey how important it was for him and for Stantons *she* should be there.

'I see. Never mind. Everyone knows, don't they?'

'Oh yes. Miles has been extraordinarily frank about it. Seemed to go out of his way to make sure everyone knew about it.'

'Very sensible.'

Donovan's brusque, almost hearty, manner concealed anxiety. He would have to see Maddox soon. Some kind of talk could hardly be avoided even if it was an inauspicious occasion. Normally Donovan was good at having the conversations most other people shied away from. He could armour himself with insensitivity when he'd accepted there was no alternative to a direct confrontation. But Sara's outburst on the day he'd taken her to lunch before

going to the theatre with Olivia made it less easy for him to condone his own behaviour. Half a chance, she'd said, and you'd have had me into bed and never mind about your old friend Miles. 'Let's have none of this honesty lark' – hadn't she said that? He couldn't forget the scorn in her face although it had been several days before he'd accepted the truth of what she'd said. He moved over to the table to pour himself another whisky. It was curious he should have gone to Close's office. He'd never been in it before.

. . . .

Margaret told Janet how smoothy Sara Maddox had moved from her house to a flat and how calmly the whole matter was progressing. There was really nothing to be said.

'How's Danny?' asked Margaret.

'Very well, I think. Charles Groat will be here in a minute. You haven't met him.'

'He's the one who persuaded you to go into an advertising agency, isn't he?'

'Not very hard. You make it sound as if I had given up a glittering career. Actually it was rather disgraceful I spent so long in such a terrible job.'

'Will advertising be any better?'

'I earn more. I work with people who are a lot cleverer and a lot more amusing than I am. It's fun. I mean interesting fun and laugh-out-loud fun.'

'Do you have bright ideas?'

'You are being patronising.'

'It worries me. You doing advertising.'

'You really do mind?'

'Yes.'

It was an odd moment. Suddenly Janet felt she had touched rock. She was face to face with someone she knew reasonably well who had put her out of countenance by refusing to accept something because, she implied, it was unworthy. She was touched and angered. She disliked Margaret's uprightness but admired her for being old-fashioned enough to have it. There was something about Margaret that always reminded Janet she'd spent three years at a University and all the freshness, pretension and sheer silliness had been about something important. Whatever it was that was important, Margaret carried it about with her. She reminded those

sensitive enough to see it of their youth and of their age. She would never be popular but in that strange half minute she kindled love in Janet who responded by gulping down her drink and pretending nothing had happened.

'I've had two smashing ideas so far. Sunglasses for little girl babies so that tell-tale lines don't start in the pram and dog aspirins. Not very good really but my Group Head – that's what they call the man I work for – says I've got the right kind of mind. He's a dear. Wears pebble spectacles and is always trying to take me out to lunch miles from the office so he can tamper with me in the taxi.'

'That's exactly how I think of advertising,' said Margaret triumphantly.

'I know. That's why I told you. I've discovered people love stories about the sinfulness of advertising. Makes them feel all good about their own frightful jobs. I must tell you about it properly one day. You'd be amazed how sane it all is.'

Suddenly the mood of the party moved on. The silence and the pleasureless sipping had first given way to a low hum of sound and this very soon changed gear into distinguishable sounds, occasional loud laughs, and people who had found nothing of interest to look at beyond the bottoms of their glasses now surveyed each other with frank and unguarded curiosity. Relaxation blended with anticipation. No one looked for an ash tray. No one waited to be offered a drink. No one, it seemed, thought of what had gone before or what would come after. It was now. The very best moment, thought Donovan surveying the scene, when everything feels ripe. From now on it could only get worse, earlier it could only get better. The Cynical Romantic, he thought with self-parody, turning to get himself another whisky. As he did so there was a small disturbance near the door. Into the room came the compact and glistening figure of Merge who stood momentarily alone, momentarily observed, his hands big and obtrusive at his side, his forehead damp and shining with a blush of redness suggesting the blotchiness ahead of him, his coat straining as his protuberant chest bulged with unattractive strength. His eyes shone, his hair shone, his shoes shone, even his new stripy tie shone.

'What ho,' he said, but with a touch of feebleness.

'Good God! It's the public school bowler,' said Donovan to

Janet who didn't hear and who wouldn't have understood if she had.

Sydney Close moved forward.

'Hallo there, Merge. Let me get you a glass of beer.'

. . .

Donovan, primed with three whiskies, decided the time had come to seek out Maddox. He guessed Olivia and Tench would be there so once he had spoken to Maddox he would be able to join them.

As he walked down the passages he had to brush past little knots of people who had met in moving from one office to another. Some of the men had beer bottles stuffed in their jacket pockets. One of them was determined to offer everyone his cigarettes. Later he would probably quarrel over whose turn it was to stand a round of drinks. Some of the groups had two girls talking to three and sometimes four men. Soon, Donovan felt, there would be bolder assaults within the confines of these little gatherings. One of the men, anxious to be first, would say to one of the girls hoping his voice would only be audible to her, 'Let's slip off somewhere and get something to eat shall we?' and the girl, if she was one of those who specially delighted in Christmas office parties talking of them for weeks ahead, planning what she would wear and which day would be the most suitable to get her hair done, would reply to this almost whispered invitation with a great bubbling happiness, implying this was exactly what she had dreamed of, 'Oh, lovely—you ask Ron and I'll try and get some of the others.' Another kind of girl, almost certainly less good-natured, might say with a touch of starch, 'It's a bit early, isn't it?' And the other men in the circle would hear her.

Maddox's room was gay and full of lively sound. Almost immediately Donovan saw Olivia in one corner of the room and she, by now impatient for his arrival, smiled and waved. Maddox was talking to Stanton, who Donovan guessed would soon move off as it was important for him to mingle with as many of the staff as possible and to give the impression they were all one big happy family and he less of an absentee landlord than he might appear; in a sense talking to Maddox, who he saw regularly and who was a friend, was self indulgence and not duty. Donovan proved to be right. After greeting Donovan rather absent mindedly Stanton

put his hand on Maddox's shoulder. 'Well – must do the rounds. Show the flag a bit. Tonight at seven then. Best bib and tucker but *pas de décorations*.' Miles and Stanton had been isolated from the rest of the party as it was assumed they wanted to talk privately even if it was an off duty occasion. Donovan inherited this situation but while he was grateful for it, he didn't imagine it would last for long enough to permit too leisurely an approach to the 'straight talk' he knew he must have. He strove to establish an immediate intimacy, to suggest nothing had happened to alter the way they had always talked to each other in the past and he did this by talking about his novel, stressing the great part Maddox must have played in getting it published, as it clearly lacked enough talent in its own right. In this Donovan was entirely sincere and, in saying once again what he had said perhaps too often and to too many people recently, he fanned in himself a warmth towards Miles which persuaded him he could venture into the mined and forbidden area with confidence, almost with impunity.

'I'm desperately sorry about the divorce.'

'Oh.'

Donovan both knew he had mistimed it, gone too fast, and knew he must go on now he had started even if it meant a snub, or worse a complete fracture.

'Is it going through all right? I mean . . .'

'Smoothly?'

'Yes.'

'A certain amount of – shall we say – manufacturing has to be done.'

'Manufacturing?'

'She has not found a Mr. Right, nor I, for that matter, a Mrs. Right. If you follow me.'

They gazed at each other. Donovan plunged.

'Did you ever suspect me of anything?'

'Yes.'

'There was never any need to have done so. There was never anything.'

'Why then, I wonder, did I briefly suspect you. I must have had a reason.'

'You sound as if you don't believe me.'

'That's right. I don't.'

It seemed to Donovan there was a sudden quiet behind him as

if everyone had stopped talking and were watching them, two people having a desperately serious quarrel. He brushed this feeling aside more aware that he was committed to a finish and, given the circumstances, he had all too little time.

'I had lunch with her twice.' He decided the third lunch after the marriage was known to have broken up, to be beside the point and likely to cause an even deeper misunderstanding.

Maddox didn't alter his manner.

'Why did you have lunch with her?'

'I suppose I liked her, of course. I knew her. I knew you. I'd often had dinner with you both. I was by way of being a friend of the family, wasn't I?'

'Yes – you were.'

'You think I should have told you? Perhaps asked you if it was all right?'

'My permission?'

'Well – '

' – I don't think you should have asked me for "permission". I do think if it had been an entirely innocent lunch it wouldn't have been concealed. I would have known.'

Donovan avoided the obvious trap of explaining this by suggesting it would have been Sara's place to have told Miles when they were together the evening of the lunch or, at least, soon after.

'There doesn't seem much I can say then.'

'No. But there is something I can say. It's this. You took Sara out because you wanted to have an affair with her and because something in her manner led you to think it wouldn't be too difficult. You might even have thought she was in the habit of it. This didn't happen. I don't know why, of course. It could have been just luck it didn't or it could be, if I was feeling charitable, because either you – or if I was being doubly charitable – both of you felt you couldn't do the dirty on poor old Miles. But – and this is the point – you did make some kind of attempt to cuckold me at the moment when, as a friend of yours, I was making all kinds of efforts to get a book of yours published which was very much a borderline case – as you say it's not very good, just good enough that's all. Perhaps you can understand why I don't want anymore to do with you, except if and when it should come, in a purely professional sense.'

Donovan felt admiration for the direct, tough, even eloquent

way Miles had spoken and saw what it was about him that made him successful. At the same time he thought while Miles had presented his 'case' with force and logic, it was false in its unrelenting, black and white censure. He wondered, if it was possible to stand aside from his personal involvement, whether he would not rate Miles pompous, even silly. Even so he couldn't find comfort in thinking this. So far as it went Miles was right. But he tried again.

'You make it sound far too cut and dried. It just wasn't like that. I can't believe you really think it was. I think you're making it up in a way. Almost as if you wanted to blame me for the divorce. Which I'm sure you can't mean to do.'

'Oh, no,' Miles was actually smiling. 'Oh no. Of course, I don't blame you for the divorce. Not remotely.'

'That's a relief at least.' Donovan smiled too. Would it start to be all right? He continued lightly, 'As long as you didn't regard me as a rival for her affections, as they say.' The wrong note. The wrong note of cheeriness, mateyness. Donovan almost blushed for his own foolishness.

Miles continued to look at him, with a smile it seemed.

'I never regarded you as a rival.'

His expression changed violently. For a second he so completely lost control of his temper and speech there was a noticeable pause before Donovan could understand the sentence that choked itself out of Maddox's mouth.

'I could never have been beaten by you.'

Then his face quickly resumed its smiling, almost bland, expression and there was a hint of pleasure in it as he saw the inevitable interruption bearing down behind Donovan who, completely taken aback by Maddox's sudden aggressiveness, found it as suddenly replaced by the well-mannered host with whom he'd started the conversation such a short time ago.

'My dear Miles – you can't stand there at your own party gassing away with a face like thunder worrying about the enormous profits you make out of people like me.'

'Well – at least we do make a profit out of your interminable cook books. Thank God, you don't write novels like Danny here. Lovely to see you, Simon.'

Close's party was going with a swing despite the staid manner of host and hostess. Although Margaret had contrived in the early stages to turn Sydney's office into a passable facsimile, given the obvious limitations, of her own drawing room and this no mean achievement since it was a new office for Sydney and one she hadn't been into before, the time had come when she could no longer, it seemed, keep order. She was even mildly drunk herself and this was perhaps why she surveyed Charles Groat with interest, even with approval. She liked Janet's 'new man' though this would have been hard to guess from the way she talked to him.

'You look very prosperous.'

'I am – rather.'

'She thinks you made it out of advertising. She thinks it's wicked. She just told me so.' Janet also was a little drunk.

'Haven't you told her how rich I am in my own right?'

'In whose right?'

'Am I not my father's son?'

'And will inherit the earth.'

'Enough of it for my simple needs.'

'He is very rich,' Janet turned to Margaret.

'You didn't tell me.'

'I hope it wouldn't make any difference whether he was or not.' Janet was finding part of her new and more emotional feeling for Margaret lay in teasing her and she realised that the strange party she was enjoying very much offered her a unique opportunity to do so. She couldn't imagine teasing Margaret in her own home.

'What does your father do?' Margaret seemed to imply he must be up to something very shady, something far worse than the Stock Exchange – gun running for example.

Charles noticed and laughed.

'Sir Groat? He's a Travel Agent.'

Margaret remained silent, perhaps trying to assess the moral fors and againsts of a profession which, on the face of it, sounded innocuous but no doubt contained sinister wheels within wheels.

'Do you think that's better than advertising?' asked Janet, who was sober enough to know she must be rather drunk to labour the point to such an extent.

'You are absurd,' said Margaret, looking rather pleased.

'Oh come on, Madge.'

'Not now, Merge.'

'I wish to Christ you wouldn't call me Merge.'

. . .

'Dear boy, I must love you and leave you. I can't think what I'm thinking of to have stayed so long. Such fun. No doubt the company of the lovely Olivia it was that kept me. Into your, I hope, safe hands I yield her.' Tench had stayed so long that Olivia, who had not been enjoying herself and felt rather exhausted by the endless stream of archaic nonsense issuing from Tench, had reminded herself on several occasions she needn't have forfeited her own office party merely to accompany Tench to such an early start. She had thought he wanted to be there early because he wouldn't be able to stay.

Tench's fluting goodbyes receded towards the door.

'Hallo, ducks.'

'You spent a long time not coming over to rescue me from him.'

'Sorry. Bit of business. I thought I ought to get it out of the way before I settled down to enjoy myself. I suppose that's what I'm going to do.'

Danny looked at Olivia, thinking there had been something possessive in her tone. It was his first experience, if he was right about this, of somebody being possessive about him before he had an affair with them rather than after when he took it for granted they would be. He had been out with her several times since the evening he took her to the theatre and there had been no effort on his part, beyond taking her arm across a road, to bring about a closer, more physical relationship. This also was a new experience for him. He had many girl friends with whom his dealing had been entirely chaste, though warm-hearted, but he had never embarked upon what he planned to be a sexual liaison and found himself having a kissless companionship. Nor did this mean he had ceased to find her attractive. Very much the opposite. This was no time to unravel another aspect of the new Donovan, he decided. At the same time he felt it might be interesting to mention it to Olivia. It might make her laugh. God knows, he thought, the memory of it coming back to him, I shall need some kind of laugh when I get away from the muffling, anæsthetising effects of this party and

chew over that conversation with Maddox. He hated me. Why do I always think I'm popular?

. . .

'Drop your drawers, you sexy beast.'

'I simply can't understand how you can find a childish remark like that funny. Look at you, doubled up with laughter.'

. . .

It was the ramshackle, do-it-yourself appearance of Liz Semple's spectacles that Fenton recognised. He was embarrassed and glad. Their last meeting when he'd tried to apologise had been a failure but at the same time, had it been a hopeless failure? During the childhood he'd so recently left, apologies had always been so much the panacea and he was thoroughly imbued with the certainty that no apology is ever entirely wasted. It always did some good. He had yet to meet the person to whom an apology was an exacerbation.

Curiously enough neither he nor Liz had bargained on meeting each other though, had they stopped to think, they would have realised it was very likely to happen. They stood awkwardly blocking each other's path, their arms half crooked and their two pairs of hands slightly apart from each other as if they were bumpers on two railway coaches waiting to be coupled. Fenton said the first thing that came into his head.

'I'm going to look for a place of my own. I can't afford a flat, of course. But a bed-sitter.'

He hadn't realised this was what he now intended. He was excited to find he'd put something into words, something that had scarcely got to the stage of being even a clear thought. It gave him an exhilarated sensation, overcoming the difficulty of seeing Liz again. She was very surprised, almost shocked that after the last two meetings so fraught with anger, shame, and lastly cold and rational dismissal he should assume on the intimacy they had built up before he, in her opinion, had so crassly and crudely destroyed it. At the same time she was amused. She was tickled.

'Are you now?'

'Yes, I am.'

'No more – what's his name – Burge?'

'Merge. No.'

'Well, good on you – as they used to say on some old programme about a doctor in Australia who spent most of his time flying about in aeroplanes trying to reach patients in the out-back.'

'Yes.'

'I'm trying to find your boss and hero, Maddox. A small, and I hope, easy to remedy, argument with your Accounts Department. I need a little loot at this time of the year and they owe me a bob or two.'

She looked at him.

'Why are you drinking tomato juice? Aren't you a bit young for hangovers?'

'It isn't tomato juice. It's a Bloody Mary.'

'With real vodka?'

'Why don't you have one?'

'I don't like it very much but leaving that aside, I haven't had the good fortune to be offered anything other than the more conventional hard stuff.'

'I can get you some if you want to try it. I know where it is.'

'I don't think so, thanks. It wouldn't go after this whisky really, would it?'

'I suppose not.'

He offered her a cigarette.

'Are you still angry with me?'

'I was angry the first time. Not the second.'

'You could have fooled me – '

' – now don't be a silly. I told you the second time I wasn't angry. And I hope I said I understood why it had all happened. Or at least something like that. Why don't you forget it? We're having ever such a jolly chat, aren't we? And no doubt we shall have others when we bang into each other like this, shan't we?'

'Can't I drop in and see you sometime? In the evening? On my way home?'

'Look, honestly, don't for the love of God take this personally but really I'd rather you didn't. It's just that. Nothing more or less. I'd just rather you didn't. No criticism of you intended, nor I hope taken,' she tried to finish with a laugh.

Fenton said nothing.

'Now don't sulk. Please. I'm off to find old Maddox *sahib*.

You may not believe me but it was nice to see you and I'm sure you're right about getting a bed-sitter. Much more sensible. And could I leave you with one tiny, and I'm afraid this will sound pompous, thought for the day as it were. I'm older than you so I have to pontificate sometimes. It's this. You can't win them all and you're none the worse for it. It doesn't make you less of a person. Christ, I warned you it would sound awful. Can't be helped. Did my best. I'm off then. Happy Christmas.'

And she sidestepped and went.

. . .

Without intending it, Donovan found himself separated from Olivia; he had turned briefly, as he thought, to talk to a man he knew slightly and when, bored with the conversation, he had moved back to his former position he found himself staring into the amiable face of a complete stranger, who seeing somebody placed temporarily in the same predicament of isolation as himself, was all prepared to pass the time of day with Donovan. Donovan might have acquiesced in this had he not observed Olivia was with Maddox about three groups away. Donovan felt disinclined to go over and join them. Instead he decided he would go briefly to Close's office for a final drink before returning to collect Olivia, who by that time he assumed would be talking to someone else – Maddox, like Stanton, had duties to perform.

He excused himself and left his new acquaintance possibly a shade less amiable than he had been before. On his way down the intervening passages Donovan ignored the open doors of several offices, beyond looking quickly into their smoke-ridden interiors to see if they varied in any interesting way from where he had just been, and went straight to Close's room. For some reason the one person he hadn't considered he would have to see was Close himself who, as it turned out, was on the threshold bidding goodbye to someone.

Close was the worse for wear. His hair was slightly ruffled, his cheeks were red, and his eyes were either watering or the lenses of his spectacles were misted up. His speech, though, was more forceful and articulate, though in no way bellicose, than Donovan had ever heard it.

'Got a drink? Soon fix that. Let's have a talk. The party's thinning out a bit. See that girl over there? The one with the red

hair. You'd probably call it Titian. Or if you wouldn't, Margaret certainly would. Shall I tell you about her? I mean the little I know.'

'Please do, Sydney.'

'She wrote a book. A first novel. Everyone said it was charming. Maddox said it was charming *and* well written. He said it had a quality of innocence about it. I read it. I thought it was charming. Then I met her. At some new authors' lunch. We always have one of those every year. You'll be asked to one soon. And I talked to her. And she wasn't innocent or charming. She was exactly the opposite.'

'Does that matter?'

'That's what interests me. Does it? Does it? I've noticed it before. Writers aren't like what they write. Shouldn't they be? I mean, how can you write an innocent book if you're corrupt?'

'But she did.'

'Yes, she did.'

'Never mind, I'm sure there's an interesting explanation and it's just too late a stage of the party to try and find it.'

Sydney looked gloomy.

'The thing is, Danny, I'm sure my question is a silly one. There is an explanation. You and Maddox and Margaret, of course, know in your bones what it is. But I don't. And because I don't, it's impossible to ever explain it to me. I'm a spiritual illiterate. I should stick to what I'm good at – '

' – they'd be sunk without you – '

' – that's kind of you. But you mustn't patronise me. I have a dim understanding of what is going on. To you, I'm something of a joke and it's really rather reprehensible of me to get maudlin – is that the word would you say? – at such an apt time as a Christmas. Do you want to meet that girl?'

'I'm going back to collect another one called Olivia in a minute. It wouldn't be worth it. Incidentally, enlarge on why she was awful. You left that part out.'

'Is Olivia nice?'

'Yes.'

'Marry her.'

'What, just like that?'

'Well – you know her, don't you and all that?'

'You mean the carnal preliminaries are over?'

'I . . .'

'They aren't, as a matter of fact.'

'You ought to get married. You'd write better. Less distractions. More food, less drink.'

'I'm sure you're right. You still haven't told me about the Titian girl.'

'Never mind her. You get back to Olivia.'

He responded to an urgent wave from Margaret. It was too peremptory to ignore, even in Sydney's unusual mood. He moved away. Then turned back quickly.

'She had the most dreadful stains . . .'

The rest of this strange utterance was lost as a new group of people surged into the room and Sydney vanished in the mêlée around his wife.

. . .

Whoever invented parties must have had something like the Stanton one in mind, thought Donovan. It lacked glitter, the conversation on the whole – if you could call it that at all – was mostly absurd and seldom witty, there were few beautiful girls and the attractive ones were dressed in a way tending to obscure this rather than highlight it. There was no formality, no special effects like a firework display, no furniture or pictures to catch the eye. It was just a mob drinking anything they could lay their hands on. Yet it lived up to the only real promise a party can make. Things happened at it. At least to Donovan. Practically every conversation with someone he knew had made them seem different, and because the difference hadn't been immediately absorbed and aim-offs for it made, the person had become more interesting, their character and behaviour freshened up, once more fruitful for speculation. Margaret, who he'd spoken to about nothing in particular had been crisper than ever with him and yet, he felt, she had sympathy with him and wasn't entirely at cross purposes with his alien character. Close had been a revelation. So, for that matter, had Maddox. He ran away again from the thought of Maddox. He couldn't think about that yet. Tench had been, if anything, more dreadful than usual but Donovan, like Maddox, found the sheer extravagance of Tench's awfulness had an awe inspiring quality – giants in any field are rare, he supposed,

and must be saluted for their size if for no other reason. But however severe some of the shocks Donovan had endured, he couldn't accuse this party as he could most others of being a waste of time. He would not be leaving it with his customary feeling of listlessness, wondering how to get the energy to find a bus, or tube or taxi to take him to some restaurant which he was unable to choose until he succeeded in securing the means to get him there. So there was still some suggestion of anticipatory bounce in his walk back to retrieve Olivia.

Close had been right. The party was thinning out.

You could see the smoke haze in the rooms before you took in the people; it hung there. The most important thing in the room; it seemed like a reproach. There were fewer people, too, standing in the passages and the carpet, now visible for the first time, was smudged with ash. Half emptied cups, usually containing flat beer, dotting Donovan's progress; spent matches, wet stains – what had Close been going to say about stains? – such as untrained puppies make, added to the exhausted look of the normally respectable façade of this small, long-established firm.

'The curious feature of office parties,' he remarked to Olivia, 'at least, this office party, is the way the hosts leave before most of the guests.'

He was elated to find his forecast of Maddox's movement had proved so accurate and Olivia had not been snatched away.

'I saw you talking to Maddox.'

'He just left to take his secretary out to lunch.'

'Have you met him before?'

'Not properly.'

'Did you meet him "properly" today?'

'I suppose so.'

'Like him?'

'Yes, I did.'

Olivia, unlike everyone else, seemed very sober and not disposed to behave in a surprising way. This disappointed Donovan who was eager for more of the same kind of stimulation as he'd got from Maddox and Close. He was questing for a new aspect. She, though, seemed as if she was going to underline her sameness. She looked at him.

'Are you all right?'

'Do you mean, am I drunk?' Donovan remembered she had

thought him drunk the first time he'd spoken to her on the telephone.

'No, of course I don't. You look disappointingly sober to me.'

'Do you know I was thinking the same of you.'

'I don't like drinking much. Not after two. Are you against that?'

'No. For some reason I find it rather sweet.'

'I take it back. You are drunk. You just hold it very well.'

'I've known Maddox for a long time.'

'He said he knew you.'

'What else did he say?'

'About you?'

'Yes.'

'He said you were one of his new authors.'

'Is that all?'

'He said he thought you might be rather good one day.'

'Cheek!'

'Why, you've told me lots of times how bad you think your book is. He's just saying the same thing. Agreeing with you in a way but obviously he has a higher regard for it than you have or he wouldn't be publishing it, would he?'

Donovan muttered something Olivia couldn't hear. She asked him to repeat it. 'I said he isn't publishing it, Stantons is.'

'Why don't you like him?'

Donovan gnawed at the side of his thumb, teasing away a tiny piece of flesh he'd been playing with all morning. Suddenly he stopped doing this, took hold of her arm and said with a complete change of tone, 'Yes. I do like him very much. But I did him wrong as they say in *Frankie and Johnny*. I didn't really mean to but I did. So I'm paranoic about him and think he would say – or do I mean do? – unpleasant things behind my back. As he was talking to you I thought he might put you off me.'

'He didn't. He was just mildly nice about you and therefore failed hopelessly to put me off you.'

They both smiled. The mood changed. He said, 'I'm still holding you like this by the arm because I'm about to escort you past the scenes of incredible squalor, no doubt being prepared for us by the lustier spirits of Stantons, and take you out to lunch which will be long, expensive and drunken. Stop after two, indeed.'

There was no one they could see they ought to say goodbye to,

so they started on their way out. The prospect before him, the drinks he'd had, the strangeness of some of the things that had happened, a warmth he imagined coming from Olivia, all in some way were responsible, he supposed later when he analysed it, for what he said next.

'Sydney Close said I ought to marry – you.'

'Who's Sydney Close?'

'It does sound a rather impertinent comment coming from someone you've never met, I agree.'

'Does he think you ought to marry rather than consider *who* you ought to marry? It's a point of view. The institution, not the people, counting.'

'I'd rather hoped I'd shock you by coming out with it like that.'

'People have said things like that to me before – at parties.'

The air in the street was like a Turkish bath with cold steam being circulated rather than hot. He pulled her more closely towards him. She said, 'Do you remember you once said – the first time you took me out, in fact – you couldn't imagine kissing me?'

'Yes. Not very nice of me was it?'

'Why didn't you ever try?'

'I've grown cautious,' said Donovan.