

Clouds Among the Stars



Victoria Clayton

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Аннотация

A witty, perceptive social comedy, perfect for lovers of Anita Shreve and Elizabeth Buchan. The Byng family, theatrical down to the youngest, 12 year-old Cordelia, are stunned out of even their normal self-involvement by the news that their father, the celebrated Shakespearean actor, has apparently killed his rival on stage during the last rehearsals for the new production of King Lear. Waldo Byng is arrested for murder and held in police custody : the press camp outside the house, detectives attempt to interview the family and friends, and Clarissa Byng abandons the entire scene by fleeing with her longtime companion. It is left to the rest of the family to try to find a way through this disaster and above all to earn some money as the play is naturally cancelled. The nine months from arrest to the final trial are a wonderful learning curve about the real world for all of them, in particular for Harriet, considered the most 'sensible' of the remarkable family. Clouds among the Stars is a true pleasure to read: witty, perceptive about some of our social habits, with an outstanding cast of characters, wonderful scenes including some of the best parties and theatrical behaviour; and above all written with a style, charm and verve that makes one want to start to read it again as soon as one has finished.

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VICTORIA CLAYTON

Clouds Among the Stars

HARPER

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About the Publisher

ONE

The day my father was arrested for murder began promisingly. It was early November. Usually by mid-autumn the walls of my attic room were spotted with damp and the ancient paraffin heater had to be left on all night. On this particular day the sky was like opaline glass faintly brushed with rose and there was a seductive mildness in the air. I felt unusually hopeful about my life and prospects. I was young – twenty-two – almost certainly in love, and I had a vocation. I was going to be a poet. I could not remember who said that all was for the best in this best of all possible worlds but I was prepared to put money on it.

Through the window beside my bed the remaining leaves on the topmost branches of the tulip tree looked as though they had been dipped in bronze. I began to compose a line. ‘Bronzed leaves unfurled like faerie banners –’ Banners? Perhaps ‘pennants’ was better. I got out of bed, put on my writing robe, sat at my desk and sharpened my pencil while I thought.

Pennant, banner, flag, burgee – no, wholly unsuitable, making one think of pink gins and yacht clubs – what about ‘oriflamme’? That was a beautiful word and perfect for a pastoral epic. I abandoned the leaves altogether and thought about my work in progress, entitled ‘Ode to Pulcheria’. Since I had given up writing poetry about myself I seemed to be getting on much better. I had written twelve stanzas and was gratified and disgusted in equal

amounts. It had quite a zip to it, but it would keep turning into a poem by somebody else.

I turned again to Nature for inspiration and saw that Mark Antony was stalking a sparrow. I banged on the glass. He looked up in annoyance as the bird flew off. Considering Mark Antony's remarkable girth and the brightness of his ginger fur it would have to be a particularly stupid, short-sighted bird to allow itself to be caught, but I do hate Nature's predatory schemes. I waved to show all was forgiven and caught the sleeve of my writing robe on the edge of my desk.

I looked sorrowfully at the long tear. It was a beautiful robe and one of my most treasured possessions, dark-blue silk velvet embroidered with silver stars and gold lozenges. My father, Waldo Byng, had worn it playing Prospero in an acclaimed production of *The Tempest*. He had received wildly enthusiastic notices and been much lionised for a time. It would not be putting it too strongly, even allowing for family partisanship, to say that my father was still one of the most famous actors of his day. But the Prospero role had been in 1973, five years ago. Since then, things had not gone quite so well with him.

It is difficult to say what had gone – not wrong exactly, but slightly awry. Experimental theatre was all the rage so there were a lot of classical actors wanting the few good parts available. Probably being made a fuss of went to my father's head. He had turned down several leading roles on the grounds that they were insufficiently 'mesmeric'. He had thought himself so deeply

into the part of Prospero that he could not stop being him. He was convinced he possessed magic powers and for a time our house was crammed with amulets, scarabs, lamps, rings, wands, pendulums and philtres. He offered to lay hands on every invalid he met. A Russian painter, who had TB, actually got better and my father exhibited Serge's miraculously pink cheeks and red lips at parties as though he were a hermaphrodite chicken or a two-headed lamb. We were all sorry when Serge died a few months later.

I looked out of the window again and saw Loveday, our gardener, weeding round what my father claimed was an antique bust of Shakespeare. It was indisputably a man with a bald head, whose features were indistinguishable from burst blisters. It stood at the centre of Loveday's maze. Originally it had taken up only a small part of what was a large garden for Blackheath, where we lived. Then Loveday had become obsessed. He had extended the maze, making it more and more elaborate until it filled almost the entire three-quarters of an acre behind the house. He had begun it in yew but in later years went over to privet because it grew so much faster. Of course it needed trimming more often as well. During the summer the drama of our daily lives was played out to the sound of clashing shears as Loveday clipped from dawn till nightfall.

Loveday had constructed the maze with the idea of baffling the Devil. He believed that all difficulties in this world were the works of Satan. Despite the ubiquity and industry of the Lord of

Pandemonium Loveday was confident his maze would go some way to confound him. We children were frequently required to test the ingenuity of the newest layout and, to keep Loveday happy, even if we weren't lost, we pretended to be. My father said Loveday was a man in a million and, though a hopeless gardener, was a wonderful illustration of Rousseau's thesis of the boundless creativity of the untutored mind. Honestly though, when it came to blind credulity, I sometimes thought it would be difficult to choose between Loveday and Pa.

'Harriet!' It was Portia's voice. She rattled the door handle. 'What are you doing?' I put the 'Ode to Pulcheria' in my desk drawer, whipped off my writing robe, stuffed it under my bed and unlocked the door.

There are seven of us in my family. My mother, Clarissa, was also a Shakespearean actor, much fêted in the fifties and sixties but now retired. The eldest of us children, and the only male, is Oberon, twenty-six years old at that time, and known to everyone as Bron. Then comes Ophelia, twenty-four, followed by me, Harriet, and then Portia, aged twenty. Then a long gap before Cordelia, now aged twelve.

Portia's eyes looked past me, scanned the room and then returned, disappointed, to my face. 'You're such a dark horse. Whatever do you do up here all alone? I think you've got a shameful secret. You're not in the pudding club, are you?'

Though Portia was two years younger than me, people usually thought it was the other way round. She had a fierce self-

assurance while I was – am – prone to self-doubt. Beneath an ancient beaver coat my mother had put out for the jumble, Portia was wearing a white dress, not very clean, that was cut low in front. A slick of scarlet lipstick hid her pretty mouth.

‘Not as far as I know,’ I said. ‘Where are you going? You’ll die of heat in that coat.’

‘It’s going to rain later on, Loveday says. Anyway, I can take it off if I have to. I’m going to have lunch with a delicious man.’

All men were, initially anyway, delicious to Portia. I looked at my watch. ‘Isn’t it rather early for lunch?’

‘I’m going to Manton’s first to borrow some jewellery.’ Manton’s was a theatrical costumier. ‘This man is a bloated capitalist,’ Portia continued. ‘I don’t want him to think I’m hard up.’ She slipped her foot from her high-heeled patent leather shoe and bent to rub her heel. ‘Ow! These shoes are hell! Why should Ophelia be blessed with small aristocratic feet and not me? It’s so unfair.’ She looked up from behind a fall of pale yellow hair, her expression half laughing and half cross.

‘You’ve nothing to complain about, I should say. Even dressed like that you look gorgeous.’

My three sisters and Bron had all inherited my mother’s looks, the same shining fair hair, huge deep blue eyes and marvellous mouth. Ophelia was generally thought to be the beauty of the family, having, in addition, my mother’s perfect nose, but I thought there might be some who would prefer Portia’s more animated features and friendlier disposition. Cordelia was

already shaping up to rival the other two. I had dark hair and dark eyes like my father and the same bony frame. While my sisters were voluptuous, I was completely bosomless, to my great sorrow.

‘Thanks for the compliment, I *don’t* think.’ Portia took a mauve scarf from her coat pocket and tied it round her head, Red Indian fashion. On anyone else it would have looked ridiculous but it gave Portia a seductive air I really envied. ‘There’s nothing the matter with the way I’m dressed. You’re a fine one to talk, anyway. I never see you in anything but black these days. I suppose it’s all because of that frightful Dodge. That reminds me what came up to tell you. He’s on the phone.’

Dodge had been my boyfriend for the last year. Everyone disapproved of him, which was one of the things I liked about him. It is difficult to assert oneself in a large family of beautiful people overflowing with self-confidence.

‘You might have said! He has to ring from a call box.’

‘I’m surprised he condescends to use such a bourgeois means of communication,’ she called after me as I ran down the stairs. ‘I’d have thought a note written in blood and wrapped round a bullet would’ve been more in his line.’

I had brought Dodge home to have supper with us some weeks after meeting him in a bus queue. It had not been a success. Usually people adore the zany glamour so liberally dispensed by my family. My father is a marvellous storyteller and my mother likes all young men to fall in love with her.

Claremont Lodge – this was the name of our house – was Regency and very large and handsome for the suburbs. It looked out over the park and was furnished in a manner both theatrical and *dégagé*, on the lines of Sleeping Beauty's castle after a decade or two of slumber. There was a great deal of peeling paint, crumpled velvet, cracked marble, tarnished silver and chipped porcelain. As much of it had been rescued from stage sets, things constantly fell to pieces and were repaired rather badly by Loveday. My mother was a keen decorator with a taste for dramatic tableaux. When Dodge came to dinner she had arranged a corner of the hall with a harp, entwined with ivy where the strings should have been, and a stool made from a Corinthian capital on which stood a clock without hands, a crown – possibly Henry IV's – and a stuffed partridge hanging from one claw. A guttering candle lit the scene, which my mother called *Caducity*. I looked it up later. It means transitoriness or frailty, a tendency to fall apart. It seemed appropriate, considering the state of the furniture.

Dodge had taken all this in with cold eyes, and when my mother had invited him to sit beside her on the sofa before dinner he had said he preferred to stand. Champagne was offered but he asked for beer so I had to raid Loveday's supplies. During dinner my father entertained us with stories of touring Borneo with *The Winter's Tale*. He described a feast of woodworms, considered a delicacy but tasting like the sawdust of which they were composed, and told of an embassy dinner where guests

in white tie and long dresses were politely offered a pair of pillowcases to tie on to their feet as protection against the bites of mosquitoes. He drew a vivid picture of natives launching little rafts bearing rice, eggs and flowers into the sea, a custom intended to propitiate the gods of fishing.

My mother had said she was sure Dodge was frighteningly clever and she longed to hear all about his fascinating political views. He had scowled at his plate and answered her in monosyllables. After he had gone home my mother gave an elaborate yawn, flapping her hand at her mouth in a parody of boredom.

My father, with one of the darting, caustic looks he had perfected playing Iago years ago, said, 'What an extraordinary choice, Harriet. I think he may have given Mark Antony fleas.'

Dodge had black hair that stood up in spikes. His eyes were grey and generally filled with scorn. Just occasionally I saw this level stare of defiance waver and a look of doubt creep in, and then I felt sure that I loved him. At least I wanted to put my arms round him, which was probably the same thing.

Dodge was an anarchist. He wanted to rebuild the world and he was making a start with me. It was hardly possible to remark on the weather without provoking a diatribe on my hopelessly class-bound attitudes. He lectured me about my feeble capitulation to society's attempts to abort the creative expansion of my spirit. In protest I had shown him some of my poetry and he had verbally torn it to shreds. Milton, Spenser and Shakespeare

were merely propagandists for corrupt regimes. He threw my gods to the ground and trampled on them. I was not to despair altogether, though. He could teach me to free myself from the bondage of erroneous constructs. By going to bed with him I would take the first steps towards enlightenment. I was only too ready to believe that I was hopelessly in error and I was grateful for his interest.

Dodge lived on a piece of waste ground by the river in Deptford, in a disused lighterman's hut. In one corner was a pile of ropes and tackle, and in another was Dodge's bed, the frame made from flotsam picked up on the shore. Instead of a mattress there were heaps of sacks. Beside his bed he had a homemade bookcase filled with anarchic texts. It was all rough, damp and pretty uncomfortable. Yet it had, for me, a strange attraction. When we sat together on the steps of the hut, frying sausages over a driftwood fire and throwing pieces of bread to the seagulls while Dodge outlined his plans for the world, I was happy. He was a seeker after truth and there are not too many of these.

When we made love Dodge changed altogether from his austere public persona. Without the regulation black jersey, donkey jacket and jeans his body was soft and white and his hands were gentle. He would growl like a dog as he got excited and yelp at key moments. I have always liked dogs. I loved it when he lay with his head in the crook of my arm afterwards, sleeping like a child, his expression unguarded and a smile on his lips. I knew it could not last, that Dodge was not the man with whom I

wanted to spend the rest of my life but there was something about the rank smell of the river, the scream of the gulls, the hooting of the river craft and the scratchiness of the sacks that made me feel alive, a real person living in the real world.

I picked up the receiver.

‘Hello, Ekaterina.’ Dodge objected to Harriet on the grounds that it was too upper class. He was a great admirer of Prince Kropotkin, the famous anarchist, and almost anything Russian, apart from Communism, met with his approval. Of the social connotations of Ekaterina we were both in happy ignorance. ‘I suppose you were asleep. Dissipation will kill you in the end, you know.’ Dodge thought lying in past six o’clock was immoral. One ought to be in the streets, destroying the fabric of society. No doubt it is easier to rise early from damp hessian. ‘We’re having a meeting. At Nikolskoye. Twelve o’clock. Be there.’

There was a click followed by buzzing. Dodge was always terse on the telephone in case MI6 was tapping the line. Nikolskoye was the code word for 14A Owlstone Road, Clerkenwell, headquarters of SPIT, the Sect for Promoting Insurrection and Terrorism. I sighed. I had hoped to spend the morning peacefully mending my writing robe and reading Emily Dickinson for inspiration. I went down to the kitchen.

Next to my own attic fastness, I liked the kitchen best. It was a large room running the length of the basement, with windows at each end, and it was always warm because of the boiler, which stood in one corner. Loveday considered the boiler one of the

Devil's more fiendish creations. It required constant feeding and riddling and spewed fine ash everywhere, but I associated the smell of coke and the screeching sound of the door swinging on its hinges with the long, sweet days of childhood. In the wall opposite the boiler was the dumb waiter, a useful piece of equipment like a small lift worked by ropes that brought food piping hot into the dining room on the floor above. We children used to give each other rides in it on wet days. It marked a boundary between childhood and adolescence when our legs grew too long to be squeezed into the shaft.

The decoration of the kitchen had been entirely neglected, as my mother hardly ever visited it. Its homely fifties wallpaper – yellow blobs like scrambled egg against a grey background – and red Formica counter-tops, blistered by hot pans, were tasteless and friendly. A large table was marked by pen-nibs, scissors and poster paints. Almost my happiest times had been spent at that table, making glittering Christmas cards that buckled with too much glue or lumpy potholders knitted in rainbow wool.

Maria-Alba was frying mushrooms and bacon. She shot me a glance from small black eyes. She was cook and housekeeper to our family but to me she was far more than that. Maria-Alba's plump breast had been my first pillow. I had insisted on entering the world feet first and my mother had been ill for a long time afterwards. Maria-Alba had fed me, bathed me and rocked me to sleep. Bron and Ophelia had been pretty babies but I was fat and plain so probably Ma was relieved that we got on so swimmingly.

Maria-Alba's nature was prickly and suspicious, but having got hold of me in a raw state, she could not doubt that my motives and intentions were innocent. From the first moment that I was capable of entertaining a feeling of confidence in anything, my trust had been in Maria-Alba.

Though she ran the household Maria-Alba was not treated as a servant. My parents had an intellectual prejudice against caste. When she wished she ate with us. Usually she preferred to eat alone in the kitchen or in her basement room, which was cosy with brightly flowered curtains and chair covers and embellished with lace mats, plates depicting windmills in relief, china donkeys and fat children peering into wishing-wells or sitting under toadstools. When I was little I loved these ornaments passionately and it was a sad day when my taste evolved to the point when I could no longer look on them with uncritical affection. From the age of about fifteen I preferred the carved ivory crucifix and the reproductions of religious paintings, which as a child I had found gloomy.

Maria-Alba's Catholicism was quite unlike the kind practised by the nuns of St Frideswide's Convent where we girls had been to school. The saints were her friends, good-natured and capricious, only tuning in to her incessant demands when the mood suited them. She wore her faith like a second skin and constantly upbraided God and his henchmen for their mistakes. The nuns who had taught us were placatory and subservient to God. Their saints were unsympathetic taskmasters and their

religion was a system of pleasure-proscriptive rules.

Perhaps the differences had something to do with climate. Maria-Alba had spent her childhood in the broiling hills of Calabria, where the earth was the colour of cinnamon and violent storms rolled in daily from the sea. Maria-Alba's mother had been a prostitute and had died from syphilis. I thought this might account for Maria-Alba's abhorrence of sex and distrust of men, though she never said so.

Maria-Alba liked to cook and she was good at it. She enjoyed eating as all good cooks do and, by the time the events I am about to describe took place, she was generously proportioned even for her height, which was just under six feet. She had trouble with her legs, and her ankles had spilled out over her shoes like proving dough. Her black hair, now streaked with grey, was always a little greasy. Her best feature was her nose, which was large and curved like a parrot's beak and gave her face distinction.

No doubt the reason Maria-Alba put up with us was because we understood and sympathised with her illness. She suffered from agoraphobia and the older she grew the worse it became. Once I was with Maria-Alba in Marks and Spencer – I must have been about twelve – surrounded by cheerful woollens and bright mirrors and comfortable smells of newness and cleanness. To my surprise, I saw Maria-Alba clinging with closed eyes to a rack of tangerine botany twin-sets. She was panting and trembling. When, in the taxi going home, I asked her what had frightened her she said that people were looking at her

and thinking her crazy. She feared she had been *iettata* – in other words, that someone had cast the evil eye on her. Her belief in this superstition was quite as strong as her devotion to the Virgin. Frequently she made the sign to protect herself against the *iettatore*, the first and little fingers outstretched and the middle ones curled. After that Maria-Alba rarely went out, groceries were delivered, and I bought most of her clothes, with varying degrees of success.

‘Egg?’ Maria-Alba pointed her spatula at me.

‘No, thank you.’

‘You lose weight. *Troppo frequentare* with the Russians.’

I had told Maria-Alba several times that Dodge had been born and brought up in Pinner. I had been touched to discover that his real name was Nigel Arthur Wattles. The staid character this suggested was reassuring whenever Dodge, in militant mood, talked of Bond Street running with blood. But Maria-Alba persisted in believing that all anarchists were Soviets, dangerous political animals bent on the corruption of virtuous females.

‘Wearing black makes one look thinner.’

‘*E troppo lugubre.*’ Maria-Alba liked to wear orange, yellow or red, which made shopping for her extremely difficult in these days of punk for anyone under twenty-five, and pastels for anyone over.

‘It’s a badge of solidarity with the workers in the textile industry who have to slave all day making gorgeous clothes for the idle rich and who can only afford to clothe themselves in rags.’

‘*Sciocchezze!*’ Maria-Alba put down a plate of food in front of me and frowned. ‘You been doing bad things with that Russian.’

‘Honestly, Maria-Alba. I’m twenty-two. Years beyond the age of consent.’

‘*Allora, bene!* You admit!’ Maria-Alba’s glance was triumphant. ‘He give you a baby, *certo, e poi un scandalo!*’

‘How could there be a scandal? Everyone expects actors’ families to have babies out of wedlock. Pa would just be annoyed with me for being careless. Probably Ma would think it rather vulgar.’

Maria-Alba widened her eyes with indignation. ‘*E il bambino?* You bring him into the world, with no name and despise by the grandmother! Ah, *povero bebè!*’

‘Harriet! You’re going to have a baby!’ Cordelia, my youngest sister, had come down into the kitchen. ‘Oh, good! I’ve been longing to be an aunt for ages. I thought it would have to be you. I can’t imagine Ophelia letting that stupid Crispin stick his thing into her. Ugh!’ she shuddered elaborately. ‘I’d better find the pram and try to get the rust off.’ She had run upstairs before I could protest.

‘*Senta*, the young mind of Cordelia is *macchiata*. I ask Father Alwyn to come to talk to her. It is not right she think of sex like she do.’

Father Alwyn was a reedy, stooping young man with a nervous manner and when, recently, our paths had crossed on the heath, he had jumped when I said ‘Good morning’ and scuttled back

towards the presbytery as though pursued by a hellish host.

‘I think possibly Cordelia knows more than he does about sex,’ I said.

‘Golly, Harriet!’ Cordelia had come back down again, her speedwell-blue eyes dismayed. ‘Isn’t it going to be agony? I saw this film and the woman having the baby was screaming the place down. She was sopping with sweat and practically tying the bars on the bed-head into clove-hitches. I don’t think I could bear it to be you.’ She flung her arms around me and began to sob.

‘What’s going on?’ Bron had come down after Cordelia. He sat at the table, snatched up the fork I had put down in order to comfort Cordelia and speared my rasher of bacon. ‘Any more where that came from, Maria-Alba, my darling?’ he said, between mouthfuls.

‘Harriet’s having a b-baby,’ Cordelia’s voice rose to a wail.

‘A baby?’ My eldest sister, Ophelia, who had drifted in after Bron, wrinkled her elegant nose in disgust. ‘My dear Harriet, how *ghastly* for you. I can’t bear the way they smell. Cheap talcum powder, milk and sick. It’s put me off breakfast.’ She floated upstairs again.

‘Really?’ Bron began on my mushrooms. ‘How idiotic. You’ll never get your figure back. And your mind will go to jelly.’

‘No, not really,’ I said a little crossly. ‘I wish you’d leave my plate alone. I’ve got to go out in a minute. Thank goodness I’m *not* having a baby if this is how my family receives the news.’

‘I don’t know whether to be pleased or sorry you aren’t,’ sniffed

Cordelia, wiping her nose on my napkin. ‘It would’ve been fun to teach it tricks.’

TWO

Owlstone Road was not one of the most attractive streets in Clerkenwell and 14A was the most dilapidated house in the row. As I gave the secret knock – three quick raps followed by two at longer intervals – at the flaking front door I held my breath, for the basement area served as the local *pissoir*.

The letter box opened and a wisp of smoke drifted into the street. I smelled marijuana. ‘Password,’ said a female voice.

‘Oh, um, wait a minute – I’ve forgotten. Is it “The Paris Commune”?’

‘That was last week.’ I heard the sound of bolts being drawn. In the gloom of the hall the kohl-encircled eyes of Yelena, known as Yell, glittered with animosity. ‘It’s too much trouble for you to remember the sodding password, isn’t it?’

‘Sorry,’ I said humbly. I knew when the revolution came Yell would denounce me as a patrician spy faster than you could say *The Conquest of Bread*. This was the title of Prince Kropotkin’s monumental work, which had been Dodge’s Christmas present to me. To my shame I was still on the second chapter.

Avoiding the sliding heaps of pamphlets on the floor and a newspaper parcel of chips that lay open on the lowest step, adding a sharp vinegary smell to the general bouquet, I followed her up to the main office of SPIT. Dodge, who was sitting on his desk holding forth to a group of admiring neophytes, turned his

head to give me a nod of acknowledgement before continuing his attack on Marx's theory of the division of labour. As I had already heard it before, several times, I felt free to wander into the kitchen to put on the kettle.

On the wall above the stove was a large photograph of Emma Goldman, the famous nineteenth-century anarchist, known in America as 'Red Emma'. Dodge had told me all about her. By day she had toiled in the sweatshops of New York, making corsets, and after work she had been a fiery orator on behalf of anarchist ideals. She had suffered imprisonment, humiliation and brutality from the police. She had been persecuted and slandered by the press and obliged to sleep in public parks and brothels. Her only crimes had been her uncompromising honesty and measureless sympathy with the labouring poor, but she had been driven to a state of complete physical and mental wreckage. Looking at her small angry eyes behind round-framed spectacles, her heavy jowls and turned-down mouth, I felt the weight of her reproach. I knew myself to be a fribble, incapable of self-sacrifice for a great cause. One night on a park bench would have delivered the deathblow to my zeal. I withdrew my eyes from Emma's gimlets and took from my bag a tin of Vim and a cloth I had brought from home. While I waited for the kettle to boil, I attacked the disgusting accumulations of grime in the sink.

'I suppose you think being a drudge in the kitchen and a whore in bed is the way to get a man.' Yell had followed me into the kitchen. She bent to take a cake from the oven. She was the only

person at SPIT who ever bothered to cook and was really much more domesticated than I was. I looked hungrily at the delicious golden dome from which rose puffs of scented moisture.

‘Sorry, what?’ I scrubbed harder. I wanted to give myself time to think. Yell always made me nervous. She began to scratch with her thumbnail at a blob of congealed egg on the enamel of the cooker.

‘Can’t you see you’re betraying the sisterhood when you concentrate on the menial tasks and neglect the great ones?’

‘Surely there’s nothing political about cleaning a sink?’

‘Everything’s political.’ Yell scraped more energetically at the egg, so presumably drudgery was a question of scale. ‘You want Dodge to abandon his principles so he can go on screwing you. You want him to marry you and become a wage-slave in the suburbs. I’d rather be celibate than betray my ideals.’

I stopped scouring to glance at Yell. She didn’t look well. She was very thin and her skin was pasty, apart from some red spots under her eyes. I decided to try appeasement. ‘I’m sure he’d never even consider doing such a thing. I know how important all this is to him. And the brotherhood. He often says what a support *you* are to him, particularly.’

Yell sucked hard on the homemade cigarette she was smoking and blew the smoke straight into my face. ‘You little bitch!’ she said before marching out of the kitchen.

‘Can’t you women manage to get on?’ complained Dodge, as we walked to the appointed place of demonstration. ‘I’m fed up

with all the rowing that goes on in the Sect.'

'I think I'm beginning to hallucinate. I breathed in two whole lungfuls of whatever Yell was smoking. I feel most peculiar.' I was hungry, having had hardly any breakfast, thanks to Bron, and nothing for lunch but Yell's cake. I stumbled a little beneath the burden of two stout poles on which were fixed cardboard placards proclaiming our beliefs. Several of the brethren had not turned up and we were having to double up with the banners.

People stared at us as we walked towards Parliament Square. Their expressions were unfriendly. I had not realised before how many variations there are on the human physiognomy. All had the regulation two eyes, nose, mouth, ears and chin but there were so many squints, wall eyes, crooked noses, misaligned jaws and deranged expressions that it was like being in a painting of hell by Bosch or Brueghel. 'I do try to get on with her but some people are impossible to please. She seems to hate me but I don't know what I've done.'

'It isn't you, you dumb cluck.' Dodge gave me that look of stern condescension I had become accustomed to. 'She's in love with me, of course.'

I looked at Yell's angular figure marching in front of me. Like me she wore scruffy black, but her hair was short and ragged, which suggested proper commitment to serious issues. 'Oh,' I said. 'Are you at all in love with her?'

Dodge brandished his placard at a passer-by who was shouting insults at us. 'I'm sleeping with you, aren't I?' Which was an

unsatisfactory answer.

On reaching the square Dodge mounted the wooden box brought along for the purpose by Hank and Otto, our two burliest partisans, and began his speech.

When he was delivering a harangue, I found Dodge quite irresistible. He was magnificent, fierce and solemn by turns. He began by flinging up his arm to direct, with an imperative forefinger, our sights to higher and better courses. Then he rolled his head forward, shoulders drooping, hands outstretched, oppressed by the apathy of the world. He looked marvellous from a distance. Because he considered taking pleasure in food selfish and hedonistic, he ate very little, so his cheekbones were sharp and his eyes smouldered in deep sockets. Also, from a distance, you could not see the sprinkling of acne on his chin.

‘Order is slavery,’ he began. ‘Thought in chains. Order is the continuous warfare of man against man, trade against trade, class against class, country against country. Order is nine-tenths of mankind working to provide luxurious idleness for a handful. Order is the slaughter of a generation on the battlefield. It is the peasant dying of starvation while the rich man dies of obesity. It is the woman selling herself to feed her children. Order is the degradation of the human race, maintained by the whip and the lash.’

As I listened to these now familiar words I felt the customary surge of indignation. As Dodge cited revolution after revolution that had been crushed by tank and gun, my dissatisfaction

with the state of the world grew. Why should wealth and land be held by the few while the masses starved? Capitalism was undoubtedly a mistake. 'Hurrah!' I shouted with the others whenever Dodge made a particularly telling point. But when he described what anarchy could do to right the wrongs of mankind, I felt less certain. Would people really work more productively because they knew it would benefit their neighbours? I hoped so but I had to admit to a crumb of doubt.

A crowd gathered. Among them was a bad-tempered-looking policeman. At once I felt guilty, an absurd reaction bred of a childish fear of authority. I shook one of my banners vigorously and gave a cry of pain as a huge splinter from the stick drove itself deep into my thumb. It was then I heard the uplifted voice of a newspaper vendor, crying, 'Read all abaht it! Famous actor arrested for murder! Read all abaht it!'

I hardly took in the sense of it as I attempted to grasp with my teeth the end of the splinter, which had disappeared in welling blood.

'Here, before you, is the walking, breathing demonstration of my thesis,' said Dodge, really warmed up now. He pointed to an old lady in a battered black straw hat, who stood just in front of me, crouching over her cane as she twisted her arthritic neck to stare up at him. 'Well, Mother, you could tell us a thing or two about capitalist repression, I should think! How many times have you had to put your children hungry to bed while you laboured sorrowfully over some wearisome task for which you were paid

a pittance?"

'Shame!' yelled one of the brotherhood. The old woman stared round at us, cackling and displaying toothless gums, apparently enjoying the attention.

'How many times has your body been numb with cold because the coal mined by brave men, dying of silicosis, has gone to power the great factories that provide wealth only for their owners?'

'Scandal!' roared the revolutionists. The old lady waved her stick at us and screamed with laughter.

'How many times have you had to scrape and contrive to put a decent meal on the table for your husband when he came home, weary and sore oppressed?'

The crowd murmured sympathetically but, in a lightning change of mood, the old woman seemed suddenly to resent being the object of universal pity.

'My 'usband was a no-good drunken layabout. 'E never did a honest day's work in 'is life. When 'e ran off with the tart from the Co-op I was pleased to see the back of 'im!'

'So put that in your pipe and smoke it!' heckled one of the crowd.

'Yeah! What choo got ter say ter that?' jeered the old woman with consummate ingratitude. I noticed for the first time that she seemed a little drunk. 'You blinking lefties think you can tell us all what to do but we ain't 'aving none of it!'

Dodge opened his mouth to reply but at that moment one of

the placards I was cradling in the crook of my arm, so I could suck my throbbing thumb, toppled over and fell on the old lady. It knocked her hat over her eyes and sent her staggering round in circles until she sat down with a thump on the pavement while her basket went spinning.

“Ere!” shouted a spectator. “There’s no call for violence just ‘cause she don’t agree with you!”

Dodge jumped from the podium. He and the policeman helped the old lady up but as soon as they put her on her feet she began to swipe at Dodge’s legs with her stick. She possessed a surprising amount of strength for such an ancient old thing. In the confusion I accidentally let go of the second placard. It knocked the policeman’s helmet from his head. He swore loudly and blew his whistle.

What happened then was terrifying. It began as an exchange of insults between the anarchists and the audience, accompanied by the jabbing of fingers and some pushing and shoving. Then like a flame creeping through dry twigs it flared into violence. In seconds there was a whirling mêlée of fists and boots and flying objects. A fat old man, his eyes glaring and his lips stretched back from his teeth in hatred, kicked me hard on the knee. I staggered against the railings. An egg, presumably from the old lady’s shopping basket, struck my eyebrow. Surprisingly, it hurt quite a lot. As I tried to wipe away the strings of white a youth with long matted hair aimed a blow at my cheek, snatched my bag from my shoulder and ran off with it. I was much too

frightened to put up a fight. Someone was screaming. I wanted to scream too, but I was breathless with shock and fear. I stared in awe as Yell climbed the statue of Abraham Lincoln, shouting defiance and waving a banner before someone hit her smack on the forehead with an orange and knocked her from the pedestal into the crowd. A police car, with lights flashing and siren blaring drew up at the perimeter of the scrimmage. I saw a gap between the combatants and before I had time to think what I was doing I was through it and running hard.

I ran for what seemed like miles until the pain in my knee forced me to stop. I sank onto a step in a doorway, almost weeping with pain and despair. Although some of the brotherhood considered it their bounden duty to be militant whenever possible, and there had been much talk of previous bloody scrums, I had never witnessed them. This was only my second demonstration. The first had taken place on a hot July day in St James's Park when everyone had been too good-humoured to care much about anything but sunbathing and ice creams.

Violence at first hand was unfamiliar to me. I had lived all my life in peaceful Blackheath and Maria-Alba disapproved of smacking children. At St Frideswide's the nuns had patrolled the playground and even the sticking out of tongues was strictly forbidden. The crazy, indiscriminate aggression I had just witnessed was deeply disturbing. But none the less I was ashamed of myself. I had enrolled myself in the cause and at the first hint of danger I had run away. I had deserted not only my comrades

but also the man I loved. At this moment he might be lying helpless while the battle raged about him, badly hurt or – terrible thought – even dead.

A car drew up at the kerb and a woman with bleached hair and a hard face stepped out. She looked at me with an expression of loathing. ‘This is not a public bench. I shall fetch the porter if you don’t move off.’

I hobbled as fast as my knee would allow me back to Parliament Square. It took some time as blood was seeping through the leg of my jeans and the rubbing of fabric on flesh was agony. ‘Actor on murder charge,’ shouted the man who had a kiosk near the Sanctuary. It went through my mind that my parents would be very interested in this piece of news, as they knew every thespian of any reputation. Then the square came in sight and I forgot about it.

The fighting was over. People stood about, talking, but of Dodge and Yell and the other members of SPIT there was no sign. I spotted a Black Maria disappearing into the traffic. The pavement was littered with squashed oranges and broken eggs and trampled placards. A packet of lard oozed and glistened on the pavement. The only person I recognized was the old woman with the black straw hat. She was trying to persuade a policeman, who was attempting to get her into the police car, to dance with her.

‘Anyone see what happened this afternoon?’ Another policeman addressed the crowd. ‘We’d like to take statements

from some of you.’ The crowd thinned rapidly and I joined the exodus.

The warmth of the day had gone now and Nikolskoye looked particularly uninviting in the fading light. I almost turned back when I saw Hank and Otto walking up the steps but I knew I ought to face up to having behaved badly. I steeled myself to bear their resentment.

‘Hey! Look who’s here!’ Hank called when he saw me. ‘You were great, Harriet! Ha, ha! When I saw you hit that policeman! I’d never have believed it! I had you down as a stuck-up bourgeoisie coquette.’

I grinned feebly as Otto gave me a clenched-fist salute. ‘Come in, Sister, and we shall drink you a toast. It was a good day’s work, *nicht war?* Leetle old ladies must take care even Harriet is about. She will knock them down!’ He mimed a punch aimed at my shoulder.

I noticed that Otto was missing an earring and that his lobe was a nasty mess. Hank’s nose was swollen to twice its usual size. We went upstairs, the two men congratulating each other on the blows they had managed to get in, in the name of freedom. What had seemed to me to be a disaster, bordering on farce, was apparently another glorious chapter in the history of heroic resistance to the forces of oppression. My appearance at headquarters met with cries of approval. Dodge and Yell were absent, having been taken to the police station, but it was generally agreed that neither of them had been much hurt.

My health was drunk in warm beer and my fearless militancy made much of. We finished Yell's cake and then Hank went out for fish and chips, and we had a greasy feast of celebration. Though it was hard to see wherein lay the victory exactly, I went along gratefully with the general mood of self-congratulation. I had never in my life been fêted for anything and it was a heady experience.

It was half-past six when I got home. I looked wildly dishevelled, almost villainous, in the hall mirror – the personification of caducity. My hair was hanging in strings from the egg and the blood from a cut on my cheek had dried in a streak of blackish-red blobs. My knee was agony and my thumb was sore.

‘Ehilà, Harriet! C’è da impazzire!’ Maria-Alba's head appeared in the lighted doorway that led to the basement stairs. Her eyes and mouth were large with anguish. ‘Clarissa is having the fits and Ophelia is lock in the bedroom. Bron is gone to The Green Dragon and Portia is nowhere found! *Non so più che fare!*’

‘Harriet!’ Cordelia flung herself at me. ‘I’m going to kill myself! I’ve made a potion of laburnum seeds and deadly nightshade for us all to drink ...’ The rest was drowned by sobbing.

‘What is it? What’s the matter?’ I was used to my family’s dramatics. I expected Maria-Alba to tell me the boiler had gone out, and Cordelia that she had been given a C for Latin.

‘Waldo sarà impiccato per omicidio. Your father is to be hang!

For murder!’ Maria-Alba sank to her knees and wrung her hands above her head.

Cordelia screamed and fainted.

THREE

We laid Cordelia on the ebony and gilt day bed, which had come from the set of *Antony and Cleopatra*. Its frame was made of writhing snakes with leopards' heads supporting the scrolled arms. The coats, lacrosse sticks, cricket bats and school satchels that had been carelessly chucked on to it over the years had chipped off most of the gesso, and Bron, when a small boy, had indelibly inked spectacles round the leopards' eyes, but it made a striking effect as you walked in through the front door. Next to it, a life-sized statue of Anubis, the Egyptian god with the head of a jackal, acted as a hat stand.

Maria-Alba snatched several feathers from an ostrich boa that was draped round Anubis's neck, set a lighted match to them and held them under Cordelia's nose. Cordelia came to immediately, complaining volubly about the disgusting smell. She gazed up at me with tragic eyes.

'Don't kiss me goodbye, my dearest sister, lest you take the poison from my lips. I love all my family but you're my favourite. Portia was a pig yesterday when I asked if I could borrow her mohair jersey.'

'Stop acting at once, this minute, and tell me truthfully. Did you swallow any nightshade and laburnum mixture?' I spoke sharply because Cordelia frequently told lies. Also I wanted to bring myself back from the immense distance to which Maria-

Alba's broken sentences had sent me. I saw myself bending over my sister in one of those out-of-the-body experiences people have when they nearly die. My sight was dim and I seemed to be intermittently deaf.

'I – I – don't remember.' Cordelia pressed her hand to her head and fluttered her lashes.

'*C'è bisogno di emetico*. Salt and water,' said Maria-Alba grimly. 'I go make it.'

'You'll be wasting your time because I won't drink it.' Cordelia sat up, looking cross. 'I hate this family. Isn't it bad enough that my own darling father is a prisoner and a captive and perhaps even going to be hung without you trying to make me sick?'

'Hanged,' I corrected automatically while muffled shock waves boomed in my head like the tolling of a submerged bell.

Cordelia glared at me. 'I expect if someone strapped you to a table and swung an axe over your naked quivering flesh like in *The Pit and the Pendulum*, you'd be correcting his grammar.'

'Probably. Anyway, they don't hang people any more in this country.'

'Don't they? Really not? Because I saw this film and the man was going to be hung – oh, all right, hanged – and the priest asked him to pretend to be afraid so that all the people who looked up to him as a hero would despise him and turn from their villainy and it was so awful when he started to cry and tried to get away – I wanted to be sick, it was so horrible. You see, you don't know whether he's pretending or he really *is* frightened –'

‘It was only film.’ My voice echoed as though my ears were stuffed with cotton wool. ‘Hanging is against the law.’

‘The law! Fie!’ said a voice from above. We looked up. My mother stood at the head of the staircase, dressed all in black. ‘The bloody book of law you shall yourselves read in the bitter letter.’

‘*King Lear*,’ said Cordelia.

‘*Othello*,’ I said at the same moment.

It was our parents’ habit to quote extensively from Shakespeare’s plays because, naturally, they knew reams of it by heart. As if this was not bad enough we were supposed to respond with the source of the quotation. In a spirit of rebellion against this pernicious cruelty we had agreed years ago to attribute any quotation to the particular play from which our Christian names had been taken (I had taken to using my second name to avoid embarrassment) and, naturally, sooner or later, we were bound to be spot on. Our parents never tumbled to this stratagem as they lived on a more exalted plane from our juvenile utterances and never really listened to us. Bron scored the fewest hits and Ophelia was most often right, which says something about *Hamlet*.

‘The quality of mercy is not strained –’ my mother began.

She delivered the speech very slowly with plenty of pomp and circumstance for the bit about the thronèd monarch and the sceptred sway. I hoped she would stop when she got to ‘Therefore, Jew’, as it was hardly relevant, but she carried on.

‘Somebody’s got to tell me what’s happening,’ I said as soon as she had finished. ‘It *can’t* be true that Pa’s been arrested!’

My mother looked pained by my lack of sensibility. ‘They say the owl was a baker’s daughter.’

Ophelia’s mad scene – Shakespeare’s Ophelia, I mean – was a favourite of Ma’s. She descended slowly, singing the mildly lewd songs that had put Sister Paulina, our English mistress, so painfully to the blush. I felt I would go mad myself if I had to listen to much more of it. As soon as Ma turned into the drawing room, still reciting, I ran up to my eldest sister’s bedroom and knocked on her door.

‘Ophelia!’

There was no answer. I turned the handle but the door was locked. I looked through the keyhole. Ophelia lay on her bed, hair trailing across the pillow, eyes closed. She looked very beautiful, framed by the primrose brocade curtains that hung from the gilded corona high on the wall. Her eiderdown was ivory silk and the carpet was a needlepoint extravaganza of flowers. A vase of pale yellow florists’ roses, probably from Crispin, stood on the table beside the bed. Ophelia had gone to much trouble to make her room pretty and comfortable, and she spent a lot of time there. The moment anything vaguely demanding or tiresome occurred she would go to bed, whatever the time of day and regardless of the inconvenience to others.

I rattled the handle. ‘Ophelia! Do talk to me! I *must* know what’s happening. I can’t get any sense out of Ma.’

I put my eye to the keyhole again. She stirred, but only to pull the sheets over her head.

I was standing irresolute, wondering if there was anything to be gained by going down to The Green Dragon to find Bron, when the doorbell rang. I went down to answer it. Two men stood on the doorstep, one of them in police uniform. I remembered the policeman's helmet and my heart gave a leap of fright. The one who was dressed in a fawn mackintosh pulled a badge from his pocket and showed it to me. I could make nothing of it. My eyes read but my mind refused to take it in.

'Miss Byng? I'm Chief Inspector Foy and this is Sergeant Tweeter. May we come in for a moment? I'd like to talk to you about your father.' A shudder of terror did something to my knees and the streetlamp by the front door seemed to jig about, in time to the rapid beating of my heart. I felt as though years were passing as I stood staring at the buckle of his belt, hearing only a faint beeping of a car horn streets away. 'It is Miss Byng, isn't it?'

I stood back to allow them to come in. Ma was declaiming still, in the drawing room. Though my family frequently drove me to despair I hated people to be critical of them. Probably these custodians of civic order would be puzzled by, perhaps even contemptuous of, my mother's response to a crisis. So I showed them into Pa's library.

We stood about awkwardly while I tried to recover my wits. I had a pain in my midriff as though I had been winded. I tried

to smile but my lips stuck to my teeth. The mackintoshed man – I had already forgotten his name – pulled up one of the faux bamboo chairs that stood either side of the secretaire and tucked it behind my knees. I sank on to it. He took the other one for himself.

The uniformed sergeant perched on the end of the chaise longue where my father was accustomed to lie with closed eyes when he was trying to ‘get into character’. The sergeant was a big man whose thighs strained at the seams of his trousers. He had a pitted nose, full red cheeks and tight black curls. He looked incongruous against the rich curtains made from the purple sails of Cleopatra’s barge held back in elegant loops by gilded rams’ heads. My stomach chose that moment to rumble with hunger. I smiled, then put my hand over my mouth because I was embarrassed to be smiling at such a time, and felt the bracing sting of the cut on my face.

The plainclothes man had very regular features and neat brown hair brushed straight back from his face. He had a cleft in his chin like Cary Grant. I saw his eyes travel round the room and pause at the skull, which was part of a tablescape composed by my mother called *Obsequy*. As well as the skull there was a graceful draping of white linen representing a shroud, an hour-glass and a lock of David Garrick’s hair. Glass lustres hanging from the table’s edge suggested tears. It had been there for some time and there was plenty of dust.

‘It’s only a stage prop. The skull, I mean.’ I was afraid he might

be drawing sinister conclusions. ‘Yorick. You know, *Hamlet*.’ The inspector’s eyes travelled to a dagger that lay on the table in front of him. ‘That’s from *Macbeth*. It’s got a retractable blade. It couldn’t hurt anyone.’ My stomach made extravagant hollow noises, which we all pretended we could not hear.

I followed his glance to a bowl of apples on the table. Among them was a core, which had turned brown. My father must have eaten it before leaving for the theatre that morning. There was a poignancy in this that made my chest ache.

‘Now, Miss Byng. Would you mind telling me your first name?’

‘Yes. I mean, no. Harriet.’ I heard the scratching of the sergeant’s pencil.

‘And the other members of the household – could I have their names, please?’

‘Ophelia, Portia, Cordelia and Oberon. And my mother, Clarissa, and Maria-Alba.’

The inspector lifted a pair of tidy eyebrows. ‘A relation?’

‘Our housekeeper – more of a friend, really.’

The sergeant’s pencil paused. ‘Half a mo, sir. Is that O-f-e-e-l-y-a?’

The inspector spelled Ophelia for him.

‘And would it be P-o-r-s-c-h-e, sir?’

I looked down at my lap to suppress a shocking desire to laugh. I was startled by the grubbiness of my hands and fingernails. Dried blood from the splinter mingled with the

dirt. The inspector was examining the room when I looked up again. I tried to see, with his eyes, the automaton of Harlequin dancing with Columbine, the copy of the Reynolds portrait of Mrs Siddons, the porphyry urn containing the ashes of a Chinese emperor's favourite ape. There was a decoupage screen of Edwardian bathing beauties peeping through foliage, over which hung a petticoat and a pair of stays supposed to have belonged to Fanny Kemble. On the marquetry bombé chest lay Othello's scimitar and hanging above it, like a hunting trophy, an ass's head with a wreath of roses round its ears from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

'This is a very attractive room. Someone has a flair for interior decoration. Your mother?'

I was grateful for this praise. For the first time I had noticed that the library was not altogether clean, that one end of the curtain had slipped from its pole and that there was a damp stain on the ceiling. The veneer was missing in several places on the bombé chest, one of the ass's eyes had fallen out and the chaise longue had a depressed circle covered with fur at one end where Mark Antony had made a nest. Now things seemed to glide back into soft focus and look charmingly original again.

'Yes. She used to be an actress. But I think she likes decorating better.'

The sergeant's pencil continued to scratch, recording these pleasantries for posterity.

'I once saw your father play Coriolanus,' the inspector went on.

His voice was deep and agreeably fruity. ‘Must have been twenty years ago, when I was an undergraduate. He held the audience in his hand. You saw it from his point of view, how he was cut to the heart by the ingratitude of the proletariat. You felt they were ill-mannered, boorish, unreasonable. And yet, as Plutarch says, Coriolanus was a man of mistaken passion and self-will. An ill-educated prince, unfit to govern. Your father presented the crux with every line. It was a wonderful performance.’

‘Thank you. Thank you very much,’ I said with what I immediately felt to be excessive warmth. I wondered if an interest in literature was usual in a policeman.

The inspector smiled as though we were making polite conversation over teacups and sandwiches. He was really rather good-looking, with twinkling, sympathetic eyes. I liked the way the tips of his ears bent outwards a little.

‘Mind if I smoke my pipe?’ I shook my head. He took out the pipe and a leather pouch and began to stuff shreds into the bowl. Then he struck a match and applied it to the tobacco between puffs. A sweetish smell floated towards me. The process was strangely enthralling. I stared at the little curls of smoke. ‘You know, don’t you, Miss Byng, that your father has been placed under arrest?’

My temperature seemed to shoot up until my ears were practically in flames while my face grew cold with sudden perspiration. Until that moment I had not believed it.

‘Why – when ...?’ I could not finish the sentence.

‘The police were called to the Phoebus Theatre this morning. Sir Basil Wintergreen was found lying on the stage with a fractured skull.’

‘Sir B-Basil Wintergreen? Is he ...?’

‘I’m afraid so.’

I wanted to groan. I may even have done so. My father was currently a member of the newly formed Hubert Hat Shakespeare Company. They were to open with *King Lear* in two weeks. Sir Basil Wintergreen was Lear and Pa was the Duke of Gloucester. Pa had told us many times that the casting was a triumph of mediocrity. Apparently Sir Basil, since his knighthood the previous year, could not get the self-satisfaction out of his voice, however sad, mad or angry he was supposed to be. His Lear sounded like a bank manager delivering an after-dinner speech to a Masonic Lodge. He had grown so fat he could barely do more than fling out an arm or waggle his head. Soon, according to Pa, Sir Basil would have to be brought on and off stage in a cart. With his eyes dwindling to sly gleams in his swollen cheeks, he could express no nobler feeling than the comic posturing of Falstaff or Sir Toby Belch.

The lifelong rivalry between Pa and Sir Basil had been both a spur and a scourge. For many years Pa had been satirical at Basil’s expense, deriding his eagerness to court impresarios, directors, critics and anyone who could help him rise. My father had insisted, in a proud-spirited sort of way, that audiences were the proper arbiters of genius. It had been an unpleasant shock

when the laurel crown had been placed on Basil's receding brow. It was not the knighthood Pa resented but the immediate clamour for Basil's presence on every stage that stung him. My father's insults became less jocular and more venomous. It would be true to say that he was in a fair way to hating Basil.

'This has been a terrible shock for you.' The inspector's manner was that of a story-book uncle, genial, reassuring, safe. Probably the pipe and Burberry helped. 'I'm afraid there are one or two questions I must ask. Your mother – is she at home?'

'I – she's in the drawing room. I'm not sure whether ... She suffers from, um, neurasthenia.'

I did not know what this was exactly, only that my mother complained of it. The sergeant's pencil paused and I heard him give a cluck of distress.

'You needn't write that down, Tweeter.' Inspector Foy nodded and hummed thoughtfully to himself. 'Are you the eldest, Miss Byng?'

'No. My brother – we call him Bron – is twenty-six and Ophelia's twenty-four. I'm twenty-two.'

'Can I have a word with them?'

'Bron's gone to the – out. Ophelia's in bed.'

'Is she ill?'

'No. She always goes to bed when she's upset.'

He squinted down the end of his pipe and hummed some more. 'Pom – pom – pom,' up and down the scale. 'And Portia? How old is she?'

‘She’s twenty. But she isn’t here. I don’t know where she is.’

‘I see.’ The inspector drew thoughtfully on his pipe and blew a cloud, his expression noncommittal. ‘I was hoping that someone would come back to the station with me. Your father’ll need some overnight things, and no doubt a visit from a member of the family will cheer him up. His solicitor’s been with him all day, of course. Your father’ll be moved in the morning. Probably the Shrubs.’

‘The Shrubs?’ I echoed stupidly.

‘Winston Shrubs. The wing for prisoners on remand.’ When he said ‘prisoners’ I wanted to be sick. I must have looked green for the inspector said, ‘You’re rather young for all this. I think I should have a word with your mother.’

‘I – I’ll ask her.’

My mother was alone, pacing the length of the drawing room, the back of one hand pressed to her forehead, the other clutching her left side. ‘Ma.’ I tried to speak calmly but my voice was breathy and unnaturally high. ‘There’s a policeman in the library who wants us to go to the station to see Pa.’

She paused in her pacing and crossed her hands over her chest as though cradling something small and vulnerable. ‘Waldo! Poor wounded name! My bosom as a bed shall lodge thee till thy wound be healed!’

‘*Othello*. Are you coming then?’

‘*Two Gentlemen*. Why, he is whiter than new snow upon a raven’s back!’

‘Yes, I *know*. But we ought to go and see him.’

She widened her eyes. ‘This is the very coinage of my brain. It harrows me with fear and wonder.’

I saw the policemen hovering at the door of the drawing room. ‘This is Inspector ... um,’ I still could not remember his name.

‘Good evening, Mrs Byng. I’m Chief Inspector Foy.’

My mother looked wildly at me. ‘Alas, how is’t with you that you do bend your eye on vacancy?’

The inspector spoke in a slow, calming sort of way as though announcing the next item of a concert on the radio. ‘*Hamlet*, isn’t it? Gertrude’s speech, if I’m not mistaken. This is my sergeant. We’d like you to come with us to the station, if you wouldn’t mind.’

My mother groaned and clasped her throat. ‘This fell sergeant, death, is swift in his arrest.’

The sergeant coughed respectfully. ‘Beg pardon, ma’am, but the name’s Tweeter.’

My mother made a small sound of impatience. Brushing past us, she paused on the threshold and pointed a finger at each of us in turn. ‘Hence, horrible shadow! Unreal mockery, hence!’ She swept into the hall and I heard her walking upstairs with slow majesty.

‘It had better be me,’ I said.

I went into the hall to find my coat.

‘I come with you.’ In the dim light of the stairs Maria-Alba’s complexion, always sallow because of all the nerve-stabilising

pills she took, looked yellow enough to be jaundiced.

‘Oh, but Maria-Alba – you can’t. You know it’ll make you – upset. Besides, they need you here.’

‘Cordelia is with the television.’ Maria-Alba was buttoning her cape, a voluminous garment in scratchy tartan, which she wore winter and summer. ‘The others is all right. And Bron, when he return home, *è ubriaco fradico, certo.*’

I hoped the policemen would not know the Italian for stinking drunk. I had not the presence of mind for argument. I went up to my father’s dressing room to pack a bag. Shirts, pyjamas, pants, socks, washing things, razor, shaving soap. Eau-de-Cologne, two silver hairbrushes and the hairnet he wore in bed. He was extremely particular about his appearance. I folded up his dressing gown carefully. It was made of saffron-coloured marocain and had once belonged to Noel Coward. As an afterthought I took two cigars from his humidor, his cigar cutter, his sleeping pills and the book of sonnets from his bedside table.

The car was an unmarked black saloon. Sergeant Tweeter drove, Inspector Foy sat next to him and Maria-Alba and I sat in the back. The inspector kept up a stream of small talk – the unseasonably mild weather, the effect of roadworks on traffic flow, the Lely exhibition, the new play by Harold Pinter, the latest novel by Günter Grass. No doubt my replies were lame but the effort required to make them was steadying. Sergeant Tweeter confined his remarks to the odd grunt of

dissatisfaction with other people's driving, and Maria-Alba sat in silence, looking stern. As chance would have it we drove round Parliament Square.

'Bit of a row here today,' said the inspector.

'Really?'

'Just some silly kids with nothing better to do than make a nuisance of themselves. But apparently they attacked an old woman. This sort of thing sends the press into overdrive. They'll insist it's proof of declining morality. There'll be sentimental talk of the past when hardened East End villains paused in the act of shooting each other full of holes to help dear old ladies cross the road.'

'Oh. Yes. Of course,' I murmured.

'But think what life was in the so-called good old days. A couple of world wars for a start. A hundred years ago children starved to death in the streets. Two hundred years ago dear old ladies were burned as witches. Plenty of things have changed for the better. In my job it's all too easy to be cynical. But there's a great deal of good in the world if you look for it.'

I understood that he was trying to keep my spirits up. In the half-darkness, coloured lights from shops and advertisements streamed across Maria-Alba's face. It was shining with sweat. Searching for a handkerchief in my pocket, I found the remains of Yell's cake, which Hank had given me. It was composed chiefly of golden syrup and had made a horrible mess of my coat. The stickiness seemed to get worse the more I licked my fingers.

The police station was modern and anonymous. As we walked in I was assailed once more by the disorientation that had threatened all afternoon. Sound and vision were subtly distorted. People's faces were crooked with bulging foreheads and noses out of proportion with their chins. Overhead neon strips made buzzing sounds, pulsating, now dim, now glaring, as though they were extraterrestrial beings attempting to communicate across light years.

We walked down corridors that swayed and jiggled like the elephants' cakewalk at the funfair. I kept my eyes fastened on the nape of Inspector Foy's neck. When he stopped and spoke to me his voice boomed and broke over my ears in waves.

'He's in here. We've made him as comfortable as we could.' He was frowning at me. 'Are you all right?'

'*Sta bene.*' Maria-Alba's voice was gruff. '*Senta, sputa.*' Her handkerchief appeared in my line of vision like a great white wing. 'On the cheeks is what you eat in the car. *Lo sa il cielo, chissà!*' I spat obediently and did not protest as Maria-Alba dabbed vigorously, hurting my cut cheek.

'Here we are.' Inspector Foy spoke with a hearty cheerfulness as though ushering his nieces into a box at the theatre for their annual pantomime treat.

FOUR

My father was sitting at a table with a glass in his hand and a nearly empty bottle of red wine at his elbow. The room had originally been painted a harsh yellow. Now, up to shoulder height, it was dimmed by dirt and defaced by graffiti. The ugly plastic chairs, metal filing cabinets and printed notices were depressing. In this setting my father, with his beautiful, sensitive face and his dark hair, grown long for the part of Gloucester, looked like an exotic creature trapped in a down-at-heel circus. This was despite wearing a jacket and trousers that plainly did not belong to him. Not only were they too small but they were of a Terylene respectability that Pa would never have chosen. A policeman was standing to attention by the door, presumably in case my father decided to make a run for it. He was grinning all over his face for my father was in full flow.

‘So there she was, without a stitch on and holding this thing as though it was a bomb about to go off, when the lights went on and the duchess said – Ah, Harriet!’ He broke off as we were ushered in. ‘And Maria-Alba. My dears, this is truly heroic.’ He stood up and came from behind the table to kiss our hands and then our cheeks with the graceful ceremony of a Bourbon prince welcoming guests to his Neapolitan palazzo. ‘I was just telling the constable the story of Margot Bassington and the Prince of Wales’ cigar case.’

I was astonished to see him apparently in the best of spirits. A shiver ran down my back and into my knees, which was probably relief. I had been afraid this terrible shipwreck might have changed my father into someone unrecognisable. I wanted to put my arms round him but I saw at once that this would be inconsistent with the style in which he had chosen to play the episode.

‘We’ve brought you some things.’

‘Thank you, my darling. Ridiculous as it may seem, my clothes have been impounded. Of course they are covered in blood and naturally the blood is Basil’s. I do not wear clothes dabbled with gore, as a rule.’ He looked more closely at my begrimed appearance. ‘Your sympathy with the oppressed does you credit, Harriet, but is it absolutely necessary to take on their slipshod condition? Where is your mother?’

‘She’s ... distressed. Lying down.’

‘Good, good. I should not like to see her against this – pedestrian background. And Ophelia? Have you met my eldest daughter, Inspector? One ought not to praise one’s own children, but she is remarkably beautiful. Very like her mother.’

‘Ophelia’s gone to bed.’ I could not keep a note of apology from my voice though I knew it would annoy him.

‘Of course, of course. The sensible thing.’ He frowned. ‘Is your brother with you?’

‘He had to go out.’

‘My son, Oberon,’ he addressed the inspector again, ‘is a fine

actor. But sordid commercial considerations must prevail over beauty and truth.’ Beauty and Truth were our household gods and my father had a special face he put on when speaking of them, lifting his eyebrows and lengthening his upper lip. ‘As a suckling actor Oberon is obliged to turn his hand to toil of a more prosaic kind. He has a flourishing career in – ah – property.’

Bron, who had not had an acting job for more than a year, had been working for an estate agent but had been sacked only last week. An American to whom Bron had sold several miles of the River Thames for a gigantic sum had complained to the ombudsman when he discovered the sale was fraudulent. There was the threat of a court case.

‘Portia’s staying with friends,’ I said. ‘She probably doesn’t know what’s happened – otherwise she’d certainly be here.’

I knew I had put too much eager assurance into my voice. My father betrayed his displeasure by drumming his fingers on the tabletop. Then he shook back his hair and showed his excellent teeth in a smile in which good humour was mildly flavoured with regret. ‘I understand perfectly, Harriet. You need not prevaricate. You see, Inspector, my children have inherited a sensibility so acute we may even call it excessive. They do not wish to see their father in this painful predicament. They dislike unpleasantness, the dark passages in a man’s life, the sordid whys and wherefores of our mortality. They prefer to frisk and frolic in the sun, to banquet on felicity. It is a family weakness but is it not better to be thin-skinned than to be unfeeling? I confess I think so.’

Maria-Alba put his overnight bag on the chair with something of a thump. 'Fortunate for you there is someone of the family without feelings. Or you have no toothbrush.' She sat on a chair beside the constable, folded her cape around her though the room was stuffy, and closed her eyes.

'Is there anything I can do for you, Pa?' I asked, still standing by the table, wanting but not daring to take his hand.

'No, Harriet. These gentlemen,' he waved in the direction of the constable, 'have done their best to supply the few requirements a man can have in such unprosperous circumstances. My supper has been brought to me and simple though it was – and, let us be truthful, rather too early to be perfectly agreeable – it was wholesome and fresh.'

'Well, sir,' Inspector Foy brought a chair up to the table for me, 'would you have any objection to running through a few details in the presence of your daughter? Informally, now, without Mr Sickert-Greene.' Henry Sickert-Greene was our family's solicitor. 'No tape recorder. Nothing that'll be used in court. While I understand Mr Sickert-Greene's anxiety that you might incriminate yourself, his refusal to let you say anything doesn't get us any further, does it? Sergeant Tweeter will write down anything you care to tell me and it needn't go beyond the walls of this room. I want to get a clearer picture of what exactly happened this morning.'

I was pretty sure old Sickly Grin, as Bron had christened Mr Sickert-Greene years ago, would have disapproved strongly of

this suggestion. I wondered if Inspector Foy was to be trusted. Looking at his nice straight nose and firm chin and intelligent grey eyes I felt almost certain that he was.

‘Do you mind a pipe, sir?’ Inspector Foy reached inside his coat.

‘Yes, I do. My voice is the chief tool of my trade, Inspector, and it is extremely susceptible to tobacco fumes.’

No one could accuse my father of trying to curry favour, at all events.

The inspector took his hand out again. ‘Would you tell your daughter what happened? Take as long as you like.’

‘Could you bear to talk about it?’ I asked timidly. Mentioning Sir Basil’s death seemed as insensitive as asking a stranger straight out how they had lost all their arms and legs.

‘Poor old Basil, do you mean? Oh-oh-oh!’ My father ran through two registers with the exclamation. ‘Murder most foul, strange and unnatural!’ He shook his head but there was a gleam in his eye I hoped Inspector Foy could not see. ‘Ha! What a lesson was there! Reduced from a strutting cock to a blood-boltered corpse in one tick – tock – of Time.’ He jerked his finger to imitate the minute hand of a clock. ‘Farewe-e-e-ll! A lo-o-ng farewell to all his greatness! Today he puts forth the tender leaves of hope, tomorrow, blossoms, the third day comes the *killing frost*.’

You had to hand it to him. The lightning change of expression from gentle introspection to malevolence as he spat out ‘killing

frost' was masterly. I did not dare to look at the inspector.

'Oh dear! Was there much blood?'

'Yes, Harriet. I was in blood stepped in so far that, should I wade no more, returning were as tedious as go o'er.'

'*Othello*,' I said automatically, then blushed, fearing the inspector would think I was trying to show off.

'Tst! *Macbeth*.'

I could hear Sergeant Tweeter's pencil, scribbling frantically.

'What happened just before you found Sir Basil?' asked the inspector.

'There was the usual delay before the rehearsal. I generally use the time to warm up. I decided to run through the gouging scene – the one in which they put out my eyes – on my own. I was still undecided about the cry of pain for the second eye, whether to rise to a shrill scream or to stay in the lower register, a bellow of agony like a creature of sacrificial offering –'

'Were you struck by anything unusual?' the inspector put in. 'Something about the stage that wasn't quite as it should be?'

'A theatre in rehearsal is always a mess.' My father seemed irritated by the interruption. 'Had the stage *not* been a clutter of heterogeneous objects then I might have thought it unusual. I expect there were props, flats, carpenters' tools, scripts, paint pots, swords, lanterns, tea trays – the usual clutter of crude implements with whose assistance we actors conjure the illusion of man's genius and depravity.'

'Did you touch anything on your way?'

‘Nothing. Nothing at all. The auditorium was in semi-darkness, the stage lit by a single spotlight. I walked towards centre stage and, blinded by the light that was in my eyes – some fool had trained a single spot there – I stumbled across something that lay in my path and fell. I put out my hand. The thing was warm, unpleasantly sticky. It was poor Basil – his head quite crushed. I sprang to my feet with a cry of “Give me some light. Away!”’

‘Just a tick, sir,’ said Sergeant Tweeter. ‘When you said “away”, was you meaning one word or two? Away with the body or you was going away or you was hoping to find a way, sir?’

My father sighed impatiently. ‘It is a quotation from *Hamlet*. Doubtless had I been capable of thought at that moment I would have intended all three interpretations you put upon it. It was a horror, an abomination!’ He gave a shudder I was convinced was genuine. He was extremely squeamish.

‘What happened then?’

‘Several people came running onto the stage in response to my shouting.’

‘Can you remember who they were?’

‘Haven’t the least idea. The women were screaming at the tops of their voices and the men were nearly as bad. Wait a minute, I remember there was that little understudy among them – Sandra, I think her name is – who was flatteringly relieved to discover that it was Basil and not I who lay incarnadined and mute.’

There was a grunt of protest from Sergeant Tweeter but the

inspector swept on.

‘Was there bad blood between Sandra and Sir Basil?’

‘It had nothing to do with poor Basil. She has a crush on me. Of course, I don’t take it seriously. She’s a sweet little thing, hardly out of school. You know how impressionable girls are at that age.’ If the inspector knew he wasn’t telling. He hummed up and down an octave. ‘But,’ continued Pa, ‘the theatre is an adder’s nest of jealousy and insecurity. And Basil, poor man, did not have the art of endearing himself to others. I dare say I could name several who actually hated him. But of course,’ he put on his noble Brutus face, ‘I shan’t.’

‘Very laudable, sir.’ The inspector’s voice was admiring. ‘But it might be in your own interest, as this is a case of murder, to put such scruples aside. This afternoon I interviewed several members of the cast. They none of them hesitated to mention a quarrel yesterday between you and Sir Basil.’

For a brief second Pa looked rather hurt by this treachery but then rapidly assumed a mask of world-weariness.

‘I have no secrets from you, Inspector. It was a childish row over a suggestion of Basil’s. He thought I should have my eyes gouged out offstage, to save messing about with blood bags.’

‘You didn’t think that was a good idea?’

‘Certainly not. In some second-rate productions the horrid deed is done in the wings. But that’s throwing away a great dramatic climax, for the lack of a little ingenuity. It was obvious that Basil was desperate to hog all the audience’s compassion

for Lear. In many ways Gloucester is a much more sympathetic character.'

'You quarrelled?'

'I called him a fat, greasy lickspittle – or something like that. He called me a Casanova, an ageing lady-killer – among other things, I forget what.' He lifted his chin, which was still firm and well-defined. 'Spiteful nonsense, of course.'

'So you were angry. Did you feel at that point you wanted to kill him?'

My father laughed as though indulging the inspector's sense of drama. 'I'm not a violent man nor is it my habit to assault people who call me hard names.'

'But why *have* you been arrested?' I asked.

My father gave a superior sort of smile. 'You have to see it from a policeman's point of view, to understand why such a hopeless bungle has been made of the business. Imagine yourself a young constable – about seventeen years old to judge from the down on his cheek – whose most exciting job of the day has been to take a lost puppy to the dog pound. You are informed that a famous actor has been found dead in suspicious circumstances. You come bounding in, almost swallowing your whistle with excitement. At last, a chance to use those handcuffs! Something to tell mother when you go home for tea! You see a possibly even more famous actor – it is not for me to say – prostrate at the scene of the crime – for Sandra's eager embraces had prevented me from rising – and dripping with the corpse's vital fluids. Naturally

– because you are young and foolish and have no comprehension of human nature – you assume it was he who dispatched the man with all his crimes broad-blown, as flush as May, his heels kicking at heaven.’

‘Hang on a bit.’ Sergeant Tweeter was breathing hard now in his efforts to keep up. ‘Who was it kicked the dog?’

‘Never mind, Tweeter.’ Inspector Foy looked at his notebook. ‘We mustn’t forget that when PC Copper questioned you, your answers were, to say the least, ambiguous. When asked what you knew about Sir Basil’s death, you said, “Blood will have blood. Never shake thy Goldilocks at me.”’ The inspector frowned. ‘I think that must be gory locks. “Will all my great-nephew’s” – great Neptune’s, I think – “ocean wash this blood clean from my hand?”’

‘They were *remarkably* bloody.’ My father looked down at his spread fingers, now mercifully clean.

‘But you can’t arrest him for saying that,’ I protested. ‘He was in shock. He just said the first thing that came into his head. It didn’t mean anything.’

‘If you remember *Macbeth* as you ought, Harriet,’ said my father reprovingly, ‘you will know it is a moment of exquisite nuance in a scene crammed with meaning and expressed in the finest poetry: No-o-o! This my hand will rather the multitudinous seas –’

‘I understand, Miss Byng. But PC Copper is not a student of English literature. It sounded to him like a confession. When

your father refused to say he didn't do it, the constable placed him under arrest.'

I leant across the table and put my hand on my father's arm. 'Pa, tell them you didn't kill Basil.'

'Thy wish was father, Harry, to that thought. Of this alone I am guilty.' My father spoke in a slow dreamy voice. 'I may not have been the instrument but I confess I was, God help me, frequently angry enough to wish him – no, not dead, but – out of my way.'

For my father other people's prime duty was to be an audience. Being looked at and wondered at and talked about was as necessary to him as breathing. He was enjoying giving a bravura performance of a man wrongfully accused. One of his first roles as a child actor had been the eponymous character in *The Winslow Boy*.

'There you are!' I looked at the inspector. 'He's just said he didn't do it.'

'Sergeant, read out what you've just written.'

'I'm getting it down as fast as I can.' The sergeant's tone was injured. He read out in a slow monotone. "'Father Harry – I am guil-ty. I may not have been a hinstrument but I confess –" Blast! Excuse me, ladies. My pencil's just broke. It's all them long words.'

The inspector sighed. 'You see how it's going to sound in court, Miss Byng. What we need is a clear statement. A straightforward denial. And there's also the business of the fingerprints.'

'Fingerprints?' I began to feel frightened.

‘The autopsy report’s just come in. Sir Basil was struck once, a heavy blow, centre skull, from above. According to PC Copper’s notes there was a metal rod lying beside the body. It was sent immediately to Forensic. Two feet six inches long, weighing several pounds, with a point at one end. And covered with blood. Forensic say Mr Byng’s prints were on the handle.’

‘Naturally they were. That was the gouger,’ explained my father. ‘I took it with me to get me in the mood. Think of it, Inspector. Your arms are tied, you are helpless before your enemies. Their grinning, exultant faces are the last things you will see in this world. But not quite! The very last thing of all is the cruel tip of obdurate iron as it makes it way through the soft jelly of your eye into your very brain! A-a-a-rgh!’ My father flung himself back in his chair and gave a blood-curdling scream that made me drive my nails into my palms. Maria-Alba opened her eyes and crossed herself fervently. A policeman put his head round the door and asked if we were all right.

The inspector waved him away and stuck to his point. ‘Did you use this – gouger to kill Sir Basil, Mr Byng?’

‘Of course I didn’t! I must have dropped it when I fell over the body. Naturally there was blood on it. Everything within ten feet of Basil was covered with it. Ugh!’ He gave another shudder and drew together his dark-winged brows.

‘Got that, Tweeter?’

Sergeant Tweeter, licking the point of his pencil, muttered that he had some of it.

‘What did you mean when you called Sir Basil –’ he consulted his notes again, “‘a dreary old queen, bloated with bombast’?”

‘Did I really say that? I don’t remember.’

‘According to Miss Marina Marlow. Was Sir Basil a homosexual, to your knowledge?’

My father put on his I-know-a-hawk-from-a-handsaw face, a combination of abstraction and cunning. ‘Don’t start a hare, Inspector. I neither know nor care if Basil was queer. He’s dead. Let his secrets die with him. *De mortuis nil nisi bonum* – good advice and I shall stick to it.’

Was it possible? I wondered, watching my father as he swept a lock of dark wavy hair from his forehead. His expression was one of pained virtue. Could he actually be a murderer? My father – who would cross the road to avoid seeing rabbits with bloody muzzles hanging in the butcher’s shop window? Who would not allow Loveday to kill the moles that ruined the grass? Who, when fishing had enjoyed a brief vogue with Bron years ago, objected violently to the cruelty of skewering live worms with hooks.

‘Thank you, sir. I think we’ll leave it there for today. Miss Byng, I’ll arrange for a car to take you and Miss Petrelli home.’

For a moment I couldn’t think who Miss Petrelli was. Then I remembered it was Maria-Alba. I was fairly sure I had not got round to introducing them. My anxiety was increased by this display of police omniscience.

‘Have you a message for Ma?’ I asked my father.

‘Tell her to be brave. All will be resolved. Tomorrow and

tomorrow, and tomorrow creeps in this petty pace ...’

I stood politely and waited for the end of the speech, my knee aching and my cut stinging. Shakespeare had suitable observations for every occasion. He really was inexhaustible. The last sight I had of my father was of his face turned to the window displaying his famous profile while the young constable applauded.

Maria-Alba held my arm tightly as we walked back along the corridor.

‘This is very hard on you.’ The sympathy in Inspector Foy’s voice was almost my undoing. ‘He’s bearing up very well, considering. Try not to worry.’ But he believed my father to be guilty of murder and was therefore the enemy. I felt confused.

We heard voices raised in anger. I averted my eyes from a quarrelsome group of people by the reception desk. I had had enough of human life in the raw for one day. Then someone shouted, ‘Order is Slavery!’ I saw, handcuffed to a policeman apiece, Dodge and Yell. Dodge had a swollen eye that was nearly closed and Yell’s nose was dripping with blood. Despite this there was evidence that the fight had not been knocked out of them. A broken chair lay on its side and several posters had been torn from the walls.

‘Pigs! Capitalist zombies!’ screamed Yell.

‘Harriet!’ Dodge must have forgotten about the opprobrious middle-classness of my name. ‘Have those fascists been beating you up? Hey! You!’ He addressed Inspector Foy. ‘You leave

my girlfriend alone! I know what our rights are!’ The inspector looked hard at me. I felt myself grow hot.

‘Where’re you taking those two?’ he asked one of the handcuffed policemen.

‘Down the nick. They’ve made a nasty mess of the nice cell we put ’em in. They’re asking for a bit of rough treatment. I think we can arrange that.’

‘Don’t let the bastards intimidate you, Harriet.’ Dodge’s voice was almost tender. ‘Refuse to say anything. They’ll have to let us out on bail. See you in court.’ He waved his free fist. ‘Fight for freedom!’

‘Are you all right?’ I looked from Dodge to Yell. She raised two fingers, discreetly so Dodge could not see. ‘They won’t be hurt, will they?’ I asked the inspector as they were led away, chanting slogans. ‘It isn’t a crime to try and make things better for other people, is it?’

‘If you’ll take my advice you won’t go to Owlstone Road tomorrow.’

‘Oh. No.’ I was too taken aback by the compass of the inspector’s knowledge to dream of rebelling against his authority. ‘I won’t.’

‘Good girl. Sergeant Tweeter will take you home. Good night, Miss Petrelli.’

Maria-Alba’s reply was inaudible.

‘Drat it!’ said Sergeant Tweeter, pushing ahead of us through the vestibule. ‘Them para-patsies are on to us. Inspector Foy had

the idea of sending 'em to Hammersmith. He set up a decoy car but o' course it was only going to fool 'em for a bit.'

I crossed the threshold and was dazzled by the bursting of flashbulbs. 'Just look this way, miss. How's your father, Miss Byng? Has Waldo Byng been charged yet? Over here! Which daughter are you?' There was extraordinary menace in these demands and questions. Now I understood why primitive peoples believed that cameras stole their souls. The explosions of light in my face greedily sucked up all my reserves of strength. Maria-Alba was sick without warning on the top step and, taking advantage of the gap that opened up as the reporters backed away from the pool of vomit, I put my arm round her and followed Sergeant Tweeter, who was breasting his way through the photographers. He pushed Maria-Alba into the car. Hands pulled at my arms, even held on to the collar of my coat. I felt the helpless paralysis of nightmare. The next moment I was inside the car and Sergeant Tweeter had slammed the door painfully against my hip.

Maria-Alba was sick again, this time into the foot well, and Sergeant Tweeter swore loudly but it may have been in reaction to the faces pressed against the windows, the popping of bulbs and the banging of fists on glass as we moved slowly forward. Maria-Alba held her handkerchief to her face and drew sobbing breaths, hyperventilating. With a proficiency born of experience I emptied the contents of my bag on to my knees and pressed it over her face to restrict her intake of oxygen and increase

the level of carbon dioxide in her blood. We left the crowd behind and sped away through the dwindling evening traffic. I rubbed Maria-Alba's shaking hands and tried to give her words of comfort. It seemed a long way to Blackheath.

A succession of thoughts, half formed, slippery, disappearing the moment I defined them, raced through my brain. My father was alone in that dreary place, acting like mad to an almost empty auditorium. I felt that I had abandoned him. From childhood, from that first moment when I was able to isolate one distinct feeling from the flood of sensations that constitute infant consciousness, I had known intuitively that my parents needed protection from a hard, ungenerous world. That intense love that children have for their parents was never, afterwards, untouched by fear.

As I grew in experience the sense of danger increased to include their own excesses. They enjoyed living dangerously, being either *aux anges* or in the depths of despair, and they rarely troubled to conceal their state from us. They saw emotional extravagance as living life to the full and perhaps they were right. But I was a changeling. Circumspection, one might fairly call it cowardice, was part of my character. I seemed to have everyone else's share of prudence and I was often afraid on their behalf. I was fairly sure the performance I had just seen was the product of euphoria generated by shock. My father's confidence must have received a fearful knock. What if his courage should desert him in the long hours of the night?

We crossed Tower Bridge without my noticing it. Was Inspector Foy convinced of Pa's guilt? Would he sift the evidence carefully or did he hope for a quick conviction? How many innocent men were serving sentences in prison for crimes they had not committed? Was my father innocent? The idea that he might not be was so frightening that I had to clench my jaw to stop myself from screaming. After an unhappy fifteen minutes we were in Blackheath and Sergeant Tweeter was saying, 'Is there a back way in, miss? Them buggers – pardon the language, miss – the ladies and gentlemen of the press are here an' all.'

At least a dozen people stood in the shadows around our gate. I could just make out Bron in their midst. He was turning his head from side to side, posing and smiling. I directed the sergeant into the mews. No sooner had I hauled a gasping Maria-Alba from the car than I heard running feet and what sounded like baying for blood.

'You get in, miss. I'll hold them off. Now then, you lot!' Sergeant Tweeter shouted as he got out of the car. We scuttled through the gate, sprinted through the convolutions of Loveday's maze and dashed into the house. I locked and bolted the back door.

'*Madre di Dio!*' wheezed Maria-Alba. '*Sono le pene dell'inferno!*'

She did not exaggerate.

FIVE

‘I can’t go *on* saying I’m sorry.’ Bron stood before the drawing-room fire, smoking a Passing Cloud through a long cigarette holder. It was later that same evening. He sounded aggrieved. ‘How was I to know you were in Garbo mode? They seemed like rather good types to me. They’d been hanging around our gate for hours. It was common courtesy to ask them in.’

‘All right.’ I must try to keep calm, be reasonable. Above my right eye throbbed a severe pain as though someone was boring a hole with a brace and bit. ‘Let’s forget it. Only it was rather like finding a herd of snapping crocodiles in one’s bed. It must have been obvious I didn’t want to talk to anybody. I’m not at all surprised Maria-Alba had a screaming fit. I wanted to have one myself.’

‘How like a girl to say “let’s forget it” and then go on about it. I sent them away when you asked, didn’t I?’

It was true that Bron had got rid of the reporters with the promise of an extended interview the next day. Later, he had gone out to rescue the hapless journalist who had been wandering about for ages, lost in Loveday’s maze. I knew Loveday would be delighted.

‘All I ask is that you don’t let them back in.’

‘I’m going to give my press conference at The Green Dragon. The landlord’s thrilled to have the free publicity. My agent’ll be

pleased too.'

'Have you understood what's happening? Pa's about to be sent to prison for the rest of his life and all you can think about is promoting your career.'

'Not really?' Bron looked quite anxious. 'That would be awful.'

'That's an understatement!'

'I must say I'm surprised. I consider myself a good judge of character.' I wondered on what grounds he made this entirely unsubstantiated boast. But as, despite everything, I loved my brother I did not contradict him. 'I mean, actually smashing a man's skull. I know Pa's always hated Basil but it's taking rivalry a bit far.'

'Of course he didn't do it!'

'Oh. No. That is, if he didn't, why's he been arrested?'

'I've explained all that.' I had, at length, as soon as the press had gone. The trouble was, Bron was full of Manhattans, and black coffee can only do so much. 'Of *course* he didn't do it. And we've got to go on telling everyone that, however bad things look. What'll the police think if even his own family doesn't believe he's innocent?'

'Righto.' Bron nodded solemnly, his fair hair flopping elegantly over one eye. 'I'm with you there, Harriet. Pa didn't do it. I'm prepared to stand up in court and testify to that.' He was silent for a moment and I knew he was seeing himself as a character in a courtroom drama.

'What on earth is that?' I stared with distaste at a swan

fashioned from white carnations, sitting on the piano. Its beak was made of orange chrysanthemums and turned up, like a duck's. Until that moment I had been too agitated to register that the drawing room resembled a cemetery. There were vases of lilies and roses on every table.

'Oh, people keep sending Ma flowers. She's very annoyed. They're all the wrong colours.'

The telephone rang. I went into the hall to answer it.

'Hello. This is the *Daily Champion*. I take it you are a member of the family? Can I have your first reactions to the arrest of Waldo Byng?'

I put the receiver back on its rest as a violent surge of misery made me almost too weak to stand. The telephone rang again immediately. I felt cornered by it as if it were a wild, snarling animal. I held my breath and lifted the receiver cautiously.

'Hello, hello? This is the *Examiner* -'

After that, though our number was ex-directory, everyone in the world seemed to know it and be bent on seeking our opinions, so I unplugged all the telephones. The front doorbell rang incessantly. I was deputed to answer it, which I did by calling through the letter box. Usually it was a reporter and he was asked politely to go away. I was afraid if I allowed myself to be rude I would lose all self-control.

Occasionally it was a neighbour, wondering if they might do anything to help. A perceptible curiosity unpleasantly mixed with relish was channelled like a bad smell through the slot

between us. We had never been popular locally. I think people were torn between pride in having a famous actor living in their neighbourhood and umbrage that my parents had nothing to do with them. No slight was intended. It simply never occurred to my parents that the residents of The Avenue might be in any way interesting. According to Bron, who fraternised down at The Green Dragon, they were enthralled if my mother appeared in a different hat, but she never noticed if they were sporting a new pram complete with twins. I expect it seemed that ours was a gay and privileged life. Faces familiar from the stage and screen came constantly to our house. Parties went on until the early hours of the morning and there was much laughter to be heard over the garden wall.

Now our neighbours had some kind of reparation for the years of neglect. I thanked everyone and said I would be certain to call upon them if there was anything they could do. After a while I got thoroughly sick of this so I fetched a stepladder, put a wedge of paper between the bell and the clapper and tried to ignore the urgent knockings and flappings of the letter box. In the drawing room Bron was reading Ophelia's copy of *Harpers and Queen* and playing *The Rite of Spring* at full volume, which made my head, already pounding, want to burst. I turned it down a little.

'What? Sorry?' Bron looked up at me enquiringly. 'Couldn't stand that bloody row going on.'

'I wish I knew where Portia was. If she's seen the newspapers or television she must be frantic with worry.' I dithered. 'Perhaps

I ought to plug one of the telephones back in.'

My mother thought television sets too hideous to be seen so ours was shut away in the small room where the fuel for the boiler was stored. Cordelia, who spent much of her time sitting in the coal-hole, greatly to the detriment of her clothes, had come running upstairs the minute the reporters had been got rid of, to say that Sir Basil's death was on the nine o'clock news. Bron and I had gone down to watch. I did not want to, in the least, but a confused sense of loyalty seemed to require that I should know what was being said about Pa behind his back.

As we crowded in, slithering about on pieces of nutty slack, there was an interview with someone who had seen Pa being driven away from the Phoebus Theatre in handcuffs. The newsreader said, in what sounded to me like a sneer, that the police were refusing to confirm that Waldo Byng had been arrested on a charge of murder. A résumé of Basil's career, with accompanying stills, had lasted nearly ten minutes. There followed fulsome tributes to Basil from people with tremulous voices and tear-filled eyes and an interview with the producer of *King Lear*, saying what an absolute disaster his sudden departure would be for theatre in this country.

Anyone who didn't know would have thought from all this that Basil was dearly loved, but actually he was a cold, proud man with a sharp tongue and generally unpopular. He never went to theatrical parties and rumours abounded that his only hobby outside the theatre was an unhealthy interest in little boys. But he

had died a violent death and I had a sick, sad feeling, watching him in a clip from an ancient film, playing Henry V. After that they had shown a recent press release photograph of Pa and Basil together as Gloucester and Lear.

‘It’s not a very good one of Pa,’ Cordelia said critically. ‘His teeth look enormous. He’s baring them as though he’s going to bite Basil’s neck.’

‘I expect that’s why they chose it,’ said Bron. ‘The bags under Basil’s eyes are shocking! I wonder why he didn’t get them fixed? Still, it’s too late now.’

I looked at my watch. I continued to worry about Portia, in the brief intervals when I wasn’t worrying about Pa. ‘Ten o’clock. I suppose she’s gone out to dinner with this new man. But usually she lets me know if she’s staying out all night.’

‘Oh. Yes.’ Bron fished about in the pockets of his jacket. ‘I found this letter on your bedside table earlier.’ The envelope was addressed to me, in Portia’s writing. ‘I thought you’d probably be keen to read it straightaway so I brought it downstairs. Then I went to The Green Dragon and forgot about it. Sorry.’

‘What were you doing in my room?’

Bron looked guilty. ‘I needed a few quid for the pub. I haven’t bought a round for ages.’

I decided to let this pass. Considering the state of things we couldn’t afford to fall out over trivial matters. I tore open the envelope.

Darling Hat, Have come back for some clothes. Dimitri’s

asked me to spend a few days at his country house at Oxshott. I think it's in Devon. It sounds terribly grand. Fifteen bedrooms and simply acres of land. I've borrowed your old yellow silk. I hope you don't mind.

I had bought that particular dress just before meeting Dodge and had worn it only once so it hardly qualified as 'old'. But it was certainly too frivolous for a dedicated revolutionary, so it would have been niggardly to mind.

Dimitri is incredibly sexy. He practically made love to me in the lift though there was an attendant. He has lots of men working for him – three bodyguards, no less! – and they all seem devoted, which must be a good sign. He only has to raise a finger and they leap to attention. We went to Gerardi's for lunch and had oysters and champagne in a private room! It made me think of Edward VII and chorus girls. Dimitri says he's been having an affair with a member of the royal family. He wouldn't tell me who but apparently she chain-smoked all the time they were between the sheets. Also he had to call her ma'am even in bed. He said this put him off. As an anarchist you will understand this. Tell Ma and Pa that I'm spending a few days with a friend from school. Make up someone suitably respectable, bye for now, Portia.

'Is Oxshott in Devon?' I asked Bron, my anxiety increased rather than allayed by this letter.

'Haven't the foggiest. Did you say ten o'clock? Long past my din-dins. Do you think Maria-Alba's recovered enough to cook some grub?'

‘Oh, damn! How awful, I’d forgotten about her.’

I ran downstairs to see if she was all right. She was lying on her bed beneath an eiderdown, reading a cookery book.

‘*Così, così,*’ she replied in answer to my enquiry. She shut the book and slowly swung her huge legs over the side of the bed. Her lids were swollen and dark, like two black eyes. ‘You need to eat, *tesora mia*. No, no,’ she went on as I protested that she should rest. ‘*Mi farà bene.*’

I peeled potatoes and made a salad while Maria-Alba put on partridges to roast. Cordelia came out from the coal-hole and sat at the table doing her French knitting. This is done by winding wool round a cotton reel with four little nails in the top. You hook the wool over the nails and from the hole at the other end of the reel emerges a knitted tail. So far all my efforts to think of something she could make from this had been fruitless. The tail was now four feet long and distinctly grubby from falling into Mark Antony’s bowl and being trodden on, but Cordelia kept doggedly on. She was unusually silent. Maria-Alba made a sauce for the partridges and heaved long, sad sighs. I knew I must pull myself together. I tried to find things to talk about that had nothing to do with murder or prisons but ideas slipped like bars of wet soap from my deliberative grasp before I could put them into words.

‘I’m starving.’ Bron came into the kitchen just as we were loading hot dishes into the dumb waiter. He peered into the lift shaft. ‘It’s a very good sauce.’ He withdrew his head, licking his

fingers.

‘Oh, Bron, you pig!’ protested Cordelia.

Bron patted her cheek with his just-licked finger.

‘A lady there was in Antigua

Who said to her spouse, “What a pig you are!”

He answered “My queen!

Is it my manner you mean,

Or do you refer to my figua?”’

Cordelia giggled. Sometimes I got the impression that other people found Bron’s ebullience a little trying, but often, as on this occasion, I was glad of it.

‘*Lascia solo.*’ Maria-Alba looked up from unmoulding the blackberry bavarois she had made that morning, when the serene skies over Blackheath were untroubled by so much as a single cloud. ‘It is well for you to make joke. When the things go wrong you abandon the boat. When Harriet want you to visit *il povero* Waldo you are rotten drunk! She have to look only to me for help!’ Bron’s full soft mouth drooped and he looked perfectly angelic. ‘*Senta, io sono debole.* She need a strong man. You do not think of other than yourself.’ With hands that trembled, Maria-Alba arranged a few whole blackberries round the pale-violet, speckled pudding. ‘You are *egoista* – selfish like a peeg –’

‘That will do, Maria-Alba!’ My mother had broken her general rule of pretending the kitchen did not exist and that food in our house was provided by unseen spirit Shapes, as on Prospero’s island. She descended the last few steps into the basement, her

progress impeded by her long black evening dress and a tiara of jet and feathers like the crest of a giant bird, which collided with the plastic shade of the overhead light. Her High Renaissance features manifested pain. 'I hardly think abusing poor Bron will help in this predicament. You know how loud, discordant voices upset me. Use your chest tones. Fingers here –' she tapped her own impressively small waist – 'and breathe from the stomach.' She bent her plumed head to examine the bavarois as though she was going to peck it. 'Darling,' she patted Bron's cheek, 'don't look so woebegone. Let's have a cosy supper together on trays in the drawing room and leave these nasty, cross people to get on by themselves. Afterwards you shall turn the pages for me while I play.'

Bron considered the proposed plan. Staying at home rated low in his estimation of an amusing evening. Various expressions flitted across his face before it assumed something like compliance. 'That would be fun. I may have to pop out later on, though.' As they went upstairs I heard him say, 'Mama dearest, could you possibly let me have a bob or two? I find I've run rather short –'

Maria-Alba slammed two trays on to the dumb waiter. I took up a tray to Ophelia.

'You can come in,' she said in answer to my knock. She lay on her back across the bed, her head hanging over the side as though she had been strangled, her long hair running over the carpet like liquid gold. 'Oh, food,' she went on in tones of disgust. 'I shan't

be able to eat a *thing*. Has Crispin telephoned?

‘I don’t think so.’

‘You realise what a disaster Pa’s going to prison is for me?’ She blinked rapidly several times. People’s faces, and their eyes particularly, look strange and rather unpleasant, upside down. I felt a return of the disturbing, hallucinatory sensations that had affected me on and off throughout the day. ‘Crispin’s mother is a complete bitch. She’s crazily jealous and she’ll use this to turn Crispin against me.’

‘But if he loves you ...?’ The Honourable Crispin Mallilieu had never struck me as the passionate type. He was small and rather weedy, with pale crinkly hair and rabbit teeth. To be fair I did not think Ophelia was much in love with him. She had told me that his elder brother’s liver was marinating in alcohol, his skin was perforated with needle marks and that he resorted to public lavatories for passages of love, so Crispin stood an odds-on chance of inheriting the title and the estate.

‘That cow –’ I understood her to be referring to Lady Mallilieu – ‘wants him to marry Henrietta Slotts. Her father wallows in filthy lucre like a hog in muck.’

‘Does Crispin like her?’

‘He says she reminds him of a dog he was very fond of as a boy. Certainly she has a long snout-like nose and a great deal of facial hair.’

‘Poor girl. In that case she doesn’t stands a chance against you.’

‘I wouldn’t be so sure. Crispin’s mental development received

a severe check at prep school. If la Slotts looked like a one-eared teddy bear with a darn on its stomach I wouldn't have a prayer.'

'I expect he hasn't rung because he hasn't heard yet. Why don't you have something to eat and then telephone him?'

'My dear, sweet sister, you know nothing about men. I've never rung one up in my life. It's quite fatal to show the least interest. I never accept two invitations in a row and I make a point of being frosty and difficult at least once a week. On Saturday Crispin threatened to throw himself off the battlements of Mallilieu Towers because I said his pathetic attempts to kiss me made me think of a monitor lizard. It's true. He's got a very reptilian tongue, long and thin and flickering.'

I thought of Dodge's face after we'd made love. Happy, peaceful and momentarily reconciled to an unjust world. 'I don't think I'd be very good at that kind of thing.'

'No, I dare say not. That's why I have hundreds of eligible men after me and you've got one spotty crackpot beatnik.'

This wounded, though I tried not to show it. 'It's because you're beautiful, Ophelia. If other girls behaved like you they wouldn't get asked out again.'

'Oh Harriet!' Ophelia's voice sharpened with annoyance. 'Don't fish. It's *so* boring. You're as good-looking as any of us. Different maybe, but there are plenty of men who'd prefer your style of beauty. I do *hate* it when you get humble and saintly.'

'Sorry. Well, anyway, eat before it gets cold.' I put the tray on her bedside table. 'I'm worried about Portia. Do read this.'

I handed her the letter. Ophelia ran her eyes quickly over it and then threw it down. 'Oxshott's in Surrey. Rather parvenu.'

'I don't like the sound of Dimitri.'

'Obviously he's a gangster who breaks people's legs if they displease him. Portia's an idiot.'

I ought to have known there was no point in asking Ophelia for comfort. It seems to me that family life consists of endless repetition of the same misunderstandings and stalemates like a sort of round game. Because I was insecure I was always seeking reassurance and because Ophelia was easily bored she always wanted to shock.

'Will you come with me tomorrow to see Pa?'

'Whatever for? I should think he'd hate to be gawped at behind bars like a chimpanzee in the zoo.'

I decided not to press the point. Ophelia usually said no to everything at first but she could sometimes be persuaded to change her mind. I left her to pick at the partridge and went downstairs slowly, wondering if she could be right about me being sanctimonious. I could be as mean as anyone when angry. Was I lacking the necessary art of dalliance, as she seemed to suggest? It was true that Dodge had been my first real boyfriend but he was not my first lover.

At the age of sixteen Portia had decided that she wanted to get rid of her virginity. She had put the names of all the men she knew between the ages of twenty and sixty into a hat and asked me to pick one. The name on the scrap of paper I had pulled out

was Roger Arquiss. This made us giggle, not just because Roger was gay but because the idea of anything remotely passionate in connection with him seemed ridiculous. Sadly, the best-looking of my father's friends were all homosexual, but Roger was not in the former category. He was in his mid-fifties, had a large Roman nose, a fleshy upper lip above crooked teeth and resembled a friendly old horse. When young he had had great success on the stage playing decent self-sacrificing Englishman who never got the girl, but later on he was reduced to playing idiot clergymen in popular farces.

‘Why on earth did you put the buggers in?’ I asked. ‘Let’s take them out and do it again.’

‘Without them there’d be precious few names. Besides, I was hoping to get Hugo Dance. I’m sure he stroked my bottom last Christmas when he was helping me into my coat. He pretended it was accidental but I saw something like a glint in his eye. I think he just needs the right woman. Still, it’s too late now. Roger it will have to be.’

‘But, Portia, you’re not serious! He’s so horrible, the poor old thing. I mean, sweet but!’

‘It’s no good picking names out of hats if you aren’t going to stick to it.’

Portia was nothing if not stubborn. We took the tube to Albany, Piccadilly, where Roger had a set of rooms decorated in a cosy English style with mahogany furniture, green leather chairs, elegant bibelots and masses of books. Roger was very well

connected, and judging from the portraits on the walls all his family would have looked at home nodding over a stable door. As luck would have it Hugo Dance was there. They were enjoying tea and crumpets and gallantly pressed us to join them, though it was obvious they were surprised to see us. It was not a little embarrassing. I wondered if poor old Roger had been trying to get Hugo into his bed. Hugo was certainly a dish. He had black hair, long curly eyelashes and a dark red mouth. I saw Portia giving him longing looks as she smothered her crumpet with quince jelly.

Roger, whom we had known for years, brought out all his tame, child-friendly jokes for our benefit. Portia, instead of laughing politely, slid down her chair so that her skirt rode up over her knees, breathing deeply to make her bosom conspicuous – already it was much bigger than mine – and smouldered. Roger looked more and more surprised. Hugo stared at her a lot, I noticed. Time wore on. It was quite dark outside and soon we'd have to be thinking about going home. Roger got out a bottle of whisky. I stuck with tea because I hate whisky but the other three had plenty. Roger's jokes began to get more daring and then Hugo told some really filthy stories. I laughed, though they did not seem particularly amusing.

'Roger.' Portia stood up, cutting Hugo short. 'I've never seen your bedroom. I bet it's pretty.'

Roger liked to be complimented on his taste. He followed her meekly from the room.

‘What’s going on?’ asked Hugo, chummily.

I couldn’t think of a convincing lie so I told him the truth. Hugo thought it was very funny. We giggled together and I thought how attractive he was and what a shame he didn’t like girls. He walked up and down before the fire, grinning.

‘I wonder if Roger will be able to – what a hoot! Your sister’s a little devil, isn’t she? I could see she wasn’t wearing any pants. Christ! How old is she?’ I stopped wanting to laugh. For some reason the fact that Portia wasn’t wearing knickers, which I hadn’t known before, made it seem real. Despite the brightness of the fire, the elegance of the furnishings and the smartness of the address, everything seemed suddenly tawdry and sad. I heartily wished we weren’t there. Hugo came over and put his hand on my breast. His cologne smelled of lemons and pencil boxes. ‘Are you wearing pants, Harriet?’ I was horrified and became rigid and tongue-tied with embarrassment. I could not look at him. ‘Mm-m-m. You’re as flat as a boy. I like that. I think it would be only friendly to follow suit, don’t you?’

He shoved me down on to Roger’s chesterfield and began to kiss me. His tongue was in my mouth and it seemed enormous. I couldn’t think what I ought to do. I wanted him to stop but I was afraid of making him angry. Perhaps it was better to go on. Portia and I could laugh about it afterwards. What was virginity but a nuisance, a badge of immaturity? This was my chance to get rid of it. If only it weren’t all so horrible. When he put his hand between my legs I don’t think I could have stopped myself from

screaming if my mouth had not been full of his tongue. I closed my eyes, terrified I was going to be sick. Amid waves of heat and sweat and pain and drowning in aftershave, Hugo rid me of my virginity before it had begun to be troublesome. Afterwards, as he lay panting on top of me, a hateful stranger, my throat ached from trying not to cry.

‘You lucky swine!’ shouted Portia as we ran down the escalator at the underground station. ‘God! Roger was the last word in utter wetness. When he couldn’t manage to have an orgasm he cried, the silly old Dobbin, and I had to tell him it was all right. I think he managed to penetrate all right, though. There was blood. That counts, doesn’t it?’

My own thighs were sticky and I had a sharp pain in the pit of my stomach. Hugo and I had been sitting silent in our chairs when Portia had come back, alone, into the drawing room, tugging a comb through her hair. Hugo was smoking a cigarette. We did not look at each other. He saw us to the door and patted my arm, before turning quickly away and shutting us out. Though the thing had not been of my doing I felt deeply ashamed.

‘You are lucky!’ said Portia again as we rattled through dark tunnels on the way home. ‘Fancy! The divine Hugo! There can’t be many girls who’ve had the pleasure.’ Then she peered at me. ‘You’ve got lipstick all over your cheeks.’

Even now, years later, when I remember Hugo I want to groan aloud. For a long time afterwards, when anyone kissed me, I wanted to retch. Portia had described in intimate detail what it

had been like making love with Roger. She was a good mimic and conjured up a vivid picture of his fumbling awkwardness and her attempts to be nice about his incompetence. The incident did not appear to trouble her in the least. In some ways I envied her profoundly.

Maria-Alba, Cordelia and I ate the partridge in silence. I could think of nothing to say.

When we were halfway through the bavarois Cordelia suddenly said, 'Are you going to see Pa tomorrow? Because I want to come too.'

I looked at Maria-Alba. She shrugged her plump shoulders. '*Perché no?*' she said, wiping blackberry-stained lips with her napkin. 'The mistake has been too little of the reality.'

I wondered which particular mistake she meant. At that moment the opening chords of Chopin's Funeral March, played with the sustaining pedal held firmly down and the occasional wrong note, came floating through from the drawing room. I rested my aching head on my hand. Oh, Pa, I thought, I do love you.

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