

From
DAVID HIGHAM ASSOCIATES

76 DEAN STREET, SOHO
LONDON, W.1

LIMITED

JANET

by

Maurice Rowdon

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R. Gen # 4

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1.

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cover on top and the pot of flowers. How horrible everything was, really. There was the upright piano neither of them used, which the children banged on now and then. There were ornaments stuck on the wall---dolphins made of brass which she had to clean every week, and an odd half-boat sort of thing with masts like little matchsticks. And the persian carpet which wasn't persian. The mirror over the mantelpiece---much too big. And the ^{light} sun~~shine~~ making it all looked fixed and shiny like things in an exhibition. Yet she'd bought it all. With Ralph. God knew where their eyes had been! They used to do things in a daze at that time. He still did. Whereas she'd changed, or at least she thought so. *J* Why didn't he stretch himself full height when he walked across the room to switch the volume up or get a better 'definition' as he called it? He always had to bow---there seemed some weight bowing him down all the time.

She'd tried to do something about this room recently--- covered one wall with a thick-striped wallpaper with an Edwardian lavishness about it, and had the other three walls distempered a pleasant dove-grey. Everybody was doing it now. And fitted carpets if you could afford it. Your lights hanging in baskets. Ruth and Jack---who set the tone for her and half a dozen other people locally, as she suddenly realised---had parquet flooring in their sitting room and one antique piece, a sideboard, against the wall; everything else modern. Compared with ^{Ruth's} ~~their~~ little house, where ^{you} ~~one~~ felt strangely free, ^{her} ~~James's~~ place was a junkshop of faded pre-war taste. How could she get rid of it? She looked round in a moment of panic, at the deep armchairs with their flower-printed pile---they were like awful old ships floating in cesspools of carpet! She must talk to Ralph tonight.

They could sell them. Well, they couldn't. You wouldn't get a smile for them. They could buy some new ones on the never-never---those heart-shaped things with iron legs that looked as if you couldn't sit in them ~~at all~~ and gave you a pleasant surprise when you did.

She felt she was getting nervous and deliberately calmed herself. She hoped Tim wasn't going to be the nervous sort. He---looked at her too much, with his great, delicately wondering eyes. He seemed to follow every mood she had. Too much---for six years of age. Elizabeth and Mary, apart from being a good bit older, were girls. They could look after themselves. Tim seemed to be wondering what sort of life he was going to have with his little soul. And so was she wondering, too. Perhaps he knew, with his little wondering mind, that everything was in balance at the moment. New decisions were in the air. But what, exactly? She was glad her thoughts weren't aloud, or written down for Ralph to see. He would come in at seven that evening---to be exact, at seven-fourteen, because it took him eight minutes to walk from the station, except Fridays when he was twice as long because he stopped at the newsagent ^{to} and fetch her magazines and pay the week's bill---and by that time she had the children ready for bed. What 'decisions' could there be in that?

The little road outside was neat and deserted. Opposite there were other bungalows---or semi-bungalows like hers, with a bedroom and ^a tiny bathroom cut into the roof upstairs like an attic. They were nicely designed. The lampposts outside were gay. Most of the houses had lawns and a few young saplings. They weren't uniform. The road curved and disappeared into a copse of young trees. Beyond that there was scrappy country-

side, nibbled at every year by a new factory or ~~a~~ broiler-house establishment, but very gradually, as if they were ashamed to rip up the trees in one go and pour cement everywhere.

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That was what kept Janet going on rainy days---its being modern. The place didn't quite belong anywhere. Above all, it didn't belong to Pyfield Green, which was about the most hideous little town God ~~had~~ ever created. She could hardly bear to say the name. She and Ruth set their teeth against shopping there. They took the bus to Chatsdowne, or she drove Ruth there, especially when Jack was away on some economic mission. Economics! She'd always thought it ridiculous for a man like Jack with his thick, black hair and his soft and olivey skin, like a beautiful Italian, to be in economics. Ralph didn't think so. He didn't see why an economist shouldn't be goodlooking. But she did. And Jack sucked at his pipe in such a silly way. He ought to be a captain of some kind---of a ship or aeroplane. But all he did was doodle with figures and look mysterious when the other men talked about exports and taxes and 'getting into Europe' and that sort of thing. They all respected him. An invitation from Jack was a big thing. Ralph got touchy if one didn't come round once a month or so. Jack was the 'firebrand'. He was going to be a big man some day, they said.

And it was a thrill being invited there. She liked the long thin candles in their Swedish-wood holders, and the check tablecloths that were supposed to come from Austria. She liked

the exact way they did everything: Jack gave you just enough gin to get you happy, and dinner was finished off with coffee and the best brandy, though it made her sleepless afterwards (it seemed to boil inside her). Whereas Jim Barnes---ferretty Jim, as she called him, because of the way he looked at her hips, with his dark, narrow, vague eyes---got you laced before the dinner was even cooked and seemed to think you could keep going on his dirty jokes. And then there was usually a petty argument between the men, which made her feel more wasted than ever afterwards, her whole life a desert of irrelevancies.

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What could she have done without Ruth? They had the same hates. That was nice. But not the same wants, perhaps: Ruth gave her a mildly estranged look sometimes. She thought Janet too critical, perhaps---a burden for poor old Ralph. Janet cut across the men's conversation too much; Ruth always said, "They know about their own jobs, at least!" ^{Janet} ~~She~~ had a way of offending them. She leaned across the table with her chin pushed forward and Ralph would say with a smile, "Watch out, boys, here she comes..."

Ruth was contented---that was the difference between them. She was really happy to stay in her modern little sitting room all day, where there was so much light and space; she was really disappointed when her girls, Sonya and Catherine, started going to school and learning neat habits (Montesori method), and reduced her housework by half. She was the ruminating kind: her cheeks were hard and ruddy, flushed with health, her bosom cried out for more children---and wouldn't you just imagine, Janet thought, that she'd cook the most delicious meals with apparently no effort at all, sitting six or eight at her table and looking as fresh as farm hay all the time? Ruth wasn't critical. She simply had the life she wanted. She didn't stand and think all the time. She changed things, subtly and quietly. She'd changed Jack. Of course, Jack had been to high school and Ralph hadn't. But that wasn't the reason. Ruth made her own home. 'And I', Janet thought, 'talk and make a lot of fuss round myself, and do nothing.'

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the stores had ^{thrown it on his back} ~~buttoned it round him~~ five years ago, and as for his shoes she knew a minute ahead of time that he was coming home by the creak. Then he went in for what he called his sports-jacket, on the week-ends. It sat on his shoulders like a ~~sort of~~ sickly green skin that he felt he couldn't peel off. It also stank of his horrible cigarettes, with that nasty sulphurous smell that permeated his skin and sweat and breath. At Ruth's the bathroom always smelled of a nice eau de cologne which she took to be Jack's. Or perhaps it was after-shave. Jack sucked a pipe, yes, but it didn't permeate him. And Jack seemed proud of his body. Not proud exactly in a swanking way, but he fitted into it. He didn't sit all crumpled up and screw his legs round each other and duck his head when he walked along as if he was expecting to get it chopped off. But that was her husband---who should be the steadiness of her life! He shuffled, almost fell, along the street. He blinked his eyes in confusion. Yet he was good-looking basdially. He had strong shoulders and a lined, firm face, and thick hair. He knew how to stir her but it was a bit---sunreptitious. They'd married ten years ago almost exactly. He'd been so open then. A boy, really. Or had he? Was it simply that she had changed in the meantime?

As for the suit he went to work in, she couldn't even bring her mind to think of it. She hated it so virulently that she had to make an effort not to scream sometimes at the breakfast table. A dirty, shapeless 'pinstripe' as he called it, and how the word made her writhe: a drab sack with his shoulders ^{stick-} ~~xxxx~~ ing out of it miserably, to rob his figure of whatever it had in its natural state, and the trousers billowing out like a pair of sailor's bell bottoms. And the waist cut in tight like a little boy's first suit, and too short, but not too short like

some of the fashionable cuts, so that you could see a bit of tight behind, oh no, just short enough to give you a view of the big flapping sail! She wanted to laugh. Then she wanted to cry. Why did she let it burden her like this? Why didn't she tear the horrible thing off his shoulders and bury it? But all she did was not sit down at breakfast with him any more. She got him his eggs and bacon and toast standing up, pretending to get things ready for the children. And then she breakfasted alone, after she'd driven the children to school. Weren't decisions needed? Could you go on like that for ever? She was horrified to think that perhaps one quite easily could... It was like a shudder of cold air passing over her.

She involuntarily put the duster up to her eyes, thinking it was a handkerchief, and nearly put her nose into it. Tim had caught her crying once. And looked up at her with his great quiet eyes. She would not have him wearing those gawky suits when he grew up---and behaving as if he owned nothing, even his own body, even his sex!

The vegetables were ready in pots---brussels sprouts in one, sitting in water, which Ruth said was the worst way you could cook them, and peeled potatoes, which Ruth said was the way to get no value out of them at all. Just before she left the house with the car-keys in her hand, which made the same tinkling noise every morning, she would light the gas and set the flames at a simmer. And when she returned with the children there would be the smell of cooking. She knew every sensation by now. Even the smells were fixed, and the way the steam drifted round the corner of the kitchen door so that you saw it as you came into the hall, and the thumpigg of the children's feet as they dashed upstairs to the bathroom. She could predict

every instant, so that there wasn't a chink of the unexpected in the day for her. Or could she predict it? Wasn't that a way of accepting it? Look how quietly Ruth went about things, never thinking about the future.

X She threw the duster in the broom cupboard and pulled a scarf over her head. On with the gas. Then to simmer. She noticed the sunlight outside with sudden pleasure. It drenched the little lawn, poured through the trees they'd planted only four years ago. Ralph had wanted a clean, open lawn and a fence all round, but she'd insisted on hiding the fence with bushes of honeysuckle and evergreen and some rambler roses, and with young trees. And now everything was leafy enough to make the garden look enclosed. It was funny with Ralph. A garden like that was exactly to his taste.

X But he didn't seem to follow his ^{own} tastes. Partly he didn't know what they were. He followed what was usually done, or what other people expected, or what he was persuaded was the economical way.

X ~~He~~ ^{his real self} ~~himself~~ was hidden under a sort of blanket, and the smokescreen he put up with his cigarettes made it worse.

She slammed the front door and turned abruptly into the tiny garage. Her legs did it all for her expertly. Up with the swivel garage door, in a quick heave. Then you squeezed between the mower and the car itself, lowered yourself in.

Janet backed the car into the sunshine and noticed another mother doing exactly the same thing further up the road. She didn't mind that---the uniformity didn't matter. She wouldn't mind being uniformly gay and happy.

She drove out of the little estate with its clean roofs and unlatticed windows and slabs of asphalt, on to what had once been a quiet country lane but was now an inferno of clattering trucks, going perilously fast. Ted Woods---whom the men always called

Splinter---had told them one evening that the truck-drivers were paid extra for quick deliveries, and their one aim was to get there. The country of law and order! She joined the queue of cars waiting to pass through the town. It was Pyfield Green's 'bottleneck'. The roadway became so narrow under the railway bridge that two trucks could hardly pass by each other and had to inch gingerly through if they met. And the pavement on either side was just wide enough to take a pram but no more. They even seemed proud of their bottleneck: the men had meetings about it at the local hall where freemasons and elks gave banquets, and by the way they talked you would think there was something eternal and even right about it. After all, it had been there for ten years, ~~and so had won itself a kind of authority.~~ And left to them, she thought, it would be there another ten ~~years.~~ They seemed to enjoy umming and ahing about it, and having little theories about it, and puffing cigarettes over it. Even Ralph did. ~~Really they seemed to enjoy the obstruction. But she couldn't think why.~~ They were all so burdened---like men under sacks of coal. Arthur Simmons at the bank, Ted Woods, Jim and Ralph and Dick Bowes---they were all the same. And she was no different. Yet she was trying to be. Which they weren't. She'd see to that bottleneck, given the chance! Or would she? Had she seen to her own home, made it to her taste? But then her taste hadn't formed until the last two years. Before that she hadn't been aware of having one.

A man passing in a car from the other direction gave her an interested look. A sort of half-smiling, blinking look, straight into her eyes. She felt she looked free: in some way capable. But look was all the men did! She'd rather they gave her bosom a quick, hard stare. Yes, that was better! This gentle little

J flicker of the eyes, that knew it would end there, was plain silly because it was useless. It seemed to announce, 'I'm ineffectual---all I can do, ~~as a prisoner~~, as a man with a sack of coals on my back, is make a little flicker.' It annoyed her and she glared in front of her at a broken-down Morris which hadn't been cleaned for months. A bottleneck! They were all in a bottleneck!

JJ She looked at the shops on either side. A ^{store}store with white-coated assistants, and a supermarket that shone like a pintable ^{salon}bar. Women hurrying along---attractive but a bit harassed, like herself. One of them had her shoulders hunched up as if it was cold, but there was premature spring sunshine; her teeth were almost chattering, as if ^{it}this was part of ^{her}a permanent public manner, ^{being}frightened and helpless. She switched the little radio on as they all moved forward but the announcer's hollow genteel voice irritated her and she switched off again. She was so particular, Ralph said. She would suddenly switch the tele off in the middle of a programme because of some little thing like an actor trying to sound like a Yorkshire miner when he clearly hadn't been north of Shepperton. Well, why not? She knew miners, having been brought up among them. And she knew the moors, they were her country. And she couldn't stand for that sort of accent from a jumped-up, faceless little ball of a man who'd just got out of drama school and had probably been born in Brighton. With his 'lassy' and 'tha knoos' and 'tha dursn't'! And Ralph would laugh. "You tickle me with all your ideas," he would say, gazing at her with a proud smile. Yes, Ralph was wonderful. He would sit there in the silence afterwards and say he preferred a wife with a mind of her own to any television programme.

A youth passed on the other pavement with, as Ralph would say, 'hair all down his back!'. He had black curls, his white collar high as if to throttle him, his jacket so long that it was nearly an overcoat, with one cut in the back, and his trousers so narrow that they wrinkled round his knees like a cowboy's, with winkle-picker shoes to finish it all off. They used to call him a spiv after the war, now he was a 'beatnik'. But he was the same person each time: he carried his head high, he had a lovely profile, his hands were in his pockets casually, jammed against his hips because the trousers were so tight. She moved slowly on, when had to stop again. She liked him. They were the best-dressed people in the land. He had so much hair it made his face look tender and pouting---it brought out all his character, wayward, confused, obstinate. The men would hate him---or smile. ~~and~~ Perhaps not hate him: just shrug their shoulders indulgently. And they themselves hurried to the hairdresser every fortnight for a squalid little trim, as they called it: that was another word---'trim'---that sat on their lives like a black hood they could do nothing about. When you went to the barber's you were clipped clean round the back and sides so that your raw, pale skin showed like the plucked breast of a chicken, and you were left with a formless mop on top that kept getting into your eyes when there was a wind. No wonder Ralph hated winds. It was like their bottleneck. Whereas the teds and beatniks got beautiful cuts: they seemed to have a special understanding with the barbers. Why shouldn't Ralph's face look tender? What were the rules against it? But oh, no, not him, he might get the sack for it. He had to have it all clipped away---together with his character. He had to be so colourless that you wouldn't look at him crossing the street. Being colourless was being

nice. It meant you didn't think yourself better than anybody else. Whereas Janet Maynard thought herself better than quite a lot of people, and would continue to do so! People did look at her. Men did, anyway. Perhaps that was why!

At last the bottleneck was solved, temporarily: its root this time was a policeman 'directing' traffic. He did it like a machine---a porky man with a sallow, moist face, blinking against the sunlight as if it was illegal. 'Come on!' she felt like shouting at him. But no, he was being fair. Two minutes this way and two minutes that. Though there was hardly anything coming from the other roads. Perhaps this was what made him look so moral. Sulkily moral, even. As if to say, 'I'm being criticised, am I? Well, let me tell you that this is what the rules lay down!' Their rules, their precious rules, like stones round their necks!

Tim was already waiting in the school-yard for her, his wide eyes fixed on the cars that were drawing up outside. Mothers her own age walked towards the gates, dressed as carelessly as she was, fresh from cooking or bed-making---or from musing with dusters in their hands, and nearly using them to wipe their tears. Scarves thrown over their heads, overcoats half hanging off their shoulders---women were a slovenly lot when you came to think of it. 'And thank God they are!' she thought. At least they weren't thinking about rules all day long. She nodded hullo to a slim woman with dry, chapped skin who had a boy in Tim's class; she overpowdered her face, that was why it got so dry, obviously. Fear again, no doubt. Whereas Janet creamed her face night and morning, or rather she used almond oil, which was cheaper and better than the so-called cleansing creams.

The children came bounding out. There was a deafening

babble of talk. Tim saw her and shouted shrilly, above everyone else. He had slipped again and there was a muddy graze on his right knee. The tears had made a dirty line down his cheek. Didn't the teacher notice? But teacher looked so sad and harassed that Janet never liked to say anything. She needed what no woman could give her. Janet called out, "Hullo, darling!" and lifted him up to kiss him. "You've fallen again! I don't know!" but his one idea^{was}/to get to the car. He tugged her along, and in a moment they were on their way to Elizabeth and Mary.

She regretted having given them such usual names now. On the other hand she didn't, because she couldn't stand these fancy names either. They were two good, healthy girls, without any fuss or side about them, and that was what she wanted, after all. If they had anything unusual about them, let them show it in their lives. Names wouldn't alter it. Arthur and Pat Simmons had spent weeks thinking up names, so Pat had told her, and the result was that the boy's name, Godwin, sat on the poor little chap like a barrister's wig.

Tim was jumping up and down in the seat, talking so fast that he could hardly get his breath and had to suck air in rapidly, with a sound like hiccups.

"Slower, slower!" she said with a laugh, ducking her head like a girl.

Tim's problem was this: the girl sitting next to him in class had giggled and nudged him and said, "I can see your shirt." He wanted to know what was wrong with that.

"Nothing," Janet said. "Why shouldn't she see your shirt?"

But the girl had giggled and also told the girl in front, who had giggled too. "I can see your shirt!" she had said, and had exploded---"Your jacket's open!" She had giggled and

looked at him in such a funny way; he imitated her arch look, and Janet laughed again. Tim said he thought she was a silly girl, but she had a nice face. But he wasn't in love with her. He was in love with a girl in another class who had her hair over one eye and was called Jean and was much older. She always went home with a boy. When he grew up he might speak to her. He'd be afraid to now.

Then he noticed a toy crane in a passing shop window and forgot all about ^{Jean} ~~her~~.

She was quietly proud that he told her this. She would never have told her own mum and dad that kind of thing. Even at six. She had always nursed her loves silently. Was this better? Not necessarily, perhaps. She had thought of mum and dad as gods--- still did, really. One needed gods in one's life. She felt confused for a moment.

Betsy and Mary were playing ball and didn't even turn round when Tim cried out shrilly from the car. They were kicking a football against the school-wall like a couple of boys, jumping in the air to kick it. Girls always overshadowed boys. She was troubled by the possible effect on Tim, later. It was the one argument against co-ed schools, Jack had said gravely once with his pipe stuck in his face.

She was so late today that nearly all the other parents had left. The teachers had been enterprising enough to make a pleasant grass verge with border-flowers all round the quadrangle. Crocuses and snowdrops were making a first premature appearance. She called out, "Betsy! Come on!" She was damned if she was going to walk right across the playground to get them. But they were too busy to hear her. Boys with skirts on! Bang went the ball against the wall. She wondered that no teachers came running out.

"Betsy!" She didn't like the abbreviation but Elizabeth was too long and Liz was awful. Anyway, Mary had arrived at the new name, and it had stuck. At last Betsy turned round.

"Ma!"

The ball was forgotten, there was a great dash towards her with long blonde hair flying about and skirts whirling, and great grins. Their legs were as muscular as athletes'.

Mary looked just a smaller edition of Betsy, almost a twin. Tim's face changed at once: he was so delighted that he actually quivered as they came dashing towards him. "Ma, you're so late!"---spoken through gusts of breath: she wasn't sure if Betsy or Mary had said it.

"Well, come on, let's get in." They all followed her, Tim clinging to Mary. He seemed too awed by Betsy to touch her. Betsy hung on to her mother.

"You're both a mess," Janet said, glancing round at Mary's skirt.

"It wasn't really our fault," Betsy said. "We had a scratch game of basketball in break and Mary fell over."

"I thought you had smocks for games?"

"It was in the break, darling," Betsy explained patiently. Then she turned round to her sister, "She just won't understand today!" And the two of them did a mock-smirk that made her feel like a little girl. The minxes!

Tim launched into an incoherent speech about the crane he'd seen, and they drove off. She busily said yes to every sentence, because neither of the girls ^{was} ~~were~~ listening. Then, through sheer lack of breath, Tim stopped abruptly and there was silence as the car hummed slowly along. She liked to go slowly sometimes, with a sort of swaying motion---it felt luxurious, like being

in a Rolls Royce.

"Your hair looks as if it's never had a comb through it," she said to Betsy, turning to glance at her.

"But, ma---"

"And for Lord's sake don't call me ma all the time."

Betsy made another face at Mary: they 'exchanged glances' in their clowning way. "I can see Ralph's going to have a hard evening!" Betsy said.

"It's Friday, that's why," Mary told her, looking over Tim's head at her. "It's because you get excited, isn't it, darling--- before the week-end?"

"Now, look, you two---"

But she couldn't hold her laugh. She burst out with immense joy. Everything seemed wonderful---the horrible deserted main street of Pyfield Green drenched in sunlight, the shops shuttered up for the lunch hour as if it was a funeral and the famous bottleneck that had gone off duty until three o'clock precisely, Sundays and Bank Holidays excluded.

Betsy kissed her from behind, sending a smell of childish unwashed hair under her nostrils.

"Not when I'm driving! How many times have I got to tell you that?"

She shook herself free and was amazed as always that Betsy wasn't hurt. Instead, she'd turned to Mary again and they were already going it thirteen to the dozen about the gymkhana that was being held at Whitsun in the fields behind the presbyterian church. The two of them were already bitten with the horse craze. It seemed that every shopkeeper in Pyfield Green kept a stud of ponies for his children and their friends. Jim Barnes, who worked in the precision-tools factory on the road to Chats-

downe, was paying out seven-and-six an hour for lessons for Ronnie and David. She would have been happy enough with a bicycle at that age! It thrilled her--this change: the sons and daughters of ordinary people riding in jodhpurs and those cute little bowler hats. She wished she could ride: to be able to teach them. She enjoyed a little image for a moment of herself riding on a kind of charger with Betsy on one side and Mary on the other, mounted on ponies, with Ralph cantering ahead, his breeches and leather boots gripped round the horse's middle, his back straight and his head bare, dressed in a white shirt perhaps, very dazzling and bleached, with an ascot, but he mustn't look too raffish.

The result of this image was that she didn't hear Betsy telling her all about how the school was going to organise riding lessons, if they could get enough support from the parents.

"Darling," Betsy cried when she realised she hadn't taken in a thing, "aren't you interested in your daughter's riding?"

"Of course ^I I am. Only Ralph doesn't earn all that much money."

"Why can't he get another job, then?"

Yes, why didn't he? She felt exactly the impatience that Betsy expressed in her voice.

"Ronnie's father gets a lot," Betsy went on. "Ronnie says ^{his dad} ~~he~~ has to say the words over to himself when he's reading, otherwise he can't understand."

"What's that got to do with it?" Janet asked, giving her a puzzled look.

"What I mean is they aren't very clever people."

"Oh."

Jim Barnes was always coming up in conversation lately as the model father. Well, he was a model father. Why couldn't Ralph work in a precision-tools factory? He could read, spell, do figures, but apparently the three Rs didn't bring in as much money as they used to. Did they bring in even prestige? So why didn't he change? But no, he'd go on working at Sims and Take's until the company was bankrupt, which it would be soon if all the stories he brought home about old Sims were true. How he threw away clients with his hard-to-get manner! But Ralph couldn't believe that the firm wouldn't always be there. It always had been. Like trims and bottlenecks. It had an authority all its own, and he couldn't change anything, oh, no! Who was he to throw his weight about? The number of times she'd heard that!

"It's what I've asked him time and again," she told Betsy, swerving into their little estate which had so much quiet, so much more order and---strangely---pain.

"Well, ask him again," Betsy said in a flat way.

"You ask him."

"What shall I say?"

"Say why can't we have riding lessons like Mr Barnes's children?"

"Isn't that interfering?" Betsy asked with an arch look and a wink at Mary.

She jumped out firmly. "Come on, children! Upstairs and wash!"

There was a great slamming of car doors. She gave Betsy the door-key while she pulled Tim's door closed---he only had the strength to click it to. He stayed with her while she did this, and the girls wrestled over the key.

"Why don't you just put it in the lock and turn?" she called out.

"Because it won't go. It doesn't fit."

"It fits all right."

She took it from Betsy and turned it quickly, and pushed the door open. The steamy smell of vegetables; the faint smell, behind it, of the floor-polish she'd used that morning---the job for Friday mornings. And the stillness. That was the worst thing. As if it floated outside the real world.

The children rushed forward, Tim half tripping on the mat, and in a few seconds they were upstairs. They were mad to get to Tim's floating ducks and tiny plastic ships---this was the craze for the week. Betsy and Mary would lean over the bath as if they'd never seen water before, and Tim would be behind them watching in amazement, flattered that something of his should be taken seriously. There was a patch on the kitchen ceiling where water had come through, and now she called out, "Betsy, see that Mary doesn't splash water this time!" They couldn't hear---both the taps were on and they were singing something they'd learned at school about 'In Scarlet town where I was born', but ^{all} that was/they knew; the rest was la-la-la-di-da and giggles and muffled blows, then the crash of an elbow on the wall. She walked out into the corridor and called up, "Betsy! Betsy!"

And after a few seconds the song stopped and Mary walked quietly out on to the landing. "Yes, darling?" She looked down the staircase, her tiny face so beautiful for a moment that Janet gasped, and couldn't believe it was her own child. And so like Ralph: a certain moment when his face was wondering, and he did nothing to tighten or protect it.

"Yes?" Mary asked her again.

"Don't splash the water this time."

"We weren't going to."

"Yes, well don't." She walked back into the kitchen.

"And while you're using all that water you could wash as well, you know!"

"We'll think about it!" Mary cried, and dashed back into the bathroom.

2.

Ralph was his usual ten minutes late, it being Friday.

It reminded her of the thrill of Friday evenings in York, when

her father came in with the pay packet and there was the usual

joke about ^{how} he wasn't going to give her mother any this week:

he would sit down at the parlour table and take his two ounces of

dark shag out of its newspaper wrapping and begin making cig-

arettes, licking them carefully along the edges and curling ^{them} round

with his coal-hardened fingers. And her mother would sit at the

other end of the table by the fire reading the paper he'd brought

in. "Come on," she'd say quietly, "part up"---part oop. And

dad would say, "Not likely, mate. Not this week. There isn't

enough brass!"---not enoof brass! And her mother would say,

"You'll get no straw in your manger tonight, then." And go on

reading the paper.

Then the time to go down to the glowing, noisy, bustling

shops would draw near. Three great shopping bags would have

to be filled, and the children would drag it along. And all

of a sudden, at a moment that was probably the same every week

by the clock, dad would put his hand in his pocket and draw

out his pay envelope, and give each of the children a shining sixpenny piece.

She'd lit a fire in the sitting room and it was blazing, with cosy little cracks and hisses. Ralph changed at once into his pullover---a bright scarlet thing that clashed with his blue serge trousers, making him look like a little boy on top and a drunken sailor below. She liked these huge roomy pullovers that some men wore, which gave them such nice easy shoulders and defined their hips. But her Ralph always ended up with one of these throttlers. "They haven't got my size!" he would say.

Another thing was his collars. They always seemed to sit on his shoulder-blades instead of round his neck. It made him feel naked, which you could tell by the way he kept bunching up his shoulders. She liked a high collar, almost up to the chin. It made a man look distinguished.

He gave her his usual pleasant resounding kiss and looked into her eyes with a little twinkle as if to say, 'Still thinking?' Then he put his evening paper and her weekly magazines on the kitchen-table where they ate. He would puff and blow a little, call out to the children upstairs, rub his hands together as if they lived at the north pole, then take his drab raincoat off. She always felt like asking what colour that raincoat was supposed to be, because it changed according to the light and the time of day. But he would only give her his amused little twinkle. He hadn't shaved well that morning. There were hard bristles on his chin. She liked a cleanshaven face, and luckily so did he.

After he'd hung his chameleon raincoat in the hall he would walk into the sitting room where he would stretch and

bawl and groan and make wild yawning noises, until the children came down for their goodnight ceremonial, which meant leaping all over him, ruffling his hair and pulling at his tie, undoing his shoe-laces, while he sat there making clown-faces at them and threatening the most awful things. Then they disappeared upstairs, with him in tow, for stories to be read, two of them, one for Tim and one for the girls. And the beds were tucked in.

But sometimes Ralph was too tired even to move from his chair. A queer neutrality would come over him, and she would feel lonely and cold. The children always seemed to sense it beforehand, too, and didn't rag him as usual. She hated reading to them. She felt they oughtn't to get their fairy world from adults. Not through books, anyway. She would rather play with them or just talk. But they insisted. Saturdays was their night for television: they stayed up till eight, and nine if she and Ralph were going to the club. They were just old enough to be left in Betsy's care, and the next-door neighbour kept an eye on them.

When the ceremonial was over and lights were out upstairs she and Ralph sat down to eat. They'd always used to call it tea but now it was dinner, according to the fashion. Actually it was still tea because the tea-pot dominated everything else as before, and she didn't cook vegetables. They had welsh rare-bit or fried plaice or a boiled egg, just as her family had done in York after dad had started earning better money, just before the war, when they'd moved from the mining village.

After the meal they moved to the sitting room. That was a big departure from York habits. She refused to let the front room be a mausoleum for Sunday use only---when it took you four hours to really warm it through. Those drowsy Sunday afternoons

over a white-hot fire... And the desolate look of that room on Monday mornings, with orange peel in the tired, cold ~~garage~~^{grate,} and the thick Sunday newspapers lying crumpled and divided everywhere, and the ashtrays full, and the chairs looking as if they were sighing for a change from a lifetime of overfed, Sunday behinds.

No, she wanted the most comfortable room in the house to live in. Ruth and Jack were the same. They lived most with their fitted carpet and books and television and solitary antique: no children allowed in except Sonya---twenty-four hours of the day.

There was one thing that worried her: her sitting room looked like a Sunday room used on week-days, where^{as} it should look the other way round. But she didn't know how to remedy it, short of imitating Ruth in every respect.

One big excitement was the women's magazines which she flicked through busily, as she used to in York when she came in from the hotel... The hotel was called the Majestic and had huge pillars at the entrance and tall glass doors, and a thick persian carpet stretching all down the foyer until you got to the smoking room where the business men sat talking about brass the whole evening and smoking cigars and cheroots. She'd been cooped up in a tiny annex to the receptionist's office for two years or more---hardly bigger than a box, but she loved it for that reason. It had one swivel-light which she could turn where she wanted, and outside its circular ray everything was darkness. She could see into the foyer without being seen. She watched the men come in for the Saturday night shuffle with their starched white collars and silver scarfs, and their wives laughing together so that they were red in the face.

That had all stopped now, most likely. At least, there might be the shuffles but she swore the people didn't dress as nice. She remembered peeping out of her little hole and then withdrawing her eyes shyly, a gawky, rather stooped girl with wispy hair. How Ralph had ever found her attractive she didn't know. She could understand better now, having filled out in the right places.

Ralph said that Sims had been snapping everybody's head off. It had been a rotten day. He was leaning on the kitchen table, his mouth half full and his eyes on the evening paper.

"Everybody in that blasted ^{office} seems to have a cold---always," he said.

"I hope you don't get another one. The children have only just got over the last."

"If I get one I shan't have asked for it."

They went on reading, after he'd given her a slightly irritated glance. She thought of the road outside, the crisp air, the lamplights like stars, the sound of people walking home in York. She wished it would snow. They'd had none this year and it sometimes came late February. Then the tiny house felt enclosed and snug, and Ralph made them hot whisky and water with a lump of sugar in it, before they went to bed. Why they couldn't have hot whistky when it wasn't snowing she didn't know but that was one of the unwritten little rules. ~~But~~ ^{Yes} she loved habits, if the truth were told. She loved Friday evenings coming round so regularly and faithfully with their promise of week-end excitements. And Ralph lived for the week-ends. You could feel the excitement dimly stirring in him, though it never changed his face. She gazed across at him with pity--- she was so hard on him. He had such a mild, even helpless

face. If she touched his chin now she knew exactly what it would feel^{like}, she could almost feel it in her fingers, and it would make a slight hissing noise.

"Why don't you get another job?" She listened to herself saying this with some astonishment.

He looked across at her in silence, levelly, looking up from his paper, then his face spread into the most delightful grin. She remembered this grin from the first days in York, when he'd been a raw traveller for a London firm. And there was the boyish rippling laugh that made you feel so safe: all his character was surveyed in it, his decency and tolerance. He hadn't done very well as a traveller. He couldn't blow his own trumpet enough, he always said.

"You been plucking up the courage all day?" he asked. "Well, congrats---you got it out!"

She smiled too and didn't reply.

"You find me another job, duck," he said, "and I'll take it right enough."

"You could do hundreds of things."

"Such as what?"

"Well, what about Jim Barnes?" She felt silly.

He grinned again. "What about Jim Barnes?"

"Oh, I don't know---". She looked away impatiently. "He seems to be able to afford things, anyway! And the children say he has to say all the words to himself before he can read them!"

This got a roar of laughter. "What's that? He has to what?"

"He can hardly read or write!"

"Well, you don't work micrometres and gauges with the ABC,

"you know. He's been brought up to it. He started as a mechanic when he was fifteen."

"Yes, but why should he be getting better money than you?"

"Who told ^{you} he is? He's giving his kids riding lessons but that's because he's always been a bloody fool with his money."

"Well, they've got a car and their own television and they pay a bigger rent than we do!" she said.

"They've mortgaged their lives, Jan. They're in perpetual debt."

"Well, let us be in perpetual debt!" She flushed.

"We are, already. But not so much as the Barneses, that's all."

"I don't believe it. I believe he gets more money!"

n.p.
"Well, you find out." (He was a bit nettled now. The poor darling worked at that firm all day where the secretaries were ~~all~~ old maids and went round with handkerchiefs up to their noses and boils on their necks, and all she did when he came home was compare him unfavourably with a shrivelled-up little chap like Jim Barnes, who'd give half his wages for another dirty joke.

"It seems to me you didn't make a right choice," Ralph went on. "You're a damned sight better off than you ever were before, and so am I. But you're always grumbling. I reckon you want jam on both sides."

"Well, why not?"

"Because it's a bloody mess, and you can't bring up children that way!"

"What?" Her eyes were fierce at once, her chin pushed forward.

"I said you can't bring up children giving 'em jam on

both sides. They get delinquent. Never heard of that?"

"Mine won't get delinquent." There was a dangerous pause and she could hear---through her anger---the cosy crackle of the fire next door. "Are you telling me how to bring ^{up} children?"

He already seemed to falter. Perhaps her white-hot determination frightened ^{him} a little---when it showed so in her face.

He got up. "Oh, come off it," he murmured as he walked through into the sitting room, where his favourite programme was coming up in about fifty seconds.

She followed him through, angry at herself that her persistence might make them miss it---it was her favourite, too. "What did you mean by that?"

"I didn't mean anything," he said with a slightly raised voice.

"There's nothing degenerate about my ^{children}."

"Who said there was?"

"And they won't be delinquents!"

"All right, they won't." He threw himself into his television-armchair, having switched the set on.

She stood at the door. "Having a decent home doesn't mean being delinquent!"

"You've got a decent home!"

"I haven't!" Years flooded her eyes. "Not if you come home late in the evening and you're too tired out to do anything and you sit in that horrible office all day."

"Your father came home late, didn't he?" Ralph shouted, yet in a mild way, seeing her tears. "I don't believe your mother complained!"

"He wasn't sitting in a train for an hour with a lot of snotty-nosed off ice people round him. He had man's work."

"I'll say he did! He worked a hundred feet under the ground breathing in coal dust and wondering when the next explosion was ~~going to come~~^{kg} round!"

"Mum was happy. She would never have said so. But there was some life in the family."

"And there's some life in ours!" And he added, "What more do you want?"

"I don't know!" She pulled out a handkerchief and cried into it.

He sat there miserably, letting her go on for a time. Then he said quietly, "Would you rather I worked down a mine?"

"No." She shook her head like a child.

"I reckon if I did it wouldn't be classy enough for you!" That made her flare up again. "I'm not interested in class either!"

"What do you want?"

"The best we can get."

"But you can't always get the best in life, Jan," he told her.

"I said the best we can get, and we haven't got it yet."

"Listen." He faced her in a crisp sort of way, his lips pursed---she didn't like it when he was like this, it made him look common. "I've got a job and I'm lucky to have it. Secondly---"

"You shouldn't feel lucky to have it. Everybody's got a job!"

X "There's still unemployment---you'll see that if you read the papers."

"Not much there isn't. There are plenty of jobs you could have, but you just won't look!"

"Why should I? I don't mind a train-ride twice a day---"

"Well, I think it's horrible sitting in that office with those unhealthy secretaries coming in and out all the time!"

He stared at her---and slowly his grin came back again, and he burst out laughing. This time he couldn't stop. He lay back in his armchair with his head up and made a kind of ecstatic yodel, as he did when Splinter told him one of his quiet anecdotal stories. Oh, why did she always have to say something silly that ended the discussion?

"What are you talking about?" he asked quietly. "Unhealthy secretaries, you said---?"

She couldn't restrain a slight, reproachful smile. "Well, I just think it's an awful office... Oh---!" she said impatiently. "I can't remember what I meant!"

"Just because Mabel had a boil three years ago!" he said.

"Oh, shut up," she said mildly, and she leaned forward and gave him a light clip round the back of his head just as he was twiddling the knobs to get his blasted definition.

"Oh, well," he said with a chuckle, "never mind! Back to work---we'll be missing your favourite if we don't watch out!"

She flung herself into the other armchair. "'Living Past'," she said---this was the name of the programme---"I'd like a living present."

This seemed to nettle him again but he said nothing. There was a woman announcer looking daffy in the screen, defining herself slowly as ^{Ralph} ~~he~~ went from one knob to the other.

"The fire's going down," she said with a pout. "You can look after it yourself this evening."

"Thanks."

Someone came on with a map and talked about the weather; what on earth he had to have a smile on his face for she didn't know because he was predicting drizzle everywhere. The programme was late, or probably their clocks were fast. Ralph went and put coal on the fire. There was a bit of news---she became lost in the little square flickering world: a report from Brazil, there was a revolution of some kind, a few shots of policemen among palm trees, the blinding sunlight, skyscrapers seen from an aeroplane, shining and shimmering. Then to her astonishment a cool glass touched her right hand.

"Ralph!"

It was a glass of whisky, with ice and soda, as he knew she liked it. He'd made one for himself as well. She hadn't been aware of him leaving the room and getting the ice. She loved the way it chinked against the side of the glass when she^e drank--- a ^{cool} ~~rise~~ luxurious sound.

"Chin chin," she said, raising her glass, "I could just do with this. How did you guess?"

But he only nodded absently, already lost in the programme. This week it was about how people had enjoyed themselves before the ~~last~~ war. There were shots of Wimbledon lawn tennis, George V's Jubilee^e drive through the side^estreets of Battersea, opening nights in Shaftesbury Avenue, crowds visiting the Crystal Palace before it was burned down, London parks and summer outings and Punch and Judy shows and peas-puddin'-and-faggots shops and crowds rolling out of a pub at closing time. She gazed with fascination at some of the faces she'd seen in the papers as a tiny child---Baldwin, Amy Johnson the flying ace, Gracie Fields, Haile Selassie standing outside the Ritz looking as if he'd like to throttle everybody, Cicely Court^enidge and Ralph

Lynn and Mrs Simpson. People were seen hurrying through the streets in the rain, hailing taxis that looked so square and quaint now, waiting for a procession to pass, surging through police ranks in a massive demonstration with posters saying ARMS FOR SPAIN and CHAMBERLAIN MUST GO.

And one thing she noticed was that the men were much the same style of clothes then as they did now: the ordinary men, that is. The same flapping trousers and tight jackets. It was just as if the ^{next} suits had been passed on from one generation to the ~~other~~, and Ralph and Splinter and Dick Bowes were wearing them now, faded and dusty and drab(!)

She couldn't keep it to herself. "Look," she cried, "they're wearing the same clothes!"

But he was too deep in the programme.

As if nothing had happened for twenty, thirty years! And why keep the wretched styles and bypass the nice ones? If they were going to be old-fashioned why didn't they go in for the Edwardian styles?

But even so the people before the war looked better. Somehow the trousers flapped better on them.

"Ralph!" she said.

He didn't take his eyes off the screen. He looked like a man driving through the fog.

"Ralph!"

She pinched him quickly in the arm.

^{ceps} "Ow!" he flinched away, frowning, but his eyes didn't leave the picture.

"Ralph, don't you remember before the war---it's just occurred to me---everybody had more style then?"

"What do you mean?" He kept his arm close to his side,

in an involuntary gesture of self-protection, though his gaze still remained on the screen.

"Don't you remember seeing men in white trousers and tennis shirts going down the road to the hard courts in the park and that sort of thing?"

A terrific crash came from the background-music, and the picture changed to the Southend lights. He turned and gaped at her.

"What are you talking about?" he said.

"Oh!"

"White trousers...?" He screwed up his face.

"I meant the young men you used to see on summer evenings in flannel bags and ascot scarfs and that sort of thing, with their rackets in wooden grips. Well, I mean, you don't see that now among the ordinary people. They used to wear much more flashy ^{or} clothes---the common people. Don't you remember?"

"What?" He only screwed up his face to make a show of interest this time---his heart and soul were on Southend pier.

"Your suit!" she said rudely.

"What about my suit?"

"Get a new one!"---and she turned impatiently back to the screen.

"Shut up!" This was because Edward VIII was now talking at some big dinner and you had to strain to listen to the quiet, hesitant voice. There were sparkling chandeliers, liveried servants standing quite still along the walls, the guests in their stiff shirts turning their heads coolly this way and that, nodding gravely now and then with "Hear, hear!"---it sounded like hah, hah. And then the ripple of polite laughter. The

white-haired, robust-looking man at his side, who the announcer said was Field Marshal Milne, put his head right back when he laughed, gazing at the ceiling. The tablecloth shone white, dishes and platters crowded the table, there were mountains of flowers, the wineglasses sparkled. Life had been real, then. Yes! She remembered it in the streets, in York, the way the air was crisp in the winter, the way the lights glowed from behind drawn curtains and firm-looking men walked into the Majestic. And sometimes, she remembered, her mother had sat down and cried. Well, Janet sat down and cried too. But her mother cried about real things, about the dole which was hardly enough to pay the rent, let alone feed a family of seven. And Janet cried about things you couldn't put your finger on... Who was happier of the two? She believed, sincerely, her mother was. Because her life was real. But for Janet everything turned to a--- ghost.

They went to bed early. They thought of going down to the pub for a drink with Splinter but the whisky ~~had~~ made them feel tired. Ralph mixed them another one---"just to put your mind^d asleep," he said---and after washing up they flopped on to the bed. The bedroom was next to the sitting room, with the kitchen immediately next door. An odd arrangement, but there was only one room upstairs apart from the bathroom and she liked that for the children.

In bed, as always, she felt as if she'd been toiling up mountains all day. Her fists were clenched, she noticed. Only when they went to see a film or to Ruth's for dinner or to the club did she feel really rested afterwards. Then she might lie awake until two or three in the morning, but there

were dreams to fill her head. Ralph slept badly now and then, tossing and turning, which she put down to his endless smoking. She said it over-excited him. And he said this was nonsense.

3.

She felt she needed a lay-in badly the next morning but Tim suddenly set up a yell and dashed downstairs. It could only have been ~~about~~ ^{about} six ^{o'clock}. A bad dream. Ralph hardly woke up, though Tim wrneched the door open with astonishing strength and threw himself into his mother's arms, the tears pouring down his face, making his whole body quiver. And with coughs and starts he told ^{her} about it, how a girl with big skirts had come running towards him and all of a sudden turned into a ball---which then hit ^{him} in the face. He gasped and choked over his words, while she sleepily hugged him towards her, kissing his hair and saying, "Don't cry, darling. Don't cry." When he paused, almost slept, in his story, she heard the clock ^{on} the mantelpiece making its desolate tick. She thought she could see a clear dawn-sky beyond the curtains, but it might be the lights from the ^{high}way. Ralph groaned slightly and turned on his stomach. Tim tried to go on with his story but slept. She felt heavy and in a strange way remorseful, though she couldn't ^{say} what she'd done wrong. As if her life---just the passing of day to day---had wrong in it. Tim cried again, kissed her, fell asleep again. She ^e draw him into bed properly and he ^{became} ~~became~~ a deadweight in her arms as if he'd never wake again. She would go to Ruth's that morning. The thought excited her, like a childhood promise. Jack was abroad, or on his way back. Ruth would look at her with calm eyes, her arms full of Sonya. 'I'd never ^{let} my children

eat me up like that,' she thought.

Sleep was finished for her. Yet she didn't want to get up either. She waited, sitting back against the pillows, with Tim wrapped in her arms. Gradually dawn came through, making the previous pale light from the highway look counterfeit, until it was extinguished altogether. That evening they were going to the club. She'd forgotten all about it---she nearly let out a cry of pleasure! Ruth might come too, but she rarely did when Jack wasn't there. Janet didn't like that side of her---as if there was something moral about having a husband. And as if Jack was a little policeman, and his silly pipe a sort of truncheon. And she made having children moral, too: like eating whole rye bread. Well, she agreed with Ruth that it was probably healthier and tasted more substantial but she didn't have to be pious about it. They did look healthier, all that family: put Ralph next to Jack and he looked like a heap of grey parchment tipped into a strait-jacket, with a clipped wig on top. Well---not quite! She almost put her hand up to her mouth and laughed, half turning towards Ralph with a solicitous movement. If he knew what thoughts she had!

Splinter would be there with Polly. She liked Polly. She had a dry skin like that woman she'd seen in the high street ^{the} ~~that~~ morning ^{before}---pale and stretched tight. A real cockney like Ralph: perhaps they all ran to parchment! And Polly's eyes had a grey film over them---from smoking, perhaps. At least, all the heavy smokers seemed to have it. Ralph had. Polly and Ralph got on like houses on fire. He said she reminded him of his aunt Kate, who'd been the angel of his childhood. Splinter was his best crony. They seemed to bring out---well, a shifty element in each other. Not exactly that, but some-

thing cringing. For instance, they always put themselves in a remote corner of the pub when they went there together, as if they were afraid of being seen. Polly had all the sauce and side that Splinter lacked. She had everybody in splits. She could sing like Marie Lloyd, her voice rich and thick as you don't hear them any more: all the old songs---Has Anybody Here Seen Kelly?, My Old Man's a Dustman, Where did You Get That Hat?, and Daisy, Daisy! Ah, those old songs were lovely. Janet remembered the last of the real working men's clubs in York, with their music-hall turns every Saturday night on a platform at the end of a long room with a carved plaster ceiling and big fireplace. Her mother's voice had a faint tremolo and seemed to come from another world, and Janet could remember standing on her lap as a tiny child and looking into her face inquisitively as she sang, to see how she did it. And her father would be sitting with a rapt, beaming, rather wooden look on his face.

Would her voice be like that for Betsy and Mary and Tim? She hardly ever sang. Sometimes they all danced at a party and shouted Ease Up, Mother Brown! But usually the children weren't there. Or was she just an older sister for them? She gazed into the growing light of the room with a frown. All of a sudden she felt restless and confused, and wanted to get up.

It seemed only a moment later that she felt a nudge in her arm and heard Ralph say, "Here, what's this? You want to make him a mummy's boy?"

She blinked. It was broad daylight. The curtains were drawn and he was sitting on the bed already dressed, smiling at her. She must have slept. And Tim was ⁱⁿ exactly the same

position as before, fast asleep.

"He had a bad dream," she said through dry lips.

"The girls are up."

She could hear Betsy in the kitchen: Betsy had a characteristic way of moving, or rather flinging, dishes.

This would be a leg-pull for the whole week-end: mummy oversleeping! Family tradition had her as the sleepless, energetic one.

Betsy called out, "Mary!"

A firm "What?" sounded from the bathroom upstairs.

"Would you bring my hair-clips down?" It was a question but in the tone of an order. An answer was unnecessary.

Mary suddenly came downstairs like a ton of coals being tipped out.

"Oh, Mary!" Janet shouted. "Your feet!"

Another "What?"

Betsy answered for her: "Mother spoke."

"Where is she?"

"In bed."

"What?" Mary dashed to the door of the bedroom in astonishment and stood there gazing down at her. "Darling," she said quietly, "~~Aren't~~ you ashamed of yourself?"

"Here," Janet said to Ralph, holding out Tim, "take him. And you," she added to Mary, "take your long face away."

Mary came and kissed her. Tim woke up with some smacking of lips and a last tearful gasp as if his bad dream had been a moment ago.

"What happened?" Mary asked her.

"Nothing happened. And stop leaning over me like an inquisitor! I just fell asleep, that's all."

"Why's Tim here?"

"He had a bad dream."

Betsy called out from the kitchen: "He said a ball hit him."

"What, you woke up? Why didn't you look after him, then?" Janet asked, pulling herself out of bed, dragging her nightdress after her---she much preferred pyjamas but Ralph didn't. She ran her fingers through her hair, yawning, while Mary watched her like a TV film.

"He ran out before I could do anything," Betsy called out in reply. "After scaring me out of my wits!"

"Then you didn't bother?"

"I just fell asleep, I suppose."

"She lost consciousness," Ralph said, shouldering Tim and carrying him out of the room.

"So did somebody else in the house, apparently," Betsy said, the triumph simply oozing out of her voice.

"All right, all right," Ralph told her, "not so much sauce."

Then Janet heard him ask, as he opened the fridge, "Where are the sausages?"

"I got them out, Valentino." Ralph chuckled and she heard him give her a resounding kiss on the cheek. Then he said, "Here, old chap, you sit down there," as he lowered Tim into the basket-chair by the stove. That basket-chair was their only concession to the old parlour-life which she'd known as ~~a child~~ in York.

Then Ralph began his familiar sausage-poking: he pricked at their skins with ^a fork---a quick motion, ^{at} and probably [^]the same speed every week. He pricked them three times on each side, that is, six to a sausage. Once and once only it had

been a different number: he'd got blind-drunk at an office dinner the night before and it sounded as if he wanted the sausages to suffer. He'd been bitterly ashamed about that. All she knew was that he came to bed very late and left his clothes in a heap on the floor, which was just what she would have done with them every day if he'd let her. She didn't mind: she'd never met a man more in need of a good jag now and then. But he didn't do it again. Perhaps her silence made him feel guilty. But what could she say? She wasn't the keeper of his conscience.

Janet She felt irritable and sat at the dressing table to comb her hair. Men ought just to do things and think about it afterwards. That was their nature. Mary's eyes were still on her, wide and curious, reminding her of Tim's for a moment. Janet spoke to her through the mirror.

"What are you gawping at?"

"You."

"Here." Janet held out her comb for the week-end ritual: Mary had to do her hair from the back. Terribly painful, because she tugged so. But a convention, so you had to bow down to it.

Betsy and Tim were suddenly quarrelling.

"Feet!" Betsy cried out. She obviously wanted to throw something in the stove and his feet were in the way.

A raspberry---from Tim.

"Don't you---!" A slight smack---it wasn't much. But intention's the thing and Tim started howling.

"Come on, come on, you two!" Ralph murmured, still pricking away. She worked it out as seventy-two pricks, counting a dozen sausages between them. Quite a number! she thought

with a smile, which made Mary say, "What are you grinning at?"

She disregarded this and called out, "Leave him alone, bother Betsy! His feet are too tiny to ~~bother~~ you!"

"He does it deliberately!"

"Anyway, I'll be there in a second."

Ralph talked to Tim---^{hear} "Here that? Your mum's coming."

Tim snatched something and flung it: probably a cushion.

"Here, you!"

And/ involuntary smack from dad.

Betsy: "You deserved that, you scrap!"

That tore it and the howling seemed irreparable now.

She jumped up, leaving Mary with the comb in her hand. And she strode next door, almost tripping over her nightdress. The frying pan was already beginning to sizzle. She'd told Betsy so many times not to put the tomatoes in before the fat was hot because it made them greasy, but she never listened. She said she liked them greasy, which to tell the truth so did Ralph.

"Here, give him to me." The cushion was still on the floor: Betsy had clearly been the target. Janet picked it up and then drew him into her arms. "There, never mind. They're a silly lot, aren't they? You come next door with mummy and Mary."

The pricking was almost finished. She noticed he was bent over it like a mechanic. Tim was installed on her lap in front of the mirror and the combing went on again. She kissed him and wiped his eyes dry, and Mary cried, "Keep still!", her lips pursed with the effort of combing out hair that had been tangled in disturbed sleep.

Betsy was contented now. One could always hear it, a sort of special silence she had. She'd make a good housewife.

She was neater in the kitchen than Janet. 'That is,' thought Janet, 'she enjoys it more.' She listened to her laying the plates down one by one: no hurry about it. Four places at table; then she heard her pull out Tim's ^{slightly} high ^{er} chair from the corner. It made a characteristic squeak which Tim heard, un- luckily.

"No chair!" he shouted.

"Yes chair!" Betsy shouted back.

"No!"

He was so sensitive this morning and she had to talk to him quietly: "All right, darling, there's no need to get upset, you can sit on mummy's lap at breakfast if you like."

"You spoil him!" Betsy said, pushing the chair back in the corner again. That was Betsy all over---the firm and neat way she did it, though nettled.

"We'll open the chocolates after breakfast," Janet murmured to her son.

"I knew you were going to say that," Mary said.

"Why not? They've been lying there since Christmas." Tim followed the conversation closely, glancing round behind her head at Mary. "I promised him."

"For when he was good."

"I am good!" He shouted this with tremulous fierceness so that her hair was wrenched for a moment in the comb.

"Ow!"

"All right," Mary said ^{to Tim} with the perfect authority ^{which} ~~that~~ another child understands and adults fear to show, "but you can spoil it. They haven't been opened yet, mind."

She suddenly thought of her own duties. "Betsy, is the milk there?"

Ralph's voice came, "I'll get it."

She heard him walk down the hall and pull the morning paper out of the letterbox, and the flap swung to and fro for a moment. Then he opened the front door and picked up the three milk bottles carefully.

"Did he leave the cream?"

"Yes."

Forgetting the cream had been the milkman's speciality for months, and now he'd reformed. She usually had to chase out after him in her bedroom slippers. She even formed the idea that he did it deliberately, to see her in her nightgown.

All this time Tim had been using her lap as a springboard, jumping up and down until her hair was almost coming out by the roots.

"Come on, it's done now, Mary. You should set up as a hairdresser."

The hair was piled up: this was the last stage, making her look like a teenager. Ralph liked it. It left fluff at the back of the neck which was a nuisance; you didn't quite know what to do with it and your fingers kept wandering there.

"Stop fussing your hair," Ralph always said. She noticed a scrap of paper in front of the mirror, lying under the powder pot, and was interested to see her own handwriting. She picked it up. It looked strange. A long, preoccupied scrawl in pencil. She couldn't remember ever having done it, but there it was. It read, "Tea, Tim's cough, Gramophone prices, Betsy's do 5 Saturday." She looked at it puzzled. Then she let out a muffled little yell---"Oh!"

"What?" Mary said, peering round at the note.

"Betsy! Your party!"

"Your mother called," she heard Ralph say. He was busy getting some of the ^{tomatoes} ~~sauces~~ out and some of the sausages in.

"Yes?"

"It's your party tonight, isn't it?"

There was a pause. Then a plate was let down on the table with a smart bang and Betsy came bounding into the bedroom with "Hurrah! I win!" Mary stopped combing all of sudden. Janet watched Betsy through the mirror---her blonde hair was all over the place, her eyes were earnest and piercing.

"There," she said to Mary, "I've won, you see?"

Mary went on combing rather sulkily.

Janet couldn't understand and looked from one to the other uncomfortably. But really she knew. She picked up a powder-puff from the dressing table in an absent way and put it down again. A bet. She knew it. She was the centre of more bets in the family than she liked to think about.

"But she did remember," Mary said.

"No, she didn't. I said she wouldn't remember before Saturday morning and she didn't."

"Here, you two," she said, "this isn't a betting parlour, what do you think you're doing?"

She heard Ralph chuckling next door.

"And I can see the note," Betsy said. "Look." She picked it up as if Janet was a thousand miles away. "Tea... Cough. Look, Betsy's do. You picked it up just now, didn't you, darling?" she asked, looking into Janet's eyes sympathetically.

"I bet Mary hasn't got the two bob," Ralph said from the kitchen. His voice had a final note as if the last sausage had gone in.

Betsy pursed her lips.

"Is that true?" she asked.

"What?" Mary said innocently.

"That you haven't got two bob?"

"I shall have."

"You said you had it when you laid the bet."

"Look!" Janet shouted angrily. "Just you get out! Do you hear me?"

"I'll let you have a bob, Mary," Ralph said. "Perhaps Betsy'll come down in her price."

"You shouldn't encourage them!" Janet shouted at him. Her cheeks were flushed with anger. "They shouldn't be standing here betting like a couple of streetcorner touts!"

The answer to this was a gush of laughter from the three of them.

"If you've got that party, what are we going to do about Tim?" Janet said, forcing a practical note into her voice. "I suppose you haven't thought of that, have you?"

"You mean, you haven't, darling!" Betsy said to her with a smile.

"Good God," Ralph called out from the kitchen, "do you mean to say you've ^u just thought of that?"

"All right, all right!" Janet said, flaring up. "I don't want you all on me!"

"Tim stays with you," Mary says.

"We're going to the club."

"Oh."

"You see," Betsy said to Mary, "that's final proof that she didn't remember."

"Well, I suppose I'll go to the club late," Janet said, getting up. She set Tim down on his feet so quickly that he

looked round him with surprise. "Come on, out of it, you lot! I want to dress."

She ushered them out and Tim caught hold of Betsy. And the argument went on next door while she dressed. It sounded very complicated. Anyway, the tote closed at one shilling and sixpence. Ralph would supply the shilling, and the sixpence would be paid up next Saturday.

She took her things in a pile up to the bathroom without glancing in at the kitchen. The smell from there was getting good. Ralph was just putting the tea on, bless him. Outside the bathroom window there was still the trace of frost on the lawn. And there was clear sunshine. TV had been wrong. She loved the thought of going downstairs in a few minutes and sitting in the kitchen-warmth, in the glow from the ceiling-light, with the tree outside making the window dark.

The bathroom was heated, which was why she liked to dress there. The kitchen stovepipe came up to the roof that way, in the corner. It was a bit primitive but they'd painted the pipe and now you hardly noticed it. The economical way would have been to make it heat the water as well, but they didn't do things the economical way. Habits established themselves and that was that.

There was a rattle from below. The stove being cleared of ash. Ralph did it with a clean, emphatic movement which was unlike himself. There was a debris of plastic boats and ducks in the bath, and Tim had been playing with the toothpaste again. A bright, lovely morning, with the trees quite still. How she needed the summer. She could see the wires along the highway and one tall lamp^Post made of cement that caste a hideous colour in the evening, which made your face look wrinkled

like a mask. They said it was good in a fog. So you had to go round like a death-mask the whole year because of a couple of weeks of fog.

She thought of the other items on the list---tea; she would have to transfer that to her Saturday-afternoon list. Tim's cough---well, it had gone now. Gramophone prices: that was something Ralph could look after while she was at the supermarket. It was Betsy's birthday at the end of May and the world would come to an end if she didn't have her pop-machine, which might have to be ordered, so the man at the shop said. She hadn't any records yet, and that would be another running sore of expense. He'd have to change his job if he didn't watch out.

Just as ^{she} ~~you~~ got downstairs into the vivid, warm glow Ralph upset her by saying, "How the hell can you come late? I suppose I'll have to tell Splinter we can't make it."

She stamped her foot. "You and that Splinter! You'd better be careful your head doesn't turn to wood like his one day!"

The children spluttered with laughter at this and Ralph smiled too, unwillingly at first. She sat down at her place with an irritated movement. Saturday-morning breakfast was her treat and she wasn't ^{going} to let it be spoiled by anybody. She conveyed this to him with a hard glance. And the others all seemed to agree silently that this should be so. Ralph jumped up and poured her tea while Betsy got her plate. She leaned back in her chair, and felt easier.

Betsy talked excitedly about the party while they ate. Mary would go as a guest, that meant on sufferance, because the other girls were Betsy's age. Ralph unfolded his paper

and disappeared from view.

"No music," Betsy said with alarm. "Everything's topsy-turvy this morning." She dashed into the sitting room and put the radio on.

"Not too loud!" Janet called after her.

"Our day will come", a voice sang, making Janet think of Jeff's Jive Rooms in York where she had taught Ralph his first ^{jittering} ~~backward~~ steps. And luckily this made her remember that she'd promised Betsy a twist-lesson before she went to her party. Betsy must know how to twist, otherwise her life wasn't worth living.

4.

After breakfast she went to Ruth's with Tim, leaving the girls to do the washing-up. She wished she could phone Ruth. Everybody else had a phone. And it meant you could get orders delivered on rainy days. Next year perhaps, Ralph had said.

The radio was blaring when she left the house and Ralph was still behind his paper, in the sports news. Ruth's house was at the end of the cul-de-sac, at the edge of a copse of young trees, where the road curved. Tim wanted to be carried but she said no, and she had a good excuse: "A man in long trousers can't be carried." It was only his second time in them. And that was effective. He walked along obediently, his head straight up, with a touch of something about him, she couldn't say what, but it made her glance down at him with a sort of awe: centuries of England seemed to be in his face, in the way he pouted his lips and in the easy, languorous set of his eyes.

The sunlight was sparkling and gay. But it might be the prelude to snow. She and the girls would take the taboggan up Nutt's hill on the other side of Pyfield Green. She liked to lie on her stomach steering with them behind her. That had been the annual thing at York. She couldn't remember a year without it. The steep hill from the castle, on the other side of the city, made a marvellous run. She yearned for the north sometimes. You got high tea there, nothing skimped---plenty of muffins and jam and cheese and Yorkshire pudding cold; but here in the south things seemed insipid and over-mild. She could remember the knife-wind across the moors, the intimate, lush valleys round Bedale, the snow on the cobbles of Richmond, the narrow York lanes with the sound of radios from behind curtains.

Ruth had had a large window put in the front wall, but bigger than the others along the road, so that you could see right into the room as you came up the path. It was always a pleasant sight for Janet, beyond the smooth green lawn--- the fawn carpet that covered every inch of the floor and the hanging Japanese paper-lamp, then the mantelpiece of piled thin bricks that Jack had ordered to imitate ancient Roman bricks, though why he should want to do that she didn't know; and then the smaller window in the other wall, that gave out on to their bit of garden. ^{Yes} ~~But~~ you couldn't see into the room from the roadway; that was the catch---you had to be on the path, a few feet from the door. Ruth was there, by the fireplace. Janet could see her. And she could see logs burning. And Ruth was dandling Sonya on her lap.

"Can you see Sonya?" Janet asked Tim. "Here." She lifted him up, and he peered into the room.

Ruth glanced up. "Jan!", she made with her lips, and gathered up the child to come to the door. Sonya stared at the window, not seeing them, her lips full and sensuous. Not a scrap of discipline in her face, unlike Catherine the older girl, who took after Jack. Ruth levered herself up from the sitting position with perfect ease, child and all, without touching anything for support. How she did it Janet didn't know. But while she was comfortably and healthily plump there didn't seem a scrap of waste flesh on her. All poise and motherly repose. The sort of hips, Janet thought, that gave one man all the pleasure he'd ever want.

The door opened and there was her broad, unruffled smile, and her flushed cheeks, and the light-blue eyes that always had a trace of diffidence in them. Sonya was still clinging to her, dark and staring, avid for pleasure---of which Ruth was the chief part. And Ruth carried it---the burden of two hungry loves, Sonya's and Jack's---like a queen. She had the advantage of being Jewish: the ancient secret, thought Janet. Jack wasn't. But he'd sort of half become one. She'd watched his face change: more gentle, and ripe and avid. But all that silly economics!

The door closed behind them. "How's Ralph?" Ruth asked her.

"He's all right."

Tim had already dashed into the big room to the toys; he knew his ground. She walked to the fire and sat down at her usual place on a tiny armchair of a silvery grey colour that was both modern and comfortable, and which she'd look for secretly everywhere without finding.

"You're so tidy here," she said. "How do you manage it?"

Ruth was still gazing at her with her quiet smile---she always seemed to be gazing---and lowered herself slowly back

into her chair with Sonya, again without supporting herself.

"I thought it was filthy!" she said with a laugh.

"It's because," Janet went on, looking round her, "the children don't bother you."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, it's something between you and the children. I don't know, you make them quiet."

"I wish this one was like either of yours, anyway," Ruth said, looking down at Sonya. And the child tried to push her little fist in her mouth.

"Yes, but it doesn't affect you," Janet said, her head forward, cupping her arms round her knees. "If Tim had done that at his age, crawling all over me from one end of the day to the other, I'd have screamed!"

"I scream, too! Don't I, darling?" And she gave Sonya a look which the child simply scrutinised objectively, without making a sound.

"Where's Catherine?"

"Outside in the garden."

Janet turned round to Tim. "Darling, don't break anything."

"Jack's coming back this afternoon."

"Did you get a letter?"

"No. He phoned."

Janet
"He phoned?" ~~Ruth~~ asked.

"Yes."

"Isn't that expensive?"

"Not very. About six bob."

Janet felt a shiver of pleasure at his name---in a way she didn't expect. She leaned back in her tiny armchair.

"Only from Paris," Ruth added.

"So you won't be at the club?" Janet asked hesitantly.

"Oh, yes!"

She wanted to ask if they'd both be there but dared not.

She wondered at herself.

"I'm taking the girls to Chatdowne park this afternoon---"

Ruth was interrupted by Sonya who gave another lunge and almost hit her in the face, turning suddenly to look at Tim, who'd got on to a gayly coloured wooden horse and was trying to make it rock, though it wasn't that kind.

"Is Catherine going to the party?" Janet asked.

"Yes. Pat's picking her up in the car."

"I'll have to come to the club late because of picking mine up---I'd forgotten all about it!"

"I expect we'll be late too."

"We'll!" She found herself sighing with relief.

"It's awful when you've got children, isn't it?" Ruth said.

"Even when I'm out I don't feel really free, do you?"

"No."

Tim was beating the horse with a drum-stick.

"Don't break Sonya's things, darling!" Janet said.

Sonya made a loud cry and frowned. At which Tim looked up with an enormous dawning surprise that made his eyes look so light-blue that the sky might have been inside them.

They went to the kitchen and drank coffee---as only Ruth could make it. The bright plastic-tile floor and the shining dishes made Janet goggle; you'd think a woman came in two or three times a week, but Ruth had no help. She watched her move about between the stove and the table, with quiet, economical movements, preparing the pleasant coffee-pot and the

paper filter. And the cups were just the right colour for the room, reflecting the cosy light from the window. She took Tim in her arms and tried to be as stoical with him as Ruth was with Sonya, but she gave it up: one of his heels dug into her leg and she let out a cry. Tim laughed. Even he seemed to see the absurdity of it.

"Betsy was named right," Janet told her. "She's always having bets---mostly about me. She bet I forgot the party and I did."

"Catherine's asking to wear that crinoline dress with a bustle of all things---!"

"No?"

"And most of the others'll be in trousers."

"I wondered if I should let Betsy go in slacks---she'll kill me if I don't. She says she can't twist in a skirt. She can't twist at all. But by this evening she will, I'm giving her a lesson."

"Oh, I don't think Pat ^{Simmons is} particular."

"No."

Catherine was a clear-faced, slim girl, with something of her father's quick gaze that seemed to pierce you right through. She peeped in through the kitchen-window at them for a moment, and waved at Janet: a bit taller than Betsy but not much in it. There were a good six years between her and Sonya, which made her younger than Betsy. But height was such an individual thing. And anyway one didn't want a tall string-bean of a daughter.

"Did you see that programme last night?" she asked.

"About before the war?"

"The documentary?"

"Yes."

"It seemed much more real then, don't you think so? Everybody's so nice now but it's because they've got nothing to be nasty about, do you know what I mean? Things don't seem to count like they used to."

There was a pause while this sank in. "I don't know..." Ruth's full, healthy hand shifted something on the table. "My home always seemed so dark. It wasn't real to me. I feel realer now."

"But look at the men---!"

Ruth laughed to see her earnestness. "What about them?"

"Well, they don't seem to have any grip any more."

"Why not?"

She was stumped, and looked at Ruth with impatience. Of course, Ruth had Jack. And how could you say he had no grip?

"I mean in things like clothes," she said. "They don't seem to make enough fuss of themselves. They haven't moved forward, do you see what I mean? You never see them wearing ascots like you used to---not our class of men, anyway."

And the moment she said this she realised that Jack wore ^{one} ~~an ascot~~ every week-end, and she didn't like it very much because it made him look sort of foppish.

^{Jack}
"Kee ~~J~~ wears ascots," Ruth said with a laugh.

"Oh, I know," Janet replied, lowering her head. "You're happy and I'm not. I suppose that's all the difference."

"But Ralph's one in a million, Jan---!"

"I didn't mention Ralph!" Janet told her hotly. "I don't have to think of myself all the time to be happy!"

Ruth always managed to call Ralph one in a million. Janet could have hit her with a dishcloth for it.

"It's no good talking to you, Ruth," Janet went on quietly. "Tim! Don't scratch on the window like that! You're like a cow, Ruth, I've told you before. A lovely, grazing cow, and all you're doing when you talk is chewing the cud."

Ruth laughed in her soft, full way. "I must tell Jack that!"

"You tell him everything!"

"Why not?"

"Well, one ought to have a bit of one's own life."

"But Jack's my life."

"All of it?" She looked sharp and earnest and fiery next to Ruth. "All?"

"I can't think of a thing I do that he hasn't some connection with," Ruth said. And she pulled Sonya smoothly on to her lap again.

"I don't know," Janet murmured. "Men seem to accept things so."

"Well, you can't expect them to fight your revolutions for you."

"That sounds like Jack," Janet said, looking up.

To judge by Ruth's convincing smile that was true. Was it possible that they discussed her? She felt a quiet thrill.

They went upstairs to look at a new dress of Ruth's, with Sonya bounding behind them and getting mixed up at once with the powder and creams on the dressing table. Ruth didn't even look at her but opened the wardrobe with quiet authority and took out the new blue two-piece which dazzled Janet at once because it was both so simple and so stylish. That was Ruth all over--no effort or strain. She spent less time on her

looks than any of them. Pat Simmons always seemed to work on herself like a secretary on the boss's desk before he comes in in the morning, and the effect was too neat. She didn't seem to know that men liked a hair out of place. Ruth was never really tidy but a glow came from her, and that was everything.

A crash came from downstairs and she hurried on to the landing outside.

"Tim?"

There was a muffled answer---the horse had fallen. She dashed downstairs. But he was only looking at it vaguely, as if falling was one of its tricks.

"You'd better come upstairs with me," she said, pulling him to the door by the hand.

By the time they got upstairs again Ruth had put the skirt on. It was tight and short and in a strange way it seemed to be the first skirt ever made; you couldn't improve on it. And then the blouse---just a sort of sack that zipped up at the back, with elbow-length sleeves; it fell on her so casually and loosely, yet it showed every curve in her body.

"It looks wonderful," Janet said, feeling the light tweed enviously. "Where did you get the stuff?"

"At Blithe's in Chatsdowne. They just had five yards left and I took them."

"I wish I could do my own dresses."

"You're ^{al}ways wishing," Ruth murmured with a trace of annoyance.

It wasn't the sort of thing you could wear for a dance, but then Ruth rarely danced. Janet remembered whirling Jack round the club-floor in the Christmas do, and how he had red lights in his cheeks afterwards---perhaps an excited twinkle

in his eye. But thoughts like that were best left alone.

"I haven't made up my mind what to wear tonight," she said.

In fact, she had. It was the one Ralph called the stunner, with a slightly flounced skirt and a very low neck, with skin-tight sleeves down to the wrist. No shoulders. It wasn't the nicest thing she had but it brought the most glances.

Sonya dropped an alabaster jar with a thud and Ruth swung round---"Not that, darling!" Tim was sitting on the wide divan bed---Jack didn't like an old-fashioned bed, so Ruth had said. Sonya suddenly spoke. It was extraordinary to hear her booming voice. "W'a's this for?" And she held up a lipstick.

"That's for lips," Ruth said, hardly turning round.

"No." Sonya wouldn't ^{believe} ~~have~~ it. Tim looked across at her fascinated.

"You push that little button on it," he said quietly.

"No, you don't!" Ruth shouted, darting to the dressing table. But she was too late. It was already smeared across Sonya's face.

"Please don't make a mess, darling."

Sonya ~~turned~~ ^{turned} round to Tim with her cheeks like traffic-lights, and he burst out laughing. They both sat there spluttering helplessly, holding their sides like old people. He dashed across and began tickling her. Some of the red got on his hands and then his collar.

"Children!"

There were screams, whelps, pinches, cuffs, the sliding sound of the dressing table being pushed towards the wall, and in a second Tim was carrying or rather dragging the other child downstairs, in a kind of uproarious burlesque act.

It always took them about this time to get together, then they

were inseparable. Yet they had a strange natural decorum in their clowning. There was real art in it.

"You'll be glad to hear Dick Bowes is coming," Ruth said with a smile.

Dick was a nursery-garden man, and the only healthy specimen in the district as far as ^{Janet} ~~she~~ was concerned. He had a lined, weatherbeaten face, and everything he did was slow and ordered, whereas the other men sort of jerked and jumped around all the time as if they were worked by engines. And Janet realised that she used him as a sort of cover with Ruth. She realised it suddenly, and smiled back at ^{her} ~~Ruth~~. Yet it seemed only to have starting ^{ed} ~~ing~~ happening a few seconds ago. Her position with Ruth was no longer honest.

"Good!" she replied.

Yet she did like Dick's darkly tanned face at the table, with its rustic authority. And she liked Connie, who always had a dazed sort of look---blonde, with flushed cheeks and a quick, shy smile that made her face look ^{fat} ~~fat~~ when it wasn't at all, and showed her silver fillings. Poor darling---she had no children. Dick took half-an-hour to say anything, and the men always said he was waiting for the plants to grow. You could see him at his best in the nursery-garden on the other side of Pyfield Green---the way he picked off dead leaves and ran the soil through his fingers. He was also a bit sceptical, never credited anything people said: just looked at them in his mild, speechless way as if they were taking him for a ride. And Janet couldn't stand that. She pulled his leg a lot, as a retaliation: asked Connie if he had green fingers, with a little wink---that kind of thing. And Connie always looked away, showing enough silver to make an ashtray out of.

"And another difference between you and me," Ruth said, slipping off the sack and showing a bosom that must send Jack giddy, "is that you dress to kill."

"How do you dress, then?"

"For comfort, partly. To look myself. Mainly to look myself." And she gave Janet a nice smile.

"And I don't?"

"Not exactly."

"Why?"

"Well," Ruth said, stepping out of the skirt, "you like to tantalise the men a bit, don't you?"

She laughed. "I didn't know it!"

"I don't mean in a showy way. But lots of cleavage, for instance."

"You've got more cleavage than I have."

"Yes, but I don't use it."

"I think you do," Janet said. "You use it far more--- in that blouse, for instance---only it's more subtle."

"What?" Ruth asked with a quick, interested glance, and a slight smile that showed she found the remark true.

"You see," Janet said. "We all show the serpent somewhere."

"Jan---" Ruth gazed at her with full, unblinking eyes for a moment. "It's all right between you and Ralph, isn't it?"

"Of course it is. Why shouldn't it be?"

"Oh, I just wondered." And she put her skirt on the hanger again.

"I can't explain really. Sometimes I feel we don't get enough leisure---it's silly trying to explain."

"Do you mean he just wants to get it over with?"

Janet sat down on the bed rather miserably. "No. I just

feel I'm missing something."

"Does he, too?"

She realised she'd never thought of that.

"Perhaps he does," she said.

The silence from downstairs seemed dangerous and they left the room. But ^{the children} ~~they~~ were ~~both~~ sitting quietly on the floor, Tim putting the red cardboard roof on to a little house while Sonya was of all things fast asleep, leaning against the wall, her face streaked red. She had that same look as Jack, even asleep, greedy for new experience; yet this went together with Ruth's golden peace.

Catherine bounded in from the garden breathlessly---with Jack's quick, appraising glance and his air of being about to arrange something exciting.

"Hullo, Mrs Maynard!"

"Hullo, Cath!"

She always flinched when they called her Mrs Maynard. What was wrong with her generation, that they couldn't take their places like their mothers had? She felt wretched all of a sudden and wanted to leave.

"When can I start dressing for the party, mummy?" Cath asked.

"It isn't nearly time yet," Ruth told her with a laugh.

"Come on, Tim, we must go," Janet said. "Your father's waiting to go shopping."

"Who is?" Tim asked.

"Ralph." She said it unwillingly, not liking even Ruth to know that this was how she called him to the children. Something troubled her all the time, underneath. She dragged him away from his bricks howling. How she'd like to join him

X and howl too!

"No, darling," she said in an unsteady voice that made him cry all the louder, because he heard the compassion in it, "you can't play all morning."

Ruth saw them to the door, smiling through his squeals, which were deafening. "Good bye, Jan. See you tonight."

"Yes."

Tim howled all the way home. She pulled him along, trying to stop herself crying too. Of all the silly things in the world, the silliest was to cry without the slightest idea of what you were crying about. They arrived home like a couple of ^awifs. The blare of pop-music from inside made her feel brighter. Betsy wanted her twist-lesson but Ralph was champing to get off to Chatsdowne. The car was shining so clean outside that it annoyed her, with its virtuous pool of water all round ~~it~~. She hurried through to the kitchen to get the shopping bags---three of them.

"All right~~ix~~, Betsy!" she cried. "I told you after lunch, didn't I?"

5.

The house was silent and Janet was alone. As usual on Saturday afternoons Ralph had lit a fire in the sitting room. It crackled and spat comfortingly, its flames lit up the dark room, flashing in the dead television screen. Tim was asleep upstairs: he'd dropped off suddenly, to her surprise, having threatened to stay awake until his sisters came home from the party. Ralph had gone to stoke up, as he called it, at Splinter's. Later at the club his eyes would be glazed and a pungent smell

of cigarettes would permeate his clothes. Jack sometimes smoked French cigarettes and they seemed better. That hideous sulphurous smell got into Ralph's underwear and seemed to come out of his armpits in bed at night, and it was as much as she could do not to choke sometimes.

She felt like a drink and wondered if she should mix herself a whisky and soda. But mixing drinks was his province. It would make her feel decadent.

She hadn't started to dress yet. She sat down in the darkness close to the fire, in Ralph's television chair, with the curtains still undrawn. People passed on their way back from the shops. She thought she saw Catherine run past under the lamp but it couldn't have been because the party was still going on. It was hardly seven. Ralph's need must have been great, for him to go to Ted's so early. He'd walked, and Ted would take him to the club in his car, while she drove over later.

She remembered the Saturday evenings in York when she'd dressed for the dance: she could still feel the cold soft satin, and how her legs had felt cold because of the nylons instead of the usual wool stockings; and the powder that had a special thrilling smell, patted over her cheeks, and the lipstick that she put on with an ecstatic sense of stagefright, as if she were an actress. And then the walk to the tramstop, and the first sight of the drab, lighted hall with its pillars at the entrance, and the youths with hair plastered down standing there awkwardly, waiting for their girls. She remembered the way her breath hardly came, when she got down off the tram. She'd always been like that---always on the boil, her mother said.

She'd taught Betsy the twist. It was a silly dance: as sexless as the young were nowadays. And so lonely. You just

stood and writhed in your skin. She'd shown Betsy how to stub out cigarettes with both heels and rub her back with an invisible towel---nothing easier. And the child was twisting right down to the ground and up again in a couple of minutes, with her mother's suppleness.

She jumped up, realising that an hour wasn't much to dress in. She took a quick bath. On the way downstairs again she peeped in at Tim. His mouth was open and his hair fell across his temple, one hand lay loosely over the side of the bed; and again she saw the look of natural authority in his face, as if he came from out of the centuries, with nothing to do with her. If only he'd keep that look. She wanted him to have long hair all his life. If only men could wear it down to their shoulders, as they used to, she thought.

The dress was laid out on the bed waiting for her. Betsy did that. In return for the twist-lesson. She rubbed eau de cologne into her armpits, over her shoulders and chest, in a vague ritual movement. Her slip was black with lace frills. It made her feel debonair. Then she sprayed behind her ears with scent. And she sank into her soft little seat in front of the dressing table. That was a concession to luxury she'd made sure of---her little velvet-covered chair with a low back that had cost more than she ever cared to tell Ralph. And that moment of sinking down and taking the comb up and looking at her dark image in the mirror was always one of enormous relief for her. She would change her life. Yes, she would!

The dress made her feel sure and determined. It defined her so well. Her pale skin gleamed in the dimness, and she glanced at the cleavage Ruth had talked about, with a slightly grim twinkle in her eye. And she slipped on her shoes. A

bracelet---then a nice silver scarab she clipped on to her dress. No necklace. She gave herself a final look from the door---rather like saying good bye. She had a sudden panic-stricken feeling for Tim which she couldn't understand and which was quickly gone. She took up her bag quickly and put on her coat. The car was out on the road and in a few moments she was driving towards Pat Simmons's, a pretty little house on the outskirts of Pyfield Green: remarkable that Pat, whose meals were always so perfect that they looked as if they'd been painted for an advertisement, and whose chairs were so well dusted that they made you feel ashamed ^{of} for having a behind, should live in that detestable little town. But rents were cheap there: they were saving for the children's education. Poor Godwin must go to a university whether he liked it or not.

Children were streaming out of the little house and cars were drawing up outside. She jumped out, her high heels clattering on the pavement in a thrilling way. Pat was just visible behind them all, tall, dark and neat like a piece of mahogany. They all had paper hats on and were talking about the games they'd had and the jellies they'd eaten. There were boys as well---more silent, awed by the girls. The sitting room, which she could see through the undrawn curtains, looked a mess.

"Are you coming tonight, Pat?" she called out above the children's heads.

"Maybe later!" And Pat threw up her arms helplessly, while ~~with~~ her lovely daughter Rachel stood clinging to her, slim and dark as an Arab, so charmed by her first party that all she could do was gaze and bite her lower lip and smile ravishingly as they all said good bye to her. Janet elbowed through the children and kissed ^{her}.

"Rachel, aren't you proud, darling?"

The child nodded silently, and at that moment Betsy burst on them from the kitchen.

"I'm ready! Where's Mary? We did the twist, it hurts your back terribly!" She looked up at Janet for the first time. "You do look a treat, darling!" And she stared at her mother with real discovery, silenced.

Arthur Simmons was nowhere to be seen. She wasn't sorry to miss his hornrimmed spectacles and grave manner. He looked at you as if you were a cash-register and the wrong figures were coming up. Still, with a few drinks inside him he wasn't so bad.

Mary appeared from outside. She'd been waiting in the street and watching all the cars. She ^{was} ~~looks~~ so relieved to find Janet that she made a little jump like a frog and planted a wet kiss on her cheek, and then got a scolding from Betsy who said the older girls were ^{watching} ~~washing~~. Car-doors were slamming, she and Pat shook hands.

"Good bye!"

"Good bye! Pat! Thanks a lot!"

She noticed with satisfaction that Betsy seemed popular. A number of the older girls gave her quiet, confidential glances at the end as if they were ^{all} going to plot hell when they got together again. You never knew if you weren't going to get a recluse for a child: she wondered about Tim sometimes. The pain of having a recluse was feeling ^{hurt} ~~pain~~ on his behalf all the time.

Mary gave her another kiss from behind in the car, just to annoy her sister, and asked, "Ma, where did you get that lovely scent?"

"Are you going to dance tonight?" Betsy asked.

"Which shall I answer first?"

"About the scent."

"I got it at Blithe's. I forget what it is."

"And who are you going to dance with?"

"I don't know yet."

"Some strange and fascinating man," Betsy said in her leg-pulling manner.

"I will if I can find him."

"What, you're not going to dance with dad?" Mary asked.

"Oh, drop it! Of course I am!"

"You have to take everything so seriously, don't you, Mary?" Betsy said. And in the same breath, "Do they twist at the club?"

"No. Sambas and quick foxtrots and old-fashioned waltzes, that sort of thing."

"It doesn't sound as if she really likes it, does it?" Betsy asked her sister.

"Why not?" Janet said, flicking her hair to one side in a characteristically embarrassed little movement.

"By the sound of your voice. You like it hot, darling, you know you do!"

Janet laughed. "Wherever did you learn that sauce?"

She glanced at Betsy when they got out of the car. What part of her lay in the child? She often wondered that.

In a few moments the girls were upstairs in bed and Tim had woken up. Betsy had brought a piece of cake for him, and they also gave him their paper hats and whistles. He listened with his mouth open to Mary's account of the party--how they'd played Spin the Bottle because an American boy was there.

No reading tonight. ^{That} ~~It~~ would be what Ralph called spreading jam on both sides.

"Well, I'll leave you to it, girls!" she said, kissing Tim a long goodnight. "Mrs Trubshawe's next door, call out if you need anything."

She found herself trembling as she ran down to the car again--- quite like those dances in York! She could hardly find the ignition with her key. And then she drove towards Ted's place in Pyfield Green and suddenly remembered that it was gone half-past eight and they would all be waiting for her at the club. So she had to turn round, which she did on the most dangerous bend, where all the trucks came clattering past. Her teeth were chattering, almost. It might be the brisk air. But she found she couldn't get her breath properly, just like when she got down off the tram in York! She mustn't let them see it at the club. Her eyes mustn't be too bright. But the lights there were usually dim, and the men would be too stoked-up to notice anything, not that they noticed much anyway. She took a deliberately deep breath and turned on to the Chatsdowne highway. She could speed here, and this was a great relief to her. When Ralph was asked once how fast she drove usually he said, "As fast as the car will go."

She got there before she realised she'd started. There were the tall Victorian shopfronts at the edge of the town, bright and gaping, with the pavements in front of them empty. She drove through the old part where the houses were squat and soothing, with red mossy roofs of tile and their walls covered with ivy. Then there was Park Hall like a massive cement tower with russet lights showing from the windows upstairs and a roof-garden on top with trees that they used in the summer.

One or two couples went in before her. From a bare lobby with strip lighting one moved to a plushy staircase where the cloakrooms were; and here a crony of Ted's, with the same wizened and honest look, took her ~~coat~~^{stole} and told her that 'the men' were already upstairs. By the way her ring touched the clip of her bag as she closed ^{it}, she knew she was still quivering, and again she felt thankful that the lights were dim.

There was music but no dancing. A slow waltz, played softly because everyone was eating or having a drink beforehand: that was all. The hall was round, with little check-patterned lamps on every table and great ~~folded~~^{pleated} curtains over the windows, with the dance-floor clear and french-chalked in the middle. Their table was on the far side, set for six or eight places, and she felt a quick surge of annoyance as she caught sight of Ralph: it was his striped blue shirt against the pinstripe suit; she didn't like either, but both together were the end. She'd so often told him not to do it, particularly if the stripes went in the opposite direction. But he didn't think it mattered. He didn't think his appearance mattered. How could he dance like that, in those billowing sailor's trousers that almost showed the light through?

Ted was there, sitting next to him, and she recognised Dick Bowes's dark, sunburned face, and Connie with her face set in a smile. Janet felt better seeing her---always so fresh, and so believing. No Ruth. She found she wasn't quivering any longer. Her eyes were burning fiercely but the men were busy in talk and ~~would~~^a hardly give her a glance.

"Here's your wife---watch out, mate!" That was Splinter. Ralph looked ^{up} smiling: yes, his eyes were glazed. "Hullo, duck! Come and sit down."

cc. 11 Dick Bowes nodded a pleasant good evening and followed her with his eyes. But not a real remark from any of them.

"Hullo, Connie," she said quietly, sitting next to her.

"Hullo, Jan, you look nice this evening."

"I had such a rush." She put her bag on the table.
"The children had a party at Pat's---I had to fetch them."

"I wish I could rush about for children," Connie said, giving her a simple glance. That was another thing about her--- she said the truth without any trouble.

"Well, what's it going to be, duck?" Ralph called out from the other side of the table.

She wanted whisky but somehow the women weren't expected to drink it, so she asked for gin-and-it, like Connie.

Ralph called out to the waiter, another crony. "Two gin-and-its, mate! And there's three thirsty men here!"

The waiter unleaned himself from the radiator, his face lined and pale, and said mechanically, "Two gin-and-its, three beers?"

"That's it."

"Here, you trying to get me drunk?" Connie asked, giving Ralph her soft smile. "I haven't finished this ^{one} yet."

"Do you good, mate."

The place was filling up. Some people were eating already. There was a pleasant warm dimness, and when her gin came it brought a little flush to her cheeks. She talked about Tim, and Connie listened as if it was a fairy story.

"You must bring him round," Connie said. "I'm sure he's going to be an actor or something."

Her heart did a leap and there was Ruth in the doorway, in the blue two-piece, waiting for Jack to come in behind her.

And he was dressed in a dark suit, fitted close, elegant and clear-cut. She held her breath as he appeared. His pipe was on. Some smoke drifted from him as he came to Ruth's side. Then they both peered through the dimness towards the table, and she saw Ruth's smile of recognition. They had an easy, slow way of walking, and Jack was erect without being stiff. He looked a little sunburned. He'd been in the mountains somewhere, where ^(a) there'd been skiing.

"Look what the cat's brought in!" Ralph cried.

They all turned. "Jack! Well, s'help me God, he's turned up again!"

He shook hands all round, giving them his swift, dark glance.

"Been selling us to Europe, mate?" Splinter asked.

"Trying to."

"What's it like over there? Cold?"

"Plenty of snow. I was in Zurich this time."

"He gets around, don't he?" Ted said to the others proudly. They were all proud of Jack's travels, in a strangely possessive way.

Ruth sat next to her and looked sideways at her after giving Connie a hullo. And Jack sat opposite, talking across to the men. She noticed he didn't go into a huddle with them but stayed at the women's end of the table. A coloured handkerchief was sticking carelessly out of his top pocket. Ralph would never dare to do that.

"Where's Polly tonight?" Janet asked Splinter, to make her interests seem different from what they were. She thought that perhaps Jack looked at her swiftly as she spoke, as if startled by the sound of her voice.

"She'll be here in a minute." He smiled at her benevolently, with his small, sharp features. "Jennifer was sick."

"Go on! After the party?"

"That's right." He laughed.

"I wondered where she'd got to!"

"Pat brought her home. I reckon it was the jelly and excitement, don't you?"

Jack was looking across the hall. Apparently Ralph's duet with Dick Bowes about whether they really greased your car when they said they were going to didn't interest him.

But he suddenly spoke. "Cath said they twisted all the time." This was to Splinter.

"I had to teach my Betsy this afternoon," she put on, determined he should look at her.

"Yes, she said Betsy gave them all lessons."

"Go on!"

Janet didn't like Ruth's silence and turned to her. "Was Sonya jealous not going?"

"I think she was happy to have me all to herself." And to her relief Ruth smiled.

"She's bitten with your Tim," Jack said.

"And vice-versa," she replied and then flushed wildly. But the waiter suddenly bent down with two more drinks, and she was hidden.

Jimmy Barnes wasn't coming, she heard Splinter say. That was a relief. She couldn't take his jokes about precision-tools and slow-moving pistons tonight, with the men all huddled round him. Jack always held apart from those huddles, she had noticed. Sometimes it was strange to see him among them. Clearly he liked Ralph, but she felt he had little to say to him.

Splinter started talking about a new process he'd seen--- he worked in a printer's shop. Like Jack, he seemed to love his work, and therefore she enjoyed hearing him. It brought a certain mellow tone to his voice, ^{like a man} ~~as if he was~~ telling a sea-story. He'd talked once about the new photoset machines that didn't require founts and keys but printed from a metal plate, and she could still remember it, as if it wasn't about machinery at all. Ralph ought to have work like that. It showed in Ted's face, too: in the sharpness and keenness. But Ralph seemed to be waiting all the time. Listening and smiling, never taking the initiative.

"Did you get any remarks about the new dress?" she asked Ruth in a whisper.

"He seemed to like it."

The band struck up a foxtrot. They always gave a sign that dancing could begin by playing louder. More people streamed in. There was the clatter of dishes. Dick Bowes began laughing at something Ted had said; his face was the barometer of all atmospheres.

Ralph, after coughing and spluttering over a cigarette, began talking to Jack about Sims and Tuke. It surprised her to hear him talking bitterly. Old Sims, she heard him say, needed a bloody shaking up. It was his way of doings things that annoyed people, he said. He never let a drop of feeling come into his letters because of the damned position he was supposed to have, though nobody knew what it was unless it was having sat on his arse for forty years doing exactly what his father had brought him up to do and not an inch more. He'd lost nearly every foreign client he'd ever had because he wouldn't realise that they needed talking to and explaining things to. Even the bloody Christmas

dinner^{were}s ~~are~~ a routine, he said.

Just as the waiter came to the table for the food to be ordered Polly appeared, slim and pale, her skin tight and dry as usual, dressed in black like Janet but without the cleavage. She was suddenly there. She nipped everywhere. She nipped from the doorway to the table, she nipped round to her chair; she was always saying, "I'll nip up the road and get some more cigarettes." Like Ralph, she clung to cigarettes like life-belts. She talked fast and smoked with quick-puffs, deep into her lungs, and did everything with sharp movements without being precisely a nervous person. Splinter, on the other hand, smoked quietly and reminiscently, gazing before him.

Polly was hardly in her seat before she had a joke out, in her piping, saucy voice.

"Hullo, Ruth---been touching the old man for clothes again?"

She was a Mile End girl and you could tell ^{it.} ~~her~~ Time had done nothing to her accent---it was bright, singsong, soft, with the same cockney optimism that Ralph's father had.

"How's Janet?" Here was her second volley. "Joined the salvation army yet, mate?"

That was a well-known one and everybody laughed. Janet flicked a glove at her playfully.

The waiter was behind her and she turned to him quickly. "Bring me a gin and tonic, darling, will you? Oh, you saucy bugger---did you see the way he winked!"

Her repartee with the waiter was famous too, and they went through a sort of act together.

"Jenny's been sick?" Jack asked her.

She turned to him slowly without saying anything, then looked back at the others with her eyebrows raised. "I say!

X Did you hear that? Lovely, ^{isn't} ~~ain't~~ it, the way he speaks?"

She imitated his quiet voice. "'Jenny's been sick?' I'll

X say she ^{has}! She spewed all over Splinter's ironed shirts!"

"Go on!" Connie cried, opening her mouth wide.

"I ironed them, too!"

X "She must have been doing ^{the} twist," Ralph said. "She was teaching all the girls, Pat said."

"Talk about twist," Polly cried. "My daughter came back in bloody knots!" There was the rather hushed laughter of familiarity. "I said, what the ~~bloody~~ hell are you supposed to be, the bow in the pony's tail?" The laughter was louder, with expectation. "I'll say she'd been twisting! She was so twisted up she wiped her hands on the doormat and gave me a kiss on the arse!" Here there was a roar---it usually went in three stages like that. The waiter joined in, as he was bringing ^{the} drink. "Talk about scream!"

X And slowly the laughter subsided. Ralph wiped his eyes, and Splinter looked across at her admiringly. Sometimes he was her butt, in a kind of two-man act. The merriment was infectious and some of Dick Bowes's nursery-garden ^{chronic} who'd come in with their wives looked round from the next table and winked at him.

X Sometimes you felt that the club was the only thing that kept them ^{all} sane: dropping in for a drink, reading the paper in the smoking room downstairs where women were expected to go as well. The Chatsdowne greengrocer who started it, swearing he'd never go to the local pub again and be turned out at two sharp in the afternoon and ten in the evening, was a canny one: he knew his club took the chill out of life ~~for people~~ ^{that is} and couldn't fail. His name was Herb Watson. He'd made a pile after the war out of his shops and now you could see him Saturday nights in his

smoking jacket standing by the band, flushed and gasping. He told everybody he never touched fruit or fresh vegetables, and his skin was as blotchy as a salami sausage.

"Pat does a nice jelly, doesn't she?" More laughter. "And I liked the look of her trifle!"

"You'll be the death of me," Connie said, showing a ^{galaxy} ~~glaxay~~ of fillings.

Janet was getting a bit tiddly on the gin. As always on Saturday night she looked back on the week days from a distance and seemed to recognise nothing. And the hall became everything for her---past and future: the draped satin curtains coloured a delicious rust-gold and the white dickies of the band on their platform, and the dim hall with lights on every table glowing among ^{they'd} faces that seemed strikingly dramatic because ^{of} the gin or beer ~~had~~ taken.

The waiter presented menus all round which opened like tall books, and there was the usual game of picking through French names which no one understood, least of all the owner Herb Watson. It irritated her and she wanted to say without looking at it, "Rump steak and chips", except that she didn't want rump steak and chips. From the men there was much stroking of chins, which you'd expect from a craven lot who never changed anything, and they all murmured sheepishly words like sauté and escalop and pot au feu. Only Jack was really studying the thing with food in mind. ~~But~~ Ralph had a faintly bemused look, as if the food would come in tinsel wrapping.

^{it was}
And as usual/the women who broke things down.

"I'd like an underdone steak with onions and mashed," Polly. "Tickled with French whiskers."

The waiter, who helped Ted on his allot⁷ment Sunday

mornings, didn't really like this departure and murmured as he noted down the order, "Purée, entrecot..." Ruth followed with a concession to the French in saying sauté. Then of course there'd be trouble over the wine. Only Jack had the faintest idea of whether what you ordered would come out red, white or a dirty brown. To tell the truth, they all hated the stuff but there had to be a taster who smacked his lips and nodded judiciously, and they all had to say something daft about how it was a little dry, while secretly it flummoxed them ~~all~~ that you could describe something wet as dry, and made them feel proud too. Jack possibly got a bit of enjoyment out of drinking it. But the others just felt flattered, as they felt flattered by the French menus. The food wasn't even good, either. The potatoes were like leather if they were baked, and like plaster when they were mashed. And as for the meat, you'd think they had dug it up somewhere.

Jack ordered a name she couldn't catch, which he said was Algerian wine watered down, but there was nothing wrong with Algerian wine.

Ralph turned to her and asked quietly, "Betsy and Mary get to bed all right?"

"Yes. Tim woke up."

"He wanted to hear all about it."

"That's right."

"Sonya never lets me go, its awful," Ruth told them.

"She seems to know where we're going before we decide ourselves." And she added, "Cath was never like that."

Jack put in, "That's because we were in a pokey flat and all had to pull together."

Splinter said he wouldn't mind his young days over again,

but nobody else agreed. Jack and Ralph were quite definite about it. Jack remembered the time he was an accountant's clerk, and Ralph when he was a salesman.

"You talk as if you're an old man," Janet said to Ralph.

"No, but the time for dreaming's over."

"I think it's just begun," she said.

"What do you say, Jack?" Ralph asked.

"I don't think life changed^s much. There are always dreams."

This made her feel so happy that she could have hugged the waiter as he brought the fake claret to the table wrapped in a napkin. Jack had a strange face. Sometimes it was blunt like a workman's, then it was delicate, with a long, fine nose and pleasantly reflective eyes. His two lives showed.

The talk got on to London. Who was a real Londoner? Only Polly and Ralph. And Ruth said you could see it in both of them: a certain perkiness, like city-sparrows.

"One of Jack's cousins is coming to stay soon," she went on. "She's a real cockney. Born within the sound of Bow Bells."

Polly took quick puffs at her cigarette so that no smoke could be seen until she suddenly breathed it out in a straight shaft just above people's heads. It was like a mechanical action, exactly the same each time. Ralph's method was more casual---smoke drifted round his mouth before he drew it into his lungs, and less seemed to come out. The sweetish smell of their exhaled smoke drifted across to her, like hay gone rotten, with something oddly intrusive about it. She knew her dress would smell of it afterwards, in fact it had become one of the exciting associations of going out. Jack puffed at his pipe with short puffs that were like thoughts cut off before

ripeness. Only Ruth sat collected and still. Connie listened closely to everything said, and cast her eyes round in a faintly anxious way as if waiting to be tapped on the shoulder.

The meal came and they spread their paper serviettes on their laps.

"Why can't we have real napkins?" Janet asked.

"Because it's too expensive," Splinter said. "Laundry. That's what Herb Watson told me."

Ralph looked at her. "What's wrong with paper? You throw it away at the end---it's ~~simple~~ ^{simple}." #

"It just feels nicer, that's all."

The food arrived already served on plates like in a snack bar. She sipped her wine and was just about to make a face when she saw how Jack was enjoying his, with grateful draughts, and checked herself.

Ralph looked younger than he did in the week, and with sudden vividness she remembered Jeff's Jive rooms in York^{again}, and wondered that he could ever have fallen for a gawky, pale creature like her^{self}, with bare elbows sticking out of an unsightly silvery dress. She'd always been terrified that he^{would suddenly} come to his senses. His hair had been fairer than, or was that her imagination? It had had more lustre. He'd spent more time out of doors^{then}, perhaps. But he wasn't grey. His skin had been less dry, too. She remembered what her father, the son of a Yorkshire farmer, used to say: "Food is what your body's made out of, son, I always see you eat well." And she wondered what sort of lunches Ralph got at the office. To her mind he'd eat anything so long as everybody else was doing the same. Whereas Jack's skin was still soft, and his eyes didn't have that glaze,

and as for his hair---. She found herself gazing at him hard, and quickly turned back to her food.

"Will you please take your partners for the spot?" sounded out from the loudspeakers. She hated that kind of thing: a blue spotlight played on the floor and couples were eliminated until only one was left. It was Herb Watson's idea. And that was followed by a foxtrot where any man could come up to you while you were dancing and take you away from your partner. She liked a straight dance, with a man she knew.

The spotlight played over the floor while the other lights were turned out, and the cut glass of the chandelier in the centre flashed and sparkled dimly. They all watched the shy couple take their prize: the girl's hair was blown up into a sort of globe the way Betsy wanted^{it} these days, as if it had a good wind underneath it all the time; and the boy's trousers were so narrow that she could see the sweat behind the calves of his legs.

At last the dessert was over and sticky liqueurs were served: kirsch was the new idea---that was another thing that it made them feel proud to say. But she liked some Italian stuff with a sort of miniature tree growing in the bottle, though the actual taste made her shudder. Her cheeks were burning and she listened to Ruth telling Polly how you sprayed your shoes with some liquid and it made them waterproof. To her surprise she was trembling again.

Polly called across to her husband, "What about that dance you promised me?" ^{Janet} ~~She~~ almost clung to her seat with expectation. The smash-and-grab dance, as Janet always called it, was now over, and it was a quickstep. Splinter, after a look of mock-boredom at Ralph, got up---and then to her ecstatic surprise

Ruth leaned forward and said to Jack, "What about giving Jan a dance? I can feel her feet twitching!"

"Mind how you go," Ralph said to her as she got up with a smile. "You've got to be careful of strange men, you know."

Polly and Splinter had already left the table and Jack was standing behind her. Then they walked towards the floor and suddenly she was quite calm.

She noticed he was a little stiff, even nervous, perhaps from his plane-trip that day, and at first they danced rather sedately. But there were plenty of other people on the floor, and it began to feel jollier.

"What was France like?" she asked as they did a quick whirl for the first time.

"I always get a bad liver. Food's too good."

"Is it?"

"Don't think I'm being disloyal to Ruth. Only she uses less butter."

They danced faster and she felt so happy she could have screamed with laughter. She saw nothing else in the hall. The glittering band, the dim lights at the tables and the bulky mass of people dancing and shuffling were only a giddy background for her. She glanced at him and marvelled to see that he was smiling too. And he was a little flushed now. Though he had the sort of dark skin that didn't show a flush.

Polly and Splinter passed them. Splinter was the smaller by several inches and looked like a man pushing a trolley. Polly called out to them, "Now, then, Jan, what would your drum-major say?"

Jack held her close for a moment: she could feel his fountain-pen against her. Then suddenly the dance was at an

end, having lasted about ten seconds as far as she was concerned.
^{But}
x ~~And~~ to her astonishment Jack stayed exactly where he was. There were other couples waiting for the next dance too---they usually did two quicksteps in a row.

The music started again and this time they danced very close. She could feel his breath on the side of her face. She'd forgotten the others, the table in the corner seemed far away. Splinter and Polly seemed to have left the floor but she hadn't noticed them. She hoped Jack hadn't either. She hoped he was as lost.

"Do you know what the French say about us?" he asked her.

"No?"

He glanced round the hall as they made another whirl.

"They say we're America's commercial travellers."

She gaped at him and said nothing. She tried to work out what he said as having a hidden meaning but there didn't seem to be any. So she just smiled and nodded. Of course it was like Jack to say that sort of thing.

Then there was a blues tune, very slow and soft. She felt she wanted to lay her head on his shoulder and sleep, not face any problems any more, not return to her life. And she nearly did so: when the tune ended it was like hearing the alarm in the morning.

"Are you sleepy?" he asked her almost in a whisper.

"No."

"Drunk?" he said with a smile.

She shook her head mutely. And to her further astonishment he again didn't move. What would Ralph say? Ruth?

Yet she and Jack had done that before---danced three, four, five times in a row until they had no more breath. But now it was different. At least for her.

The hem of his jacket was touching her hip: it might have been electric for the awareness she had of it. To her relief she saw Ralph and Ruth walk on to the floor together. ^{Ruth} ~~she~~ wouldn't do much whirling in that two-piece, but then Ralph wasn't much of a whirler. It was going to be another quickstep. Ruth waved to her and she waved back happily, hoping her relief ^{didn't} ~~wouldn't~~ show.

This one was a great earth-thumper, one of those where you felt your heels were beating the drums right through the floor. And a kind of sigh went up from the tables---of excitement. At once and she Jack were taking short, quick steps, not those silly clever ballroom steps you see on TV in the competitions but real sort of half-leaps, a cross between jitterbug and barndance, pulling away from each other and meeting again as if they'd never done anything but dance all their lives. And this dance was repeated too. They could forget the world! How they skidded and flew in between the other couples without touching them she didn't know, but their legs seemed to be worked by machines. There was a rapt look on Janet's face, half a smile, and she gazed straight in front of her, because that was the way you didn't get giddy. At a sudden turn she caught a glimpse of Ruth, dancing much faster than she would have thought possible in that two-piece. And Ralph was staring before him in his disembodied way, or so she assumed from his flashing presence. Jack's eyes were gleaming and there was a kind of grim ferocity about his dancing, and she found herself suddenly envying Ruth because she would be alone with him that night, and all night. Her bracelet made a clinking noise as he caught hold of her, like copper hanging on a gypsy dancer, and the band beat even harder so that she thought she had no body left and would go flying

off among the tables. Even when it came to the end she seemed not to stop, only her feet stood still like two mechanical things suddenly planted there and throbbing with motion; and Jack stood at her side, panting and smiling. The drift of dancers off the floor, brushing past them, had nothing to do with her and she was only vaguely aware of their shadows. Ruth and Ralph were nowhere to be seen. The lights glowed as lights do when you cease to focus your eyes; and the tall satin curtains all round were like one bronze cylinder that enclosed them all. When the next music began, in a slower rhythm, they were in each other's arms at once, as if there hadn't been a pause.

This dance ended suddenly too, with a great thump, and everything was still again. This time they must go back; and without a word to each other, only puffing and smiling, with a gasped laugh now and then, they stumbled towards the table in the corner, through other couples.

But there was no one there. They looked at each other. There wasn't even a handbag on the table, only her own; not a stole left by one of the women. There were only the empty liqueur glasses. No reserved card stood on the table as before. That meant they must have given it up. Polly's cigarettes that had been on the table weren't there. The ashtrays had been cleared away.

"What time is it?" she asked him.

"Gone midnight."

"What?"

They stood looking at each other. He shrugged and made a slight smile.

"They must have gone," she said.

"I suppose so."

"Were we so long?" she said.

"We must have been."

"I suppose Ralph's taken the car."

"I've still got mine," he said. "Ruth can't drive."

"He must have taken her back too."

At the same time they were excited. Thrown together like this! Their mouths flickered with a smile as they talked, and they tried to stop it showing.

"What shall we do?" he said.

"You'd better drive me home, I suppose."

They walked downstairs to the cloakrooms and got their coats, not thinking to ask when the others had left. They felt they knew the answer.

Jack had a Citroen, the sort that sat down slowly like an old lady when you put the brake on. When they slammed the doors after getting in the sound had something exciting and forbidden about it, such as she hadn't felt for years. There were parked cars all round them, and again they didn't think to look for Splinter's or Ralph's car. Jack's lights shone on bonnets, dickies, number-plates. And the car swung into the road outside. The town was deserted, with its bare lights and shop-fronts.

The white of his shirt-cuffs gleamed as he changed gear, and her low neck gleamed with the same brightness between the fur stole she'd wrapped round her shoulders. Then they were on the dark Chatsdowne highway, whirring along like a speedboat on a smooth sea. He had put his pipe on, which annoyed her. He hadn't had time to fill it with tobacco so he was chewing on it thoughtfully. She could see his frown in the darkness. Now she was alone with him she couldn't focus her attention on

the him she'd started to dream about that day. The physical him at her side was remote, and the dreamed one was the real one; and she hoped to make them meet.

They drew closer and closer to Pyfield Green and she began to feel sad. The week-day numbness returned. Why was he such a fool as to think she wanted to be driven back home?

As if she'd said this aloud he glanced at her sideways and murmured, "Would you like a breath of air?"

"Yes. It gets so stuffy there, doesn't it?"

They were still some miles from home. He slowed down and took the first lane going left, between young trees and bushes, with the hushed countryside suddenly all round them. He went nearly a mile, driving slowly, and they saw hardly a house all the way. They must be near the edge of the Downs. At a gravel patch he stopped and they got out into the silence. Their shoes scraped on the path. There were tall trees near by, then the slow sweep of the hills in the darkness, that stretched for miles and miles. There was a clear sky and his cuffs shone as before, like her neck. He filled his pipe as they strolled along, and stopped to strike a match. She didn't want to see his face clearly over the match, so she turned away until he'd blown it out again.

"I've never enjoyed a dance so much," he said.

She said nothing to this. They walked along the edge of a field, quite close together. If by chance his jacket touched her they both seemed to flinch. She'd never felt so tongue-tied in her life. She could see the stars now.

The air was biting cold and dry, as she liked it. They could see the field rising at their left beyond a fence, and a farmhouse lower down on the other side with one yellow, twinkling

light behind a curtain, lying deep in the valley.

"Weren't you born near here?" she asked.

"In Chichester."

"You're lucky."

The bowl of his pipe glowed red when he took a suck at it.

"It's funny when you come back to this country," he said, gnawing at the thing as if the wood tasted good. "The incentive's gone out of life. Do you know what I mean?"

"I think so."

✓ "Everything's at a standstill with a hell of noise going on!"
He laughed at the idea.

"Do you vote Labour?"

✓ He stopped and ~~gaped~~^{looked} at her in the darkness, and didn't reply at once. Why did she always have to say such silly things?

"Well, I do. More in hope than conviction." He added, this time studying the bowl of his pipe in the darkness, "I don't blame the people, really. The country's been America's aircraft carrier since the end of the war, and of course their pride's been knocked to pieces. The English are free or nothing."

The silence was immense all round them.

"You work with Americans, don't you?" she asked quietly.

✓ She was going to be careful this time.

"Well, they're on the commission sometimes, yes."

✓ They walked on and his bowl gleamed again, making much^{more} light than you'd think, giving him a sort of lively mask like in one of those pierrot shows at the end of the pier.

✓ "One of these chaps, statistics coordinator they call him, he's from the States and he says he thinks this country's about the most barbarous place in the civilised world. He's not far wrong, either."

"What does he mean?" she asked, still treading carefully.

"Oh, the hotels, I suppose, the food, the papers---the general ^{mess,} ~~lay-out,~~ I suppose."

"Your work sounds interesting---that's more than I'll say for Ralph's," she said tremulously.

"I'm only a walking notebook for other people."

They came to the end of the path and turned up a narrower one, between hedges. They saw a house straight ahead, white and Georgian with tall, orderly windows and ivy on the walls. It must be somebody's driveway.

Then they turned back. Again she had a flat feeling. A dance followed by a lecture in the dark was all she was going to get, it seemed! But what else did she want? She caught her breath at the realisation that she did want something else.

His pipe had gone out. He sucked at it twice to make sure, then blew through it like a man with a trumpet, presumably to clean out the flues. Then he took it out off his mouth and stared into the bowl. He was going to knock the ash out, she could feel it. And he did glance round in a preparatory sort of way. But there were only bushes. There's always your heel, she thought. And he seemed to have heard ^{her} because he promptly stopped and lifted his leg like a horse being shod and then knocked the blasted ^{thing} out on his heel. She waited patiently, like you ~~as a woman might~~ wait for ^{your} ~~her~~ husband to come out of ^{the} ~~a~~ lavatory, her head slightly in the air.

But it didn't stop there. He now had to feel for his tobacco pouch. ~~But~~ He did this walking along. Then he filled the bowl by pushing ^{his finger} down into the tobacco and ~~feeding it with his fingers,~~ with funny little fiddling movements that made her want to knock him on the head. Now the pouch was folded and

put away, and the bowl packed down with the middle finger. At this rate she preferred cigarettes. Ah, matches! Here they came. Rattled smartly to see if there were any. Yes, yes, saved again! Then a match blazed^a in the darkness, and a mad suck, suck, suck, suck started, with immense clouds of smoke flooding out, as if he wanted to fire the whole county. Now he was fully himself again. He clamped the mouthpiece firmly between his teeth and put his hands in his pockets.

"Why do you smoke that silly thing?" The words were out of her mouth before she knew ~~what she was saying~~.

He looked at her. "What?"

"I said you look a damned fool smoking that thing!"

He stood quite still. She seemed to have stunned him. The pipe almost fell out of his mouth.

But she went on, seeing her effect. "Haven't you got better manners?"

He took the thing out of his mouth---to gape at her, it seemed. And then he did an amazing thing. Without a word more he made a great determined swing of his body and flung the pipe high into the next field, over the hedge. Now it was her turn to gape. The sparks flew from it and she watched its high, arched course, red and glowing. Then it was gone in the grass.

"Now are you satisfied?" he said with his mouth almost closed.

"Oh..."

She tried to say something grateful but couldn't. For a moment the sky was vaster and more still than she'd ever seen it, and they were both held in this stillness as if no real movement was possible in the world. She was so overjoyed that she

wanted to cry and laugh at the same time. Yet she didn't know why. ^{Because} ~~Was it that~~ he'd bound himself to her in that act? Without even intending/^{it}himself? Did he realise it too? He seemed to, by the way he stood there staring at her, with a peculiar, dark, concentrated earnestness.

And it made her afraid. Suddenly she thought of Tim. He'd be lying in bed at this moment, a lock of hair still falling over his temple, his arm hanging out of the bed. And Ralph. Where was he? Suddenly she realised the enormity of everything she'd been thinking. She wanted to run. She must get back home immediately, find her family.

"Jack," she said breathlessly, "take me home now."

"Yes, it must be late."

They hurried along, their heads forward, not speaking. Tim's face occurred to her again, sunk into the pillow. At the same time she was happier than she could ever remember being. And free. The sky seemed immensely free. She was aware of its aeons of freedom, its dome that included every thought and wish you could have. They jumped into the car and she drew the wrap round her. She wasn't quivering any more. She felt a strength that gripped her whole body. And she hoped he did too.

6.

When they drew up outside the house she saw that Ralph wasn't home at all. The garage was open and there was no car. She stared while Jack waited for her to get out. She didn't move at once because she was ^{so} astonished. He turned the engine off and the road was absolutely silent.

She stared in at the garage as if the car might have shrunk and fitted itself into a dark corner. But there was only the smell of petrol and oil. She went into the house. Not a sound. The fire in the sitting room was dead. She went quickly into their bedroom. There was the smell of her own scent still on the air. No Ralph. She switched on the light to make sure, then put it out at once again.

She ran outside. "He isn't back."

"Where've they all gone, then?"

They stood together on the pavement, slightly brushed by a breeze. Not a sound came from the highway.

"Let's try my place," he said. "They might be there."

They drove round the curve to Ruth's place but they found the same: no lights.

"I'll see," he said, jumping out.

He went through the same performance as she had, peeping into the garage, going into the hall, putting on the light in the upstairs bedroom for a moment. Then he returned and bent down to speak to her through the car-window.

"You know," he said with a smile, "I think they're still at the club."

"But they can't be."

"Why not? We didn't try the smoking room."

"Unless they're at Splinter's."

"We could try," he said. "But I think they're at the club."

They drove through Pyfield Green to Splinter's house, but there was no answer when Jack rang the bell. It was a tiny, depressing, red-brick place.

"What's the time?" she whispered from the car.

"Well past one."

So they found themselves on the highway again, this time travelling fast. Also it was cold. He switched the heating on but it brought in a smell of fumes, so he put it off again. She found that she was biting her lower lip anxiously and tapping her foot on the floor.

When they arrived a few of the cars had gone, but not many. The first thing they saw was Ralph's, sitting exactly where she'd parked it herself.

"They are here," she said, as if it was all a conspiracy.

They walked past the cloakroom without putting in their coats and then up the gaudy staircase.

"Let's try the smoking room," Jack said.

And there they all were. Sitting as large as life in big armchairs as if nothing had happened.

There was Ralph laughing and joking with his back to the door, she could have hit him over the head with her handbag. Dick Bowes saw them first, which was unusual for him, as he was always ~~seemed~~ half-seas over. They all turned round and stared at them, Ruth included.

"Where are you going?" Ruth asked Jack, her mouth open.

"Going? We've been!"

"Where?" They all gaped.

Janet took over, speaking to Ralph. "What did you do that for?"

"What?"

"Come down here without saying a word. We thought you'd gone home."

"Gone home?"

"We've been scouring Pyfield Green for you!"

"What?"

"Oh, don't keep saying what!" Janet cried, and drew a laugh.

"And how would I get home?" he asked her.

"In the car of course!"

"I haven't got the keys! They're in your bag."

"Oh." She looked round in a slightly pleading way, and they had a good laugh at her expense again.

"Anyway, come and sit down and have a drink, duck," Polly said. "You'll need it if you've ^{been} alone in a car with him--- these dark buggers are all the same!" And she let out an enormous belly laugh. They must have been stoking up like a ship's furnace. Even Ruth looked as soused as a herring.

"I thought that was a bloody long dance you two was having!" Polly went on. She nudged Janet, who'd sat down at her side on the settee. "What ^{was he like} ~~did he do~~ in the car, mate? Hope he found the right gears, eh, Ruth?"

"Well, what's it going to be, Jan?" Splinter asked her with something comforting in his voice.

"I think I'll have a whisky after all that."

"But didn't the waiter tell you we were down here?" Ralph asked.

"There wasn't a waiter in sight," Jack said. "Just an empty table."

"Sounds fishy to me," Polly said quietly. And she made them all laugh again with her look.

"We even went to Splinter's place," Jack told Ralph.

"You've had quite an outing!"

"You should have phoned from our place," Ruth said, "and we could all have driven over."

(fals)
"I couldn't," Ralph said. "Not without the keys."

"No, that's right!"

"I wonder the chap in the cloakroom didn't tell you,"
Connie said. "He knew we didn't go out."

"He was being discreet, mate," Polly said. "He thought they'd slipped out for ^{some} ~~a bit of~~ slap and tickle." She turned to Janet: "I bet they don't that in the Salvation Army."

They got on to another subject after the drinks came and she sank further into her chair, feeling she could breathe properly at last. Dick Bowes was almost asleep, meaning it was very late. ~~His wrinkled face showed the seasons, the time of day.~~ It must be a comfort living with him, ^{she} ~~Janet~~ thought: no blame, no curiosity, just like a tree or a field. But she was accountable to Ralph for everything.

She almost dared not look at Jack: she expected his face to show traces of the last hour. But when she glanced at him it didn't. His eyes were concentrated and he was leaning forward to hear something Ralph was saying. For a fluttering moment she wondered if the last hour had meant anything to him. But then she remembered the tall, arched flight of the glowing pipe.

"We were all watching you," Ruth said to her quietly. "When you were dancing. You seemed to have springs in your legs."

Dick Bowes spoke, and everybody turned to him because it was such an event. "I wish I could get round the floor like that, anyhow."

"You could," Connie told him with mild reproof. "It's only a matter of confidence."

"I'm too slow."

"He's not too slow to get three pints of beer down ^{him} inside an hour, I've noticed," Connie told the others.

"That's different," Splinter said. "Beer travels by jet, don't it, mate?"

Herb Watson had fixed up chandeliers in this room too and they cast a make-believe grandeur over everything, conspiring with the deep, plush armchairs. She felt happy and calm. She dared to let herself think of her new life; ~~not~~ ^{that was what} for she had ~~one~~ at last.

In the corner of her eye she saw Jack fiddle in his pocket while he talked to Ralph, and she guessed this was his automatic motion when he took out his pipe. She only hoped he didn't carry two. She waited, her eyes fixed on Ruth so that she could take in Jack at the edge of her vision. He fiddled once, twice in the same pocket. Then the other pocket. Then it stopped. He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and seemed to forget all about it. His thoughts must have been contagious because Ralph lit up nervously and was soon blowing his rotten-hay stink across the table.

Janet turned to Ruth, admiring her: "You look as fresh as when you came. How do you do?"

"Steamed vegetables and dark bread," she said with a smile.

Polly's eyes were bloodshot and she looked drawn and pale. Splinter, too, seemed to be fading under the liquid weight of all his beers. There were yawns all round.

"What about it?" Ralph asked, looking at everybody.

"Yes," Polly said, "I think we've had our lot tonight, don't you?"

The men went to the cloakroom to get the coats and she

heard Splinter say in his cosy voice as they were coming back,
"I've got to be on that allotment tomorrow morning."

"Come round and have a drink one evening, duck," Polly said to her as they got up.

"Yes, we will."

They drifted out of the building with the crowd. The night was crisp and bright and clear still.

"Shouldn't be surprised if we don't get snow," she heard Dick say. "T'ards the end of the month."

Headlights were coming on and engines were starting. There were cries of goodnight. They stood in a group shaking hands, and she and Ruth kissed. She noticed the warmth of Ruth's cheek, like a little brazier, and for a moment she was frightened on her behalf.

She and Ralph walked away alone.

"Not too bad, was it?" she said.

"Not too dusty."

They got in the car and she yawned.

"Tired?" he asked.

"I'll say!"

"Well," he said with a laugh, "you've been driving all over the countryside!"

He drew on to the road and switched on his lights in one expert movement.

"I reckon we needed the fresh air after the way we danced," she said.

"I reckon you did." He added, "He certainly don't dance like a parliamentary under-secretary, does he?"

"Is he one?"

"No, but he will be if he goes on like he is doing."

They got on to the highway and began speeding along.

"You watch that boy," he said. "He'll go up like a meteor."

And his saying meteor reminded her of the pipe flying through the night.

"He says it looks as if we won't get into Europe," he went on.

She stared at him in the darkness. "Who won't?"

"England."

"Why?"

"What do you mean, why?"

"I mean what's it about?" she said.

"England's trying to get into Europe. Hasn't it got into your women's magazines yet?" He made his rippling laugh, then added, "Jack's on the trade mission. Didn't he tell you that?"

"He talked about America, I think."

"Oh, he's got a bee in his bonnet about that."

There was a pause and he spoke again: "If he didn't talk about his work what did you talk about? Because old Jack talks about nothing else."

"I noticed that!" She decided to laugh, and to make it sound deprecatory.

She realised suddenly that they were just passing the path where she and Jack had turned off, and it seemed marvellous for a moment that the clear domed sky overhead was the same sky they'd walked under only an hour or so before.

They said nothing more to each other until they were home. He quickly put the car in the garage and pulled the door down, while she glanced in the direction of Ruth's house and noticed

a tiny light that might be the bedroom.

Saturday night was 'their' night but Ralph didn't move close to her this time, and she was thankful for it. He was^h too tired and made a great fuss of himself groaⁿing and yawning. He'd never laughed so much at Polly as tonight, he said. While she and Jack were upstairs dancing she'd kept them in fits for an hour or more, which was probably why they forgot all^habout the missing couple.

And he went on to talk dreamily about the Saturday nights he'd had as a child with aunt Kate in Shoreditch. The whole family used to troop over, he said. She was a lovely woman, with fine blonde hair that stretched down to her waist when it was unravelled. And the way she swore, he said, it was like music! And she'd had the same cockney humour as Polly.

A rich voice that sent a shiver down your spine. He used to x be nervous an hour before she gave him the good^hnight kiss--- and he could only have been nine at the time. She was all gold to him. He always pictures^h her gold. She had deep gleaming eyes and a plump, rosy face and a cupid's bow mouth. And why should she have died in agony? There seemed no justice in that.

She let him fall asleep. It was so silent that the breath through her nose was like a tiny wind. She tried to imagine his face---dark, with piercing black eyes, and his smooth skin. But she couldn't. She put a pipe in his mouth to help the picture but it didn't do the trick^h. A sign of love, they said. She hoped Ruth was tired too. She hoped he was lying in the dark thinking, exactly as she was.

The next day went like a second. Ralph stayed in bed until after ten with the sheet over his head while she and Betsy got the breakfast. Then he got up in his dressing gown, looking grey. He said mixing whisky and beer in the wrong order had upset him. He didn't even light a cigarette. Betsy seemed to be starting a cold---she'd gone into the street to 'cool off' at the party, like a fool. Tim still wanted to hear all about the party from Mary---he was too in awe to trouble Betsy---and kept insisting until she was in tears. As a reprisal he stamped and broke one of Janet's nicest powder compacts which happened to be on the floor by his feet. But none of it affected her. She made a second pot of tea after breakfast and did the washing and drying up herself. Then she laid the fire in the sitting room and hoovered the carpet, and after lighting the fire she installed Ralph by it with a hot water bottle in his lap. All the beds were made before noon.

There were clouds outside but they weren't dreary because they looked like snow-clouds, as Dick had promised, and cast a dim, cosy light in the rooms. She heard Ralph rustling the Sunday papers, whole layers of them, and she looked forward to getting her magazines out again after lunch. She didn't think of anything in particular. She only knew her life had changed, and it was enough for her. She couldn't bear to think what it had been like only yesterday.

She wondered that she'd ever attached so much importance to sunshine. She didn't care if it rained every day for a month of Sundays. And the snow could come or stay put as it liked.

They'd bought a nice joint of salted beef the day before,

and she'd had it in soak all night. That was Ralph's favourite, with young boiled carrots, potatoes and peas-pudding. Tim was so made for peas-pudding that she had to make enough for an army. For afters she made real custard---like her mother, she never allowed custard powder in the house; and a nice apple pie ^{fl}avoured with cloves and cinnamon. Betsy wandered in and out trying to look like a ghost and making loud sniffing noises, because she meant to miss school next day; until Janet said, "All right, darling, I get your point!"

She busied herself patting the edge of the pastry with a knife so that the children would get bored and leave her to imagine all sorts of things alone. Still she couldn't see his face: it was only a vague feeling of liberation which chose his face as its centre.

The fire crackled and spat in the sitting room and she found herself looking forward to television which started at three with a brains' trust, after she and Ralph had dozed in their chairs and the children had been sent out. There, in front of the TV screen, she could dream for hours. Then the street would get darker and you'd begin to see the flames against the wall, and after tea Ralph might get her a whisky and soda with the ice tinkling musically, while the children took a bath upstairs under Betsy's supervision.

They watched television all evening after she'd bathed the children because Betsy was snuffling too much. ^{She} ~~Janet~~ downed three whiskies and hardly felt it. He was yawning before she even began thinking about bed. And not once did she fix her mind on anything. She just let it drift.

"I hope you don't get the cold too," she said.

"Oh, I'm all right."

She glanced at him for a moment frightened that he knew more than he showed. But he was looking at the screen with a placid face. Or was he a better actor than she realised? She felt a rush of shame.

"Shall I get you something hot?"

"Stop worrying, for Christ's sake!"

That was better. He wouldn't shout if anything was wrong.

That night became their night. She was surprised that she didn't recoil from him in any way or feel strange. And this surprise was ^{hers} a surprise to her: as if she already belonged to someone else. In fact, there was a new withheld excitement. Hardly for a moment did the image of Jack leave her mind---or rather the feeling of Jack. And it made Ralph separate from her for the first time. The excitement of this seemed to communicate itself to him too. He seemed less---behind a blanket. She didn't try in any way. She didn't care. And that too seemed a source of new excitement.

She was aware of keeping her loyalty to Jack fiercely and obstinately and a quick thought of divorce even crossed her mind. But she couldn't imagine leaving Ralph. She didn't even find she wanted to. Yet it was as if she and Jack had been married all these years, not she and Ralph. It was as if they were making intimate plans together in the silence. Only afterwards, when Ralph had moved away from her again and they were both quiet, did she feel the madness of it, in a drowsy and also ecstatic way. Ruth was her best friend, Jack she hardly knew etc, etc. She wanted to stay awake all night. She saw so clearly how your life changed, even to the nerves of your body, when you had a dream.

Ralph got up earlier than usual and brought her a cup of tea in bed. Mary was already awake and asking not to go to school. As for Betsy, she couldn't breathe through her nose and had the sheet right up to her eyes when Janet looked in. So she decided to take only Tim. He hadn't woken up yet.

It was still dark outside and she loved the way the yellow glow from the upstairs rooms fell on their own trees, ~~which~~ which were bare and still. Ralph was moving about quickly downstairs and she heard the milkman lay three pints on the step, and then there was the electric whine of his van as it drew away. Ralph raked out the fire and took the ashes into the back yard. He'd switched on the news and she heard the announcer's empty, fluting voice, as if there couldn't be anything exciting or unusual in the world. But she knew better than that.

"You haven't even a snuffle," she said to Mary quietly as she took Tim out of his bed. "I know your game."

"I'm going to have one," Mary said, turning the pages of her book.

She put Tim in the basket chair in the kitchen, wrapped in a blanket. He was still half-asleep and she noticed again how like Ralph he was, only Ralph with no defences in his face.

"Looks like rain," Ralph murmured from the hall as he pulled his raincoat on. Light was just breaking through and there seemed to be a heavy mist, which accounted for the deep silence round the house.

Early morning exercises started on the radio and ^{she} turned it down. Then she saw Ralph off: his raincoat was green-cum-grey-cum-brown and had a schoolboy belt round it which he always secured at the second hole. She kissed him affectionately and noticed the slight wrinkle round his mouth and his puffy skin

under the eyes, and the smoothness of his chin, and the way he glanced at her quickly as he walked down the path, with something intimate yet also wondering and even amused in his eye.

Tim was so pleased to have breakfast alone with her downstairs that he forgot to ask why he was going to school alone until he was in the schoolyard. Ralph was right---there was a nasty drizzle. Most of the trucks still had their headlights on along the highway. After seeing Tim in his class she went along to the other school and gave her excuses for the girls. The teacher stayed and chatted with her a while. She seemed to like Janet, and looked at her wistfully, with admiration perhaps.

She took ^{the girls'} ~~their~~ breakfast upstairs when she got back, which was so unusual that Mary gaped at her, especially as she ^{felt} ~~was~~ as right as rain. Janet enjoyed watching them drag the low table into the middle of the room and sit down under the glowing lamp like a couple of old matrons. Betsy's nose was red, and Janet put kleenex on her shopping list---she wasn't going to have a pile of sopping handkerchiefs at the end of the day. She was in such excitement that she had to hold herself in all the time in case the children noticed. And with Ralph too she'd had to be careful. She was surprised to find that she didn't want actually to be with Jack. He would be in London now. She only required him to be in the world somewhere. They might see each other in a week, two weeks---it didn't matter because the longer it was the more chance it gave her to dream.

She went to the supermarket and strolled under the harsh, silvery lighting that made everybody look queer. Only when she was standing gazing down at some poor trussed chickens wrapped in cellophane did she realise that she'd come shopping in Pyfield Green for the first time in a year or more. But she

didn't even notice the crammed narrow street outside where trucks and cars and singledecker buses pushed and gr~~o~~aned and squeezed their way along. Nor the tired, prematurely lined faces, which ~~she noticed~~ sometimes broke into brave smiles. She'd just driven there automatically, as the most convenient thing, instead of driving miles to Chatsdowne.

She wondered if she ought to get the chicken. They looked so awful and limp, lying there. She knew they were broiler house, produced by so many million a year. The flesh was rubbery and tasteless, as you might expect if you kept the poor creature out of the light of day all its life and then overfed it and gave it hardly any space to move in. Ruth had told her once that there'd been a case in Germany where a boy was in hospital and his parents brought him a chicken nearly every day which they insisted he must have instead of the usual food, and after a few weeks he'd started growing breasts, because of the hormone feeding that the chickens got. And some people said that these things had a lot to do with cancer, and that was why so many young people were getting cancer nowadays, because of all this sort of artificial food. Of course, Ruth could be a bit cranky about that sort of thing.

She knew she'd get a better chicken at the butcher's but he was closed on Mondays. It was a few shillings dearer, too. She put out her hand to pick up one of the limp corpses but stopped. No, she wasn't even going to risk it. She suddenly remembered Jack and Ruth---their faces, how clear they were, and their eyes, their nice skins. At least they were healthy people. And none of the others were. Not even Dick Bowes. His health was painted on by the sun every day, you could see it didn't go underneath. So she got some chuck steak which was

lying at the bottom of the freeze. It was the cheapest cut but the nicest if you braised it slowly in the oven with some onions and tomatoes, for five or six hours. Her mother had done that on Tuesdays. Nowadays the women seemed ~~to be~~ ashamed to ask the butcher for such a cheap meat, or perhaps that was because they knew nothing about the cuts like their mothers did, and so they didn't know what to ask for.

She wasn't going to let her children grow up cripples. Their bones had to grow, and for that you needed fresh and natural food. And she wasn't going to have them sniffing with colds all through the winter like Hilda's children.

8.

She saw Jack sooner than she thought. It was only three days later. On Thursday evening she said to Ralph on a whim, just as he was putting television on, "Let's go over to Polly's. She invited us." He was ducking in his characteristic way as if he'd never been given the full human right to stand up straight, and at first he said nothing.

Then, "How do you know he'll be in?"

"We'll take the chance."

And she walked out of the room to get her coat, not knowing why she was being so firm about it. Only later, when she saw Jack standing by the round, tasselled lampshade in the middle of Polly's room, did she realise how little we know about fate.

Polly was the only one of them who had a real parlour in the old style, with a fire burning in a tiny grate and two easy---but not too easy---chairs on either side, with a table plumb in the middle of the room where you were bound to knock into it

whichever way you came. There was a pile tablecloth, a great polished sideboard with photographs of weddings and a biscuit barrel that was never used even for biscuits, and then on one side of the fireplace there was a tall dresser with all the cups and saucers and plates collecting the dust. The enormous silk lampshade hung in the middle over the table, exactly as it had done in the old gas days, when you nearly blew yourself up every night. She loved all that. It was like being back in York again, with the same suffocating heat---too many people in too small a room, with the window tight closed.

And he was nothing like what she'd been imagining him. She noticed that at once. She realised that a vague and thrilling presence had been with her for the past three days, and of course when that presence was suddenly filled with dark, piercing eyes and a sharp nose, and black groomed hair, she felt a sort of shock. Half of wonder and half of fear. He was the only other man there besides Splinter. And he'd only just come. Dropped round that minute on an impulse and not even sat down yet! He smiled at her and then his eyes flickered away at once to Ralph. Was that a fear of showing too much? He and Ralph said hullo in a hearty way.

"She tore me away from my quiz," Ralph said, sitting down.

"Good for you, Jan!" Polly said.

"We mustn't be too long," Janet told them. "Betsy's got a nasty cold."

"Here, Jack, come and sit by the fire, mate," Splinter said.

But Jack shook his head and said he'd stay where he was. "That's dad's chair," he added with a smile, meaning the leather chair by the hearth, and Splinter did give it a look of quiet

possession.

"Where's Ruth?" she asked him.

"Ironing. I got a bit restless."

"It's because you're always travelling."

"I expect so." He fingered his glass of beer as Splinter put it down for him and said, "Oh, it's scream---I was pinched today!"

"Go on!"

"What for?" Ralph asked.

"Nothing much. Parking without lights. There was that bloody rail-strike last week and I had to drive to Chatsdowne instead of here. I left the car outside the station and of course when I got back from town it was lights out. I had a bit of overtime. And the blighters pinched me."

"That's all right, mate," Splinter said, settling into his chair after he'd given Janet her port and lemon. "It'll only be a couple of quid. If you plead guilty."

"It's that pig at the station. He got me to talk, you see. And then he took one little thing ^{I said} and typed it out as my statement. I said I travelled so much I got mixed up with all the different rules and regulations. And he fixed me on that. What sort of pig is it who gets you to talk to him like a human being and then fixes you?" He added, "It made me ashamed to be English."

"Oh, you get that everywhere," Ralph said.

"I've never met it on the continent."

"It is that short feller with fussy hair?" Splinter asked.

"That's right."

"It depends who you get," Polly said. "I parked on the wrong side of the road in Chatsdowne and ever such a nice chap

came, all in shining buttons. I've been parking wrong ever since to get him to come again!"

"The police have certainly got their work out out---dealing with people like you," Splinter said with a smile. "They're bound to get some blame."

"It's like this bottleneck," Janet said to Polly. "There's always somebody pops up with an objection."

"They say the doctor can't move his practice back fifty yards," Splinter said. "That's the latest thing. I think he's got a case."

"Everybody's got a case!" Jack said. She was glad he spoke up---on her own lines too! "I've got a case for working my lawn mower at three o'clock in the morning, but there'd be a hell of a mess if I did. It's about time the people of this country woke up a bit and turned it into a place where you can live, instead of a blasted junkyard. But that's the trouble, the people haven't been in charge of the country for twenty years or more!"

"I bet I know who has," Splinter said with a wink at Ralph.

"I don't see as Europe's our world necessarily," Ralph said.

"They civilised us, mate!" Jack cried.

"Who did?"

"Read your history books. We got our religion from the Italians and our constitution from the French."

"That doesn't mean we've got to tie ourselves down to anything."

"We've been tied down to American policies for twenty years. three thousand
And she's ~~twenty~~ miles away! How do you like that? You won't be tied down to your own kith and kin, but you will to a country

that thinks of yours as an old-fashioned museum!"

"Oh, well, we know what you feel on that subject, mate," Ralph said quietly.

"Perhaps I know more about how Americans feel than you do. And they don't respect your country, Ralph, which means they don't respect you. Of course, they think you're great. You're a great representative of fine old traditions or some bloody rot like that. But you're not up to date, you're not in the real world. That's what ~~they~~ ^{they} think and I don't call that respect. And ~~the~~ ^{they} thinks ~~you~~ won the last war for you!"

"It may be," Ralph said with the same quietness, "you don't meet all the Americans there are in the world. So how can you say?"

"I've got a mind, I can put two and two together."

"The ones I've met have been a bloody sight nicer people than half the English I know, anyhow," Splinter said.

"Who's talking about being nice? I tell you, the ones I know like us more than they like Americans. But that's not what I mean. I'm talking about whether they see us as equals. Whether they think we can make as good a performance. And they don't. People can be ~~be~~ very nice and open and secretly very patronising." He took a drink of beer. "Oh, they're the best friends I've had. Don't mistake me. And England's supposed to be free. I think it's bloody shameful. The people of this country have been sold, and for a not very high price."

"How's that?"

"Oh, well, a few shares sold here, a subsidiary firm set up there. You know the arrangement, the Americans have a forty-nine or sometimes fifty-one percent interest in your firm which means you can expand. Or they ask you to set up a

small company for them under your ^{own} name. So the number of America's commercial travellers grows year by year."

Splinter smiled across at Ralph. "I reckon he should put up for local MP, don't you?"

"I'd rather be seen dead!" Jack said with a laugh.

"Well, I'll say this, Jack," Splinter said. "I agree with you in one thing---the old country's not in a good state."

"I'll say it isn't. It doesn't ^{even} exist. A country doesn't exist unless it's independent." He turned to Ralph squarely,

as if going on with a previous conversation. "And that's why people haven't got the jobs they want and the jobs they ~~are~~ fit.

Because the wrong people have got to the top. ~~The people who can be relied on to turn out an England that was killed by the last war.~~ That's what's been holding us back. ^{gave us} After

"I don't see as I've been held back," Ralph said, puffing in a strangely heavy way at his cigarette.

"You're always talking about what a fool old Sims," Janet said. "And how he loses business all the time."

"Business isn't everything," Ralph said. "We had business for a hundred years, we were the richest country in the world, but I don't see it did us any good in our heart and souls."

"All right, then," Jack said, "but if there isn't any business let's have a civilisation at least. But you can't have neither. You can't have a junkyard geared to business and then no business!"

Splinter helped her to another port and lemon and she felt an unaccountable rush of happiness. She looked across at Jack with a fierce and open gaze, fixing him with her eyes possessively, and not caring if anyone noticed. Above all, she noted that he hadn't once put a pipe near his mouth or even fiddled in

his pocket. ^{There} ~~That~~ was more eloquent^{ce in that} than anything he might do with his eyes. She didn't ask for glances. And ^{these} they were dangerous---she must realise that, with Ralph sitting close by. She ~~st~~took a sip of her drink and then gazed round the room as she felt she'd never gazed at anything before in her life, with her head lifted up and a sense inside her of being in utter self-command. She realised how humbled she'd always been, since childhood---taught never to speak out of turn, never to mention ^{her} ~~yourself~~. Never put yourself forward, ^{always} study ~~other~~ people's feelings: these were the didactic themes of English life. And in most people it had gone too far. They ~~needed~~ a dose of salts.

Ruth ^{you}
"Did ~~Ralph~~ tell ^{you} we've got a cousin of mine coming this week?" he asked her.

"Oh, yes!" she said, startled by his sudden piercing glance.

"She's separated," Jack went on. "Husband's quite a nice chap. Works up in Preston."

"I know Preston all right!" she said.

"Any children?" Ralph asked.

"No. That's a blessing."

"She'll be able to baby-sit instead of Rachel Simmons," Polly said. Rachel was used quite a lot locally, and she got half-a-crown an hour.

"Yes, I reckon young Rachel gets a bit fed up at times," Splinter said.

"Don't you believe it," Polly told him. "She makes quite a penny."

"That's all being saved up for the university," Janet said.

"University! It's a lot of damned rot," Polly replied.

"A university counts," Jack said. "If I'd been to one

I wouldn't be where I am today, anyway."

"I wouldn't mind being where you are today!" Splinter said with a smile.

"I wonder," Ralph said. "We've got a chap in our ^{office,} ~~factory~~ he's been to Cambridge and he's falling asleep on the job."

"He gets more money than you, I bet," Jack said.

"Not much."

"According to our boss," Splinter said, "they don't make use of the clever people today like they should. Which is why so many of them leave the country, if you ask me."

"The finest brains have left this country, let's put it that way," Jack said. "And half of them are in America."

She heard the distant rattle of the train as it drew up at Pyfield Green station and it reminded her of her childhood when she sat with her legs curled up by the fire reading a boy's annual while her father dozed in the other armchair; and the train would sound exactly the same except that it would puff, being a steam engine. She would never have dreamed then that life could bring her such strange adventures. At the moment she felt as mysterious as Cleopatra.

Polly was puffing at her cigarette in her firm, mechanical way. She wasn't providing her usual fun this evening.

"Come on," Janet said to Ralph, "drink your wallop up. I don't like leaving the children too long."

"I'm all ~~all~~ aches and pains," Polly said to her quietly as they ~~all~~ got up, glancing to see if Splinter was near by, but he was getting the coats.

"Why don't you go and see a doctor?"

"I'm scared, that's why."

"You could give me a lift, Ralph," Jack said. "I walked."

"What about Saturday?" Polly asked as they got to the door.
"Anything doing this week?"

"Not at Herb Watson's prices, eh, Ted?" Ralph said.

"No, I reckon that's a once-a-month lark." And he added,
"More Jack's income group."

"Don't you believe it, mate," Jack said. He stood outside
with his hands in his pockets. "They give me travel expenses
but it's still cheaper staying at home."

"Arthur Simmons said something about seeing us round the
pub," Splinter told Ralph.

"Oh, well, we might see you then, eh?" Ralph said.

The night was clear and cold again. "That drizzle seems
to have passed," she said to Polly.

Ralph started the engine up and Jack got in the back.
He was behind her in the darkness: it was like her back being
exposed, vibrant with awareness. The headlights seemed to her
like beacons flickering over a landscape she'd never seen before,
promising a life she dared not visualise, because it would be so
free and exciting. She recognised none of the shops. The
bleak supermarket where she'd stood that morning was as new as
on their first day there. And again she felt a peculiar int-
imacy with the clear sky overhead, as if he and she belonged to
it incognito, without past or attachments. And this made the
attachments which she did have easier. He was silent in the
back of the car. If only he'd touch her or something. Or
lean forward in the darkness, put his head between hers and
Ralph's. Only give a sign. And perhaps look at her quietly.
His piercing eyes would be softened by the dim light. She
didn't need him physically. She wanted him as a deeper lover
than that. She only wanted to know that he was well, and that

he was somewhere in the world. Yet more than that, too: she wanted a sign. She wanted to know that he felt the same too. Yes, with that she'd be deliriously happy, she wouldn't have to see him for weeks, months. But the sign was what was lacking.

He and Ralph talked to each other but she didn't catch a word. They stopped outside Jack's place and she saw that a light was on, beyond the trees. He jumped out and leaned down towards her window to say good^enight. She turned towards him slowly, not wanting to show any feeling. She waited. But all he did was nod to them in the darkness and call out, "Well, good night! Don't forget what I said, Ralph! Sleep tight!"

And Ralph turned the car round. She watched him walk between the trees to the house. In a moment he was lost, in another they were home. She felt momentarily numb. He hadn't even looked at her. Or perhaps he had.

But as they walked into the little hall and Ralph bolted the front door she realised that she hadn't looked at him either--- not really looked. She'd been afraid to show him a sign: should she be astonished that he was afraid to show one, too? Of course! Did she expect him to grip her hand or something with Ralph a foot away from her shoulder? At once the numbness left her.

She surprised herself next morning by putting^{on} a bright dress to take the children to school. She refused to ^let Mary stay at home any more with a sham cold, and she bundled her and Tim off early, putting Betsy by the stove in the kitchen with the radio on full blast. There were white clouds drifting thickly over the house, a really dismal day. After she'd seen Tim into the playground she drove straight to Chatsdowne and parked behind

the High Street. Then she went to Blithe's and strolled around for an hour among the thick axminster and persian carpets, and the clean-looking deal furniture with cute china services displayed on dining tables, and easy chairs with sort of wings, and wonderful curtain material marked as an import from Austria which reminded her of cosy farmhouses in the snow. One piece caught her eye, a cross between a chest-of-drawers and a tallboy, but in a modern style with slim legs and six wide drawers. It was sensible, you didn't have to stoop to get at anything, and it looked a dream. But if she put it in the bedroom she'd have to get rid of everything else. Assuming that Ralph let her buy it. They could always get it on the never-never. She could pay it off quietly, from what he allowed her. She could have it delivered that very day if she wished. He'd come in and see it standing against the wall.

But her courage failed her. There were other things to get before a chest-of-drawers. A carpet, for instance. That she could think about. And she hurried out of the stores. On the way down she passed the coffee room, or rather, on walking past she found herself suddenly walking in, and then sitting down in a cosy corner with dim, russet lights set in the walls all round her. Which she'd never dreamed of doing before. The waitress brought her a coffee and a piece of plum cake. She looked at herself in ^{her} the pocket mirror: she looked healthier than she could ever remember; her eyes were bright, she caught a look of ardour in them suddenly. All of a sudden she had a fit of depression at the thought of returning home. It was the silence of the house more than anything---even when the radio was full on; the heavy furniture, the way her own mirror looked at her in the bedroom. The little kitchen was nice; she would

sit in there with Betsy. And take home a few magazines. She determined to get herself a dressing table with one drawer and a slab of glass on top, and fit a nice piece of material round it; and then, one day, the tallboy she'd seen. But she wasn't going to sit in front of that old mirror again with her knees sticking into brass drawer handles, every time she wanted to dress. The idea!

That evening Ralph unknowingly thrilled ^{her} by talking about Jack.

"Of course," he said, stubbing out a cigarette, "I expect he sees things different, being abroad a lot of the time."

"Do you think he's right?"

"What about?"

She couldn't think what about; she only wanted him to say, yes, he's right about everything.

"Well, about America," she said.

"They fought the war with us. I don't know what we'd have done without them."

"It wasn't just our war. It was theirs as well. Of course they fought in it!" she said hotly, wanting to defend Jack. Then she tried to check herself.

He looked at her and smiled. "What, has he been at you, then?"

She flushed. "In what way, been at me?" Her heart was beating fast.

"I mean on the America beat. I didn't know he'd tried to work on you as well."

"I don't know what you mean," she said breathlessly.

"Oh, well." He looked back at the television screen.

"He can't be blamed for trying to get converts. If he's going

to stand for parliament."

She was still breathing heavily. She watched him out of the corner of her eye, waiting for a clear sign. But he seemed to be concentrating on the programme. She thought all was well. But she couldn't be sure. It put her on her guard.

"Like a drink?" he said.

"No, thanks. Why don't you?"

"I think I will." He got up. "You sure, duck?"

"Well, I might have a little nip."

And she knew it was all right. She breathed out long with relief. But she must be on her guard. She glanced at him again but it seemed to her that his face was placid and unconcerned as he poured the drinks.

"I told Splinter we might go round to the pub Saturday night," he said.

"Oh, that's nice."

She dared not ask if Jack would come. Yet normally she would have asked. Perhaps she should ^{force} ~~make~~ herself do so, to make things seem normal. But she couldn't. She couldn't risk the tremor in her voice.

And she didn't care if he came or not. She would sit in her usual corner happily waiting. The expectation would be enough. She could already see herself in the smoky atmosphere of the Bear drinking her gin and tonic.

It made her sleep well that night.

She drank port and lemon, not gin and tonic. The others laughed at her for being old-fashioned but she laughed back at

them. Why they allowed port and lemon at home but not in the pub she didn't know, but it was one of the conventions.

She'd had a triumph that morning: she'd got Ralph to agree on a fitted carpet for the sitting room, and she would move the sitting-room one into the bedroom, which would hide the awful oil-cloth he'd put down when they moved in. She told him the monthly rate and he said, "It's OK by me." What she didn't tell him was that it cost nearly twice as much as he thought; and secondly that it would be down on the floor, fitted, before he came home on Monday evening. She'd phoned the stores in Chatsdowne while they were out shopping, and they said a man would be there about four Monday afternoon, and that would be perfectly all right, madam. Betsy would be back at school. A surprise for them all.

The pub was at the end of the High Street where there was a last garage and a few corrugated huts left over from the war. So it stood with one foot in the country. The windows were imitation Tudor and there were modern beams across the ceiling. Everything had a clean and new look, including the round table they always sat at and the armchairs with sit-up backs. This was their favourite corner, where they could see the bar with its bright strip-lighting and gay bottles with concealed lights behind them, and they were out of the draught from the door. Jimmy Barnes and Hilda turned up, and Splinter and Polly were already there when they arrived. He was quite a decent chap, Jim, really, for all his nasty mannerisms. He had a way of twitching his head a little to one side like a ferret when he was going to make one of his dirty jokes. And as always the men got on one side of the table to listen to him, and she and Polly and Hilda were on the other. It made her sick but tonight

she could bear anything.

She was almost certain he wouldn't come. Ruth hadn't said anything. And she usually did on the Friday if they were going to see each other.

Hilda was muffled up to her neck in pink frilled silk as usual, and as usual Janet felt like giving Jim a piece of her mind about it. A man who professed so much interest in the subject ought to let her show just a wee little bit, you'd think. She herself had thrown on an old jumper and had hardly troubled to do her hair. That surprised her: she did what she felt like---for the first time in her life. And Ralph gave her a little glance before they left the house as if to say, 'You're got up well tonight, aren't you?' It only went to show, if you felt all right you looked all right. Because she was loved for the first time in her life. That was it. She'd never been really loved before. Even Ralph hadn't loved ^{her} so completely that she felt the rightness of every inch of her body, every gesture she made.

As usual on Saturday night it was crowded. There was a crackling log fire opposite the bar, and a pleasant heat came off. Did her new life show in her eyes? She wondered. The long ^{bar} glittered brightly and there was the sound of men's laughter through the hatch from the public bar. She was determined he should show her a sign soon: a lighted pipe sailing through the air wasn't enough. She would spend the whole evening thinking up a way of achieving that, while everybody talked pleasantly round her.

"My wife's mortgaging my life," she heard Ralph tell them.

Then came the story of the carpet. She confirmed it with a smile and then said something to Hilda about how you got fed

up with the same things round you all the time, didn't you?

She happened to ask for more lemon and this made Jim say to Ralph as he went up to the bar, with a ferrety twitch of his head, "Tell Tom to give her lemon another squeeze, mate." Tom was the barman.

There was a kind of decayed snigger from Ralph and Splinter, and Jim went on, "I used to be quite a hand at lemon-squeezing, eh, Hilda?"

And Hilda gave him one of her demure, faintly suggestive glances. "It's only what I taught you," she said.

"Here," Jim said, nudging Splinter with a twinkling look, "did you hear that?" And he added, "No wonder I can't take the bends like I used to!"

All his images were from plungers, gears, highway codes. What a funny little world he must live in. And there was something secretive in it that Hilda seemed to enjoy. Perhaps the silk up to her chin was her own choice. Again Janet felt she was the luckiest person in the world. Only in childhood, on Saturday afternoons before her mother took her to the Grand or the Broadway Palace, had she had that same feeling. Sitting in the darkness of those ~~Fork~~ cinemas she'd shuddered with the same happiness, ~~sometimes~~.

"I thought Pat was coming?" she asked Polly.

"That's what she told us. But you never know with them. He wants to stand for the local council, she told me."

Janet smiled. "All we'll have is candidates soon---what with him and Jack."

"Oh, all Arthur Simmons has got is horn-rimmed ^{glasses} ~~spectacles~~," Polly said. "And that ^{don't} ~~doesn't~~ make a man clever." And she added, to Janet's excitement, "I said to Ted last night, I said,

if he had Jack's head on his shoulders he wouldn't do so bad!"

With her third port and lemon she would go and phone Ruth. Why not? They were friends---the others wouldn't think it funny a bit.

"Did you see Ruth?" she asked Polly. "I missed her yesterday."

"I thought she said they were going out tonight or something, didn't she?"

She had a flutter of disappointment. That decided it--- she would phone.

"Have you got some coppers?" she asked Ralph.

"Half a mo." He felt in his pocket. "Who you going to phone, your boyfriend?"

She looked at him quickly, with sudden blazing eyes of fear, but she saw this was only a pub joke, mostly for the ferret's benefit.

"I'm here, sweetheart, sitting in front of you! What do you want to phone me for?" Jim cried.

"Here." Ralph gave her some coppers across the table.

"I thought I'd phone Ruth," she said quietly.

She got up and walked across to the little booth on the other side of the bar. To her astonishment Ruth was at home. She hardly knew what to say.

"I wondered if you were coming," she said. "We're at the Bear."

"I can't, Jan---I think Cath's caught your Betsy's cold."

"Oh, dear!"

"Jack's coming. He's bringing Dosh."

There was a long pause and she said in a stumbling way, "He's coming?"

"Yes. . . He wants to bring Dosh along."

"Who's that?"

Ruth laughed. "You're so funny. . . I told you dozens of times about his cousin Dorothy."

"Oh!"

"The one from Preston."

"Oh, yes, the one who's separated! That'll be nice."

"The penny's dropped," Ruth said.

She wanted to run back into the bar in case he'd come already. She peeped through the misty glass but could only see the vague flicker of the logs, and the heavy shadow of a man as he passed with a glass in his hand.

Ruth was speaking. "I hope it works out."

"Yes, so do I." And she added, "Well, I'll be seeing you, Ruth."

"Don't let him come home too late. She had a long journey too, she only arrived this afternoon."

"All right."

She slammed the receiver down and pushed the door open. No, he wasn't there. She could see Ralph laughing. Her own chair faced the room, empty. She strolled back, and warmed her hands at the fire on the way. And as she raised herself up with the warmth tingling through her fingers she saw him walk through the swing doors with a blonde-haired woman behind him. *The woman's* Her cheeks were rosy and she had unusually quiet eyes: ~~there was~~ no challenge in them. ^{Jack} He was wearing the same suit as last time. Again she had to adjust her image of him ^{to} with his actual physical self, and that was difficult because her image of him included all the good things on the earth. For a moment they wouldn't join. He seemed ~~almost~~ a total stranger. Then it

was all right: his piercing eyes and his slim, delicate face, slightly sallow-skinned, and his soft lips that could show a contradictory severeness, were suddenly in focus. She watched him say something with a smile to Ralph and the men all got up. The woman was introduced. Janet had already forgotten her name. She was so fascinated watching them that she couldn't leave the fire. Only when the woman had shaken hands all round, in her quiet composed way that was like a flower, did she move forward. Just at that point Ralph was looking round for her.

Jack turned and she met his eyes. He smiled briefly, "Hullo, Jan," and introduced the cousin. Again Janet was struck by her composure: ~~there was~~ complete stillness, even in her hands. And it was a different stillness from Ruth's, though she couldn't tell in exactly what way. The men were still standing up, and two more chairs were bought. Splinter looked rather shy and Jimmy Barnes had a slight smile playing on his lips---his form of shyness too, perhaps.

~~"Have you"~~ had a long journey, dear?" Polly asked the cousin.

"Not too bad. Only Preston."

They all sat down.

"Oh, are you from the north?" Janet asked brightly.

"Well, my husband's working up there. I'm a Londoner really. I can tell where you're from."

"You can't mistake that accent!" Ralph said with a smile.

"She's been trying to get rid of it for years!"

"I like the north," the other woman said to her confidentially. "I like the people. They're genuine."

Janet noticed the bloom of her skin, making Polly's look like yellow parchment. And her full breasts, under a loose jumper. Her eyes were a deep blue, contrasting with her hair;

and her mouth had something rich about it, a cupid's bow.

"Is it chilly up there still?" Janet asked her.

"Yes, we had snow this week."

"That means it's on the way down," Splinter said.

"That's what I miss in the south," Janet said. "The crisp air. It seems to give you an appetite."

"Oh, we get enough crisp air down here, don't you worry!" Polly said.

"Where do you come from exactly?" the woman asked.

"York. At least we moved there. I was born in a mining village."

"Oh. I like York. I always used to cadge a lift from my husband if he was going there."

"Dosh and I were sweethearts once," Jack said to Ralph with a wink. "But later on she wouldn't have me."

Janet smiled, but still it sent a little tremor through her body: he shouldn't even joke about it. She looked at the other woman with the slightest momentary glint of suspicion.

"You were too ugly!" the cousin said with a laugh. She had a way, Janet noticed, of making everything seem gay and sparkling, just by the way she spoke.

"Anyway, it would have been in-breeding," Jim Barnes put in with his nasty smirk. But no one took any notice.

"Jack isn't so bad," Polly said. "He likes the French girls, don't you, mate?"

"Are you still away a lot?" his cousin asked him, turning to him intimately.

"Well, I seem to be living on an aeroplane these days, that's all."

"It wouldn't do for me," Splinter said.

"Nor for me," Hilda Barnes told everybody with a shudder.

"When I hear those jets go over I think to myself, well, you're braver than I am up there!" Polly said.

"Oh, you gets used to it, eh, Jack?" Jim asked.

"Not really. It gets worse all the time."

"Go on!"

The men listened to him in respectful silence.

"Still, I only do short trips."

"Well, here's health!"

They all drank to the newcomer.

"I see the U.S. army's putting a rocket emplacement at the bottom of your garden, mate," ^{Jim Barnes} ~~Jack~~/said to Jack as if he'd been saving it up a long time.

"That'd be the day," Jack murmured with a smile, though he didn't like his leg pulled on that subject.

"To protect you against the Russians, mate---and keep you in check yourself." Jim was the only one of the men who sided completely with Jack, because he'd once been a communist, so Ralph told her.

Jack said nothing, only looked away.

"Is your husband coming down later on?" Ralph asked the cousin, leaning his elbows on the sides of his chair and making a faint rocking motion.

The woman turned to him with a perfectly tranquil gaze and said, "We're separated."

"Oh."

"I still see him. We're friends." She took a sip from her gin and tonic. "He likes this better than he likes me."

"Likes what?" Ralph asked.

"This." She pointed to her glass as she set it down.

"Oh, well," Ralph said, "we all like a drop now and then."

"But he's very nice, when all's said and done. He never gets nasty when he drinks. Eh, Jack?"

"Oh, he doesn't get nasty. Still, you can't live with that sort of thing."

"No, of course, not," Ralph said.

Janet could hear the cockney in her voice. She spoke in a level way, as if reminiscing ^{all the time} ~~about something~~. Her voice suggested a sad gaiety.

"What's your husband's line?" Splinter asked.

"Textiles."

"Oh, well, that's ^a/thriving line of business."

"He started as a traveller," she went on. "Then they gave him an office and I suppose he found too much time on his hands. And too much money in his pocket." She added, "He didn't give me any, though."

"Have you got any children, dear?" ^{Hilda} ~~Patty~~ asked her.

"No." Yet she looked more motherly than any of them, Janet thought. "But I think it was travelling that started him on the liquor in the first place."

"I can understand that," Ralph said with a glance at Jack. "I used to travel once."

"Who for?"

"A London firm."

"Not in textiles?"

"No."

"Well, you've got to be the type," the woman said. "My husband's always been a bit loud," she added with a smile. "Check suits and snazzy ties, and all ~~that~~ sort of thing. He used to take a shooting stick round with him as a gimmick."

He never shot anything in his life---except lines."

They smiled politely.

"He sounds quite a boy," Jim Barnes said.

"It's that sort of thing gets sales. And I suppose I must have liked that sort of man to marry him," she added wistfully.

"He sounds a Tom Walls type," Ralph said.

"Who's Tom Walls?"

"Comedy actor before the war---used to have a moustache."

"It's funny, my husband had a moustache until I made him shave it off."

"That's why he took to drink!" Splinter said genially.

"Now the truth's coming out!"

"I wouldn't stay out too long to night, Jack, if I was you," Polly said. "Ruth'll be getting jealous."

"I wouldn't blame her," Jim Barnes said with an admiring glance at the cousin.

The bar was crowded now and everybody was calling their orders out at once. Tom the barman was rushing to and fro levering tops off tonic bottles and pushing glasses under the gin and whisky measures, with sweat pouring down his face. She watched him with a sense of drowsy self-sufficiency. She hadn't forgotten that one thing remained to be done: Jack must give her a sign.

Jack leaned forward to say something to Ralph, talking across Dorothy for a moment. She didn't catch what he said, only watched one short lock of black hair fall across his temple, and saw how his fine hand rested on his glass.

If he'd said to her at that moment, 'Let's go, let's leave them all,' she would have done it, she would have put down

her drink and never come back. Ralph was sitting there placidly talking, his pale, dry skin slightly enlivened by the beer, puffing his stale cigarette smoke. She remembered the dense, starry dome of the night when the two of them had walked together. She suddenly wanted to hide her face in case it showed her animation, and she took a quick gulp of her port.

But he made no sign. And she couldn't think of a way of provoking him to it. They sat there for an hour more talking on. Closing time came. The terrible lights went on and off--- the signals of her doom. She turned away from him angrily as they all walked towards the swing doors, an act which he didn't seem to notice. Only Ralph gave her a slight glance. Dorothy was like an island of consolation, with her still, measured way of walking.

In the car-park outside she turned to Jack suddenly and said, "Ruth told me to get you back home early, so I won't invite you for a drink." And she gave him a pale, defiant look in the darkness.

"That's all right," he said easily. "It's been a long day for Dosh, too. Look, why don't you come round later in the week and have a natter?"

"We'd love to," she said, giving way at once to his easy tone.

Ralph said nothing all the way home. Yet he seemed light and cheerful, without doing anything to show it. The clear, starry sky outside was now wasted on her. They pulled the garage door up together and he drove the car in. Jack's car drove past swiftly on the road. There were two hoots on the horn. She turned---please give me a sign! she thought. Don't leave me derelict like this!

And with an immense thanksgiving that went through her body she heard him call out across the night, "Sleep tight, Jan!" And she saw the white cuff of his sleeve move up and down once in a wave, outside the car-window. He had said Jan. He had actually used her name.

Ralph didn't touch her that night, though it was Saturday. Yet he didn't seem to be sleeping. She wondered if he was sharing everything with her, each step in her experience. She knew she could never leave this man, though even as she thought this her mind was full of Jack. First the curved ^{flight} ~~tip~~ of his glowing pipe, then the flashing movement of his cuff: these were the images she kept in mind until she was asleep. She had got her sign.

10.

On Monday afternoon she got herself an early cup of tea and waited for the carpet men. She'd managed to get Betsy to school and that morning she'd cleared out the sitting room as best she could, clearing the centre and putting the little tables and the television set in the hall. The men could do the rest. Not a chink of the floor would be showing: just one marvellous soft expanse of blue carpet.

They ~~men~~ arrived almost on the dot and carried the gorgeous blue thing into the house on their shoulders---behaving as if it was the most ^{usual} ~~usual~~ thing in the world. Then they set to work on the furniture, moving it all to one side of the room, while she made another pot of tea. They worked swiftly and quietly, and when she peeped in from the hall to say their tea was ready it was nearly half done, giving the room an extraordinarily

splendid look, almost better than Ruth's downstairs room, except that the furniture wasn't in her class. By half past five it was all done, with every bit of floor covered. Then the furniture was back in its place, invested now with a much lighter air, as if it had all been painted. She walked across the room again and again, springing on the carpet. It felt a sacrilege to wear shoes. She'd make sure that Polly didn't come over in her stiletto heels. But the armchairs looked out of place, rather dingy and obscenely big. And she'd have to have the curtains down this week. They looked as if they had a winter's fog in them.

The children whizzed into the hall when she brought them back and suddenly skidded. They gaped and stared.

"What's that?"

"A new carpet."

"When?"

"This afternoon."

"It's absolutely fab," Betsy said.

Tim dashed upstairs with some incense a teacher had given him, leaving the girls to gape on.

"I don't want you treading all over it," Janet said.

"What are we supposed to do, fly?"

"If you can."

"I can, but I'm not sure Mary can."

"Fry your face," Mary told her.

And the rest of the evening it was, "Don't tread, Mary! Fly!"

"It makes the furniture look sort of floating," Mary said.

"That's because it doesn't really fit," Janet told her.

"Why have we got it then?"

"Because we can't afford anything else."

"But how could we afford that?" Mary asked her.

"I suppose I just had bad taste in those days, that's all."

"Oh."

"Perhaps you should take the piano out," Betsy said. She lived in fear of piano lessons which Janet had been threatening.

"No. It's the armchairs. We need something more modern."

Ralph gave a little whistle when he came in.

"Well, look at that," he said quietly.

But he disagreed about the modern armchairs.

"You mean uncomfortable ones. They're all uncomfortable."

"Ruth's aren't."

"She hasn't got one good chair for television in the place!" he said. "Her room's all carpet," he added.

She agreed there. Janet noticed that he didn't flop out by the fire at once this evening. There was an alertness about him which made her afraid for a moment. The room was so splendid that she couldn't leave it. She sat in front of the fire with her shoes off, rubbing her feet in the softness.

When he came down from reading to the children he said, "What about a drink before dinner?"

She nodded and he went to get the ice out of the fridge.

"They did a nice job!" he called out from the kitchen.

"Is the money too much for us?" she asked him.

"I don't think so. Not if we cut out some of the Saturday nights."

"Do you mind that?"

"No." He came into the room with a bowl of ice. "No, I don't at all."

"We can go to the pub."

"That's nearly as expensive these days. One round and you've made a big hole in a quid."

They raised their glasses. "Cheers!"

They talked about Jack's cousin. Her husband seemed to be pestering her, Ralph said. That was why she'd come south for a bit. She hadn't left her address at Preston.

"Yet she seems to like him," Janet said.

"Not enough to live with him, according to Jack."

She turned her thoughts to the carpet again. "Don't you think we should have the walls done?"

"One thing at a time."

"They look so dingy, Ralph."

"I could do them one week-end with Splinter."

She glanced sideways at him while she sipped her drink and for a moment his profile wasn't recognisable. He looked thinner, his eyes were brighter. She wondered if worry was eating him away. Or perhaps it was the new carpet.

"Shall we eat?"

He nodded, opening his paper as he did a hundred thousand times, just before dinner.

"What's her second name?"

"Whose?" he asked absently, studying something on the front page.

"Jack's cousins."

"I don't know."

She got up and went to the kitchen, taking her glass with her. He hadn't yet seen the bedroom, with the sitting-room carpet in it. A bit stuffy, but, as Ralph had said, one thing at a time. The children were dead-tired and it was silent upstairs. She regretted it. She wanted someone to talk to,

worry about. Tim had hardly kissed her good night. She'd begun to feel all these things. As she'd deserted them inwardly so they---. She mashed the potatoes and finished grilling the chops; and there were some tomatoes, with a fresh salad. The lettuce was supposed to come from France and looked nice; she'd paid enough for it. Ruth had introduced her to salads as a regular thing: before, they'd been what you had for lunch in a heat wave, with boiled eggs, about three times a year. Ralph still hadn't much to say for them.

She realised that she'd hardly thought about Jack all day. His image came back to her as a quiet relief. Perhaps a certain admixture of pain made the image more intimate this time: he seemed to be so close to her that they might be married, that is, sharing pain. She glanced through to the hall. She noticed he hadn't switched the tele on yet, but then he rarely did before dinner. He allowed himself the radio, usually. But even that was silent. The silence of the house was unusual and terrible.

He rustled his paper in the sitting room, coughed.

"Have you seen the bedroom?" Janet called out to him.

There was no reply. A hot panic swept over her. He knew and perhaps forgave her---but could hardly address her. It was worse to be forgiven so coolly. Had Jack told him something? She felt the ancient woman's fear of two men getting together.

A belated "Eh?" came from him. Thank God!

"Did you see the bedroom?" she asked, the grill-pan poised in her hand.

"No."

"Go and have a look at it."

But he'd lost contact again. The paper rustled as before.

She warmed the plates in the oven and realised she hadn't made a cup of tea yet. But as they were having meat perhaps she'd leave it till afterwards: Ralph like his father always said that tea hardened meat inside you if you took them together.

"Smells good!" Ralph called out.

Yet the remark didn't sound real. It made her stop--- as worse than silence. Or had she lost all sense of what was genuine in other people and what wasn't? as if she'd committed a crime and this had blinded her?

"I got some chops," she said, to complete the masquerade.

Couldn't he, on his side, now say that this didn't sound genuine? So one false thought left ^a trail of other false thoughts behind it. She was suddenly aware how much happiness they'd had these last ten years, how close they'd been.

"OK!" she called out with her usual formula. "Come and get it!"

She heard him drink the last of his whisky, and then the newspaper was thrown on the settee. She put the plates on the table and started dishing up, while he went into the bedroom, switching on the light there.

"Blimey!" he called out. "Looks swish, doesn't it?"

"Do you like it?"

"I'll say! It'll be warmer for the feet." He came into the kitchen. "All we need now is a washing machine."

"It'll come."

They ate in silence. "Train crowded?" she asked.

"As usual."

"It'd be nice to have a job round here, wouldn't it?" She only said it to make conversation.

"Oh, I don't mind it."

"I do," she said.

She expected him to flare up as usual, but he said in a mild way, "There aren't any jobs round here to start with. There's a wood factory and a broiler house."

"In Chatsdowne there might be."

"You find me one, then."

She helped him to another chop from the dish. "Is the new carpet going to cripple us?" she asked.

"Yes."

"I thought you were worried about it."

"I'm not."

She looked at him curiously. It was true---there wasn't a shadow of worry on his face.

"The car takes us right up to the edge of our means," he said. "And the carpet takes us beyond."

"And you're not worried?"

"No."

"Why didn't you tell me that before I ordered it?"

"Because I don't care." He looked across at her in an unusually open way. She could hardly remember his eyes so--- so unfilmed, since they first met in York. "I'm not complaining, am I?"

"No."

"Well, then." He added, "A few quid here or there doesn't make any difference."

"I wish we had enough money to spread ourselves a bit," she said with a sigh. "I don't know how some people do it!"

"Like you did it this morning. On the HP."

"You've got better brains than most of them."

"I give 'em all to Sims and Tuke."

"That's what I don't like."

Apparently, she was incapable of annoying him this evening. He didn't even light a cigarette rapidly after he'd finished the meal.

That night he didn't go to sleep at once but drew towards her, and they made love until two or three in the morning. He seemed to have a new curiosity towards her, in the darkness. Or perhaps that again was her imagination. Yet her body responded to it even if it was only supposed. She had noticed in the mirror on Saturday night when she was changing her petticoat that her breasts were sharper and firmer. And the suggestion of unwanted flesh round her hips, which she'd accepted for a year or more now, had gone. The newness was all in her. Only the curiosity came from him. And again she found herself able to do it without the slightest feeling of disloyalty to Jack. Afterwards to her surprise Ralph got into his dressing gown and padded next door to the kitchen to make a cup of tea. They were both wide awake. She went to the kitchen too, shivering pleasantly, and they opened the vent of the stove. This hadn't happened for years: usually they felt hemmed in with routine---he had to be up in the morning. Now it was a thrill to see the cosy kitchen-light shining out of the window onto the young trees. And Ralph looked fresher than he usually did after a full night's rest. She was vaguely disturbed.

They sipped their tea in the silence, he with the same habit as his father---blowing the steam away from his face between each sip, his eyes dreamy. It was nearly dawn when they went back to bed.

"Is the alarm set?" she whispered.

But he was already asleep. Yet the alarm had always been

a hideous little god for him ever since they were married. She'd watched him with annoyance so many times when he'd wound it up carefully and set the bell, as if it secured him respectability. And her body had achieved all this. Its new proud self-awareness had done it. Then it was Jack who had awoken her! She loved him even more.

He was up at his usual time in the morning, looking none the worse for wear. It was dark and grey outside, and she stayed in bed a little, listening to the sounds in the kitchen as he went to and fro in his carpet slippers making tea and boiling himself an egg. She lay there satisfied and drowsy. Sometimes she got breakfast for him, sometimes she didn't. He always seemed to know when she needed to stay in a bit. Then how could she ever leave him? How could you leave a man who knew you so well? How could there be two in the world?

He brought her a cup of tea, without switching on the light, and said to her surprise, "Shall we go to Ruth's tonight?"

Luckily it was too dark for him to see her face, and she murmured, "Mm," as if it had been the most ordinary question in the world. She liked the way he said Ruth's and not Jack's! Was that to spare her feelings?

In asking that question he had laid the hope and thrill of her day. She wanted to get up at once, call the children, and after getting them off to school do the first item in the spring-cleaning, which was their room.

She drank her tea hurriedly and put on her dressing gown. It was almost daylight and the children still weren't awake. He was getting his raincoat. There was their usual kiss at the front door, again with more curiosity than usual; and she watched him go down the path with his paper folded in his left-

hand pocket as she'd seen him a thousand times before. What wisdom was he hiding? But his figure revealed nothing. He had the same rather hunched walk as always. It was almost as if he was thankful for what was happening to her, and wanted to encourage its cause. She felt strange and troubled underneath, together with thrilled expectancy as to what would come that evening.

She woke the children and kissed Tim until he was red in the face, with great loud smacking noises that made Betsy look up at her with a sort of coy admiration. Mary wanted her share of kisses too, at the breakfast table, and moved her plate close to hers until they touched. It was still heavy and brooding outside, though this made the house all the more cosy.

She got them off to school and watched Tim walk proudly across the playground to join his class-team: they had to form columns when the whistle blew, and were then marched into school, like at her own infant school. And they were given coloured ribbons to put round their shoulders, for games. She drove back and wondered if she should call in at Ruth's to tell her they were coming. But she couldn't face Ruth. Or perhaps she wanted to take a chance on their being out that evening: left to chance, things worked out most naturally.

She had a momentary sense of bleakness, as if the wretched main street of Pyfield Green and the nasty cement lamp standards and the dirty bungalows dotted here and there in their bare cement quadrangles, shorn of trees and even bushes, showing a positive horror of anything gracious, had all got into her blood and curdled it, and driven away her dreams. For what evidence did she have that these were anything but dreams?

This was the terrible thing Pyfield Green did to you, it

made you feel that nothing you dreamed could be real; that all the hopes and whims and drowsy longings that were really the substance of life were nothing at all. Was that what Jack found when he came from the continent? Was that what he meant when he said we'd cut ourselves off from our own souls? Had he ever said that? Perhaps it was only her conviction, and hers alone. She felt a surge of loving anger against him that he didn't talk to her more, and that he hadn't made a sign---but a real sign---yet. And perhaps this more than anything accounted for her momentary bleakness, the sense that he had nothing to say to her.

Suppose---it took her breath away---suppose he felt no more for her than, say, for Polly, for Hilda? Her mother had said she was always on the boil! Had she cooked up Jack's feelings as well? If that was the case she was finished. She didn't know what she would do. All life would then become that nasty High Street in Pyfield Green, and the lighting in the supermarket that made you look sick, and Jim's ferrety face at the pub when he cracked a joke. And the suffocating furniture... The heavy sky outside that looked like---like an old man's last gaze... And the way Ralph cleaned the car on Saturday mornings... And---and the sound of the milkman... No, she couldn't bear it! All of a sudden she was crying like a child, her shoulders heaving, with the car going all over the place.

But no, she thought through her tears, trying to dry them as they came, it wasn't true. She thought of his pipe flying through the air, and the curve of his white sleeve in the darkness as he'd passed in the car. Yet these seemed stale images now. She had used them too often.

She forced herself to get the carpets up in the children's

room and take them outside. It was even darker now, and the air was quite still. Beating the carpets revived her. She remembered the narrow sidelanes of York: she thought of them in the snow. And after lunch the snow came, lightly at first, as if it would turn easily to drab rain, then it took courage and began coming down in a heavy, swirling mass that hid even the trees close to the house. It came round the house like a lovely shroud, and she breathed a sigh of relief at being enclosed like that. The impenetrable silence of snow fell on the road outside, and she opened up the vent of the oven so that the house would be warmed through when they all came home. She wondered if the car would need chains but when she looked out of the sitting-room window she saw ^{with disappointment} that the cars had already made slushy tracks through the snow. She lit a fire in the sitting room and watched it crackle brightly: Ralph said you could always see the state of the weather in the fire, the whiter it burned the harder the frost. And today it threw out a great warmth at once, and the flames lit up the room, with its sea of blue carpet.

The children had to have an hour's snowballing outside that evening, and by the time Ralph got home their gloves were soaked and their cheeks red like tomatoes. The lamps in the street came on and the snow got deeper. Their feet made a lovely padding noise when they ran to and fro, laughing. Ralph joined in the game, and his drab raincoat was soon covered. Lights came from various houses up and down the road, illuminating the stiff white branches in the front gardens and the soft snow that lay cupped in the ^{holms oak} ~~first~~ leaves, drifting down in powdery flakes now and then. The end of the game came when Betsy stuffed a snowball down Mary's neck. Janet called out sharply,

"Just you go in, both of you!" There was a scramble for the bathroom, and Ralph made a burlesque of getting there first and pushing them aside. They all had a scratch supper together, as a treat---a fry-up of eggs and tomatoes with some onion pudding she had left over; washed down with a cup of tea that made their faces glow even more.

All he said in reference to their going to Ruth's was, "What shall we do with the fire? Try to keep it in?"

"I think we'd better bank it up, don't you?"

Every step they took across the bedroom sounded mysterious, in the immense silence round the house.

"I started on the upstairs rooms this morning," she said quietly.

"Funny, spring-cleaning in the snow."

"That's what I thought."

"Fruit crops are all ruined again, Splinter was telling me. The blossoms were just starting. They knew it was going to happen."

They padded up the road together, bent against the snow that swirled in their faces and got in their eyes. Ralph had put his blue overcoat on, which suited him better. The cars parked by the kerb were already covered in snow; white, humped forms in the shining darkness. It was like the wildest journey of her life, a kind of trek, with Ralph to help her. She was icy-cold all the way through her body, and tensed; her thoughts were bold and clear. They said nothing all the way. The street was one blind swirling mass of snowflakes.

Jack and Ruth were in. The usual cosy yellowish light streamed from the window on to the trees outside, this time on to the snow, which had formed a kind of muff round the glass.

They heard laughter, then someone came running down to answer the bell. It was Ruth. She looked delighted---even excited, and called up to the others, "Look who's come!" Jack and the cousin appeared at the top of the stairs, flushed and puffing: they'd all been snowballing too, with the children, and were rubbing themselves down. Sonya was already asleep, her hands had been nearly blue with cold, Ruth ~~had~~ said. The fire was crackling in the sitting room, and Sonya's toys had been cleared away.

"I'll be down in a sec!" Jack called down to Ralph.

The cold produced vivid, stark images in her. She couldn't believe she was with him so soon again, in his own house. Ralph picked up a paper and sat by the fire. Again she had the impression that his face had changed, become sharper and cleaner. She heard the cousin laugh upstairs---a peal of fresh laughter, blonde like her hair.

She felt that Ruth had given her a quick, curious look at the door but she couldn't be sure. She heard Cath call out for a glass of water upstairs, but really she wanted to come downstairs and stay with them for a bit; you could hear it in her voice. And Ruth replied quietly, in her still way, "Get it yourself, darling." She sat down and kept crossing one leg over the other nervously, and rubbing her chin with the tips of her fingers. Ralph was still bent over his paper with one hand extended towards the fire absentmindedly. She knew she wouldn't feel easy until he'd come down.

Suddenly he appeared, in a light grey pullover and an open-necked blue shirt, looking as fresh as a boy. "Hullo, there!" he called out. "Nice to see you."

Ralph put out his hand. "Hullo, mate."

At that moment Ruth called her upstairs to see a present the cousin had brought her from Preston. It was a marvellous spring coat of light peppery tweed. Nice things just seemed to flow into Ruth's life! The cousin was standing there, in the bedroom, just unbending from the mirror where she'd been touching up her lips. They shook hands and Janet noticed her placid eyes again, making her feel at ease at once. She suddenly saw the difference between her and Ruth, that there was more of a natural, born stillness in Ruth, while the cousin seemed to have fought for hers. It was in the way she stood, her feet planted slightly apart, erect and yet not a bit show-offy. Janet felt a bundle of nerves compared to them both.

She put the coat on---it was pencilled down nicely at the skirt and fitted her like a glove.

"Do you like the sleeves?" Ruth asked her.

"It's a dream---the whole thing!" The shoulders sloped gracefully, the pocket-flaps were set at a cunning angle, there were four bold tweed-covered buttons. She laughed: "I'd like to tear it off your back!"

"I saw it in Bradford one day," the other woman said. "And I said to myself, that's Ruth all over."

"It certainly is."

Ruth smiled at the cousin. "Janet's my authority on clothes."

"I'm ever so glad you like it," the cousin said to her.

"Ruth's my idea of a happy person," Janet said to her suddenly.

The cousin laughed and gave Ruth a little glance, but didn't reply.

"That's why I put on weight so easily," Ruth said with a smile.

As a matter of fact, that was one of the marvels of this coat: it made her look as slim as she ought to be, but really wasn't.

"The doctor told me sugar was the worst thing," the cousin said.

"Oh, they all have a different story."

They went downstairs and Ralph was already guzzling a whisky and soda, with a cigarette on. He got up and shook hands with the cousin, giving her a pleasant smile.

Then he told them about the blue carpet, how nice it looked now it was down, though it might drive him into the workhouse.

"What carpet?" Ruth asked with a glance at Janet.

"Haven't you told her?" Ralph said.

"Not yet!"

"I thought you told her everything?" Ralph asked with a wink at Jack.

"Well, I forgot that one. Anyway, she wasn't there Saturday night if you remember." She looked across at Ruth in a confidential way. "It's a lovely blue fitted carpet."

"Oh, that's nice! Did you get it in Chatsdowne?"

"Yes, at Blithe's."

"I think they have the best stuff."

"They laid it the same day. I reckon it only took them an hour and a half to get it all down. You ought to have seen the children's faces!"

"I want a new one for the stairs," Ruth said.

"The kids'd ruin it in a week," Jack told her.

"They have this one." As if carpets came with the morning milk!

"Women haven't got any sense of money, don't you think so,

Jack?" Ralph asked.

"I don't know," the cousin said, "I had to look after all the finances in our house, otherwise I don't know where we should have been."

"It's true," Jack told Ralph. "Old Geoff used to hand over all his money to her, like a child."

"Of course, he asked for most of it back before the end of the week," the cousin said with her strange mixture of sadness and sparkling gaiety. And Janet noticed the richness of her voice--- the kind that children remember all their lives.

"He needed it for the publicans," Ralph said.

"That's right."

"Yet you couldn't find a cleaner-looking chap if you tried," Jack said. "There's nothing squalid about Geoff like there is about most drunkards. He's got style, hasn't he, Dosh? And I think he realised he couldn't keep a wife on those terms."

"Well, he could have," Dosh said placidly. "But he saw the effect on me."

"Really it was his goodness sent him away," Jack said.

"Was his work affected too?" Ralph asked her.

"No. It mostly consisted of drinking with other people anyway."

She smiled and they all followed suit.

"I don't think I'm in any danger of turning to drink," Ralph said. "Not with a wife like mine. She spends it all on carpets!"

"Go on with you!"

"All Geoff does when he's drunk is slur his r's a bit and smile at everybody," Jack said.

"Oh, well, that's not so bad," Ralph said.

"But afterwards he falls asleep," the cousin said quietly.

"And may be I didn't want to fall asleep."

There was a slight pause. Her tone was a little strange.

"They always have a smile for other people," she went on, "but then when you get them home and want a smile for yourself they've fallen asleep or they're being sick in the bathroom, something pleasant like that."

"It hasn't turned you into a teetotaler yourself?"

Ralph asked.

"Oh, I'm not going to let him ruin my pleasures, just because he can't control his own."

"That's right."

"You'll be staying a nice long time?" Janet said to her.

"That depends on Ruth. She might get fed up with me!" she said with a laugh.

"No, she's so easy-going," Ruth told Janet. "It's nice having her in the same house."

"Well, fish stinks after three days," the other woman said gayly. "And they say guests are like fish, don't they?"

They laughed politely.

"Dosh has taken a lot of knocks," Jack said. "But it hasn't changed you, has it, mate?"

"I hope not."

"You must pop over and see us sometimes," Janet said.

"We're only a few houses down."

She realised it would be another good and safe link with Jack.

"Oh, that's nice," the other woman said.

"Our television programmes are the same as here," Ralph

said with a twinkle. "So you'll be all right."

"Well, I'm a sucker for television," the cousin said.
"I'm always worrying Ruth to put it on."

"It's me who's not so keen on it," Jack said with a look at Ralph.

She noticed he looked at her as rarely as ever. Suddenly she felt angry: what a silly thing to do---throw your pipe across a field and think yourself pure for having done it! And why did he do it? She could have pushed his modern iron-legged chair over, with him in it.

Yet she saw that he wasn't smoking, that his hand hadn't even drifted to his pocket this evening.

"Off on your travels again soon, Jack?" Ralph asked.

"I heard one of the secretaries asking about plane reservations to Paris today," Jack said with a side-look at his wife.

"You didn't tell me," Ruth said.

"Well, they might take the trade section over and leave us this time."

There was a drowsy pause.

"This snow's smething, eh?" the cousin said.

"It reminds me of up north," Janet said.

"That's just what I was going to say."

"How's Cath's cold?" Janet asked Ruth.

"Well, she makes it worse than it is."

"Just like my Betsy. And you ought to have heard Mary sniffing round the house. I told her, you're a born actress, I said."

"Sonya just wants sympathy, as she doesn't go to school yet."

The snow outside made the fire white-hot, and they all sat gazing into it. She yawned, then Ruth yawned---and they smiled at each other. Again she felt a total stillness like that of the air outside: as if her dreams were dead. She looked at Jack. He was tapping his right foot slightly. She knew it was impatience to get back to his work upstairs, where he had a little room. So much for his dreams. She knew the truth at last. Suddenly she could read it in his face. How could she have gone on so long dreaming? And what made her know it now? She'd waited too long, perhaps; her strength had given out. The fire blazed but she was mortally cold all the way through. She wanted to be sick. Strange how sudden these blows were. One moment you were talking pleasantly, then you were dead. She sat there frowning, her face in a sullen, mute fixity, until Ralph said to her, draining his glass so that the ice chinked against his mouth, "Well, we'd better push off."

"Do you feel all right?" Ruth asked her, giving her a close look.

"Yes, you look a bit pale tonight," Ralph said. "I noticed it before."

"It might be the cold," she said.

"Do you feel sick?"

"A bit." Life sick, she wanted to add.

"Come on, I'd better get you home."

At the door she didn't even look at Jack. The brisk air outside was a bit of a comfort. The snow whirled in her face. She'd said to the cousin, "Don't forget to come and see us." There was something comforting in the cousin's being unattached, her marriage broken, wrecked and broken. Again they padded down the road huddled together. Their footsteps at home, down their own path, were completely hidden. The silence was pervasive like the whiteness itself.

"Did you eat anything funny today?"

"No."

"Well, you get to bed and I'll bring you something hot."

She got into bed as soon as they were in, exhausted.

She heard him lock up and put the empty milk bottles out.

Then he stoked up the fire in the kitchen and brought her a hot water bottle. A long time seemed to pass and he came with a glass of steaming lemon. She took a few sips and then was asleep, before he came to bed. There were no dreams, and she seemed to lie in a stillness like that of the snow outside.

She woke looking into Ralph's face. The curtains were open and a blinding white light came in. There wasn't a sound from the children upstairs.

"Haven't you gone to work yet?" she asked.

He smiled. "Do you know what the time is?"

"No?"

"Ten o'clock."

"What?"

"I've driven the kids to school already. I had to put the chains on."

"I'd better get up."

"You stay where you are. You've got a cold, my girl."

And in truth she could no more think of moving her limbs than of flying in the air.

"What about the office?" she said.

"I phoned them up."

The snow had stopped. There were ^{little} heaps along the window ledges. For a moment she was excited by the cosiness, just like York at Christmas-time, but then she remembered her real state.

She listened to him moving about the kitchen, getting her breakfast.

"Like to see the paper?" he called out.

"No, thanks."

He brought her scrambled eggs and toast with marmalade. She was surprised at her appetite, like feeding a body that belonged to someone else.

She wanted to hug him and cry on his shoulders. But she felt too numb and he seemed too--too far away.

11.

She was in bed for a week. First a cold wracked her, literally shook her from head to foot like a toy: coughing, sneezing, retching. Then she got inexplicable high temperatures in the evening. But she held out against Ralph calling a doctor. In all that time she hardly said anything, but held herself stiff and cold. Hardly any images passed through her mind. He stayed home for two more days, then went back to work, because old Sims wasn't very gracious about it, he said: but he got off an hour earlier in the evenings. The children stared at her from the doorway, seeming surprised that she should be a real living creature capable of colds like they had. The first day or two Tim kept whining for her to get up, and Mary sat on the bed simply gazing at her, saying she was a good actress. Then they seemed to accept it, as if she'd been in bed all her life. They played upstairs as usual and walked round to Ruth's every morning---Ruth had to take them to school and give them lunch. Betsy kept the house clean in her little way, and even made broth for her once. There was no chance of

getting up: the strength had gone out of her entirely.

It was as much as she could do to drag herself upstairs to the lavatory. Ralph wanted her to get up for television in the evening but she couldn't even manage that.

The second evening he went out to the pub for an hour to see a few of the boys. She told him to go. He came back soon after ten and told her he'd seen Arthur Simmons and Ted. Arthur had been down with flu too; then as he was getting better Pat and the children got it. That was why they hadn't come to the pub Saturday. Polly had been taken bad according to Ted, and seemed to be getting a chill.

"So you're in the fashion," he said.

"What's wrong with Polly?"

"Pains in the chest."

"Did she go to the doctor?" she asked weakly, lying back on the pillows.

"Yes, he was a bit blunt, and I think that upset her. He said she'd got pains in her chest because she was afraid of getting lung cancer, you know he goes in for this psychological stuff. And he said, by God you'll get it if you go on smoking at this rate, too."

"He was chainsmoking himself up until a year ago."

"Well, that isn't to say he's wrong."

"I don't know, he diagnosed me as having flatulency when I was pregnant with Tim, anyhow."

"Like a drink of something?"

"No, thanks."

"Arthur Simmons was on about Jack," he said.

She registered a flicker of life, but not much. "Oh, yes?"

"Jack's going to join the Labour party, he said."

"I thought he was in it."

"No."

"He votes Labour, anyway."

"So do I but it doesn't mean I'm in the party."

Arthur Simmons was known for saying the opposite of whatever Jack said. Ted and especially Jim Barnes held him in suspicion for voting Conservative, though nobody knew if he really did or not. Ralph liked him, and Arthur seemed to respect Ralph.

Ralph was sitting on the bed. She had the illusion it was ten years ago and he was in the bedroom upstairs in York saying good night, before he went back to his rented room near the castle. And in another moment she was asleep.

The evening temperatures abated and she began to feel clearer, though no stronger. Betsy was marvellous. She induced a feeling of awe in the other two so that they tiptoed about everywhere in the morning, although they made up for it in the evening, with interest. Janet would call out weakly, "Not too much scrapping up there." Sometimes Tim came down and simply gazed at her: she held his hand but wouldn't let him kiss her.

Towards the end of the week she said to Ralph, "Why don't you walk over to Ruth's and take her something nice? She's been ever so good."

She said it without motive. She tried to think of what exactly had happened in the last few weeks but couldn't.

"I'll take her a box of chocolates," Ralph said.

That evening he brought a box^x of assorted home with him, and a cigar for Jack.

The snow had begun again, just as the other lot was thawing.

It swirled round the bedroom window and darkened the room all day. The muffled silence returned. That was a comfort. All day Friday she lay gazing in front of her, not touching her magazines, which Ruth had brought her. Pat Simmons came and sat with her for a bit in the afternoon. She wanted to know all about their evening at the club when she and Jack had got lost. Janet showed a slight surprise that she should know, though she was beyond surprises now. Pat said she and Arthur had screamed when they heard about it. 'I bet you did,' Janet thought. 'And then mulled it over together.' But she didn't give a damn. She just answered, "Oh, we thought they'd all gone home. Jack's dancing must have turned my head, I reckon." So there!

Pat went on to talk about Jack joining the Labour party. She said the secretary of the Chatsdowne branch had been round to see him. They were weak on speakers, the secretary had said, and needed people like him. Perhaps Pat was feeling her out on the subject, to see what she knew. She was a tall, slim, dark girl with too native an appearance; Janet watched her as objectively as if she'd never set eyes on her before. She did so look like polished mahogany, especially in the summer when she'd been in the sun a bit. And she did everything in jerks, including thinking.

Ralph went to Ruth's that evening, and came back just before midnight in what she thought was an animated mood. She thought he had news of some kind, perhaps about Jack and the Labour party. But he said nothing. Jack had been there; she ascertained that much. Dimly, right at the bottom of her being, she still felt a tremor at his name. But it was quickly gone, even that.

When he was getting undressed he told her it was true that

Jack had been approached by the local Labour party secretary. He was a sort of pal of Jack's and had been after him for some time. She gazed at him drowsily while he put on his pyjamas, feeling as if she'd been working hard all day instead of lying in bed. Perhaps Pat Simmons had taken it out of her. He wasn't going to work next morning, it being Saturday, thank goodness. She would lie and listen to the ~~the~~ sounds of their getting breakfast, and perhaps she'd try and crawl next door to join them.

"What would it mean, if he did join the Labour party?" she asked him.

"Well, they seem to think he might make a candidate--- one of the possibles, anyway." He added, "He's the type all right. He lives for his ideas."

"I don't think it's good to live for ideas."

"Why not?"

"I think it's the wrong way round."

He got into bed.

"Is it still snowing?" she asked.

"No. But there's plenty more in the sky."

"Did they have television on?"

"No."

He made a long sigh and in a few minutes was asleep. Or he seemed to be. She wanted to touch him and tell him that they were now back again in their old humdrum life. No more dreams. Nothing to soften and enhance her body. He need feel no curiosity. Just the known routine every day, and a bit more fat on the hips every day. Nothing to make the evenings at the pub sparkle, nothing to turn the club into a sort of tropical night. And would he change back into the rather muffled, busily

smoking, stooped figure he'd been before? Had he really been that before? Was she sure he'd changed? Hadn't ^{he} always been bright---surely he'd always had his comic side? [^]Remember him in York, before they were married! He used to keep her family in fits. And her father said to her once, "Well, duck, you're marrying a spark, that's one thing." Then the spark had gone out in the darkness of Sims and Tuke. All this time Ralph hadn't moved.

"Ralph!" She found herself ~~calling~~ calling his name.

"Yes?"

He was awake!

She made up a question, "Is it too hot?"

"No, it's all right." There was a pause. "How do you feel?"

"Not too bad."

Had he been thinking too? The silence offered her no answer. Her mind was blank like the miles of snow outside, unruffled by the slightest breeze. And the silence gradually absorbed her. She fell asleep.

She woke early and waited for him to get up. The snow began again and before you could say Jack Robinson the children were outside in the road shouting and ~~thor~~throwing snowballs, their voices strangely muffled. Ralph moved about briskly in the kitchen, and she could tell he was enjoying life. She wondered numbly what it could be---then told herself that she knew: it lay in her own disappointment. Could that be right? His mood was infectious: she began to feel brighter, the cold had left her head at least and hadn't gone down to her chest.

"You awake?" he called out, putting the kettle on.

"Yes."

"How is it?"

"I feel a bit better, thanks."

The newspaper fell on to the doormat with a thud---late on Saturday mornings. He hurried to the front door and she heard him unfold it, standing there to read the headlines. Then he went into the sitting room and started laying a new fire. And to her surprise he lit it.

"What's that in aid of?" she called out.

"What?"

"The fire so early?"

"You might want to get up."

Tim let out a howl from outside---his foul-play cry.

But he subsided. Betsy rushed in and shouted, "Any grub, dad?"

"No help, no grub."

She dived for plates in the cupboard and distributed them on the table like playing cards.

"Here there!" Ralph said. "You going berserk or something?"

He began forking the sausages. She heard the familiar, busy little plunges, in the same rhythm as always. She could smell the frying tomatoes---proof that her cold was on the way out. Then the teapot was scalded, wiped dry with a teacloth---she could picture every movement he made---and given one, two, three, four spoonfuls of tea: three and one for the pot, Mary and Tim not counting as real tea-drinkers, they only took a drop in their milk. And the boiling water went in. But there wasn't anything humdrum about it. That was funny. She enjoyed the sounds. They seemed to be waking her to life again.

Tim and Mary dashed in.

"Look, you two," Betsy told them, "don't bang about so much or dad'll give you a slosh."

"How do you know I will?" Ralph said.

"I will, then!" Betsy announced.

That seemed far more fearful to them than a blow from Ralph, as they promptly shut up like jack-in-the-boxes. Janet heard them scrape their chairs up to the table, puffing and blowing. They hadn't even kissed her good morning, though Ralph might have told them not to wake her.

"Are you two soaked to the skin?" she called out weakly.

"Ssssh!" she heard Betsy say. "Mummy's saying something."

She said it again but it was lost amid the sausages being dished up.

"You getting up, Jan?" Ralph asked her.

"I might."

"What?" Betsy cried. She dashed into the room. "What, can you get up? Oh!" She bent down and gave her a kiss on the cheek and a hug that nearly choked her. "Mummy! Darling!" Janet felt a child in her own child's arms and could have wept. Betsy was rosy, and her hair was wild, damp at the edges.

She hobbled out of bed and pulled on her dressing gown with a heavy movement. She was pale but her face was clear at least. She did her hair in the mirror while Betsy stood waiting. Then they went into the bright, warm kitchen together---and suddenly she couldn't understand how she'd been able to stay so long in bed.

While they ate he went on talking about Jack, just as if their conversation the night before hadn't ceased. How grateful she would have been for a mention of that name only a fortnight ago!

"I think it's just a gag," he said.

"What is?"

"All this parliamentary candidate business. Just to get him in the party. Of course, they tell him he's one of the possibles---that's a very long shot from being one." He returned to his paper, rustling it in a final way as if this was part of his argument.

She found herself gazing at him with her mouth open, not blinking.

He looked up suddenly and startled her. "You all right?"

Betsy was looking at her too. "Your eyes look awfully funny, mum."

"No, it's the shock of getting up---and seeing your face," she said with tremendous effort.

They smiled and sniggered at the unexpected joke. Tim made a clownish guffaw which lasted longer than Mary liked, as she was sitting next to him, and she gave him a sharp jog in the ribs.

"Here, you two!" Ralph cried. "Attend to your rations!"

"May I get down?" Mary said.

"No."

"He's bothering me."

"Your mouth's full," Janet said quietly.

When the meal was over she went back to bed. The fried stuff had made her feel a bit sick. The tea had done her good. The children were outside again at once and Ralph was cleaning the car in the garage. First he had to shovel the snow away from the garage door, and it took him a long time to start the engine. The noise irritated her, breaking in on the silence. And half way through the morning she got up and went to the sitting room, by the fire.

She watched the snow from her armchair. Now and then the

dark form of one of the children dashed across the whiteness. There was no Ruth to get lunch today, so she pulled herself up and went to the kitchen. It would have to be something simple. Ralph had done the shopping with Betsy. She'd asked him to get a nice H-bone of beef but he seemed to have brought lamb. He'd have to drive in and get something else. One thing he never forget was his blasted sausages, which had made her feel queer.

She flopped into a chair by the kitchen stove. The children's voices drifted in to her, and only when Ralph pushed the front door open did she realise that she must have been sitting there quite ^{a time,} ~~an hour~~ perhaps an hour or more.

12.

The next Tuesday Jack flew off to Paris. Ruth came in and told her the morning after, knocking on the back door as she'd done when she was ill. The reason he'd gone was that there'd been a hitch in the trade negotiations, and he'd only got a day's warning.

"Just as I was getting used to having him," Ruth said.

"Oh, well, the job's good," Janet replied in rather a slack way. "He's happy."

"They're going to Brussels as well, so he won't get much rest." She stopped and gazed at her for a moment. "How do you feel, Jan? You look a bit better."

"I'm OK now."

The snow had stopped the day before and a warm sun had come out, turning it to slush in a few hours. Everything glittered outside in a wet and dreary way, and the trees and gutters dripped all the time. There was the hiss of slush outside

every time a car went past.

"The spring seems to have come with a bang," Janet said.

"Why don't you get Ralph to take you away for the week end? I'd look after the children."

"On his money?" She felt ashamed to show her self so down, answering so ungraciously. But she just had no strength in her bones.

"What about Dorothy?" she asked, to change the conversation. "We haven't seen her."

"She goes up to town nearly every day. To see all the things she used to miss in Preston."

"She goes to London?"

"Yes."

"I like her," Janet said.

"She likes you too. She said you have spirit."

"I haven't got any spirit at the moment!"

"Oh, flu always leaves you feeling depressed."

For a moment no trucks passed on the highway and there was a silence so deep that she thought she would never move again, never survive it.

"Are you worried about something?" Ruth asked her.

"No," she said after a pause.

Ruth looked so flushed and rounded with health as she sat there at the other end of the table. Janet felt she must look a sight next to her.

"Nothing to do with Ralph?" Ruth asked her.

And again she replied, "No."

"Everything's all right?"

Janet looked across at her and for a moment she was on the alert, dimly and numbly.

"Why?"

"You look so low, that's all."

She thought she saw a slight appeal in Ruth's eyes. As if she might have cried. Janet registered this quite coolly, like someone far away.

She was about to make a stock remark but stopped herself. She owed that at least to her best friend, never to lie. Though she wasn't obliged to tell the truth.

"Are you going to the club?"

"I don't know. Ralph didn't say anything."

"Arthur and Pat want to arrange something as they missed it last time," Ruth said.

"But you aren't going without Jack, are you?" Janet asked her.

"Well, I'd like to show Dosh what it's like."

"Oh, yes."

When Ralph came home that evening she told him about it and he said with a gay look, "We can't afford any more club evenings this year, mate."

"Why don't you go alone?"

"A round of drinks would cost just the same," he said.

"Well, how do you feel, anyway?"

"All right."

"You need a pick-me-up."

She found sympathy as irrelevant as everything else. She'd worked mechanically that day. She'd nearly smacked Tim but stopped herself in time. Ralph always maintained that a good wallop never hurt a child if it was in anger, but she noticed he never administered one himself. Her arms were quite limp, she had no grip. How she'd cooked lunch for the

children she didn't know. And she'd had to ask Ruth to do her shopping again.

She noticed one thing. She could now picture Jack quite easily. She could see his sharp, delicate nose, and his soft skin as if he was standing there. She didn't even need to stick a pipe in his mouth to do it. The image came like a photograph. And was as full of life as a photograph.

Ralph gave himself a generous whisky and soda.

"Like one?" he asked.

"It'd make me sick." She added, "You're getting quite a drinker."

"Spring's coming."

"That's when you ought to be knocking off."

The light from outside had that disturbing pallor of first spring sunshine. It seemed to gleam and bore its way into the room---into her heart. She noticed that the evenings were longer now. And the roofs dripped endlessly with the last of the snow.

"I wish we could have a change," she said.

Almost all that week she sat by the fire, staring in front of her until it was time to get the children. On Friday morning she drove into Pyfield Green to pick up the week's magazines: she hadn't the patience to wait till Ralph did it in the evening. This restored her to^a/little life. She sat turning over the pages drowsily.

Again she said to Ralph in the evening, "Why don't you go to the club Saturday?"

"I'll go if you do too."

"I don't feel like it, honestly."

She felt she wanted news of the outside world but couldn't participate herself yet.

"You'll come back with some stories," she said. "It'll amuse me."

"You sound like an invalid!"

But he agreed to go.

"I promise not to gorge myself, mate---only a four-course dinner and six or seven whiskies." And he laughed.

She watched his boyish expression from far away. They were as distant from each other as they could have been. She no more knew what his thoughts were than she knew the milkman's. He slept at once at night, or seemed to; while she fell into a semi-sleep, a long stillness that lasted until morning.

When Saturday evening came she watched him dress while she lay on the bed under an eiderdown. She promised him she'd watch television later, but she knew she wouldn't. He put on a white shirt and made himself quite spruce, with a white handkerchief in his top pocket, which he usually reserved for office binges at Christmas.

If they were separate now, she thought---not like strangers because strangers have at least a hope of striking up an intimacy and they had none---then it was her doing. And she hadn't moved a limb. She'd just sat and dreamed, and dreamed away her marriage, without getting one little scrap of satisfaction, either. Not a kiss even! Only dreamed. She noticed Ralph had given up asking how she felt. He no longer talked about the office. He'd become independent. Hadn't that been her object?

"Have a good time," she told him as he bent down to kiss her. "Give everybody my love."

"Blimey, you're not dead yet! Why don't you come along?"

"I just couldn't, honestly, Ralph."

She heard him close the front door, and his steps sounded

down the path; then he turned left to the garage, pulled up the door with a heave. He opened the car-door. It was as if she'd never heard those sounds before. They seemed to echo like in a vast concrete stadium. The engine started and she could imagine him turning round to back down, one arm resting on the back of the seat. He left the front gate open, as they always did on Saturday nights.

Then he did something strange. Instead of driving out towards the highway, to the right, he turned left towards the cul-de-sac. She became quite still. She hardly breathed, as if this would solve the question in her mind. At once her mind was awake. Why had he done that? Only Ruth lived at the end of the cul-de-sac. There couldn't be another reason. Yet why should that be strange?

She listened for the car as hard as she could but it was already lost beyond the trees. He'd gone round the curve.

No one else lived there, no one they hobnobbed with: only Ruth. And he ^{hadn't} ~~hadn't~~ mentioned Ruth. He hadn't said he'd seen her, to make the arrangement. He didn't even know she was going to the club. Not for sure.

Yet why shouldn't he pick her up? She was a friend. What was there guilty about that? Perhaps she was applying her own guilt to Ruth, to him! Why should they be like her--- betray in silence, with dreams? He wasn't like that, not her Ralph.

But she couldn't remove it from her mind. It was fear, too. Fear that he'd do to her what she'd done to him. Would she get the same medicine back now---have him at her side in bed dreaming of divorce? Her hands and feet were icy cold. Her teeth almost chattered.

Yet it had given her energy. She jumped up---almost gay---and made a cup of tea busily in the kitchen, still more or less trembling. She stoked up the stove and put some more coal on the sitting-room fire. As she was sipping the first cup she heard him drive back again, towards the highway. He must have had a drink there. For quite a time, too. Yet why not? Ruth was their common friend. Jack would do the same for her if Ralph was away. And then of course Ruth couldn't drive. Of course, of course. But why hadn't he mentioned it? But then why should he? Ruth was a common friend. She even kept her promise and looked at television. There was a brains-trust and some limp variety from the north. She gazed at the bright flickering images and the cheap I'd-sell-myself-for-anything smiles as if they were her own thoughts. She tried to picture them all at the club---the usual long table in the corner and the checkered lights on every table, and Herb Watson in his smoking jacket standing by the band. Would Ruth do to her what she had only hoped to do to Ruth? And she'd looked at Ruth with pity not a fortnight ago! On the previous Monday---yes---Ruth had given her a queer look and asked her if she'd be coming to the club.

Now Janet would learn what it meant to love your best friend's husband. Not in the way she'd planned: but as a victim.

She would have to hope for Ruth's kindness. A wave of cowardice came over her. ^{been kind to} But had she ~~pitted~~ Ruth? She hadn't given her a thought! She'd wanted to destroy her. She'd hated the thought of Jack touching her---his own wife. How could people be like that? Yet that was herself. She shuddered, watching a grinning comedian on the screen. She

hoped Ruth was a better person than herself.

✓ ~~W~~ She heard trucks clattering along the highway. Well, at least her thoughts were coming clear now. She was past the flu.

She found she was ~~w~~sweating ever so slightly, as one does in fear, while her feet and hands were still frozen. The fire burned fiercely and threw out what must have been a great heat, but it hardly touched her. She was still sick, perhaps: these thoughts were part of it, surely? They had that feverish edge. Just because he'd driven to pick Ruth up! How else could she have got to the club? He'd done it before, when Jack was away: only Janet had been there, too. What was the difference? It was a mechanical act on his part, to go there and pick her up.

She was troubled: put her hand up to her face, fidgetted, looked round. A dream had cost her all she had. Was that still the necessary conclusion?

When he came in she was already asleep. How she'd got herself undressed and switched out the lights she couldn't say. She couldn't remember doing it. She woke with a start. He looked a little pale, but his eyes glistened, though bloodshot with drink, as usual ^{on} Saturdays. She watched him move round the room, undoing his collar and taking out his cuff-links.

"How was it?"

"Oh." He turned and looked at her. "You awake?"

"I woke up."

✓ "Shall I switch the light off?" He meant in the hall. ² outised, for he hadn't switched the bedroom one on. He was always careful about that, if she was sleeping.

"No."

He wasn't going to say any more, it seemed. She persisted: "Was it nice?"

"Not too bad. Jim and Hilda were there."

And again he was silent, taking his clean pyjamas out of the drawer.

"Would you like a cup of tea?" he asked.

She tried to want one with all her strength, to get him to talk, but she couldn't.

"No, thanks." She closed her eyes, then made one more effort before she fell asleep: "Did you dance?"

But she was asleep before he spoke, and never heard what he said.

13.

She spent Sunday quietly, pleading tiredness, whereas she was alert and watchful behind her pallor. He made a fire for her in the sitting room as he'd done the morning before, and she went there in her dressing gown, putting Tim on her knee to read to him. Betsy and Mary went to Ruth's to play with Catherine, and this thrilled Janet in a strange way because she hoped to be able to read something in their faces when they came back. Ralph had found some nice fresh sole in Chatsdowne when he went there to get his car looked at the previous morning, and they had it fried for breakfast, which made a change from his sausages, and sat on her stomach less. She pecked at it and watched him while he sipped his tea. They hardly spoke and as usual he spent his time at table plunging about in the Sunday newspaper, occasionally putting his hand round the corner to feel for a cup of tea.

"You'll knock it over one day when you do that," she told him.

"What?" He looked round his paper with a surprised air.

"Oh." And he promptly went back.

Then he went into the garden and cleared a channel for the water that had poured down from the roof, so that the lawn wouldn't flood. The sun seemed to have come to stay, which partly disappointed her because she wanted to hug over a fire, thinking her dark thoughts. But as if in answer to her it clouded over before lunch.

Tim asked her, "Why does it always get cloudy before Sunday dinner?"

Ralph answered for her: "Because everybody's cooking their Sunday joint and it fogs the air up."

"You shouldn't mislead him like that," Janet said quietly.

"He knows a joke when he hears one, don't you, son?" He looked down at his son with one of those clear smiles that made his face delightful. "You didn't believe me, did you, mate?"

Yes, love was changing him as it had changed her!

"No," Tim said emphatically.

"He knows clbuds are moisture," Ralph said.

"I bet he doesn't," Janet murmured, trying to make herself sound normal.

The next morning a sudden determination came over her. She went to Ruth's. She'd just parked the car outside after driving the children to school when she felt a wave of defiance like a wind that rattles the windows and sends the dark clouds rolling away from the roofs. She noticed he'd kept his white handkerchief in his top pocket to go to work. Or had he simply forgotten it?

Ruth was in the garden hanging out some clothes.

"Janet!" She looked surprised and delighted. "Come in!"

There was a real challenge in Janet's face---fixed and pale. But she felt better, though she tried not to. Perhaps the air had done her good. She followed Ruth into the big room where Sonya's toys were in the corner as usual. How silly those nightmares were! Yet, on the other hand, the look on Ruth's face might be happiness. Why should she look guilty? Had she felt guilty on account of Jack? No, she'd felt happiness.

"Would you like some coffee?" Ruth said.

She felt so gay for a moment that she almost skipped.

"Yes!" she said.

The light in the kitchen was soft and warm, and the dresser looked as pretty as ever with its old-fashioned service. She didn't care what the truth was. She was free! Ralph could do what he liked. And that gave her freedom, didn't it? She would take it, then.

"How was the club?" she asked boldly.

"Oh, all right. I felt a bit lost without Jack."

"When's he due back?"

"Not for a fortnight, I don't think."

"Poor you! You ought to get a boyfriend!" she said gaily, acting.

Ruth looked at her with what she thought might be a sad, even hurt, expression. "I wouldn't mind if he changed jobs with your Ralph sometimes."

That was so near the wound that she flushed, but luckily her pallor was very thick. It was only an inward flush.

"Oh, you would mind," she said. "I have to think about every penny I spend."

"You've got him with you, at least."

And hadn't she felt that towards her, Ruth--how lucky she was to have Jack at her side all the time, in her bed, like living in a palace? She wanted to confide in Ruth. Ruth must confide in her. They looked at each other for a moment. And the moment passed.

They sipped their coffee, watching Ruth's clothes flap and strain at the line outside.

"I thought I'd take advantage of the wind," Ruth said. Then, "I wish you'd been there Saturday. Did Ralph tell you about the spot?"

"About what?"

"He got the spot for the quickstep, with Dosh. Didn't he tell you?"

"No." She went on being gay. "He was too full of whisky, and Sunday morning he was inside the papers, you can never get a word out of him then."

"They got a big basket of fruit and some chocolates. He made her keep the lot, which I thought was very nice of him."

Janet laughed. "The mean old so-and-so! He might have kept the chocolates for me!"

"Men want to be cavaliers, you see."

"Well, I've got a rival there," Janet said. "She'll be dancing with Jack as well!"

"I think she had a good time, anyhow. She said it was the nicest evening she'd had since she was married."

"Oh, that's nice."

It was a sign of how far he'd drifted from her---that he hadn't said a word about that dance. Only a fortnight before he would have been so full of it, bubbling over like a boy. He'd never won a spot before, never had the courage to try.

Ruth was still talking about Jack's cousin. "She's got relatives up there. They look after her a bit."

"Relatives where?"

"In London."

They sat together until it was time for Ruth to pick up Sonya from nursery school round the corner. For a woman away from the ^{husband} ~~man~~ she loved Ruth looked remarkably healthy and carefree. Her breasts seemed higher and firmer. Janet remembered the same thing in herself. Ruth's plump, rosy, smooth cheeks mocked her. Her stillness mocked her, as if to say, 'Now wait for some of your own medicine back.' At the same time she couldn't believe it.

She left in the opposite mood from which she'd come---all her determination had gone. She had no one left, no one! She would cling to Tim. She wouldn't let anyone take him away from her. The girls would cling to her, stand by her---she knew that. Now the coward in her was looking round for allies! The street looked bleak under the dark, racing clouds, and all its neat modernity was only a flimsy cover over despair.

She decided to ^obreach the subject the moment he came in that evening. "You didn't tell me you won the spot," she said.

He laughed. "Why, the bush telegraph been at work?"

"That's right."

"Well, I didn't want to boast, mate." And he winked at her, disarming her venmity. Again she was struck by the brightness of his face, and its clean lines, as if he'd shed ten years

of life.

In bed that night, while he seemed to sleep, she pictured him dancing round ~~the round~~ the hall with Dosh in a quickstep that never ended, while Ruth watched him from the corner table, calm and benign. She saw Dosh's tight blonde hair, and the way her teeth protruded slightly in a smile, and her cupid's bow mouth. Perhaps Dosh didn't see what was going on. Perhaps she did, in her wise way, with a broken marriage of her own behind her. And she and Ruth might talk together. What did they say? They might say how unhappy Ralph appeared, how Janet hardly seemed able to satisfy him, she was so rebellious, always complaining, even ashamed of him. And what man could stand for that?

Perhaps Jack was still keen on Dosh. Could that be it? Gradually things were piecing together. Ruth hadn't come to the pub that first night with them. And Jack had talked about Dosh lovingly. Men spoke the truth, men like Jack did: and he said he'd been keen on her in childhood. Early loves are the most haunting. And little wonder, she was so lovely, she stood quite apart with her golden hair and her rich voice, and her stillness that made you feel so safe. Why had Ruth taken her to the club? As a pretext for going there without Jack? ^{Had} ~~Was it that~~ she'd found her own outlet now, ^{in Ralph,} and positively wanted Jack attached elsewhere? Janet knew how the mind worked in these things, when it was a question of love. Nothing was barred.

The next morning she got up before Ralph and busied herself in the kitchen as if not to let him encroach on her domain.

"Feeling energetic?" he asked with a yawn.

She began to see other things in his face she'd never

noticed before. His lips were full, not slightly pursed as she always imagined them. Or had they only become so? His slightly grey hair at the temples gave him a rugged and weather-beaten look. When he concentrated on something it gave his face gravity and character. She realised, with a twinge of horror that passed immediately, that she'd always looked on him as just another clerk, though she had loved him no less for it. His nose was delicate, not much less so than Jack's. Not sharp like his but perhaps with more decision and force about it. She liked his hands. She knew how he devoted himself to her--- getting her tea, always so careful if she got sick, mixing her a drink in the evenings. He used to. He seemed not really to look at her now.

She began to wonder, quite practically, what she would do if it came to a separation. She'd do the classical thing, she supposed---go back to mother. She imagined the dark, narrow ~~st~~ street with all its cosiness gone. The castle would brood in the sombre, grey sky. The children would look lost, she'd have to find them new schools. She wanted to cry, but pulled herself up. She went and looked at the new carpet, to give herself heart. That seemed ages ago. Yet who would say it hadn't been her fault? Why had she done it? There must be some reason for it---some reason in fate.

At present the children knew nothing. They thought she was quiet perhaps, but then she'd been ill. Bessy asked her every day as they were driving home from school, "How do you feel, mummy?", peering into her face. Sometimes Janet went to bed early, leaving Ralph to look at television alone. She noticed everything he did. He didn't mix himself a drink any more. Perhaps he didn't need it. After all, dreams were

enough, as she'd found out.

He hadn't touched her in bed for nearly a fortnight now. But then she'd been ill. Yet he seemed not to have the desire.

He didn't go to Ruth's again that week, didn't seem to be aching to do so either. Just like herself, when she'd felt she could stay away from Jack a fortnight if necessary, so long as he was safe and she could have her dreams: so long, above all, as he loved her too.

But sometimes it seemed that she was only locked in a nightmare, and still hadn't recovered from the effects of flu. The thoughts went round and round in her head until she was ready to reject them all. Just because he'd picked up Ruth to take her to the club as he'd done a dozen times before when Jack was away!

There was no club that Saturday, nor did he suggest going round to the pub. They sat watching television, and this time she took the whisky and soda he offered her. She felt rested and steady. Her cheeks began to burn healthily again. And when they went to bed he moved towards her, and at once hard, locked energies seemed to burst out of her, and she made sullen, almost angry movements, never speaking or making a sound, her mind almost absent. Their climax was instantaneous, and relief went through their bodies like a cough. She was naked and her nightdress was crumpled in a tiny heap under her, soaked through. She changed quickly and they were asleep at once.

She watched him still, from a distance, but the nightmare had passed. Certain thoughts came and went, with a distressing clearness, but she pushed them out of her mind. She could go on living like this if necessary. Doing the practical things, even in bed. No looking forward or back. She went about

shopping briskly and made heavy meals. The spring was coming fast, and soon there would be no need for the fire in the sitting room. But it was cheerful in the ^evenings. She settled down to television early, irrespective of him. She listened to his stories of the office as if he was a stranger, but ^{then} he told them like a stranger. She didn't care. It made them free.

Once or twice she drove to Chatsdowne to have a morning coffee, and once she went to the cinema. She even took the liberty of asking Pat Simmons to pick up the children for her, because the film didn't finish until past six. She laid tea ready for the children, and she promised Betsy they would all go to the cinema ^Saturday afternoon as a treat. She painted her lips and was more careful with her hair than usual. The film was one of those where every shot looked as if it was never going to end so that you could wallow in the scene as if you were there. Which is just what she did. There was hardly anyone else in the cinema. Only a few housewives like herself, smoking and looking dazed and a little shamefaced when the lights went up. She drove back to Pyfield Green quickly. It was a quarter to seven.

Instead of driving off the highway into the main street of Pyfield Green she took a short cut that brought her out behind the station. ^Returning to the house that way meant not being in the peak-hour queue of cars coming from the opposite direction. It was about the time of Ralph's train. She might pick him up as he walked home.

She found him walking home with Jack's cousin. At first she was going to draw up the car on the opposite side of the road and call out to him. But then she noticed something different. It wasn't just the fact that he was walking with

Dosh, it was the way they were walking. They were strolling, almost hand in hand. It didn't seem that they'd just met by accident on ^{the} sixth four from London Bridge. They almost stopped sometimes, half turning to each other, rapt in what they were saying. She'd never seen him like that. He usually walked briskly. Now his body was soft and casual. Usually he had something self-conscious about his movements, making them guarded and mechanically. That was gone. And Dosh's cheeks were flushed. She laughed once and---almost---their hands touched.

She could hardly breathe. Her heart was beating fast and she'd stopped the car behind them, though luckily on the other side of the road. And luckily there was no traffic behind her to toot their horns and draw attention to her. She could creep forward without passing them and then disappear down a sidestreet. She wanted to cry, call out something, bang the steering wheel with her hands. All of a sudden she realised that she was completely alone in the world: not as she'd thought previously, in a dreamy sort of way, but really. Her thoughts of the last few days were nothing compared to the reality. The narrow main street with its shuttered shops and bare windows was so bleak in the mild evening light that she could have destroyed herself in that moment. It was all so dark, the drab hedgerows in the dentist's front garden by the supermarket were like funeral wreaths, the faces in the other cars were implacable and closed.

They walked so slowly on the other side, she thought it was never going to end, as if she'd been there all her life, watching her own Ralph from a car. How could he do it? How could he do it to her? He belonged to her. Yes, he did! Tears filled her eyes but they were more indignation and righteousness than

sorrow. She realised how close they really were to each other, she and Ralph, after days of thinking they were strangers.

Atlast they were ten yards or so ahead---thankfully neither of them turned round---and she managed to drive swiftly round into the side^d street, where she put the brake on sharply and more or less slumped in her seat. The picture of Dosh dancing with Ralph, her tight blonde hair shining---the passionate way her teeth protruded ever so slightly when she smiled!---came back to her mind. And she'd never given Dosh one thought, not one. Then how mad she must have become, not to have seen the truth right away. Had Ruth been trying to tell her about it? Yet she couldn't believe it, either. Quite coolly a little voice said to her that the hardest things to believe are the most obvious. No, it was true. There was no mistaking the way they walked together, their hips almost bumping when they smiled or half turned to each other. They were in love. Ralph was madly and fiercely in love.

She waited a long time, giving even lovers---oblivious of the world, as lovers were---^{time} ~~was~~ to get away. The queue of cars going in the opposite direction had eased a little. With exhaustion she started the engine again and turned the car round clumsily. She joined the queue going out of Pyfield Green, away from the house. He'd be home late. She remembered that he'd been late several times the previous week. Yet not really enough to notice. Could she be sure? Couldn't he simply be enchanted^h with her? No, it was reality, what she'd seen on that pavement a few minutes ago. Both her dark and her pleasant dreams had disappeared now, leaving reality: a world of brick and stone without a spark in it.

She would drive round to the Chatsdowne highway again and

join the queue so that she could tell him she'd come straight from Chatsdowne. She even felt guilty for having seen him. And joining the queue from the highway absolved her a little from it. She wanted to know nothing, for his sake. God forbid that he and Dosh should be strolling along near the house when she got there! The queue edged along, mercifully slow, and for the first time since moving to Pyfield Green she blessed the bottleneck.

She had a rush of tender feeling for Ruth, wanted to cry on her shoulder. But she couldn't confide in her. No, she didn't want to. At first she didn't know why this was. Then she realised that she didn't want to interfere with his love in any way. That was how close she was to him. She had a horror of interfering with things that fate had clearly provided for.

How he'd be able to eat or look the children straight in the face she didn't know. She must look pale, her face must be gripped tight. She looked in the little mirror. Only her eyes showed anything---a kind of pleading expression. At the same time she was fascinated---to watch him, note his movements. She looked forward to that. She couldn't say that life was dull now.

When she got home the first thing she heard was Betsy's voice, "What was it like, mummy?"

Mary and Tim were upstairs at their boats---apparently with Ralph, too, because he called out, "That you, Jan?"

"Yes."

"Been giving yourself a good time?"

She answered, to cover her real state, "You should take the children to see it Saturday."

He went on splashing, unaware. Betsy clung to her and they

got the tea ready. She kissed Betsy several times and nearly cried. She was all but certain that Betsy sensed something. But the child was discreet. And then, children---they^{only} woke up years later to the reality of something they'd understood with their senses, *at once*.

The street outside had been empty when she drove home. She'd given the roadway a glance in Ruth's direction, a fearful glance.

"Where did you sit, downstairs?" Ralph asked her, appearing in the kitchen. He gave her the evening kiss.

"In the gallery," she said.

"That's where I like to sit," Betsy told them in a tremendously confidential tone.

"Except they project the film just over your head," Ralph said. "And it keeps flickering all the time, and you can see your smoke as it goes across the screen."

"No, it doesn't," Betsy said with complete authority. "You're thinking of the Palace in Pyfield Green. They do it from behind the screen at the Broadway."

"Well," he said with a smile, "I don't spend so much time there as you do."

The white handkerchief was still there, showing carelessly out of his top pocket. It looked silk but she knew it was fine poplin because there was no silk in his drawers. Janet wanted to pluck it out of his pocket and give it an examination.

The sun appeared briefly and sadly between dark clouds, on its way down. Soon there'd be summer, with those long, melancholy evenings---half exciting, too---when voices drifted in from the street and the garden looked lush, and stirred the senses.

She drank three cups of tea instead of her usual two that

evening, and found herself hoping that he'd offer her a whisky when the children were in bed. But he didn't. No, he didn't need it like her. He gazed at television with benevolent eyes, perhaps as she had done, not seeing the images or hearing anything, but dreaming. The blue carpet had a strange effect---she wanted to burst into tears when she thought of it.

They went to bed early and she wanted him to move towards her. She found herself excited in a dim and numb way, against all her other feelings. But he fell asleep, or made it seem so.

She began to think of Dosh, as perhaps he was ^{thinking of her} ~~at that moment~~ too. She still liked her. She even thought, with bright selfless clarity, that Dosh would be good for Ralph. She thought of her mouth again and her rich voice, and the way they'd danced the quickstep, as if she'd seen them do it. Perhaps they'd discovered each ^{other} for the first time in that quickstep. Hadn't---very nearly---the same thing happened between herself and Jack? But Ralph must have felt something that first evening in the pub, when Dosh was introduced to them. And she'd seen nothing. How far human beings are from each other, she thought. Such feelings, behind such closed faces. Dosh had reminded her of someone else that night. And she couldn't think who it was. It was more an impression than an actual facial similarity. Something to do with her voice and the way she gazed at people, and the sparkling gaiety that seemed to go together with the blondness of her hair. The image was before Janet half the night, and only when Ralph was clearly asleep for the first time, breathing heavily, did she realise who that other person was. It was his aunt Kate. At once she knew how ^w he'd fallen in love, and how inevitably. All of a sudden she felt sorry for him, and tender.

He'd had nothing to do with it, after all. The worship of his life had suddenly appeared before him, renewed. Perhaps she could even help him. She moved slightly and touched him by accident. His body felt magical to her now. She felt it even as a privilege.

Again she was up before him in the morning to get tea. She kissed him at the door as if he were a child, and she watched him all the way down the street. She could face him, at least. That was something she'd hardly dared hope the evening before, in the car. She didn't feel broken---only that she had little to do with her own life.

She peeped into the road continually from the sitting-room window. And when she drove the children to school she kept an eye on both sides of the High Street to see if Dosh was on her way to the station. She was pretty sure she didn't catch the same train as Ralph. Perhaps she went earlier, soon after dawn: that would be devotion, indeed.

Later that morning she went round to Ruth's again, and they had coffee together. She was determined to show Ruth a happier and more trusting face than before. And Ruth put this down to her feeling better, as she hoped she would.

"I can't remember you looking so well," she said, which made Janet quietly proud, that she had such command.

Ruth seemed to know nothing of what was going on, after all. Janet established that much by getting her to talk about Dosh's love-life. She had a kind of sweetheart up in Preston, ~~Ruth thought~~^{said}, and she was quite anxious to get back: though she hardly seemed the sexual type. Just how one woman mistakes another, Janet thought.

And Jack would be coming back earlier than she thought.

Janet hardly heard this piece of news. It seemed a name from another age.

In the afternoon she drove over to Chatsdowne again and had high tea at Blithe's with fish and chips and cake, because she'd not wanted lunch. The money was disappearing fast. All these visits to Chatsdowne meant she had to break into the housekeeping money: she wasn't the one to save. And what Ralph was doing in London she didn't know. Seeing Dosh every day might be expensive. And she was sure he was doing that. Perhaps Dosh had money. The future would tell. A break would come soon. As Janet thought this she had a feathery sensation inside that almost made her throw up her tea.

14.

He began to come home at the right time. Had he glimpsed ~~her in the car?~~ her in the car? But he didn't seem cautious in any other respect. If he had seen her he would have made a start, he would have hurried across to her, felt a pang of guilt. But he did seem warned in some way. He was watchful---at the same time as his face became softer and more relaxed. He couldn't hide his joy: that was it. The days were perfect for love. There was mild, warm sunshine and a breeze from the sea, and the first lilac and ^{magnolia} ~~cherry~~ blossom was out---what hadn't been killed by the frosts. Ruth told her that the fine weather had come in with the tide, early in the morning, and when that happened you could rely on it staying for ten days or more. That would be ten days of bliss for Ralph.

As if to prove that he wasn't seeing Dosh he asked her to meet him at the station one evening with the car, because

there was an early TV programme he wanted to see. She went, and there was no sign of Dosh in the crowd. She kept a lookout from the sitting-room window later, but she didn't pass. Next day Ruth told her that Dosh had stayed the night in town with her brother-in-law, so as to meet Jack in the morning at the airport; then they would come home together in the evening. So Ralph wasn't so clever after all.

The following evening, too, he returned alone. She was surprised at how cool her own thoughts were. There wasn't a hint of nightmare in them as there had been when she'd suspected Ruth. Poor Ruth!

This was a real emergency, and all her energies were steeled.

She tried talking about his aunt Kate. It even excited her to do so. She was amazed at her powers, how level her voice sounded. And that proved it. He wouldn't talk on the subject. He made it seem that he was concentrating on the television. A spasm of horror went through her, as if, although she knew the truth, it shook her to be presented with it tangibly.

Again, on the Thursday evening, he moved towards her in bed, but selflessly, as if he was thinking of something else all the time. And again she found this exciting, so much so that she hardly dared move. She seemed to have no attitude of her own, almost no body. No pride, almost no self-respect. ^{But} She was excited, and perhaps more so than ever before. Their climax was sudden and quick. She found she was unaware of his cigarette-smell; or rather, it now had a sort of authenticity; it seemed none of her business.

This made her nerves easier during the day. At least he was looking after her in this respect, and that was the most

important one. She set about the spring-cleaning and got the upstairs done in a couple of days. What she found under the carpet in Betsy's area of the room had to be seen to be believed, and they had a fine old argument about it when she came in from school. It made her feel hilariously normal---let him have his affairs!

They had almost no conversation now. He knew she knew: that was clear. He gave her little glances now and then, but she couldn't tell whether they were fear or pity. But he didn't seem sorry. She remembered how little sorrow she'd felt. One thing suddenly struck her when she was cleaning her precious blue carpet one morning: his body had changed its lines, she no longer pictured him as stooping when he walked. So how could she feel resentment against Dosh, who was giving her a new husband? She wanted to laugh. More than that, she had a strong sense of Dosh's magic, that came to her through him: a sparkling blondness seemed to surround/^{him}when he came home in the evening. She admired his taste. And his movements weren't so jerky, as she'd noticed in the High Street. Hadn't she learned to carry her head high for the first time in her life? All these things she saw in Ralph through herself.

And wasn't it a sort of bargain---that in return for giving him his freedom she should get him back new? The thought was thin and clear, and had no support from her body. The thought horrified her body, but remained. The terrible part of the bargain was the risk, that one day he might never come back. Yet she decided to take the risk. There was nothing else to do if you didn't believe in opposing fate.

She wondered more and more how much money he had in his pocket. He was cutting down on cigarettes, she noticed that.

"Aren't you smoking these days?" she asked him, amazed at her own directness.

"I feel it in the old chest sometimes."

Once she managed to be at Ruth's at about seven in the evening, and Dosh came back at that time: she must have been on the six-four. Janet gazed at her curiously. Dosh seemed to feel no embarrassment, nor to feel the possibility of any resentment. ^{Janet} ~~She~~ was happy to see this because she thought it meant that Ralph wasn't going to upset his family-life.

✓ She felt no competition with Dosh, ^{as} and she would have done otherwise. Dosh even looked at her with pleasant curiosity, like Janet's curiosity towards her. For a moment Janet doubted her belief. But Dosh looked so radiant that she began to feel doubly sure. She looked at Dosh's neck once. There was the dark trace of a kiss---a long, burning one. You didn't get that travelling up and down to see the sights of London.

Jack was back in England but working a lot of overtime. It was now definite, Ruth told her---as if she ^a ~~gived~~ a damn[!]---, that we wouldn't get into Europe. Only the people right at the top still believed it, she said. Well, Janet thought, Ralph was luckier in his love than she ^{been} ~~was~~: he hadn't fallen for a pipe-sucking political machine! She had a sense of venom against Jack which passed into indifference. Now ^o she couldn't see what her dreams had been about.

Then Ralph came in one evening and asked her if she'd like to pop over to Splinter's with him. They'd met at the station. She had a twinge of fear: Dosh must be planning to go there, perhaps with Jack. No, she couldn't face seeing them together. But she said---so as to seem normal, in the unspoken conspiracy of normality between them, "Yes, I wouldn't mind."

They arrived there at dusk. The evenings were drawing out really long now, and the trees were ^{beginning to show leaf,} ~~thick with leaves.~~ Underneath her fear there was a physical satisfaction, even a sort of reawakening. She began to look forward involuntarily to their holidays. But it wouldn't be by the sea this year. He'd make some excuse. She'd know he'd gone into the holiday-money. She could feel it. She felt she needed the sun terribly. Well, she'd get it in the garden if nowhere else.

Jack and Arthur Simmons were in the middle of an argument. You could have cut the atmosphere with a knife. They sat on either side of Polly's table looking very glum and set, while Splinter sat in dad's chair by the fireplace as usual, making funny little placatory faces. And Polly looked contrite, as if she was responsible for it all. Dosh wasn't there. ^{Janet} ~~she~~ sank into a chair with a sigh of relief. At least Dosh respected her that much. Polly ^{made her} ~~got~~ a cup of tea ~~for her~~ while Ralph got his usual half-pint of wallop. Arthur and Jack took hardly any notice of them. They'd never been too keen on each other. Arthur had about as much rebel in him as a doctored cat, and this didn't suit Jack at all. Arthur sat there in his white bank-clerk's collar and neat tie, his hornrimmed spectacles on---she felt he was proud of them. But she liked him. He was always so nice and responsible. And he'd given Pat a good life, when all was said and done: Rachel and Godwin would go to college if it killed him. Well, if you had as little brain on your shoulders as Pat it was all right.

It seemed to be the tail-end of the argument. There was a brief, uncomfortable silence and Jack turned to her: "How are you, Jan?"

"All right, thanks. Did you have a good trip?"

"Not too bad." He smiled without much warmth. "Too much work, though."

There was another pause.

"How did all this start?" Ralph asked in his intimate way that seemed to make them all feel better, even the protagonists.

"Jack said it was America's fault we wasn't getting into Europe," Splinter said.

"Well, I didn't say exactly that, mate," Jack told him.

"I said we hadn't made up our minds if we were negotiating for America or ^{our} own country. That's not America's fault. That's ours."

"I don't see what you mean by saying America put the clock back for us after the last war," Arthur said.

"I said we've been at a standstill all that time because ^{we're tied to} of America. Yes, I said that. We've got a fake socialism that's completely run by business men. ^{I say} Because we're tied to an old-fashioned tycoon capitalism that was all right ³⁰ ~~hundred~~ years ago but ^{it} ~~is~~ no good now. And I say that after the war we were getting on to something new and then America stepped in with prospects for the boys."

"Old-fashioned? America?" Arthur said with his silly hornrimmed spectacles going up and down, giving Janet an incredulous look, as if she cared ~~a damn~~.

"America's run by big business men and we're run by their lackies! That's what I say!"

"All right, mate," Polly said quietly, "there's no need to shout."

"I tell you what," Jack said, springing forward in his chair, "if one of the parties came forward and offered this country independence, and chucked up all this stuff about a

nuclear alliance with America, it'd sweep the country."

"Have you told the Labour party that?" Arthur asked with a wink at Ralph.

Jack smiled. "Yes, he didn't think much of it, either!"

"Are they putting you up as a candidate?" Ralph wanted to know.

"Not just yet, mate," Jack said, leaning back in his chair in a comfortable way. She could just see him in ten years' time, radiating steadiness.

"They didn't like his nuclear policy," Splinter said.

"And he called the secretary a fascist."

"Go on!" Ralph laughed.

"He wanted to know where I stood," Jack said. "He wanted to know if I believed in a European nuclear force independent of America. That was a catch, you see. I said I didn't believe in anything nuclear. Which meant I didn't believe in being part of the American nuclear system, either, where somebody else three thousand miles away could pull the trigger for us. I said we should throw up all this bomb business because it wasn't real defence anyway, it was just a power-symbol. I said I didn't believe in the nuclear balance between Russia and America. I said ~~I thought~~ ^{just} it was a hoax to stop the ~~world in between~~ ^{just one} being independent and shifting for ~~themselves~~ ^{ourselves}. I said it was only propagated by Englishmen who didn't know if they ^{were} English or American. I said we should work for real things, to try to establish a real civilisation, we've got a wonderful island and it's about time it stopped being used as somebody else's rocket base. I said we ^{had} ~~have~~ to have real allies who spoke our language and understood our thoughts, not a substitute-ally who was everybody's friend and who secretly thought we

X were pathetic and outmoded. I said we needed any ally who didn't regard himself as morally superior to us and think he'd been elected to solve history's problems for all mankind. I said that was the way for us to get back to real life again, to stand on our feet and start living in the present, but our own present and not somebody else's. I said that was what our youth wanted, I said they couldn't respect parents who didn't love their country but believed it right for Americans to love theirs. I said the American alliance was the most fatal alliance we'd ever had in our history because it sapped our energies and cost us our independence. I said that if we didn't believe in bombs we shouldn't shelter under American ones, and if we did we should have our own. Well, that tore it." He paused with a funny little smile at ^{Ralph} Jack and added, "He said the party would never have that from a candidate."

She did admire him still. She could see now how she'd loved him. She hadn't been wrong. But she was weak, tired through. She didn't want any more talk, no more promises for empty dreams.

"All I know is prices are going up all the time," Polly said, getting up to draw the curtains. "That's all I know."

Jack turned to her again, after he'd got breath back from his speech. "Ruth said you were really bad for a fortnight."

"I've never seen Jan so low, anyhow," Ralph said, but she noticed Jack didn't glance at him or say a word.

"I'm all right now," she murmured, under all their gazes.

"You look thinner, Jan," Arthur said as if he'd just seen her.

Well, she was sitting between the two men who'd done it: who'd both rejected her. She felt thin, yes: they'd added

that word for good measure! What fools men were.

"Ruth was marvellous," she said with an edge to her voice. "She did all my shopping." And she stared at Jack in a deliberately sullen way.

"I reckon she didn't want her friend laid up for a month." And he made an awkward movement that seemed to her almost like affection. He turned round to Splinter: "Ruth dotes on old Jan, you know." Again he addressed nothing to Ralph.

Was there a moral edge to Jack's tone? It seemed to her as she glanced sideways that Ralph was looking a ^{but} abashed and helpless. Oh, yes, ^{Jack} ~~he~~ could be moral---who was so foolproof against love himself! But at the same time she wondered if ^{he} ~~Jack~~ didn't feel protective towards her. That was a discovery. She nearly had a resurgence of her old feeling for him. Yet she was worried ^{for} ~~about~~ Ralph too: not to have him given the cold shoulder by the others.

"How's Dosh?" she suddenly said---even with innocence in her voice.

Jack blinked but maintained his composure. She couldn't have ~~had~~ better proof that it was all true.

"Oh," he said, "a sight happier than she was up at Preston."

"I'll bet." She didn't say it with sarcasm.

"How does she strike you?" Jack asked her in a confidential way.

Ralph was sitting bolt upright, not risking a movement, even the flicker of an eyelid.

"She's marvellous," she said. And she said it with firmness, as if to tell him that no moral lines were to be taken; that she could look after herself. "A tonic for any man---I can't see

how the other chap could leave her."

'Other chap'---that was good.

"Well, he didn't leave her, really," Jack said. "He's eating his heart out."

"I reckon," Polly said suddenly, "a woman should stick by a man if he's a drunkard or not." They all looked at her. "Particularly if he's a nice drunkard, like everybody says he is."

X And she gave her ^{2d} husband a straight, pale, confirming look.

So she knew too?

Yet nobody would talk about it openly. That was England. It was how she'd been brought up. It was something you began to understand slowly: that under the vague faces there were passions and bitter sorrows.

She turned to Polly and said with a peculiar contradictory defiance, "But you've got to get something out of it, haven't you? I mean, he wasn't giving her anything."

And Polly disregarded this as if she wasn't really in the discussion. The glances were all round Janet, bypassing her, never direct.

J Only Arthur didn't know perhaps. He was gazing at the tablecloth benevolently: it was a great night for him---two glasses of beer without Pat standing over him like a ~~little~~ mahogany goddess.

"I reckon a woman's always got a way with a man," Splinter said, poking the fire suddenly, though he'd just that minute poked its heart out.

"Of course she has," Polly said, though nobody knew quite what Splinter meant. "A woman can change a man if she's a mind

to."

"Oh, well," Jack said quietly, looking down, "she's had a rough time, I don't care what you say. There's no behaviour too low for a drunk, and he's usually lowest at home. She's taken the foulest insults I've ever heard come from a man's lips, I can tell you that."

"Well, I wouldn't stand for it," Janet said. And again they disregarded her, as if she knew nothing.

"Nor would I," Ralph put in. She thought his voice was gripped with determination, but as he was puffing at a cigarette at the same time you couldn't tell.

"You're a man, mate!" Polly cried indignantly. "You ought to stand for it a damned sight longer than a woman and see that she changes, too!"

Did she mean Ralph ought to change her, Janet? Did she have the reputation of---looking round her too much? She had a surge of hot panic, sweat formed instantaneously on her upper lip---to think that people might think that! If only they spoke their thoughts clearly! But, ^{in his vagueness} ~~as it was~~, you couldn't tell where you stood or what sort of person you were.

"Never mind," Splinter said, obviously feeling it was going too far, "it's none of our business, eh, Ralph?" That was a brave little shot. "And what about another drink all round?"

The first glass he went and picked up was Ralph's.

"I reckon I could do with a drink now," Janet said. She'd only had tea so far.

Everybody looked delighted. "Well, listen to that!" Polly cried. "The saucy hussy! Here, give me a glass down, Splint, and I'll give her a peg of port."

"You'd better have some yourself while you're at it,"

Splinter said. "Bloody old misery!"

They laughed deliberately, and the port and lemonade were brought out. Beer was poured into the other glasses, and everybody said cheerio. She drank gratefully and as the liquid made a warm channel down inside her she thought, what the devil did it matter who loved who as long as they were friends?

Polly leaned over to her confidentially and told her in a lower voice that she'd been to the doctor again, and some x-rays had been done, and it was all right.

"Oh, thank God for that, Poll," Janet said. "I was going to ask."

"He said to cut down on the smoking, that's all. And I might have a stomach ulcer, he said."

"No?"

"In cipient. Anyway, he's put me on a diet, and I reckon I can do it if Splint cooperates."

"It seems all fish---boiled, too," Splinter said with a sorrowful look at the others.

"That's what Connie Bowes was on for a twelvemonth, " Arthur said. "And it seemed to do her good."

"How are Dick and Connie, by the way?" Janet asked her. "I haven't seen them for ever such a long time."

"I saw Con the other day. She wants us to come to the club this week."

"That's an expensive lark," Arthur said.

"I reckon we'll never be seen there again, not since Jan put in a new carpet," Ralph said.

"I don't know, mate," Polly answered at once---she was determined to get a cut at him, "you was there two Saturdays ago, wasn't you?"

"Only because I sent him," Janet told her quietly.

"Well, more fool you!" Polly cried with a laugh.

Ralph seemed like a threat to public security for them. That was how he sat there, alone, glad for a glance in his direction.

But you can't help love, she wanted to tell them. At the same time she wanted to lay her head on the table and cry herself to sleep with misery.

To give herself courage she looked at Jack and tried to see every feature of his face as she'd seen it once: the darting eyes, the skin that was so soft---somsoft to the touch! How lucky Ruth was! She felt almost reawakened. She stared at him openly.

Could she be sure he didn't feel something too? How did she know he hadn't deliberately suppressed his feelings? Perhaps he had a stronger character than Ralph---some would say weaker, because you needed strength to love. And Ralph hadn't harmed her, after all. Even in the most intimate matters he'd fulfilled his---quota.

She realised they'd got on to politics again.

"No," Jack said in answer to something of Arthur's, "I say America took us right back to the Thirties again---prosperity and nobody believing in anything. And after the last war we were all set to change it. Then we found ourselves in the middle of another war---a few months after the other one ended. They call it a cold war and there we've been ever since, with our life frozen and paralysed! They've even got into our secret service if the truth be told!"

She tried to love him again with all her heart, to relieve

the pain.

"I don't see they're any different on the continent," Splinter said, shifting in his seat.

"They don't want to buy us up, at least."

"What made them see the light first over there?" Ralph asked him. He was being a tiny bit sarcastic.

"They hadn't lost the key to our civilisation as much as we had," Jack answered promptly. He always spoke in this light yet probing way, as if the thoughts were already in his head and he only had to put them to words.

"Oh, come off it!" Arthur cried. "I don't call nazism much of a key!"

"We've forgotten how to live," Jack persisted. "And we've got to learn again."

"What sort of thing?" They were playing with him.

"Well, the arts of food---love," Jack said mildly, with a faint smile.

That was too much even for her. The arts of love! From him! She could have tipped his beer over his head.

And then she saw him do an extraordinary thing. She could hardly believe her eyes. He put his hand in his pocket and---took out his pipe. She gaped and stared. And then he began fiddling for his tobacco pouch!

"Good Lord!" she cried,

Everybody looked at her.

"What---what do you think you're doing?" She gasped so much that she could hardly speak.

"Eh?" He stared at her, then followed her eyes down to his pipe.

"What are you doing with that?" she said contemptuously.

flicking her hand towards the damned little black thing.

He turned the pipe over in his hand, looked at it, looked up at her, blinked. And all at once she came to her senses. A blush crawled up her neck with awful slowness. No one spoke. There was nothing they could say, really.

Such a long time seemed to pass that she nearly ran out of the room. As for Ralph, she wanted to hit him for not rescuing her in some way. But everybody seemed to be struck dumb. How she could ever explain it? How? She just had no idea.

"Oh," Jack murmured, putting the pipe away again, "I forgot. Jan isn't keen on pipes."

And he flushed slightly. Did ^{it} ~~he~~ mean he really had understood then, at the time? that the curved flight of his pipe in the darkness had really been a sign? His flush seemed to her the most marvellous thing she'd ever seen.

Polly laughed. "Well, what a tyrant!"

"I made him throw it away once," she said. Truth was the only way out, she knew that. "It seems ever so rude, but the smoke gets right down into my stomach somehow."

"It's because you've been queer," Ralph said. "I wondered what the hell was up?" Eh, Jack?

Jack nodded a little timorously and they all laughed again.

"No wonder you're grey round the edges, mate!" Polly said to Ralph, as if she'd forgiven him in her heart.

Only Jack was a little constrained.

"It was that night we got lost," Janet said. She was determined to have it all in the open, for her own sake.

"We took a walk to get some air and I made him throw it away."

This seemed to relieve Jack, too. "What I didn't tell her," he said, "was that I had two pipes."

"He threw it into the next field."

"What was you doing in a field?" Polly asked shrilly, with a wink at the others.

"Walking."

"Walking my arse!" Polly cried, in her old form suddenly. "Tell that to the marines!"

"All he did was talk politics," Janet said.

"You are slow, mate!" Splinter said. "What's the matter with you?"

"Happily married," Janet said, so coolly that it didn't seem an exceptional remark at all.

"Well, all this is news, Jack," Ralph said in his comical way. "One lives and learns."

"I thought I'd got him to give up smoking," Janet said. "And I see I didn't succeed."

Arthur couldn't quite keep pace with all this. He sat beaming and raising his eyebrows.

"Oh, well," Ralph said in a final way, "Let's drink up. We're keeping these good people out of their beds. And it's a working day tomorrow."

She noticed Jack gave him a little glance of surprise, as if what ^{he'd} ~~Ralph had~~ said was audacious.

On the way out when they were all saying good night she heard Jack say to Ralph, "See you tomorrow night, then?"

"OK, mate."

In the car as they were driving home she said, "Are we seeing Jack and Ruth tomorrow, then?"

"No. I'm seeing Jack in the pub, that's all."

He offered no reason and she was too puzzled---frightened---to ask.

As they were pulling up outside the house he said,
"Old Jack's got some good ideas. Mixed up with some bad ones."

"Like all of us," she said.

She said it a little touchily, but he didn't reply, seeming not to want an argument of any kind.

She noticed how easily he walked to the front door after putting the car in. She felt a quiet excitement again---and pride. She actually stopped and watched him.

He came home a little earlier the next evening. Just as of meeting Jack in the pub was important in some way.

"I got off at four," he told her, taking off his jacket.
"Not much doing this week."

He needn't have said that. And she didn't answer.

She had a horrified presentiment that Jack wanted to have it out with him, as they used to in the old days, when men fought each other with bare fists in their back yards. But Jack wasn't like that.

She noticed he didn't put on more casual clothes. Suddenly it seemed to her obvious that Dosh would be there. Then the fear was past, as why should she see him in Pyfield Green when there'd been so many ecstatic meetings in London?

She watched him leave, and mixed herself a whisky and soda afterwards. The whisky hadn't gone down a finger in the last fortnight, she noticed. He didn't need it these days.

It was Friday and he hadn't given her any money. There was nothing unusual about that, as they didn't live by clockwork, but she attached importance to it this time. She watched television in a daze, growing more and more nervous.

When he came home he looked haggard, yet with a tiny light of defiance in his eye. "Old Sims may pay me off next month,"

he said, sitting down heavily.

Her breath stopped. "What?"

"He may pay me off."

"You mean sack you?"

"Yes." He nodded, his hands together loosely, his elbows on his knees. Even in that moment she noticed what a strange new elegance he had.

"Why?"

"Business slack," he murmured, looking down. He seemed to plead with her not to ask more. "He's been threatening it for some time."

"Is it certain?"

"No."

"We'll have to give up the car."

"Yes, I thought of that. It'll bring us in a couple of hundred quid at the least, to tide us over, and we'll be saving ~~on~~ the insurance. It isn't as if we really need the car."

"No," she said breathlessly. She switched the TV off with a smart movement. They sat in silence for a time. She was trembling and cold all the way through.

"Oh, well," she managed to say, "we'll cope somehow."

"Yes." He looked up at her for a moment, clearly relieved beyond words.

A week passed in that uncertain state. Then she phoned Sims and Tuke, on an impulse, and asked to speak to Mr Sims himself. She gave her name, and she had to put more money in the box because he took so long to come.

After a few strained civilities she asked, "Is it right you're sacking my husband?"

"Well, it's not decided yet, Mrs Maynard."

"Why is it?"

"You see, he's been missing so many days." He stopped.

"I don't like to tell you this, Mrs Maynard."

"I knew---in a way," she said pathetically. She tried to stop herself making a sound, but the tears began pouring down her face and she had to screw up her eyes. She was glad to be in a phone-booth where no one could see her.

"You won't do it, will you?" she asked, unable to hide the crying. "Oh, Mr Sims!"

"No, Mrs Maynard, it was thinking of you that stopped me doing it before." He paused again in his old-fashioned way. "These things pass, you know. I shouldn't let it---change anything."

"No. As long as we've got a bit of money."

"I had to give him a warning, you see. He's been coming in ever since. We've never had trouble with him. He's been one of our best employees. If not our best."

Which means, she thought through her tears, that he shows no spirit, and now he does show some you want to sack him.

"You won't sack him?" she asked again, almost in a whisper.

"As I say, I had to give him a warning. We can't have a man on our books who doesn't do the work."

"Not after ten years?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"He can't help falling in love, can he?"

"I'm sorry, Mrs Maynard, all I know is he doesn't come into the office."

"Tell me what you know," she said breathlessly.

"Well, he's been seen outside," he murmured. "You asked me to tell you, Mrs Maynard."

"And after ten years you can't show him a little understanding?"

"I have to keep a balance sheet, Mrs Maynard. The other employees depend on it too."

"Oh, yes, yes," she said, crying openly. "But don't sack him, please."

"I'll tell you what. If I let you know how things go before I do anything?---how would that be? Give me a call in a week or so. I'll tell my secretary to put you straight through."

"All right."

"I'm sorry, Mrs Maynard. But an office is an office."

"Thank you. Good bye." She put the receiver down before she heard him say anything.

When Ralph came in that evening he looked at her and said, "You been crying?"

"Yes."

"I told you not to worry. It may be all right after all."

He sold the car a few days later, and she began to see the children on to the school bus every morning, which made her feel fitter because of the walk, and it also meant she had more time in the morning. The children took it hardest of all. It was a prestige matter. They said the other children laughed at them for not coming in the car any more.

"That's not true," Janet said.

"Well, it will be if they find out we haven't got one," Betsy said.

Janet laughed. "Well, perhaps we'll buy another one

before that happens."

They paid off the new carpet with the money. So there were no debts hanging over them. He seemed to be going to the office again. She could always tell by a certain dimmed look round his eyes. Dosh had gone away for a time, at least from Pyfield Green. She was staying in London with her brother-in-law, Ruth told her. When Ralph saw her she couldn't tell: perhaps in the lunchhour. Perhaps that was the cause of the tired look round his eyes---the fact that he wasn't seeing her enough. Sometimes Janet sat gazing before her in the silence of the house. She hardly ever went to see Ruth now. She wanted no one. She wondered how far he'd gone with Dosh. But really she had no doubt. She could feel it in his body. She could even have given an approximate date: his touch had become different.

One evening he said, "I'm fed up with that office. I've been loyal enough all this time."

"It's all we've got to live on," she said, thinking of the children...

He didn't reply to this, only went next door to take his shoes off. He hadn't been reading to the children lately. Of course they noticed it, and Janet told them that he was feeling tired these days because a lot of work had come in. Sometimes it was on the tip of her tongue to ask him about Dosh--- a simple question of how she was, whether she was happy.

Every time he opened his mouth to speak she was afraid he was going to say something terrible: such as ^{dis}that he wouldn't be coming home any more. Was that what Jack and Polly and Splinter knew and ~~dis~~approved of? Had he threatened that? She watched him closely but took pains never to seem to watch

him at all. She was wise enough for that. She couldn't believe he would ever do it. It wasn't in his face. Once it was on the tip of her tongue to ask him, do you still belong to me, Ralph? But she dared not risk it. It might be the very thing that sent him flying away.

All this time she was helped by what she'd felt towards Jack: it supported her pride, to know that she'd had a love too; and above all a guilt, to equalise herself with him. She consulted her own experience. She remembered that while she'd felt the right to possess Jack she'd always belonged to Ralph. Any thought of divorce had been academic.

She went so far as to say to him tenderly, "Can I help in any way, Ralph---about the job?"

"No." There was a pause during which she couldn't tell what he was feeling. The recent sunlight had deepened his eyes: he must have been outdoors a great deal.

He moved towards her in bed no less than he'd always done, and there was the same unabated thrill for her, so strong that she didn't dare to take a movement of her own accord, it nearly throttled her, and it was bitter in some way, marvellously so.

He added with a questioning look, "I suppose you know Jack's trying to get me into his office?"

"He is?"

"For some time now."

"And it hasn't worked out?"

"Not so far. He's trying again. There's another possibility."

Jack's image passed across her mind, more illusive and mysterious than ever.

"He thought I needed a change."

She gazed at him with slight wonder. "He thought?"

"Mm."

"Didn't you think so, too?"

"I mean that's what started him on the idea. It won't be exactly in his office. No travelling or that kind of thing. Not at first, anyway."

"I didn't get that. What made him think you needed other work?"

"He said he thought my mind wasn't being used. He said I seemed idle." He looked at her like a boy. "Do I to you?"

"It's true it isn't the work for you. You know I've always said it."

She was proud that Jack thought his mind good.

"Will there be more money?" she asked.

"No, less." He blinked hesitantly, which proved to her that he at least cared what she thought. "At first."

"I don't care about that," she said.

"We won't be able to get another car just yet," he went on. "Even if I get the job."

"When will you know?"

"By the week-end." He added, "I'll have to go up for an interview."

"Oh!"

"To Reading. I'll have to stay the night. They pay the expenses."

Her body drooped with the foreknowledge---as swift as a flash---that this would be a whole night with Dosh. She could feel the expectation in him, throbbing and vibrating inside.

X What a long way they'd travelled, she and Ralph, since she'd
X taught him his first shy steps at the palais de danse!

"You'd better get a new suit," she said, barely able to speak.

"Yes."

"Will you get it in London, or shall we go to Blithe's together on Saturday?"

"Let's go to Blithe's. I'm no good at choosing." He sighed. "I've had about as much of Sims and Tuke as a mortal can take."

Well, her objectives were achieved. But at a price she could never have foretold.

The job came through. Jack drove round on the following Saturday afternoon and told him. Then it transpired he'd made a mistake. Only the interview had come through. It was for the following week-end. All Janet could think of was the hotel-room where he would stay, and of Dosh, how the dawn would come through on to her blonde hair. She had to use all her strength not to sabotage his going, which she knew it was in her woman's power to do.

And she knew that the next Saturday night was a test---of which even Ralph didn't know the outcome. On Sunday morning he might be as far away from her as if they'd never met. A whole night could do that. Janet was so nervous she couldn't eat. She almost begged him to get in another bottle of whisky: she said it seemed to do her good, and he obliged her. She never took more than one glass in the evening, but it rested her nerves so that she could sit through television without crying. The silence was the worst thing, her having to keep silent: but at the same time it gave her strength.

She became more nervous as the week went on. He took an afternoon off and they went to Chatsdowne to buy his suit.

She insisted on something stylish, with narrow trousers. He looked so impressive that she almost gasped.

She had to tell him in the coffee room where she'd sat alone so often in the past few weeks, "How you've been wearing those other clothes all this time, I don't know."

"It'll blind 'em, eh?" he said with a twinkle.

"Yes, it will!"

She smiled at him, remembering that it would blind someone else too. She had dressed him at last--for another woman.

She was so nervous on the Saturday morning that she snapped at Netsy and made her cry. And she cried as well.

"What, two of you?" Ralph said, trying to be jocular. He looked so swish in his suit that she thought it was another man when he came downstairs.

He left at midday. And she wished she had a religion for a moment, so that she could pray. She prayed to herself, to the future, to whatever God might exist; that he would come back. Please come back to me, she prayed.

She walked home from the station in the sunshine. The children had stayed behind, by her wish. He had given^{her} a long, warm kiss as the train started to draw out, not at all awkward as he'd always been at railway stations. They waved each other out of sight, and she found she was too frightened to cry.

Ruth was waiting for her when she got back, with Sonya in her arms, as if she thought a friend might be needed. They made a cup of tea together, and Ruth asked her to come round in the evening. She said she would.

"We'll have a drink together," Ruth said, though she hardly ever touched more than lemonade.

"I'm keeping my fingers crossed about that interview."

"Jack says there's a fifty-fifty chance."

As Ruth was leaving Janet asked her, "Will Dosh be there tonight?"

And with a little start that showed Janet how much she knew, Ruth said, "No, she's still in town. I think she's going on to Preston."

"Oh. Back to her husband?"

"No." Ruth seemed to say that unwillingly. "Just to clear things up."

She gave the children a bath that evening and read to them, doing everything carefully and slowly. As she was reading to them she thought of him walking into the hotel, checking in at the desk, walking up to his room. Was it a double room? Was she waiting for him? Or were they to meet later? How exciting that would be, a whole night together. Would they take different hotels? Had they decided to be careful? But there was no need. No one was hindering them. The double bed was clear in her mind.

She said little at Ruth's. Jack talked about other things, the food in the south of France, whether they should ^{have} another child, as people said three was the best. He gave her three glasses of port. She felt tired and resigned. He offered to walk her home but she said she'd rather walk alone. And they seemed to understand her at once, which again proved they knew. They saw her down to the gate and gave her a quiet, affectionate good night.

When she got back she threw herself on the bed and cried her eyes out, coughing and making long moaning noises that filled the house. She didn't even put the lights on. Her tears soaked the pillow and the moaning sounds wracked her body as if it

didn't belong to her. She was still in her outdoor clothes. She whined timidly, hugged the pillow, cried, "No, no!" And all the time the tears poured down her face so that her skin smarted, and her mouth was full of the salt taste. She stayed there like that until three or four in the morning and then fell asleep, still moaning curiously, without blankets over her. By that time---she knew dimly, at the back of her mind, even as she drifted off into a childish sleep---the decision would have been made on which she and Tim depended for their lives and souls and happiness.

He came back. It was early Sunday morning---the very day after, but it had seemed like ten years. He'd taken a taxi from the station, and at first when she saw it drawing up outside the door she thought it was something terrible, perhaps Jack come to break bad news. Then she saw him, as fresh and elegant as when he'd left. She'd cried too much the night before to cry any more. She'd woken up at dawn and dressed, to be ready for the worst if it came. She felt so quiet and calm now that it was like floating on the sea, on one of those fine days when the water shimmers like a lake.

"How did it go?"

Involuntarily she looked at his suit to see if it was crumpled.

"Not too bad. There were plenty of others, though."

She forced herself to treat the return as normal. After the children were in bed that evening she switched on television and lit the fire as it was still chilly after dark.

"They said they'd give me the job just for the suit," he said in his burlesque way.

"I bet," she said, seeming to give all her thoughts to the

screen.

She noticed a love-bite on his neck, deep and crimson like the one he'd given Dosh. But her crying had purged the sorrow out of her. The pillows had still been wet in the morning, and she'd dried them by the kitchen stove before the children got up.

They were both exhausted and slept as soon as their heads ~~were~~^{tucked} on the pillow^s. She wanted to stay awake to savour the taste of relief at having him next to her again so that she could touch him, but she couldn't. She wanted to ask where Dosh was, but that too seemed remote now. And he seemed to have passed into calm again. She couldn't tell. But something in his body, in the way he took off his shirt to go to bed, gave her that feeling.

They passed nearly a fortnight of suspense. During that time they didn't touch each other. Jack said it was usually decided in a week! And that silence was a bad sign. Though they might be having difficulties between one or two candidates. There had been many candidates. It was the first time she really understood that. Her hope sank completely. It would be Sims and Tuke for the rest of his life. But she had him. It didn't matter.

How she could ever have looked at Jack with yearning she couldn't undress and now. It was a joy to be with Ralph in the evening, when they sat together, when they ate in the kitchen. At first she didn't want to go out anywhere, then she suddenly got it into her head to go to the club. She wanted to celebrate. So they went the following Saturday. Hilda and Jim were there, and the Simmonses. It wasn't a very good evening. Connie and Dick were supposed to come but didn't. Yet it was nice to

sit in the cosy gloom of their corner, and then dance with Ralph. He seemed a bit lost. It was like getting to know a new person.

Suddenly the job came thorough. The real thing this time. Jack phoned him at the office, and they had a little celebration in the evening at Ruth's. It would mean a lot of hard work, but then the pay would go up, and there might even be some travel, outside England, but not most of the time like Jack's. None of this meant anything to her: she didn't care at all. She knew the facts would all come to her slowly, later on, over the months and years. She was celebrating something else. All she wanted to do was to thank God, and to thank again and again. She got a bit tipsy, and did a sort of twist for them.

That night he moved towards her again, as if with shere relief that life was straight again. The excitement was so great that she couldn't believe it was Ralph but a man without a name who'd got into her bed by mistake. She abandoned herself completely to him, but completely and utterly. She realised it was for the first time.
