

Chapter One

There were owls in the nursery when James was a boy. The room was papered in a pattern of winding branches, amongst which great green parent owls perched in identical courting couples. Beneath each pair, a trio of green owlets huddled, their sharp beaks slightly ajar. They sat between big, thistling green flowers with tiny white blossoms which made James think of mother-of-pearl buttons, the kind on Charlotte's Sunday dress. When he was alone in the nursery, James thought he could hear the owls chatter together softly, like monkeys, scratching and scratching their claws against the endless green branches. But when Charlotte was there, they were quiet, because she had told them that if they did not behave, she would get her box of watercolours and paint out their eyes.

At night James would hear the real owls screech outside and imagine them gliding through the dark. Sometimes there was the high sudden cry of a fox. And sometimes there was a noise from the house itself, a whispering creaking sound, as if the walls were sighing.

Often he would slip out of bed and down the corridor to

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Charlotte's room. Charlotte would always be sound asleep: face down on the pillow, though Mrs Rowley, the housekeeper, said it was unnatural and would lead to Charlotte being smothered to death one of these days. James would slip under the blankets and lie down topsy-turvy, with his head at the bottom of the bed, his feet near the top. Charlotte would sometimes murmur and kick half-heartedly against him, then fall asleep again, and James would do the same, his feet pressed against her back until they grew warm. They would lie all night like that, snug as the pair of pistols that lived in the blue-lined case in Father's study.

When morning came James liked to wake early, open Charlotte's bedroom window and look down onto the grounds of Aiskew Hall, which went on for as far as he could see. There were wide lawns and gardens edged by paths and stately, lovely old trees – oaks and horse chestnuts and copper beeches and silver birches. Between the trees there were two grassy mounds. These were the icehouses, which now held gardening tools and other odd things.

At a distance, the gardens still had the illusion of being neat and well tended, as they had been before James and Charlotte were born. Long ago, in the prosperous days, there had been people to look after things: gardeners and undergardeners, two gamekeepers and a carpenter. A fire engine, too, drawn by horses. Now there was only Griswold, strange and grim-faced and sixty-three. There had been a young Griswold once – the gardener's son, who had been expected to take over from his father and who instead went off to foreign parts and then died (fighting the Shantee, said Ann, the housemaid. James thought perhaps this was a sort of banshee.)

After his son went away, Griswold had been left alone to wage a vain and bitter war against the gardens. He shot the rabbits but they came back, grazing the lawns at their leisure. The mighty rhododendron bushes flourished unchecked, and in the orchard the trees turned wild and the apples were eaten by blackbirds.

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At the end of the hall gardens, the ground gave way to a sudden drop that felt like the edge of the world. Below was a ditch full of nettles, which was called a ha-ha. Beyond that there were wide flat fields for miles, green and gold in the spring, red-brown earth in the winter. There were oak trees and black sheep grazing and the ruins of a small Grecian temple, where long ago the ladies of the hall would sit to enjoy their books and needlework. Part of the roof had given way, and the pillars looked slightly crooked. It was not safe to sit there any more.

Charlotte had heard Mrs Rowley say that people in Aiskew village thought it was a scandal to leave the hall so neglected. Before now the hall people had always done their part in the village: there had been treats for the Sunday-school children; sometimes the hall ladies would take baskets to the villagers who were poor or ill. More than that, there was any amount of work at the hall: mouths to be fed, washing to be done, windows to be cleaned, horses to be stabled. It had been a fine place, back in the old days. Now it was mostly shut up. Everyone wondered why Charlotte and James's father troubled himself to keep the house at all, since he did nothing with it.

Charlotte thought that if Mother were still alive, then Father would have lived with them, at least some of the time, when he could be spared from his business, and the people in the village would have been friendlier. As things were, nobody much cared for James and her. Even Mrs Rowley seemed to prefer them to be elsewhere: outside in the gardens or at their lessons or in the nursery, anywhere as long as they were out of the way.

When Father had left Charlotte and James at Aiskew after Mother's death, he had said that he would make all the proper arrangements. Then they did not hear from him for a long while. Eventually he wrote to tell Mrs Rowley that he had engaged a governess. The letter went on to say that he would approach Mrs Chickering, his aunt, who might be able to make a long visit to Aiskew, to help Mrs Rowley set things in order and make the

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place comfortable again. Once all this was done, perhaps he could be spared from business long enough to come back to Yorkshire himself and see them.

At first they were all of them – Charlotte and James, Mrs Rowley and Ann, and Mrs Scholes, the cook – in the habit of speaking as if Mrs Chickering might arrive any day. But months went by, and she did not appear. It was her health, Mrs Rowley said, sounding rather scornful. Mrs Chickering never seemed strong enough to travel. A year passed, then another.

Ann and Mrs Scholes were the only servants at Aiskew – apart from Griswold, who scarcely counted. They were both up from York and spent a great deal of time huddled in the kitchen for warmth, complaining over the remoteness of the house, the dreariness of the mists, and the loneliness of their situation. Sometimes there was a governess for Charlotte and James – but these ladies never stayed for very long.

So Charlotte did her best: they would have to be brave, she told James, and she devised ordeals for them to perform – walking down one of the long corridors alone after dark, or keeping one's head under the bathwater for a minute at a time. Or – this was worst of all – shutting oneself in the priest hole in the library.

The library was full of treasures. The cousin – the very distant cousin who had owned the hall before them – had bought books at a fearful rate, adding to an already extensive collection. There was no one to stop Charlotte and James from taking what they wanted, poring over whichever old, delicious-smelling volumes they chose.

It was a beautiful room, too: there was a red carpet and red-and-gold paper on the walls and a beautiful marble fireplace with a pattern of grapes carved all the way round.

The priest hole had been added to the house by the cousin. He had many romantic ideas and had lavished money on trifles. Much of the grounds and the farmland had been sold to pay

the resulting debts, and the estate had been much reduced, and the cousin had died in Italy of grief or something else.

The cousin had thought that the priest hole might make the house seem older than it really was, though why he should have wanted this neither Charlotte nor James could have said. It was frightening inside – stuffy and smelling of wood and polish. Ann sometimes left dusters and brooms in there, and if you weren't careful you could knock them over in the dark. The door to the priest hole was hidden, fitted cunningly behind one of the bookshelves. It opened with a secret spring concealed behind a dummy book – *Fungi of the British Isles, Vol II*. The false spine was scruffy claret-coloured leather, faded from the touch of many hands. If you didn't know which one it was, you might never find it. From inside the priest hole, there was no way of getting out again.

You passed the ordeal if you didn't scream for help. When the door was shut, it was so close to your face that it felt difficult to breathe. There was no light. It felt as if everyone outside had gone away and there would be no one ever coming to let you out.

They did not do this ordeal often – only when the door's fascination grew too much. It was the best ordeal of all and would make you the bravest, Charlotte said. And this was good, because if you did enough ordeals, you would be grown up.

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One June morning, when Charlotte was nine-and-a-half and James was five, she took a box of coloured chalks out to the terrace and set about teaching him his letters. This was necessary because Miss Prince, their latest governess, had gone home to Shropshire two weeks earlier without being able to make James properly acquainted with any letter other than S (with which, for reasons he was unable to explain, he had an odd fascination).

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The terrace had large flagstones which would grow warm in the sun, so that in the hottest days of summer it was pleasant to walk over them barefoot. Charlotte took a piece of white chalk and drew a large *A* onto one of the stones. Then she moved a little way along, stooped again, and drew *B*.

‘What’re you doing?’ James asked.

Charlotte glanced up, brushing her hair out of her eyes with a chalky hand. It left a dusting of white at the top of her head, making her look as if she were wearing a powdered wig, like a lady of a hundred years ago.

‘You have to know the alphabet,’ she said.

‘Why?’ James asked, staring at *A* with vague mistrustful remembrance.

Charlotte looked up from *F* with a frown. ‘Because you have to. What would you do if you grew up and you couldn’t read? People would think you were ignorant.’

She said *ignorant* in a disagreeable way she had learned from Miss Prince – leaning on the *ig*, making it sound like a finger jab to the ribs.

James scowled. ‘I don’t care.’

‘Well, Father probably thinks you can read already,’ Charlotte said, and drew *N* – it came out bigger than she had intended, all pointed angles, making James think of a gate locked shut.

He watched her in silence and made no further argument. After a moment, he went over to where she was kneeling, the twenty-sixth flagstone, and inspected what she had drawn. It was an angry angular slash, a diagonal stroke, its elbows pointing both directions in a standoffish sort of way.

‘What’s that?’ James asked, pointing at it with his foot.

‘It’s *Z*,’ said Charlotte.

‘It looks like half an hourglass.’

‘Well, it isn’t.’ Charlotte stood up and brushed the dust from her hands. ‘Now go and stand by the fountain.’

James did as he was told. The fountain was a bone-dry stone

bowl at the middle of the terrace, supported by three naked cherubs with mossy legs and expressions of baffled malignity. One of them was missing his nose, and this misfortune, which ought to have made James feel sorry for him, only made him the most hateful of the three.

Charlotte had climbed onto the low wall of the terrace and was pacing up and down. 'When I call the letter, you have to go and stand on it.'

'I can't. I don't know what they are.'

'You have to work them out. When you know them all, then you win.'

'Win what?'

'A prize.'

'What prize?'

'You'll find out when you win,' Charlotte replied, and then she took a breath and bellowed, 'R!'

It was a magnificent cry – *ARRRR!* – like a pirate with rum on his breath and matches smoking in his beard. (They had a book about pirates, which Charlotte would sometimes read aloud, though not on Sundays.)

James hesitated. The chalk lines seemed to run into one another, squirming away from him when he looked at them.

'Go on,' Charlotte said – and James moved reluctantly in search of the right letter.

They stayed out until it was time for lunch, and then again until it was sunset and the shadows from the great trees in the grounds were stretching across the lawn towards the house. It took a long time for James to learn, but, though Charlotte was often cross, she never lost her temper.

She never lied, either; that was one of the nice things about her. She had said that James would manage to do it, and after a time she was proved right and the letters were safe in his head, like the days of the week or the sound of his own name. And there was a prize, just as she had said: a sugar mouse, pure white, with a piece

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of string for a tail. James decided that he was called Aljijohn.

‘Algernon, you mean.’ Charlotte said.

But James shook his head. ‘Aljijohn,’ he said, and took Aljijohn upstairs and made a bed for him on the chest of drawers out of an empty matchbox and a handkerchief.

‘You should eat him,’ Charlotte suggested, when she saw Aljijohn’s bed. ‘Otherwise he’ll go bad.’

James frowned. ‘He’s my friend,’ he said. But that evening it was liver for dinner, and James went to bed hungrier than usual, and in the morning there was nothing left of Aljijohn but a mournful-looking piece of string and an empty matchbox.

‘He would have wanted you to eat him,’ Charlotte said later. ‘It was what he was for.’

‘Are you sure?’ James asked.

She nodded.

‘But I feel all horrible inside, like hurting. I wish I hadn’t thought of him being Aljijohn.’

‘It wasn’t real, though,’ Charlotte said.

Last year, she had been reading to him from a very old book called *The Surprising Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, and the pictures had frightened him so much that Mrs Rowley had taken it away. He had bad dreams afterwards for three nights running. Already she knew that an idea could pain him like a bruise. He had grey eyes that showed every thought, and Charlotte sometimes worried that he might be hurt in some way that she would not be able to prevent.

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This was the way things used to be, and afterwards it seemed to have lasted for many years. This was the way things used to be, and at the time it did not feel as if anything would ever change. As far as they could see, all that happened was they got older. James was six now and could climb higher than before;

he could follow Charlotte over walls and fences. Mrs Rowley began to say that he ought to be sent away to school, but nothing came of it.

Some evenings they would sit in front of the nursery fire, whilst Charlotte taught James to read words the same way she remembered being taught: with short sentences, sounding each letter as she went, as if she were testing a rotten floorboard that might give way beneath her. James liked a rhyme, and so they had *the cat sat on the mat*, and *the fox sat on the box*. After a while they progressed to *the robin sat on the bobbin*, and *the weasel sat on the easel*, and from then onwards James began to write for himself – small stories and rhymes, which were not usually very good. But he was still young, and Charlotte tried to be encouraging.

‘You could write a whole book,’ she told him. ‘When you’re grown up. And have a house in London.’

James said, ‘I want to live here when we’re grown up. But just us.’

The hall was going to belong to James when they were older. They had always known this.

‘Read,’ she ordered, pointing to the slate that lay on the floor between them.

Aiskew was still everything, of course. Later she would not recall feeling discontented at that age, but she had known, even then, that there would be a time when she would want to be elsewhere. Sometimes she dreamed of a view she had seen once, fleetingly, from a train window – the moors, dark purple beneath a grey sky.

A little while afterwards, something unexpected happened. Father wrote to say that instead of sending a new governess to replace Miss Prince’s successor – as everyone had expected – he would shortly be coming back to Yorkshire himself.

‘Why’s he coming back?’ James said, when Mrs Rowley told them the news over breakfast.

‘Why shouldn’t he?’ Mrs Rowley replied. ‘Eat your porridge.’

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‘Does he want to see us?’ Charlotte asked.

‘Of course,’ said Mrs Rowley, frowning, as if Charlotte’s question were somehow impertinent. ‘And he writes that he requires some rest. His physician says that his health is not all it should be.’

‘What’s wrong with him?’ Charlotte said. ‘Is he ill?’

‘The porridge has got hedgehog in it,’ James announced suddenly, dropping his spoon onto the table. ‘Look!’ He pointed to a dark husk of oat.

‘Don’t slop your breakfast about like that, James,’ Mrs Rowley said, ignoring this accusation, which James had made many times before. She put Father’s letter away, and the chance to ask further questions was lost.

On the afternoon that Father was expected, James and Charlotte were sent into the garden to be out of the way. There was enough to do in preparing the house without having them to worry about as well, Mrs Rowley said. They were to be back by four o’clock sharp, to be washed and dressed in time to greet their father.

Shooed outside – like chickens – they wandered rather aimlessly into the grounds. Somehow it was always less fun to be told to go out and play.

They went past the rose garden (where Griswold looked up from his work and stared at them), past the lake and the orchard, out to the rhododendrons, which crowded thickly around the secret statues: a beautiful lady in a scarf and nothing else, a fawn, a centurion (he was getting a bit mossy in places), and a blue-metal gentleman wearing a hat like an upturned mixing bowl, sitting astride a cow. The statues were further additions of the cousin’s. There had been wonderful summer parties in the gardens in his day; they would string coloured lanterns up in the trees and dance outside as darkness fell. Sometimes Charlotte and James found odd relics of that time – half a shattered champagne glass, a playing card wiped blank with rain.

They played amongst the statues for a while, and when they

were tired they sat down to rest on the steps outside the arbour at the end of the yew walk. Inside, the arbour was overgrown with honeysuckle and home to a large family of spiders, which liked to drop from the ceiling without warning. On the top step, Charlotte had tried to carve her name but had only got as far as *Cha* before giving up, exhausted by the effort.

It would be half past four by now, Charlotte thought, perhaps even later. Father must have arrived.

‘Perhaps he’ll come and find us,’ she said. She remembered a Christmas a long time ago, a game of hide-and-seek. Father had been laughing, searching for her in the silliest places, like Mother’s bureau or inside a thimble.

‘There’s someone coming.’ James pointed straight ahead, to the end of the yew walk. ‘There.’

It was Mrs Rowley. She was walking briskly, holding her skirts out of the damp grass. ‘There you are,’ she said, when she was within speaking distance. ‘I told you to be back at four o’clock.’

‘Sorry,’ Charlotte replied. ‘We forgot. Is Father here?’

‘Yes. He’s been— He’s gone upstairs.’

‘Can we see him?’

‘Tomorrow, perhaps,’ Mrs Rowley said. ‘The doctor’s with him now.’

She looked worried, Charlotte thought. Frowning but not angry.

‘Is he all right?’ she asked.

‘He needs rest,’ Mrs Rowley answered. ‘You children must be very quiet when you’re inside, so as not to disturb him.’ She glanced around her, eyeing the arbour with evident disapproval. ‘You’d best play outside for a little while longer,’ she added. ‘Come in before dark.’

She gave them one last, sterner look, then turned away and started back towards the house.

They did not see Father the next day, because he was too ill to have visitors. From Mrs Rowley they heard that he was no better.

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There was a different doctor with him now – not from Aiskew or even brought in from York but all the way from London. It must be interesting to be so important, Charlotte thought – like being the king in a play. She heard Mrs Rowley telling Ann that really, Mrs Chickering ought to be there, that someone from the family should.

The doctor did not leave, nor did Father come downstairs. Mrs Rowley was crosser than usual, and Ann began to look at Charlotte and James strangely. The weather grew worse. On some days it was too cold and wet to venture out of doors. In the house there were only a few rooms which were not forbidden – their bedrooms and the nursery, where they also took most of their meals now. They were not to run and they were not to raise their voices.

At first they did their best to carry on being good. But as the house stayed hushed and Father remained upstairs, they began to make small trespasses: downstairs to the ballroom (all shut up now), or out to the stables. Nobody seemed to notice what they did. Charlotte thought perhaps it would be good to store up some more bravery – the way you could save up hunger, when you knew there was going to be cake later. So they did more ordeals.

In the orchard they climbed to higher branches, balanced their way across the narrow red-brick garden wall. Then in the wider grounds they turned over rocks and forced themselves to pick up spiders – and later a toad, which had strayed onto the terrace.

Afterwards it would be one of the things Charlotte remembered clearly: the cool, warty brown skin of the creature, the rough sensation of its webbed feet against her palm. It was smaller than she had imagined, with wide yellow eyes. She was afraid it might bite (*could* toads bite?) but it did not. It sat quiet, still and frightened in her clasped hands as she carried it down to the lake. When she set it down, it took a few seconds for it to understand its freedom and hop away.

It had been raining for three days when they went back to the library. They were not seen on their way down – the servants

were elsewhere, the doctor was with Father, Mrs Rowley was in her own room. She had told them that morning that Mrs Chickering would be arriving today at long last, and though neither of the children could quite believe her, the news made Charlotte feel restless, uneasy.

‘Let’s do an ordeal,’ she said to James.

Though there was hardly any need for stealth, they crept into the library as if they were housebreakers, enjoying the furtiveness of it. The clock above the mantel ticked to itself, a low, friendly sound that one hardly noticed after a little while. Apart from this there was silence.

Charlotte thought about saying to James that just coming downstairs without being seen was a good enough ordeal, and perhaps they had better go back. But he had already gone to the priest hole and, with his hand on *Fungi of the British Isles, Vol II*, was struggling to open the door. He could manage it for himself, usually, though sometimes he would stand on a pile of books, to make it easier to reach.

Charlotte pushed him aside – not too roughly. ‘Let me do it.’

They never grew tired of watching part of the bookcase suddenly jolt forwards and swing open. Once, Charlotte had pushed at the spring with too much force, and two shelves of books had crashed to the floor. Today she was very careful.

‘Do you want to go first,’ she asked, ‘or shall I?’

‘Can I?’ James said. It was best to go first – it meant the ordeal would be over sooner.

She nodded. ‘I’ll shut it and count to a hundred.’

The door was heavy, and though Charlotte was tall and strong for her age – Mrs Rowley had taken to calling her a *great girl*, in a tone not at all complimentary – it was a struggle to push it closed.

When it was done, she leaned against the door and called to James, ‘Are you all right?’

‘Yes,’ James said, and sneezed. ‘Go on, count.’

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She always counted loudly, so that he would know how long there was to wait.

She had reached twenty when she heard the footsteps. It was Mrs Rowley – Charlotte knew her tread well enough. She was outside, hurrying closer. And as she approached she called, ‘Charlotte? James? Are you here?’ Charlotte looked about for somewhere to hide, but there was no time – Mrs Rowley had already opened the library door.

Charlotte thought she would be angry, but instead she only said brusquely, ‘Where’s your brother?’

‘I don’t know.’

She sighed, then took Charlotte by the wrist and said, ‘Well, come along.’

‘Where—’

‘Your father wants to see you.’ She hurried Charlotte out of the library before Charlotte could say another word.

Father’s room was dark, and smelled wrong somehow. There was the doctor from London standing by the bed – he was quite young, with yellow hair and a bony face.

Father was lying still. Charlotte remembered him tall and broad-shouldered, infinitely strong. Now he was thin and wrecked, and his eyes – dark like Charlotte’s – were bloodshot and stared nowhere. He gasped as he breathed.

He could not speak, Mrs Rowley said, but Charlotte might take his hand and speak to him, if she did not raise her voice.

She couldn’t think what to say. In the end she muttered that she hoped he would be better soon and that James hoped so, too. She thought he turned his head slightly at James’s name.

‘That’s enough,’ Mrs Rowley said. ‘Your father will be tired. You may kiss him.’

She would rather have not, but there seemed nothing else to be done. He was very hot and smelled of sweat and fever and sourness. She wanted to rub her mouth afterwards, to wipe the sickness off.

‘There, now,’ Mrs Rowley said. She looked at the doctor, who shrugged. ‘Perhaps you may see him again tomorrow—’

Then the doctor said, sharp and sudden, ‘Take the child away.’

Father’s face had changed. Something bad had happened, perhaps as Charlotte kissed him.

The doctor leaned over Father with a frown, and Mrs Rowley took Charlotte’s hand and pulled her outside. She shut the door.

Charlotte turned and ran – down the corridor, down the stairs, back to the library. But she halted at the door: there were voices coming from inside. It was Ann, talking to someone.

‘. . . see if she can be spared,’ she was saying, and the other person murmured something in reply. The stranger sounded like an old lady – it must be Mrs Chickering, arrived at last.

Charlotte barely had time to duck out of sight before Ann came out of the library, heading in the direction of Father’s room. Charlotte hoped that Mrs Chickering might follow Ann upstairs to see Father, but she did not. Instead, Mrs Rowley entered the library – followed, a short time afterwards, by the doctor. He was wiping his hands. She thought later that she might have imagined this detail, but there it was in her memory – a tall, thin-faced man, fastidiously wiping his fingers on a handkerchief. He went into the library and shut the door.

The three of them stayed in the library for the better part of an hour. Charlotte could hear voices but not words. She waited, growing cold in the draughty, wood-panelled corridor.

At last they emerged, and all went upstairs again. Charlotte ran at once into the library, hardly caring if they were out of earshot or not. The room was as it had been before. She rushed to the priest hole and opened the door. James was sitting there – leaning against the wall, his eyes closed.

‘Are you all right?’ she asked.

James opened his eyes. ‘Did you see him?’

‘Yes,’ she said. She saw what a bad thing she had done. She tried to think of something comforting. ‘He said your name.’

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He looked at her and didn't speak.

'I'm sorry.' She knelt, tried to help him up, but he wouldn't let her.

His fingers were bleeding – he must have been scrabbling at the door, the rough, splintery wood.

'We'd have been in trouble if they found you here,' Charlotte said.

He stared up at her and drew his knees up to his chest so he was curled up on one side, reminding her of the woodlice that lived in the shady places of the garden, which would roll into a ball if you shook them from their rotten log.

'I'm sorry,' Charlotte repeated.

'I hate you.'

She didn't know what to do.

'Well,' she said at last, 'there's no need to be a baby about it, anyway.' She hated herself for saying that, and hated him for flinching and saying nothing, and she stalked out and went to her own room and lay down on the bed, trembling.

It was later that she discovered what the grown-ups had been talking about in the library. Hidden behind the bookshelf, James would have heard the doctor telling the others that Father was dead.

A mouse died somewhere under the floorboards, a few days before the funeral. There was no smell like that of a dead mouse, nothing so insistently rotten. Griswold was brought in to try to find the body, but without any success. Mrs Rowley had said that they would just have to wait for the odour to depart on its own. It was worst in the room where Father was laid out, but they did not like to move him.

Mrs Chickering had been the one to give Charlotte and James the news of Father's death. Some hours after her arrival, they were brought into the library and introduced to her. She was thin and white-haired and kept her mouth held tight in a way which

must have been very uncomfortable. Perhaps she had forgotten she was doing it. She inspected them both in silence for a little bit, and then told them that Father had gone away, and they would both have to be very good from now on.

Mrs Chickering was afraid of things, Charlotte soon discovered – afraid of fire and rats, afraid that the servants were dishonest, afraid that the dinner had not been properly cooked. She was afraid that the children had been spoiled, she was afraid that they were both very ignorant and that Charlotte was grown into a hoyden. She never ate very much at mealtimes but consumed lavender lozenges almost incessantly; the scent went with her everywhere.

Mrs Chickering said that of course Charlotte and James might not attend the funeral. Instead, they sat in the nursery on the day Father was buried – James in front of the fire, Charlotte curled in a chair, watching him. She wanted to go over and sit beside him but was afraid he would tell her to go away. And so she sat quietly, as if it were still all right between them.

In the days after the funeral, things began to change quickly. James was to be sent to school. Money would be more difficult now, Charlotte learned. They would have to economise. The hall would be shut up entirely. Charlotte would live with Mrs Chickering (and James, when he was not at school) in East Lodge, the cottage close to the ha-ha, near the edge of the estate. This was bad enough; worse was the fact that James remained changed. One wet afternoon, the day before he was to be sent away to school, Charlotte discovered him in the library, writing. The library was the only place that was much the same – everywhere else was already packed away. They had made so little impression on the dust and quiet of the house, Charlotte thought. In a few days, when they and the servants and Mrs Rowley were all gone, there would be scarcely any sign they had lived there at all.

‘What’s that?’ she asked, looking at James’s writing.

‘Story.’

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His handwriting was still terrible. She peered over his shoulder and could not make out a word. He kept his head bent over his work.

There was something wrong, something hurt somewhere in him. It was her fault, of course. He must be anxious about being sent away to school, but he refused to talk about it.

She wanted to say again that she was sorry, but she had told him this many times already, and the time for it was long past.

Instead, she said, 'I wish you weren't going.'

Still he said nothing, which was becoming his way. After a pause she went back upstairs, to finish her packing.

James's school term seemed to last a long while. For reasons of economy and also tradition, he was sent to Father's old school – a small institution of no great academic reputation. He wrote regularly to Mrs Chickering and Charlotte – dutiful letters, addressed to them both. When he was at last released for the holidays, the dogcart was despatched to bring him from York station, and Charlotte went out of the house to meet him. She walked slowly through East Lodge's small garden, down the path that led into the hall grounds. There was no distant sign of light from the hall. Every room was shut up now. Some of the more expensive pieces of furniture had been sold. It was as if their lives were a pencil line drawn on a piece of paper and someone had followed behind with an India rubber, erasing the line as they went. Charlotte still had the key to the French windows that led from the terrace into the library. Sometimes she would visit, but only in daylight and only this room. Gradually her footsteps began to show in the dust. Mrs Chickering said that she would not be able to return for much longer; sooner or later the place would have to be let.

It began to rain as Charlotte went through the trees, skirting the yew walk and the statues – which would soon disappear entirely into the bushes. She was grateful for the cool air and the

silence. She was not sure what James would say to her, and if he could not forgive her now, then she did not know how she was to stand the months and years ahead of her, with only Mrs Chickering for company.

At the edge of the trees she saw him – a little way distant, wearing a scarf against the damp evening. With his face hidden by fog, he looked like someone else, and for an instant she was afraid. But it was him, and they embraced without speaking under the dark, rain-heavy trees.

She had feared that he might be a stranger now, but he was still himself – older and more serious in just those few months, and with a new, watchful expression, but still James. As they embraced, she realised that he had grown. She would not always be taller.

She decided that things would be all right. She would keep him happy, and the memory of what she had done to him would help her, would make her more vigilant and loving, so that no harm would ever come to him again.

He was looking back at the hall – the unlit, uncurtained windows. She did not like the place in dusk any more. It was too melancholy.

‘We’d better go in,’ she said. She turned away, and together they made their way through the trees towards East Lodge, down the old paths they both knew well.

Chapter Two

Was it Shakespeare or not Shakespeare? James paused, pen in hand, and considered. He had been writing for some time without interruption, and yet the distant memory of someone else's words would not leave him alone. Probably it was Shakespeare. Things which sounded like him usually were. From *Julius Caesar* – no, it had happened in England, hadn't it? There had been a fool, and someone had been betrayed or murdered or perhaps both. Or was it *Timon of Athens*, after all?

It was the last week of James's final term at Oxford, and almost summer. His room in college was high up, high enough to look down on the Isis at dusk and see the ducks, black shapes drifting on the dark glimmer of the water. In spite of Mrs Chickering's warnings about moths, he had taken to sleeping with his window open. The nights were delicious in those last few weeks, the skies clear indigo blue, the air cool and sweet.

The days were less pleasant, James thought. Too hot to concentrate, muggy enough to make one in love with autumn. The upper gallery of the Radcliffe Camera was uncomfortably warm today.

He looked down, resumed his inspection of the words he had just written. He was filled with a sudden disgust – a specific sort of self-loathing he only ever experienced when confronting his own prose. It was feeble, all of it. At this rate the article would never be finished. He drew a line through the last paragraph and stood up. He might feel better for a change of air.

Downstairs, at the library door, he hesitated. The place seemed unaccountably quiet today, with neither librarian nor janitor in evidence. He might take the exit or follow the staircase down to the Lower Camera. He had spent the better part of three years in Oxford feeling out of place in the great libraries, always afraid of being too loud, disturbing the other readers, or of wandering out of bounds and provoking the ire of one of the librarians. He had never dared make an unselfconscious exploration. Now, recklessly – it was the end of term, after all, the end of everything – he thought he might venture.

The Lower Camera was deserted – not a sound, not a human voice, it was only James and the books. There was enough light from the arched windows for James to wander amongst the shelves, enjoying the smell, the quiet and the tidy procession of names, some known, others strange, all ordered into sensible patterns.

Then he stopped – that didn't belong here, surely? A book had been left carelessly on top of a row of shelved volumes, entirely out of place: *The Martyrdom of Man*. It was not even a library book but a brand-new copy, the gilt title still bright against the green cloth binding. It was then that he heard, through the silence of the library and the chatter of his own thoughts, the sound of a woman laughing.

Of course, James had seen women at lectures from time to time. He had been to Somerville once for tea with someone's sister – an earnest New Woman in Nile green, whose Greek was better than his own. There was really no reason to be taken aback at the sound of a woman's voice. It was, besides, a rather nice laugh. But there was a softness to it that was quite private, and

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which James had never heard before. It seemed to him that a woman would laugh like that only when she was alone – almost alone.

More whispering – another voice now, a man's – and more stifled laughter. They would have to be standing very close to hear each other talking so low. Then he heard the sound of a swift kiss. They were on the other side of the bookcase. There was a noise like ruffling feathers.

'My hat,' James heard the woman warn her companion, the laugh still there in her voice, and he saw her quite clearly in his head: blonde, very young, too innocent to care for the appearance of things.

'It would be a pity to spoil it,' the man agreed – and now there was a rustle, as if ribbons were being undone. 'There,' he said.

'You did that quite well,' she said, sounding amused. 'Perhaps you should give up the law idea and become a lady's maid instead.'

'Well, if I could be yours . . .' Another kiss. He would be fair also, James thought – barely older than she, innocents both, Daphnis and Chloe in a grave green forest of books. The lovers, as he had seen them in many different names and guises, in many stories and songs. So it was like this, then, James thought—

Then the girl sneezed, and James started, as the time and the place came back to him. To remain where he was would be out of the question. But he would probably make a noise if he tried to move. He took an experimental step backwards and immediately heard the floor creak. He stopped abruptly, hearing them do the same on the other side of the bookcase.

James imagined them, laughter suddenly cold on their faces, listening intently. This was no engaged couple, then, no signed and sanctified pair of lovers.

'Who's there?' the man said. His voice had turned louder – one could hear the self-assurance now in the way he spoke. Whoever he was, he was used to having his questions answered.

James hesitated but remained silent. Perhaps they would go away.

‘You may as well come out,’ the man said. ‘We can hear you breathing.’

There was no helping it. James found himself walking, very slowly, round to their side of the bookcase.

They were not at all as they had sounded – both were slightly older than James had imagined. The girl was delightful: dark and buxom, with a heart-shaped face and a mouth which was very slightly too full. James realised that he had seen her before. She was someone’s fiancée – she had been pointed out to him because she had money, or an uncle who was a baronet, or some other claim to distinction. Her name, if he remembered rightly, was Miss Emily Richter. In one hand she held a hat of delicate artifice, which looked like a white dove snared in silk.

Her companion was not her intended, James was certain. He was about James’s height and stood like a prince in disguise, with the kind of good looks which challenged one to glance away. His hair was soft brown; his gaze made James immediately uncomfortable.

‘I’m terribly sorry,’ James said.

He saw them exchange a look. There was worry there – the situation was an awkward one, though not untenable. But there was a private knowledge in their eyes, too, and it made him feel lonely.

James said desperately, ‘I’m really very sorry. I had no idea that you were here. . . .’

Perhaps the girl said something – James had a vague impression that she might have spoken and held out her hand – but he was already turning away, confused and embarrassed, eager to leave them. His footsteps sounded far too loud on the wooden floor. He went back up the spiral staircase and returned to his desk and his books and his papers. He imagined the pair of them still behind the bookcase: serious over such a near miss, or perhaps laughing at James’s clumsiness.

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His last paragraph, determinedly crossed out, seemed suddenly like a taunt:

The idea that immoral action may add depth to art surely conceives of art as something supremely selfish, and art ought not to be selfish – any more than is it truly selfless. Indeed the exquisite balance of it ought to convince anyone of the divine ordering of our universe: the artist delights in creation, his audience in beholding the creation – their interests are united, there is a harmony, a mutuality of benefit which is much like love.

He had been wrong earlier: the whole thing was feeble, not merely that last paragraph. What did he know about art, or about anything else? He folded the papers away, attempted another beginning.

• • •

That evening, he took a walk past Christ Church meadow. He stopped by the river to tear his article into fragments and scatter it into the water – attracting a flurry of ducks, which mistook the paper for bread crumbs. He thought, with a touch of melancholy: what now, what next?

He had enjoyed himself in Oxford, in his fashion. He had an idea that he would retain little of what he had learned, and yet his studies had made him happy. He was respectfully fond of Latin, which seemed to him a language of sentences ready to be dismantled and reassembled elsewhere, eminently practical for a conquering people.

He had his secret yearning, however, an illicit passion: there was talk that the university was soon to offer tuition in English literature. On hearing the news, he had experienced a baffled sense of a missed step, for this ought to have been his fate, and

he was only a few years ahead of himself, most likely – if only his birth had been better timed.

He walked further, thought further, thought of the strangers in the library:

There had been so much life to them. They existed in that place where things happened, a vivid, vital centre of things. He saw now that he had always existed at a quiet distance from reality.

There came to him then an urge to do something, to live before it was too late. Beneath this was a childish wish to show them.

And, of course, there was something he could do – if he had the nerve for it.

It had occurred to him when he was quite young that it would be the very best of things to spend his life writing. The idea had not gone away, and neither had the words, which sang in his ears at night, in the space between his prayers and the deliberately vague thoughts of soft embraces with which he would send himself to sleep. Thanks to a small legacy received some years ago, James had enough to live in relative comfort, without the need of pursuing a profession. Charlotte was sufficiently provided for. So he might still write, if he wanted. And he could live in London, where a writer ought to live and where things would happen. He would be a flâneur, wandering the streets, seeing everything, observed by none. That evening he wrote in his memorandum book, *Life with a capital must be lived in the Capital*, and was pleased with the sentiment.

A few days later, he settled down to write his final Oxford letter to Charlotte. For now she remained with Mrs Chickering, whose health was steadily declining. He thought she might have expected him to return home, at least to begin with. But – and James reasoned this out very carefully in his letter – it was important that he live by himself at the onset of his career. He hoped she would not think he was selfish. He must have this time – a year, at least – to see if there was any real talent in him. He sent her

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a parcel of books, and his love, and hoped that Mrs Chickering was doing better. Charlotte replied by return of post:

Of course I understand, and I want you to have the best start possible in London. (Naturally our aunt still says that she cannot see why it must be London and not somewhere closer, but I am sure she will get used to the idea.) You'll have so much to occupy you, doing whatever it is that young men do in the city, and even if our aunt could spare me, I should be in your way, especially at first. Besides, that rose of mine is still in a critical state; I couldn't think of leaving it at present. But what will you do about the hall?

Here he stopped reading, because he preferred not to consider Aiskew Hall at present. It was his, now that he was of age, and he had a responsibility to it. As a child it had seemed a marvellous thing, to be master of the place. Now it was only a source of unceasing demands and tedious papers and figures and beneath that a memory of wood panels, darkness and cold. The building must be restored and then sold or let (the debate between these two alternatives furnished the chief topic of conversation between Mrs Chickering and himself whenever he returned to Yorkshire). The longer he left matters undecided, the more pressing the situation became, so that now the mere mention of the place, from Charlotte or his aunt, was enough to depress his spirits.

At length, he wrote back that he would certainly attend to the hall in due course, and in the meantime he was sure that they both would manage well enough without the extra income.

As he had expected, Charlotte was understanding:

I don't suppose the delay in deciding about the hall will much matter, though the house will need some care quite soon. I walked through the gardens today – our usual walk, you know – and pressed my face against the library window. I felt a bit like a ghost

or a thief, peering in like that. I went inside to get some books, and the volumes are all safe and sound, you will be glad to know, though they really ought to be stored elsewhere. The dust is dreadful – thick as velvet.

I am sending you a present to help you on your way to literary giantdom – Froude's Life of Carlyle. I hope you have not read it already. Also sending The Art of Authorship, which I understand is a very useful guide to pursuing a literary career. Aunt says that you should not stoop over when you read or write, or the blood will gorge your eyes. And you must be very careful in choosing your lodgings and always pay particular attention to the drains. She knows a promising young man who did not and later died as a consequence.

He reread her letter on the train to London and smiled over it in spite of his nerves. He was anxious now about this unprecedented step, and somewhat taken aback at how quickly everything had changed. He had not expected to make a decision about his life and see it come so immediately into effect. He had boxed and bundled his papers and books, taken set of rooms – it had all been rather easier than he expected. Now he could not help wishing that he had decided to delay things, to return to Yorkshire first.

His new residence was not far from Paddington – on Wyndham Street, decent and prosaic. The daunting business of giving the address to the cabman and having him strap James's luggage to the roof of a four-wheeler was accomplished without any difficulty. Quicker than he had expected, he was installed in his rooms, provided by his landlady with a key and a long catechism of rules for his tenancy, and left in peace.

His lodgings were small but comfortable – innocent of damp, soot and black beetles. They were let by a distant acquaintance of Mrs Chickering's. James had at first rather regretted this connection; he had wanted to make his own place in London without

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being indebted to anyone. But the association was now welcome – it was a link to home, that old world where everything was easy to understand.

When he was left to himself, he went to the window. He leaned against the sill, stared through the glass. Outside was London – modern and commonplace and very busy. The city did not appear to have marked his arrival.

He did not venture far from his rooms for several days, during which time it rained unceasingly – even the rain was not clean, he discovered. Everything here felt smoky, slightly rotten. He felt jostled and ill at ease. His first impulse on returning to his rooms was always to wash his hands. Later, as summer failed, the fogs descended and stayed for days. James would look out of his window and see nothing but the dirty light of the streetlamps, and it was as if the city were hiding itself, playing with him like a cat. So he drew the curtains and stayed indoors.

He tried to work. His latest literary effort, *Demeter*, was not progressing well. It was an attempt at merging a description of Hades with a depiction of London (this idea drawn, or even stolen, he admitted to himself, from Doré's illustrations of the city and from Baudelaire's *capitale infâme*). Having brooded over the thing for several weeks, he succumbed to a moment of weakness and submitted an extract to *The Spirit Lamp*. Afterwards he went through agonies of regret, and when the piece was promptly rejected he put the entire poem in a drawer and could not look at it for some time.

He had not shown his work to anyone for so long that his reaction to this failure took him by surprise – a wincing feeling of self-exposure, self-disgust. He had expected a few initial rejections and had imagined dismissing such minor stings with a wry smile and a shrug. He was disappointed in himself.

Not long afterwards, there was another unwelcome discovery: his landlady announced that she would shortly be selling the house and moving to Canada to live with her married daughter.

Tasked with finding new lodgings at short notice, James immediately ran into difficulties. Suitable lodgings were not affordable, affordable lodgings were not suitable – on one or two occasions, barely sanitary.

One evening, after a visit to look at one such dubious property – a place in Islington with mould growing on the walls, more dismal than he had supposed a human habitation possibly could be – James returned home to find a letter from Charlotte waiting for him:

I hope the search for lodgings is not too arduous and that you have found the city as you anticipated. I imagine it must be quite brilliant, especially at night – so different to the absolute country blackness we get here. I think I should find it a difficult change, after Oxford, though of course an exciting one. You said that the crowds were a little oppressive at first, but I think that is natural – and you are very sensitive to your surroundings. You'll get accustomed to it all after a few weeks. Perhaps if you go about and look at people, it might be easier? See some of the attractions, too – if it is not beneath your dignity to wander the Tower of London behind a gaggle of country schoolgirls up for a day of sightseeing.

The letter was well timed (as Charlotte's letters usually were). James read it and read it again, at first cheered and irritated in equal measure, and finally resolved to take her advice. He had been anxious amongst the crowds and traffic, tramping about until his feet were sore, choking uncontrollably from the smoke of the Underground, but had taken no time to stop and observe. As Charlotte had probably guessed, he had been thinking of other things. Poetry made him clumsy – absorbed in his own thoughts, he had run into people by mistake, taken wrong turnings, missed a great deal. Now he would try to do things differently.

He was living close enough to Oxford Street to make a walk

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there feasible. He would take a stroll, perhaps wander into Hyde Park. He had not yet seen the Serpentine, and would enjoy a sight of the water.

It was six o'clock and Oxford Street was busy; there was much to observe. Stopping to glance at a display of watercolour prints in a shop window, James was suddenly pushed forwards as a man elbowed past him, a hatstand wrapped in brown paper slung over his shoulder like a rifle. The fleeting contact, rough and impersonal, upset him in spite of himself. It was as if the city itself had reached out and pushed him aside. This vast place, with its shifting, trampling crowds, would never make sense to him. His blithe expectations were now an embarrassment. He understood nothing here. The human soul might perhaps be laid open, its devices and desires brought to the light – but to comprehend London? Surely it was impossible.

He turned his footsteps back the way he had come, deciding that the experiment had not been a success.

He was at the corner of Portman Street when he realised that someone was calling his name – someone waving from the other side of the road. It was Geoffrey Margoyle, whom James remembered from Oxford. Margoyle was older than James, loud and ambitious, with a decided fondness for giving good advice. He had left Oxford a year ago, and James had almost forgotten about him.

He was waving now; James could hardly pretend not to see him. Instead, he waited as Margoyle darted across the street, nimbly dodging the traffic (and how many months in London would it take for James to be able to manage that?).

'Norbury!' he said, as soon as he was within speaking distance. 'How are you?'

To James's great surprise, Margoyle proved a blessing, in his way: after telling James in some detail about his flourishing career at the Foreign Office, he added that he had just the solution to James's problems. He knew an excellent fellow who needed

someone to go halves with him on a very nice set of rooms. He was in abruptly straitened circumstances due to an unlucky conjunction of pressing debts, cancelled allowance and a family quarrel (Margoyle knew James would keep this to himself), and in fact James had probably met him at Oxford – Christopher Paige. Surely he remembered . . . ?

‘Paige?’ James repeated. ‘Ah.’

‘You don’t remember him?’

‘Was he at Corpus?’

‘Magdalen. Did you do *anything* useful at Oxford?’

‘I fed the ducks, sometimes.’

Margoyle ignored this remark. ‘Anyway, I’ll introduce you. He’s a decent chap, you’ll see.’

‘I’m grateful, Margoyle, but I’m not really sure if—’

‘Don’t be an ass,’ Margoyle said, as if this settled the matter. ‘You can meet him at my club tomorrow afternoon. Three o’clock. Be on time, if you can manage it.’ He took out his watch. ‘Now I must go.’

He disregarded James’s continuing protests and departed with aplomb, leaving James feeling rather more rueful and bewildered than he had been before.

Margoyle’s club was a grand old place in Pall Mall, ponderously, expensively silent. Inside, it was difficult to imagine the noise of the streets only a yard or so distant. Margoyle, who liked directing things, was in a cheerful mood. James was uneasy. He was sitting opposite Margoyle, listening to a very long story (about how Margoyle’s father had once met General Gordon on a train, and what Margoyle’s father had said to General Gordon, and what General Gordon had said to him), when the door was opened and a man paused, breathless, on the threshold. James recognised him immediately – the same dark eyes and careless good looks. He had an air of enjoying himself tremendously – which, James would later learn, was habitual.

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‘Paige,’ Margoyle said, genial and reproachful. ‘We’d nearly given up hope.’

‘Well, there’s a story there,’ Paige said. He looked from Margoyle to James and then blinked. ‘Ah.’

James stared back at him, quite at a loss. He remembered *The Martyrdom of Man*, and the gentle shade of the library, and the smell of dust and sweat.

It might, in that moment, have fallen out in a number of ways. James ought to have pretended not to recognise Paige at all.

Instead, he said incredulously, ‘It’s you.’

‘Yes,’ Paige agreed.

‘You’ve met before?’ said Margoyle.

Paige glanced at James. ‘We were never introduced, were we, Mr . . . ?’

‘Norbury.’

James saw Paige’s mouth twitch and thought that he was struggling with suppressed fury. Then he realised it was not rage at all but laughter, and this unsettled him more than outright hostility would have done.

‘Actually,’ James added desperately, ‘I think perhaps I ought to reconsider – about the rooms, I mean. I’m sorry to inconvenience you, but—’

‘Reconsider?’ Margoyle repeated coldly.

‘Yes, I – I’ve just thought, I know I ought to have mentioned this before, but I should probably think about going back to the country soon, and I wouldn’t want to . . .’

Margoyle was still looking at him in unconcealed disapproval, but Paige smiled again and sat down in the chair nearest to James.

‘Nonsense,’ he said.

James said nothing. It had dawned on him how well Paige was dressed, the way he could say *nonsense* as if fate could not possibly have the audacity to disregard his wishes.

‘Come and see the rooms, at least,’ he said. ‘You’ll think

differently when you see them. Besides, I'll be an ideal person to share with. Won't I, Margoyle?'

Margoyle smiled sardonically – it seemed he had become expert in sardonic smiles since leaving Oxford; perhaps it was something they taught one at the Foreign Office. 'You'd be a fool not to see the rooms,' he told James. 'You were so down in the mouth before, about having nowhere to live.'

This was indisputable. And so Margoyle left for another appointment, and together James and Paige departed to look at the rooms.

The house was 75 Egerton Gardens, not far from the Natural History Museum, opposite the Brompton Oratory, on a street of high red houses. It was all exceedingly genteel. James thought of Aiskew, of the times when Charlotte and he would open a window at the top of the house and scream out of it, for the delight of hearing their whoops and yells echo across the grounds. There would be no yelling here. Even the horses' hooves sounded different, as if the animals were on their best behaviour. From the pavement, the sky above looked oddly removed.

The rooms belonged to a Mrs Morris, Paige explained – a distant relation, who, being confronted by unexpected pecuniary difficulties (rather like himself), was obliged to let rooms after her husband's death. Paige and James's advent would be a considerable relief, for letting ordinary lodgers into the house would probably have been the death of her. James would be doing her a great favour if he kept his discussion of delicate financial matters – like the rent – as brief as possible.

Inside, the house was evidently still in mourning and seemed far too grand to be broken up by tenants. But it was also a little emptier than might have been expected. There were blank spaces on walls and shelves, indentations on the carpet where articles of furniture must once have stood. James suspected that Mrs

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Morris had been forced to part with certain household treasures to settle her husband's debts.

Mrs Morris met them in the drawing-room. Like her house, she was very respectable and rather sad. She was white-haired but younger than James had expected, a gentle lady still in mourning, half swallowed in bombazine and crêpe.

'I prepared the second floor,' she said. 'I hope that will suit you both.'

'It will, indeed,' James said, feeling almost unbearably sorry for her, her desolate house, her nervous, fluttering manner. It would be impossible not to take the rooms now.

She led them up to the second floor, which they would have entirely to themselves. They would have a bedroom each and a sitting-room to share between them. Mrs Morris's rooms were on the next floor, the servant's room above those.

Their rooms were let furnished, but this did not stop Paige from altering their appearance as far as was possible. He replaced all of the pictures with art of his own choosing, including one painting he had done himself: a large, livid sunflower which glared down on the sitting-room like a furious eye. There were also two blue-and-white vases, which were too large for the mantelpiece where they stood, and a Japanese folding screen that was forever getting in the way.

Better than these were the flowers – always exquisite, though never very tidily arranged. Paige liked tulips especially and would keep them for days, letting the petals come loose and the stems wind across the table like slender green snakes.

He never explained why he had elected to share with James. At first, James half-thought it might be to keep him in sight, in case he was the sort to spread tales and cause trouble. More likely it was simply a matter of convenience: there were the rooms, and there was James. For his part, James thought it was well to observe people like Paige. From a literary point of view, he was good raw material.

Though, to begin with, James saw little of him. Paige was usually out or asleep during the day, and what conversations they did have generally took place after dark. Paige would return home at some unwholesome hour of the morning to find James still awake, writing in the sitting-room, busy with *Gondoline*, his latest poetical work.

Sometimes Paige's friends accompanied him home. The two who visited most often were called Soames and Bleasdale – loud and tiresome young men, very modern, much given to puerile humour. If either of them had a profession, James saw no evidence of it. They would return with Paige after an all-night debauch and spend hours in the sitting-room, drinking and trying to smoke up the chimney (in a half-hearted attempt to avoid upsetting Mrs Morris, who abhorred the smell of tobacco). Often they did not leave until the morning – once, they had terrified the housemaid by disturbing her as she came upstairs to clean the grates. They called James 'Jimmy' and made ridiculous puns on his surname and pretended to believe that, as a poet, he must lead a life of intrigue and depravity. After a few tiresome encounters, James began to avoid them. Whenever he heard their steps on the stairs, he would gather his work together and retreat to his bedroom. But when Paige came home alone, James would remain where he was, because the desk in the sitting-room was far bigger than the one in his own room, and he had as much right to be there as Paige did.

Paige never stumbled, even when sponge-heavy with drink. Not even on the night in late September, not long after James first moved to Egerton Gardens, when he came home absolutely squiffed, soaked to the skin, and dressed in a much-abused doublet and hose and a long, mud-spattered cloak. James – deep in an irritating metrical negotiation – had started and looked up to see what the noise was. He blinked, taking in Paige's disarray, his peculiar costume.

'Don't laugh,' Paige said.

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‘I wasn’t going to.’

‘Of course you were. You’re an awfully bad liar, you know. Cabby had a few things to say, I can tell you. And that was before we ran out of money.’ He pushed the door shut slowly, with concentration that was almost comical, and then turned to look at James with an expression of infinite weariness.

‘Is there any tea?’ he asked.

‘Beg your pardon?’

‘Tea,’ Paige said – enunciating very, very precisely. ‘Is there any?’

The housemaid had probably been asleep for several hours, as Paige surely knew quite well. James looked around the room briefly and then said, ‘No.’

Paige sighed and looked so tired and put out that James was sorry he had been brusque.

‘I could make you some, if you like,’ he offered.

‘Really?’

James had been accustomed to making his own tea at Oxford, and he had brought the things with him. ‘There’s no sugar, though,’ he said. ‘No milk, either.’

‘That’s all right.’ Paige sat down and closed his eyes. ‘Party at Mrs – party at Mrs someone’s. Dancing, feast, mock tournament, all medieval. Picturesque age, everyone said. We all had to go in costume . . . My God, what an evening.’ He needed an audience, perhaps, because when James made no reply he added, ‘Really, you wouldn’t credit what happened.’

‘Oh?’ said James. ‘What happened?’

And Paige leaned further back on the settee and began to tell him all about it.

• • •

This slowly became a habit between them. At night, sometimes one or two o’clock, or later, James would look up from his work to find that Paige had returned. He might have been to the theatre,

or to dinner at the Café Royal, or to a ball at the home of a society hostess. Or in the company of less exalted ladies, somewhere around Charing Cross. Once he had visited a skating rink; another time he went to see the remains of Bentham, embalmed and preserved at University College. ('Bored,' he said, when James asked him how the corpse had looked.) Living his life, James thought, must be like wandering in a hothouse, every fruit and flower at one's fingertips. He sometimes spoke of pursuing the law – it seemed to be a standing agreement with his family – but surely there was no time for anything of that sort, living as he did.

'Good evening?' James would always ask when Paige got back, and would raise his eyebrows at Paige's dishevelled appearance. 'You look done in,' he might add, if Paige seemed particularly worn.

'Oh, be quiet,' Paige would counter – or words to that effect, perhaps more colourful or less distinctly articulated, depending on how much he had had to drink. 'And for the love of God, make me some tea.' Then he would decline gently into a chair and close his eyes, as if, like the philosopher of Ecclesiastes, he had exhausted all the pleasures of the world and found them wanting.

And James would sigh and make some tea on the fire. By the time the tea was made, Paige would have recovered sufficiently to talk. His stories were generally about himself, his friends or his family. They were rather interesting. Paige had an older brother, Eustace, who was a bore and sanctimonious to boot, and a sister, Lydia – who was, Paige said gravely, no gentleman. She could freeze out a suitor so thoroughly that the poor fellow was never the same afterwards. Several of Paige's friends had fallen victim. Worse still, she kept an ungenerously accurate tally of Paige's debts. When she wasn't doing that, she was treasurer to dozens of charitable concerns – so industrious, in fact, that he wondered how there came to be any ill-used match girls or

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crippled crossing sweepers or friendless young women of good character left for anyone else to patronise.

Then there was Paige's mother, who had quarrelled with him without any fair cause, and who, through various slights and pointed remarks, had made it impossible for him to remain on speaking terms with her without losing all self-respect.

'Which would have been out of the question,' said Paige.

'Well, of course,' James replied.

The family money was all from his mother's side, Paige said. She'd been widowed at eighteen, and her first husband had left her everything, tied up so tightly that no one could touch it – not his family, not even her second husband. That was love for you. Paige's father had been poor but very aristocratic and with an excellent profile, and Queen Cophetua had just snapped him up. He might have done something for Paige, if only to annoy his wife, but he had died some years ago.

'Drink and a Welsh mistress,' Paige said. 'That's what did for him, in the end.'

'Ah,' James said. 'I'm sorry.'

Paige shook his head. 'We weren't friendly. We disapproved of each other.'

(What an odd idea, James thought later, when Paige had gone to bed. To disapprove of one's father, as if he were simply another person about whom one might be allowed to have an opinion.)

There was one evening, in mid-October, when it had begun to rain as it grew dark. It was pleasant to sit with the curtains drawn and the fire built up, and to hear the storm growing outside. James wondered if Paige enjoyed being out in such weather, and in the cosy sitting-room, with only the noise of the fire and the gentle scratch of his pen to break the silence, he had felt content. Slowly he had grown tired and descended gradually into a comfortable doze.

He woke abruptly to the feel of icy water trickling down his

neck. He jumped, cursed, and looked up to see Paige holding a dripping umbrella over him.

'You were asleep,' he said cheerfully. His eyes were slightly unfocused, and his breath smelled of stale wine and tobacco and something else – an odd, acrid smell James couldn't place. Wherever he had been, it appeared that the storm had in no way spoiled his evening's entertainment.

James glanced down at the page of *Gondoline* on which he had been working – it was spotted with water, as if he had been weeping over the manuscript. 'Look what you've done,' he said. 'You utter—'

'Sorry, sorry,' Paige said. Then, unexpectedly, he laughed.

'What? What is it?'

'Have you been drinking ink?'

'What? Of course not.' But James looked at his hands. There were the usual black smudges, the writer's marks of which he was rather proud. He must have rubbed his mouth or begun to bite his nails. He could taste it now, a bitterness of black ink. He took out his handkerchief and rubbed at his mouth.

'No,' Paige said impatiently. 'Other side.' He glanced at the pages of *Gondoline*, still drying on the desk. 'What are you writing, anyway?'

'A poem.'

'Can I read it?'

'No.' James shuffled the pages out of sight, wary of the sudden gleam in Paige's eyes and afraid he might seize *Gondoline* by main force.

'Is it so bad?'

'I won't know until it's finished.'

'Well, what's it about? Something serious – decline of the race, o tempora o mores, whither England, death of some great man, that sort of thing?'

James smiled in spite of himself. 'Not really, no.' (He had, in fact, once attempted a verse eulogy of Browning but had given

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it up in despair.) 'There's . . . well, there's an old man. He appears at a christening, scarred and withered of visage, and insists on telling his tale before the child is baptised.'

'Then what happens?'

'He tells his tale. It's about a virtuous maid stranded in a remote mansion. There's something horrible after her, I think.'

He had seen Gondoline often in his mind; sometimes a girl in the street reminded him of her – the pale oval of her face, the masses of dark hair, the sharp black line of the velvet ribbon around her throat. She had wide brown eyes and would endure any number of trials, poor thing, before the poem was ended.

'It's not a ghost after her, is it?' Paige asked.

'What's wrong with ghosts?'

'Too flimsy. You can walk right through them – what's the fun in that?'

'Well, it isn't a ghost. At least I don't think it is. I haven't got to that part yet. It's taken me these last six stanzas just to describe the old man.'

Paige smiled at him – really smiled at him, without mockery. James couldn't remember him ever doing such a thing before.

He said, 'I suppose that makes sense. The old men are important, aren't they? In this type of poem. People will want to know what he looks like, whether he has a beard, that sort of thing. You did give him a beard, didn't you?'

'I don't think so.'

'Well you'll put one in, if you take my advice.'

'I'll make a note,' James said. He turned back to his work.

When he next glanced up, Paige had fallen asleep, sprawled out in his chair as if determined to take up as much space as possible. Even drunk and unconscious, he still contrived to look agreeable. After a moment, James returned to his poem, to the lines he had just added. Not entirely bad, he decided, but certainly not good. There was time enough for improvement, though. There was tomorrow. He sat back in his chair, abruptly pleased

with the world and himself – and with Paige, who smiled in his sleep.

James thought, proud and wondering: this is my friend. Only now did he realise how solitary his life had been before.

But as he sat and watched the fire, he was also uneasy. This was not what he was used to. Perhaps it was like being in a poorly lit room: you saw well enough, because your eyes were accustomed to it. But if someone brought in a lamp, everything was suddenly very bright – unpleasantly so at first. You might well hate the person with the light, for arriving so rudely and unannounced.

And how odd, how interestingly perverse, to be frightened by happiness. It was the dread of getting things wrong, fear of losing this friend he had (by sheer luck) managed to find.

He would not dwell on these things. It was growing cold and the fire would soon be out, and he was getting morbid. He should wake Paige up – it would be an unkindness to leave him there all night. And he would go to bed soon, though not just yet. He sat up a while longer and watched the fire burn low.