1

The Barbers had said they would arrive by three. It was like waiting to begin a journey, Frances thought. She and her mother had spent the morning watching the clock, unable to relax. At half-past two she had gone wistfully over the rooms for what she'd supposed was the final time; after that there had been a nerving-up, giving way to a steady deflation, and now, at almost five, here she was again, listening to the echo of her own footsteps, feeling no sort of fondness for the sparsely furnished spaces, impatient simply for the couple to arrive, move in, get it over with.

She stood at a window in the largest of the rooms—the room which, until recently, had been her mother's bedroom, but was now to be the Barbers' sitting-room—and stared out at the street. The afternoon was bright but powdery. Flurries of wind sent up puffs of dust from the pavement and the road. The grand houses opposite had a Sunday blankness to them—but then, they had that every day of the week. Around the corner there was a large hotel, and motor-cars and taxi-cabs occasionally came this way to and from it; sometimes people strolled up here as if to take the air. But Champion Hill, on the whole, kept itself to itself. The gardens were large, the trees leafy. You would never know, she thought,

that grubby Camberwell was just down there. You'd never guess that a mile or two further north lay London, life, glamour, all that.

The sound of a vehicle made her turn her head. A tradesman's van was approaching the house. This couldn't be them, could it? She'd expected a carrier's cart, or even for the couple to arrive on foot—but, yes, the van was pulling up at the kerb, with a terrific creak of its brake, and now she could see the faces in its cabin, dipped and gazing up at hers: the driver's and Mr Barber's, with Mrs Barber's in between. Feeling trapped and on display in the frame of the window, she lifted her hand, and smiled.

This is it, then, she said to herself, with the smile still in place.

It wasn't like beginning a journey, after all; it was like ending one and not wanting to get out of the train. She pushed away from the window and went downstairs, calling as brightly as she could from the hall into the drawing-room, 'They've arrived, Mother!'

By the time she had opened the front door and stepped into the porch the Barbers had left the van and were already at the back of it, already unloading their things. The driver was helping them, a young man dressed almost identically to Mr Barber in a blazer and a striped neck-tie, and with a similarly narrow face and ungreased, week-endy hair, so that for a moment Frances was uncertain which of the two *was* Mr Barber. She had met the couple only once, nearly a fortnight ago. It had been a wet April evening and the husband had come straight from his office, in a mackintosh and bowler hat.

But now she recalled his gingery moustache, the reddish gold of his hair. The other man was fairer. The wife, whose outfit before had been sober and rather anonymous, was wearing a skirt with a fringe to it and a crimson jersey. The skirt ended a good six inches above her ankles. The jersey was long and not at all clinging, yet somehow revealed the curves of her figure. Like the men, she was

hatless. Her dark hair was short, curling forward over her cheeks but shingled at the nape of her neck, like a clever black cap.

How young they looked! The men seemed no more than boys, though Frances had guessed, on his other visit, that Mr Barber must be twenty-six or -seven, about the same age as herself. Mrs Barber she'd put at twenty-three. Now she wasn't so sure. Crossing the flagged front garden she heard their excited, unguarded voices. They had drawn a trunk from the van and set it unsteadily down; Mr Barber had apparently caught his fingers underneath it. 'Don't laugh!' she heard him cry to his wife, in mock-complaint. She remembered, then, their 'refined' elocution-class accents.

Mrs Barber was reaching for his hand. 'Let me see. Oh, there's nothing.'

He snatched the hand back. 'There's nothing now. You just wait a bit. Christ, that hurts!'

The other man rubbed his nose. 'Look out.' He had seen Frances at the garden gate. The Barbers turned, and greeted her through the tail of their laughter—so that the laughter, not very comfortably, somehow attached itself to her.

'Here you are, then,' she said, joining the three of them on the pavement.

Mr Barber, still almost laughing, said, 'Yes, here we are! Bringing down the character of the street already, you see.'

'Oh, my mother and I do that.'

Mrs Barber spoke more sincerely. 'We're sorry we're late, Miss Wray. The time just flew! You haven't been waiting? You'd think we'd come from John o' Groats or somewhere, wouldn't you?'

They had come from Peckham Rye, about two miles away. Frances said, 'Sometimes the shortest journeys take longest, don't they?'

'They do,' said Mr Barber, 'if Lilian's involved in them. Mr

Wismuth and I were ready at one.—This is my friend Charles Wismuth, who's kindly lent us the use of his father's van for the day.'

'You weren't ready at all!' cried Mrs Barber, as a grinning Mr Wismuth moved forward to shake Frances's hand. 'Miss Wray, they weren't, honestly!'

'We were ready and waiting, while you were still sorting through your hats!'

'At any rate,' said Frances, 'you are here now.'

Perhaps her tone was rather a cool one. The three young people looked faintly chastened, and with a glance at his injured knuckles Mr Barber returned to the back of the van. Over his shoulder Frances caught a glimpse of what was inside it: a mess of bursting suitcases, a tangle of chair and table legs, bundle after bundle of bedding and rugs, a portable gramophone, a wicker birdcage, a bronze-effect ashtray on a marbled stand . . . The thought that all these items were about to be brought into her home—and that this couple, who were not quite the couple she remembered, who were younger, and brasher, were going to bring them, and set them out, and make their own home, brashly, among them—the thought brought on a flutter of panic. What on earth had she done? She felt as though she was opening up the house to thieves and invaders.

But there was nothing else for it, if the house were to be kept going at all. With a determined smile she went closer to the van, wanting to help.

The men wouldn't let her. 'You mustn't think of it, Miss Wray.'

'No, honestly, you mustn't,' said Mrs Barber. 'Len and Charlie will do it. There's hardly anything, really.' And she gazed down at the objects that were accumulating around her, tapping at her mouth with her fingers.

Frances remembered that mouth now: it was a mouth, as she'd

put it to herself, that seemed to have more on the outside than on the in. It was touched with colour today, as it hadn't been last time, and Mrs Barber's eyebrows, she noticed, were thinned and shaped. The stylish details made her uneasy along with everything else, made her feel old-maidish, with her pinned-up hair and her angles, and her blouse tucked into her high-waisted skirt, after the fashion of the War, which was already four years over. Seeing Mrs Barber, a tray of houseplants in her arms, awkwardly hooking her wrist through the handle of a raffia hold-all, she said, 'Let me take that bag for you, at least.'

'Oh, I can do it!'

'Well, I really must take something.'

Finally, noticing Mr Wismuth just handing it out of the van, she took the hideous stand-ashtray, and went across the front garden with it to hold open the door of the house. Mrs Barber came after her, stepping carefully up into the porch.

At the threshold itself, however, she hesitated, leaning over the ferns in her arms to look into the hall, and to smile.

'It's just as nice as I remembered.'

Frances turned. 'It is?' She could see only the dishonesty of it all: the scuffs and tears she had patched and disguised; the gap where the long-case clock had stood, which had had to be sold six months before; the dinner-gong, bright with polish, that hadn't been rung in years and years. Turning back to Mrs Barber, she found her still waiting at the step. 'Well,' she said, 'you'd better come in. It's your house too, now.'

Mrs Barber's shoulders rose; she bit her lip and raised her eyebrows in a pantomime of excitement. She stepped cautiously into the hall, where the heel of one of her shoes at once found an unsteady tile on the black-and-white floor and set it rocking. She tittered in embarrassment: 'Oh, dear!'

Frances's mother appeared at the drawing-room door. Perhaps she had been standing just inside it, getting up the enthusiasm to come out.

'Welcome, Mrs Barber.' Smiling, she came forward. 'What pretty plants. Rabbit's foot, aren't they?'

Mrs Barber manoeuvred her tray and her hold-all so as to be able to offer her hand. 'I'm afraid I don't know.'

'I believe they are. Rabbit's foot—so pretty. You found your way to us all right?'

'Yes, but I'm sorry we're so late!'

'Well, it doesn't matter to us. The rooms weren't going to run away. We must give you some tea.'

'Oh, you mustn't trouble.'

'But you must have tea. One always wants tea when one moves house; and one can never find the teapot. I'll see to it, while my daughter takes you upstairs.' She gazed dubiously at the ashtray. 'You're helping too, are you, Frances?'

'It seemed only fair to, with Mrs Barber so laden.'

'Oh, no, you mustn't help at all,' said Mrs Barber—adding, with another titter, 'We don't expect that!'

Frances, going ahead of her up the staircase, thought: How she laughs!

Up on the wide landing they had to pause again. The door on their left was closed—that was the door to Frances's bedroom, the only room up here which was to stay in her and her mother's possession—but the other doors all stood open, and the late-afternoon sunlight, richly yellow now as the yolk of an egg, was streaming in through the two front rooms as far almost as the staircase. It showed up the tears in the rugs, but also the polish on the Regency floorboards, which Frances had spent several back-breaking mornings that week bringing to the shine of dark toffee;

and Mrs Barber didn't like to cross the polish in her heels. 'It doesn't matter,' Frances told her. 'The surface will dull soon enough, I'm afraid.' But she answered firmly, 'No, I don't want to spoil it'—putting down her bag and her tray of plants and slipping off her shoes.

She left small damp prints on the wax. Her stockings were black ones, blackest at the toe and at the heel, where the reinforcing of the silk had been done in fancy stepped panels. While Frances hung back and watched she went into the largest of the rooms, looking around it in the same noticing, appreciative manner in which she had looked around the hall; smiling at every antique detail.

'What a lovely room this is. It feels even bigger than it did last time. Len and I will be lost in it. We've only had our bedroom really, you see, at his parents'. And their house is—well, not like this one.' She crossed to the left-hand window—the window at which Frances had been standing a few minutes before—and put up a hand to shade her eyes. 'And look at the sun! It was cloudy when we came before.'

Frances joined her at last. 'Yes, you get the best of the sun in this room. I'm afraid there isn't much in the way of a view, even though we're so high.'

'Oh, but you can see a little, between the houses.'

'Between the houses, yes. And if you peer south—that way'—she pointed—'you can make out the towers of the Crystal Palace. You have to go nearer to the glass . . . You see them?'

They stood close together for a moment, Mrs Barber with her face an inch from the window, her breath misting the glass. Her dark-lashed eyes searched, then fixed. 'Oh, yes!' She sounded delighted.

But then she moved back, and drew in her gaze; and her voice changed, became indulgent. 'Oh, look at Len. Look at him

complaining. Isn't he puny!' She tapped at the window, and called and gestured. 'Let Charlie take that! Come and see the sun! The *sun*. Can you see? *The sun!*' She dropped her hand. 'He can't understand me. Never mind. How funny it is, seeing our things set out like that. How poor it all looks! Like a penny bazaar. What must your neighbours be thinking, Miss Wray?'

What indeed? Already Frances could see sharp-eyed Mrs Dawson over the way, pretending to be fiddling with the bolt of her drawing-room window. And now here was Mr Lamb from High Croft further down the hill, pausing as he passed to blink at the stuffed suitcases, the blistered tin trunks, the bags, the baskets and the rugs that Mr Barber and Mr Wismuth, for convenience, were piling on the low brick garden wall.

She saw the two men give him a nod, and heard their voices: 'How do you do?' He hesitated, unable to place them—perhaps thrown by the stripes on their 'club' ties.

'We ought to go and help,' she said.

Mrs Barber answered, 'Oh, I will.'

But when she left the room it was to wander into the bedroom beside it. And she went from there to the last of the rooms, the small back room facing Frances's bedroom across the return of the landing and the stairs—the room which Frances and her mother still called Nelly and Mabel's room, even though they hadn't had Nelly, Mabel, or any other live-in servant since the munitions factories had finally lured them away in 1916. This was done up now as a kitchen, with a dresser and a sink, with gaslight and a gas stove and a shilling-in-the-slot meter. Frances herself had varnished the wallpaper; she had stained the floor here, rather than waxing it. The cupboard and the aluminium-topped table she had hauled up from the scullery, one day when her mother wasn't at home to have to watch her do it.

She had done her best to get it all right. But seeing Mrs Barber going about, taking possession, determining which of her things would go here, which there, she felt oddly redundant—as if she had become her own ghost. She said awkwardly, 'Well, if you've everything you need, I'll see how your tea's coming along. I shall be just downstairs if there's any sort of problem. Best to come to me rather than to my mother, and—Oh.' She stopped, and reached into her pocket. 'I'd better give you these, hadn't I, before I forget.'

She drew out keys to the house: two sets, on separate ribbons. It took an effort to hand them over, actually to put them into the palm of this woman, this girl—this more or less perfect stranger, who had been summoned into life by the placing of an advertisement in the *South London Press*. But Mrs Barber received the keys with a gesture, a dip of her head, to show that she appreciated the significance of the moment. And with unexpected delicacy she said, 'Thank you, Miss Wray. Thank you for making everything so nice. I'm sure Leonard and I will be happy here. Yes, I'm certain we will. I have something for you too, of course,' she added, as she took the keys to her hold-all to stow them away. She brought back a creased brown envelope.

It was two weeks' rent. Fifty-eight shillings: Frances could already hear the rustle of the pound notes and the slide and chink of the coins. She tried to arrange her features into a businesslike expression as she took the envelope from Mrs Barber's hand, and she tucked it in her pocket in a negligent sort of way—as if anyone, she thought, could possibly be deceived into thinking that the money was a mere formality, and not the essence, the shabby heart and kernel, of the whole affair.

Downstairs, while the men went puffing past with a treadle sewing-machine, she slipped into the drawing-room, just to give

herself a quick peek at the cash. She parted the gum of the envelope and—oh, there it all was, so real, so present, so *hers*, she felt she could dip her mouth to it and kiss it. She folded it back into her pocket, then almost skipped across the hall and along the passage to the kitchen.

Her mother was at the stove, lifting the kettle from the hotplate with the faintly harried air she always had when left alone in the kitchen; she might have been a passenger on a stricken liner who'd just been bundled into the engine room and told to man the gauges. She gave the kettle up to Frances's steadier hand, and went about gathering the tea-things, the milk-jug, the bowl of sugar. She put three cups and saucers on a tray for the Barbers and Mr Wismuth; and then she hesitated with two more saucers raised. She spoke to Frances in a whisper. 'Ought we to drink with them, do you think?'

Frances hesitated too. What were the rules?

Oh, who cared! They had got the money now. She plucked the saucers from her mother's fingers. 'No, let's not start that sort of thing off. There'll be no end to it if we do. We can keep to the drawing-room; they can have their tea up there. I'll give them a plate of biscuits to go with it.' She drew the lid from the tin and dipped in her hand.

Once again, however, she dithered. Were biscuits absolutely necessary? She put three on a plate, set the plate beside the teapot—then changed her mind and took it off again.

But then she thought of nice Mrs Barber, going carefully over the polish; she thought of the fancy heels on her stockings; and returned the plate to the tray.

The men went up and down the stairs for another thirty minutes, and for some time after that boxes and cases could be heard being

shifted about, furniture was dragged and wheeled, the Barbers called from room to room; once there came a blast of music from their portable gramophone, that made Frances and her mother look at one another, aghast. But Mr Wismuth left at six, tapping at the drawing-room door as he went, wanting to say a polite good-bye; and with his departure the house grew calmer.

It was inescapably not, however, the house that it had been two hours before. Frances and her mother sat with books at the French windows, ready to eke out the last of the daylight—having got used, in the past few years, to making little economies like that. But the room—a long, handsome room, running the depth of the house, divided by double doors which, in spring and summer, they left open—had two of the Barbers' rooms above it, their bedroom and their kitchen, and Frances, turning pages, found herself aware of the couple overhead, as conscious of their foreign presence as she might have been of a speck in the corner of her eye. For a while they moved about in the bedroom; she could hear drawers being opened and closed. But then one of them entered their kitchen and, after a purposeful pause, there came a curious harsh dropping sound, like the clockwork gulp of a metal monster. One gulp, two gulps, three gulps, four: she stared at the ceiling, baffled, until she realised that they were simply putting shillings in the meter. Water was run after that, and then another odd noise started, a sort of pulse or quick pant—the meter again, presumably, as the gas ran through it. Mrs Barber must be boiling a kettle. Now her husband had joined her. There was conversation, laughter … Frances caught herself thinking, as she might have done of guests, Well, they're certainly making themselves at home.

Then she took in the implication of the words, and her heart, very slightly, sank.

While she was out in the kitchen assembling a cold Sunday

supper, the couple came down, and tapped at the door, first the wife and then the husband: the WC was an outside one, across the yard from the back door, and they had to pass through the kitchen to get to it. They came grimacing with apology; Frances apologised, too. She supposed that the arrangement was as inconvenient to them as it was to her. But with each encounter, her confidence wobbled a little more. Even the fifty-eight shillings in her pocket began to lose their magic power; it was dawning on her just how thoroughly she would have to earn them. She simply hadn't prepared herself for the oddness of the sound and the sight of the couple going about from room to room as if the rooms belonged to them. When Mr Barber, for example, headed back upstairs after his visit to the yard, she heard him pause in the hall. Wondering what could be delaying him, she ventured a look along the passage, and saw him gazing at the pictures on the walls like a man in a gallery. Leaning in for a better look at a steel engraving of Ripon Cathedral he put his fingers to his pocket and brought out a matchstick, with which he began idly picking his teeth.

She didn't mention any of this to her mother. The two of them kept brightly to their evening routine, playing a couple of games of backgammon once supper had been eaten, taking a cup of watery cocoa at a quarter to ten, then starting on the round of chores—the gatherings, the turnings-down, the cushion-plumpings and the lockings-up—with which they eased their way to bed.

Frances's mother said good night first. Frances herself spent some time in the kitchen, tidying, seeing to the stove. She visited the WC, she laid the table for breakfast; she took the milk-can out to the front garden, put it to hang beside the gate. But when she had returned to the house and was lowering the gas in the hall she noticed a light still shining under her mother's door. And though

she wasn't in the habit of calling in on her mother after she had gone to bed, somehow, tonight, that bar of light beckoned. She went across to it, and tapped.

'May I come in?'

Her mother was sitting up in bed, her hair unpinned and put into plaits. The plaits hung down like fraying ropes: until the War her hair had been brown, as pure a brown as Frances's, but it had faded in the past few years, growing coarser in the process, and now, at fifty-five, she had the white head of an old lady; only her brows remained dark and decided above her handsome hazel eyes. She had a book in her lap, a little railway thing called *Puzzles and Conundrums*: she had been trying out answers to an acrostic.

She let the book sink when Frances appeared, and gazed at her over the lenses of her reading-glasses.

'Everything all right, Frances?'

'Yes. Just thought I'd look in. Go on with your puzzle, though.'

'Oh, it's only a nonsense to help me off to sleep.'

But she peered at the page again, and an answer must have come to her: she tried out the word, her lips moving along with her pencil. The unoccupied half of bed beside her was flat as an ironing-board. Frances kicked off her slippers, climbed on to it, and lay back with her hands behind her head.

This room had still been the dining-room, a month before. Frances had painted over the old red paper and rearranged the pictures, but, as with the new kitchen upstairs, the result was not quite convincing. Her mother's bits of bedroom furniture seemed to her to be sitting as tensely as unhappy visitors: she could feel them pining for their grooves and smooches in the floor of the room above. Some of the old dining-room furniture had had to stay in here too, for want of anywhere else to put it, and the effect was an overcrowded one, with a suggestion of elderliness and a

touch—just a touch—of the sick chamber. It was the sort of room she could remember from childhood visits to ailing great-aunts. All it really lacked, she thought, was the whiff of a commode, and the little bell for summoning the whiskery spinster daughter.

She quickly turned her back on that image. Upstairs, one of the Barbers could be heard crossing their sitting-room floor—Mr Barber, she guessed it was, from the bounce and briskness of the tread; Mrs Barber's was more sedate. Looking up at the ceiling, she followed the steps with her eyes.

Beside her, her mother also gazed upward. 'A day of great changes,' she said with a sigh. 'Are they still unpacking their things? They're excited, I suppose. I remember when your father and I first came here, we were just the same. They seem pleased with the house, don't you think?' She had lowered her voice. 'That's something, isn't it?'

Frances answered in the same almost furtive tone. '*She* does, at any rate. She looks like she can't believe her luck. I'm not so sure about him.'

'Well, it's a fine old house. And a home of their own: that means a great deal when one is first married.'

'Oh, but they're hardly newly-weds, are they? Didn't they tell us that they'd been married for three years? Straight out of the War, I suppose. No children, though.'

Her mother's tone changed slightly. 'No.' And after a second, the one thought plainly having led to the next, she added, 'Such a pity that the young women today all feel they must make up.'

Frances reached for the book and studied the acrostic. 'Isn't it? And on a Sunday, too.'

She felt her mother's level gaze. 'Don't imagine that I can't tell when you are making fun of me, Frances.'

Upstairs, Mrs Barber laughed. Something light was dropped or

thrown and went skittering across the boards. Frances gave up on the puzzle. 'What do you think her background can be?'

Her mother had closed the book and was putting it aside. 'Whose?'

She gave a jerk of her chin. 'Mrs B's. I should say her father's some sort of branch manager, shouldn't you? A mother who's rather "nice". "Indian Love Lyrics" on the gramophone, perhaps a brother doing well for himself in the Merchant Navy. Piano lessons for the girls. An outing to the Royal Academy once a year . . . ' She began to yawn. Covering her mouth with the back of her wrist, she went on, through the yawn, 'One good thing, I suppose, about their being so young: they've only his parents to compare us with. They won't know that we really haven't a clue what we're doing. So long as we act the part of landladies with enough gusto, then landladies is what we will be.'

Her mother looked pained. 'How baldly you put it! You might be Mrs Seaview, of Worthing.'

'Well, there's no shame in being a landlady; not these days. I for one aim to enjoy landladying.'

'If you would only stop saying the word!'

Frances smiled. But her mother was plucking at the silk binding of a blanket, a look of real distress beginning to creep into her expression; she was an inch, Frances knew, from saying, 'Oh, it would break your dear father's heart!' And since even now, nearly four years after his death, Frances couldn't think of her father without wanting to grind her teeth, or swear, or leap up and smash something, she hastily turned the conversation. Her mother was involved in the running of two or three local charities: she asked after those. They spoke for a time about a forthcoming bazaar.

Once she saw her mother's face clear, become simply tired and elderly, she got to her feet.

'Now, have you everything you need? You don't want a biscuit, in case you wake?'

Her mother began to arrange herself for sleep. 'No, I don't want a biscuit. But you may put out the light for me, Frances.'

She lifted the plaits away from her shoulders and settled her head on her pillow. Her glasses had left little bruise-like dints on the bridge of her nose. As Frances reached to the lamp there were more footsteps in the room above; and then her hazel eyes returned to the ceiling.

'It might be Noel or John Arthur up there,' she murmured, as the light went down.

And, yes, thought Frances a moment later, lingering in the shadowy hall, it might be; for she could smell tobacco smoke now, and hear some sort of masculine muttering up on the landing, along with the tap of a slippered male foot . . . And just like that, like a knee or an elbow receiving a blow on the wrong spot, her heart was jangling. How grief could catch one out, still! She had to stand at the foot of the stairs while the fit of sorrow ran through her. But if only, she thought, as she began to climb—she hadn't thought it in ages—if only, if only she might turn the stair and find one of her brothers at the top—John Arthur, say, looking lean, looking bookish, looking like a whimsical monk in his brown Jaeger dressing-gown and Garden City sandals.

There was no one save Mr Barber, a cigarette in the corner of his mouth, his jacket off, his cuffs rolled back; he was fiddling with a nasty thing he had evidently just hung on the landing wall, a combination barometer-and-clothes-brush set with a lurid orangey varnish. But lurid touches were everywhere, she saw with dismay. It was as if a giant mouth had sucked a bag of boiled sweets and then given the house a lick. The faded carpet in her mother's old bedroom was lost beneath pseudo-Persian rugs. The lovely

pier-glass had been draped slant-wise with a fringed Indian shawl. A print on one of the walls appeared to be a Classical nude in the Lord Leighton manner. The wicker birdcage twirled slowly on a ribbon from a hook that had been screwed into the ceiling; inside it was a silk-and-feather parrot on a papier-mâché perch.

The landing light was turned up high, hissing away as if furious. Frances wondered if the couple had remembered that she and her mother were paying for that. Catching Mr Barber's eye, she said, in a voice to match the dreadful brightness all around them, 'Got everything straight, have you?'

He took the cigarette out of his mouth, stifling a yawn. 'Oh, I've had enough of it for one day, Miss Wray. I did my bit, bringing up those blessed boxes. I leave the titivating to Lilian. She loves all that sort of thing. She can titivate for England, she can.'

Frances hadn't really looked at him properly before. She'd absorbed his manner, his 'theme'—that facetious grumbling—rather than anything more tangible, more physical. Now, in the flat landing light, she took in the clerkly neatness of him. Without his shoes he was only an inch or two taller than she. 'Puny,' his wife had called him; but there was too much life in him for that. His face was textured with gingery stubble and with little pimple scars, his jaw was narrow, his teeth slightly crowded, his eyes had sandy, near-invisible lashes. But the eyes themselves were very blue, and they somehow made him handsome, or almost-handsome—more handsome, anyhow, than she had realised so far.

She looked away from him. 'Well, I'm off to bed.'

He fought down another yawn. 'Lucky you! I think Lily's still decorating ours.'

'I've put out the lights downstairs. The mantle in the hall has a bit of a trick to it, so I thought I'd better do it. I ought to have shown you, I suppose.'

He said helpfully, 'Show me now, if you like.'

'Well, my mother's trying to sleep. Her room, you know, is just at the bottom of the stairs—'

'Ah. Show me tomorrow, then.'

'I will. I'm afraid it'll be dark, though, if you or Mrs Barber need to go down again tonight.'

'Oh, we'll find our way.'

'Take a lamp, perhaps.'

'That's an idea, isn't it? Or, I tell you what.' He smiled. 'I'll send Lil down first, on a rope. Any trouble and she can . . . give me a tug.'

He kept his gaze on hers as he spoke, in a playful sort of way. But there was something to his manner, something vaguely unsettling. She hesitated about replying and he raised his cigarette, turning his head to take a puff of it, twisting his mouth out of its smile to direct away the smoke; but still holding her gaze with those lively blue eyes of his.

Then, with a blink, his manner changed. The door to his bedroom was drawn open and his wife appeared. She had a picture in her hands—another Lord Leighton nude, Frances feared it was—and the sight of it brought on one of his mock-complaints.

'Are you still at it, woman? Blimey O'Reilly!'

She gave Frances a smile. 'I'm only making things look nice.'

'Well, poor Miss Wray wants to go to bed. She's come to complain about the noise.'

Her face fell. 'Oh, Miss Wray, I'm so sorry!'

Frances said quickly, 'You haven't been noisy at all. Mr Barber is teasing.'

'I meant to save it all for tomorrow. But now I've started, I can't stop.'

The landing felt impossibly crowded to Frances with them all standing there like that. Would the three of them have to meet,

exchange pleasantries, every night? 'You must take as long as you need,' she said in her false, bright way. 'At least—' She'd begun to move towards her door, but paused. 'You will remember, won't you, about my mother, in the room downstairs?'

'Oh, yes, of course,' said Mrs Barber. And, 'Of course we will,' echoed her husband, in apparent earnestness.

Frances wished she'd said nothing. With an awkward 'Well, good night,' she let herself into her room. She left the door ajar for a moment while she lit her bedroom candle, and as she closed it she saw Mr Barber, puffing on his cigarette, looking across the landing at her; he smiled and moved away.

Once the door was shut and the key turned softly in the lock, she began to feel better. She kicked off her slippers, took off her blouse, her skirt, her underthings and stockings . . . and at last, like a portly matron letting out the laces of her stays, she was herself again. Raising her arms in a stretch, she looked around the shadowy room. How beautifully calm and uncluttered it was! The mantelpiece had two silver candlesticks on it and nothing else. The bookcase was packed but tidy, the floor dark with a single rug; the walls were pale—she'd removed the paper and used a white distemper instead. Even the framed prints were unbusy: a Japanese interior, a Friedrich landscape, the latter just visible in the candle-light, a series of snowy peaks dissolving into a violet horizon.

With a yawn, she felt for the pins in her hair and pulled them free. She filled her bowl with water, ran a flannel over her face, around her neck and under her arms; she cleaned her teeth, rubbed Vaseline into her cheeks and ruined hands. And then, because all this time she'd been able to smell Mr Barber's cigarette and the scent was making her restless, she opened the drawer of her nightstand and brought out a packet of papers and a tin of tobacco. She rolled a neat little fag, lit it by the flame of her candle,

climbed into bed with it, then blew the candle out. She liked to smoke like this, naked in the cool sheets, with only the hot red tip of a cigarette to light her fingers in the dark.

Tonight, of course, the room was not quite dark: light was leaking in from the landing, a thin bright pool of it beneath her door. What were they doing out there now? She could hear the murmur of their voices. They were debating where to hang the wretched picture—were they? If they started banging in a nail she would have to go and say something. If they left the landing light burning so furiously she'd have to say something, too. She began trying out phrases in her head.

I'm sorry to have to raise this matter—

Do you remember we discussed—?

Perhaps we might—

It might be best if—

I'm afraid I made a mistake.

No, she wouldn't think that! It was too late for that. It was—oh, years and years too late for that.

She slept well, in the end. She awoke at six the next morning, when the first distant factory whistle went off. She dozed for an hour, and was finally jolted out of a complicated dream by a hectic drill-like noise she couldn't at first identify; it was the ring, she realised blearily, of the Barbers' alarm clock. It seemed no time at all since she had lain there listening to the couple make their murmuring way to bed. Now she got the reverse of it, as they emerged to mutter and yawn, to creep downstairs and out to the yard, to clatter about in their kitchen, brewing tea, frying a breakfast. She made herself pay attention to it all, every hiss and splutter of the bacon, every tap of the razor against the sink. She had to accommodate it, fit herself around it: the new start to her day.

She'd remembered the fifty-eight shillings. While Mr Barber was gathering his outdoor things she rose and quietly dressed. He left the house at just before eight, by which time his wife had returned to their bedroom; Frances gave it a couple of minutes, so as not to be too obvious about it, then unlocked her door and went downstairs. She raked out the ashes of the stove and got a new fire going. She crossed the yard, returned to the house to greet her mother, make tea, boil eggs. But all the time she worked, her mind was busy with calculations. Once she and her mother had had their breakfast and the dining-table had been cleared she settled herself down with her book of accounts and ran through the bundle of bills that, over the last half-year, had been steadily accumulating at the back of it.

The butcher and the fishmonger, she thought, ought to be given large sums at once. The laundryman, the baker and the coal-merchants could be kept at bay with smaller amounts. The house-rates would be due in a few weeks' time, along with the quarterly gas bill; the bill would be higher than usual, because it would contain the charge for the cooker and the meter and the pipes and connections that had been installed upstairs. There was still money to be paid, too, for some of the other preparations that had had to be made for the Barbers—for things like varnish and distemper. It would be three or four months—August or September at the earliest, she reckoned—before their rent would show itself in the family bank account as clear profit.

Still, August or September was a great deal better than never, and she put her account book away with her spirits lifting. The baker's man came, shortly followed by the butcher's boy: for once she was able to take the bread and the meat as if really entitled to them and not somehow involved in the shady reception of stolen goods. The meat was neck of lamb; that could go into a hot-pot

later. She had no real interest in food, neither in preparing nor in eating it, but she had developed a grudging aptitude for cookery during the War; she enjoyed, anyhow, the practical challenge of making one cheap cut of meat do for several different dishes. She felt similarly about housework, liking best those rather out-of-the-way tasks—stripping the stove, cleaning stair-rods—that needed planning, strategy, chemicals, special tools.

Most of her chores, inevitably, were more mundane. The house was full of inconveniences, bristling with picture rails and plaster-work and elaborate skirting-boards that had to be dusted more or less daily. The furniture was all of dark woods that had to be dusted regularly, too. Her father had had a passion for 'Olde England', not at all in keeping with the Regency whimsies of the villa itself, and there was a Jacobean chair or chest in every odd corner. 'Father's collection', the pieces had been known as, while her father was alive; a year after his death Frances had had them valued and had discovered them all to be Victorian fakes. The dealer who'd bought the long-case clock had offered her three pounds for the lot. She would have been glad to pocket the money and have the damn things carted away, but her mother had grown upset at the prospect. 'Whether they're genuine or not,' she'd said, 'they have your father's heart in them.' 'They have his stupidity, more like,' Frances had answered, though not aloud. So the furniture remained, which meant that several times a week she had to go scuttling around like a crab, rubbing her duster over the barleytwist curves of wonky table legs and the scrolls and lozenges of rough-hewn chairs.

The very heaviest of the housework she saved for those mornings and afternoons when she could rely on her mother being safely out of the way. Since today was a Monday, she had ambitious plans. Her mother spent Monday mornings seeing to bits of parish

business with the local vicar, and Frances could 'do' the entire ground floor in her absence.

She began the moment the front door closed, rolling up her sleeves, tying on an apron, covering her hair. She saw to her mother's bedroom first, then moved to the drawing-room for sweeping, dusting—endless dusting, it felt like. Where on earth did the dust come from? It seemed to her that the house must produce it, as flesh oozes sweat. She could beat and beat a rug or a cushion, and still it would come. The drawing-room had a china cabinet in it, with glass doors, tightly closed, but even the things inside grew dusty and had to be wiped. Just occasionally she longed to take each fiddly porcelain cup and saucer and break it in two. Once, in sheer frustration, she had snapped off the head of one of the apple-cheeked Staffordshire figures: it still sat a little crookedly, from where she had hurriedly glued it back on.

She didn't feel like that today. She worked briskly and efficiently, taking her brush and pan from the drawing-room to the top of the stairs and making her way back down, a step at a time; after that she filled a bucket with water, fetched her kneeling-mat, and began to wash the hall floor. Vinegar was all she used. Soap left streaks on the black tiles. The first, wet rub was important for loosening the dirt, but it was the second bit that really counted, passing the wrung cloth over the floor in one supple, unbroken movement . . . There! How pleasing each glossy tile was. The gloss would fade in about five minutes as the surface dried; but everything faded. The vital thing was to make the most of the moments of brightness. There was no point dwelling on the scuffs. She was young, fit, healthy. She had—what did she have? Little pleasures like this. Little successes in the kitchen. The cigarette at the end of the day. Cinema with her mother on a Wednesday. Regular trips into Town. There were spells of restlessness now and again; but any life

had those. There were longings, there were desires . . . But they were physical matters mostly, and she had no last-century inhibitions about dealing with that sort of thing. It was amazing, in fact, she reflected, as she repositioned her mat and bucket and started on a new stretch of tile, it was astonishing how satisfactorily the business could be taken care of, even in the middle of the day, even with her mother in the house, simply by slipping up to her bedroom for an odd few minutes, perhaps as a break between peeling parsnips or while waiting for dough to rise—

A movement at the turn of the staircase made her start. She had forgotten all about her lodgers. Now she looked up through the banisters to see Mrs Barber just coming uncertainly down.

She felt herself blush, as if caught out. But Mrs Barber was also blushing. Though it was well after ten, she was dressed in her nightgown still; she had some sort of satiny Japanese wrapper on top—a *kimono*, Frances supposed the thing was called—and her feet were bare inside Turkish slippers. She was carrying a towel and a sponge-bag. As she greeted Frances she tucked back a sleep-flattened curl of hair and said shyly, 'I wondered if I might have a bath.'

'Oh,' said Frances. 'Yes.'

'But not if it's a trouble. I fell back asleep after Len went to work, and—'

Frances began to get to her feet. 'It's no trouble. I shall have to light the geyser for you, that's all. My mother and I don't usually light it during the day. I should have said last night. Can you come across? You'll have to hop.' She moved her bucket. 'Here's a dry bit, look.'

Mrs Barber, however, had come further down the stairs, and her colour was deepening: she was gazing in a mortified way at the duster on Frances's head, at her rolled-up sleeves and flaming hands, at the housemaid's mat at her feet, still with the dents of her

knees in it. Frances knew the look very well—she was bored to death with it, in fact—because she had seen it many times before: on the faces of neighbours, of tradesmen, and of her mother's friends, all of whom had got themselves through the worst war in human history yet seemed unable for some reason to cope with the sight of a well-bred woman doing the work of a char. She said breezily, 'You remember my saying about us not having help? I really meant it, you see. The only thing I draw the line at is laundry; most of that still gets sent out. But everything else, I take care of. The "brights", the "roughs"—yes, I've all the lingo!'

Mrs Barber had begun to smile at last. But as she looked at the stretch of floor that was still to be washed, she grew embarrassed in a different sort of way.

'I'm afraid Len and I must have made an awful mess yesterday. I wasn't thinking.'

'Oh,' said Frances, 'these tiles get dirty all by themselves. Everything in this house does.'

'Once I've dressed, I'll finish it for you.'

'You'll do nothing of the sort. You've your own rooms to care for. If you can manage without a maid, why shouldn't I? Besides, you'd be amazed what a whiz I can be with a mop.—Here, let me help.'

Mrs Barber was on the bottom stair now and clearly doubtful about where to step to. After the slightest of hesitations, she took the hand that Frances offered, braced herself against her grip, then made the small spring forward to the unwashed side of the floor. Her kimono parted as she landed, exposing more of her nightdress, and giving an alarming suggestion of the rounded, mobile, unsupported flesh inside.

They went together through the kitchen and into the scullery. The bath was in there, beside the sink. It had a bleached wooden

cover, used by Frances as a draining-board; with a practised movement she lifted this free and set it against the wall. The tub was an ancient one that had been several times re-enamelled, most recently by Frances herself, who was not quite sure of the result; the iron struck her, today especially, as having a faintly leprous appearance. The Vulcan geyser was also rather frightful, a greenish riveted cylinder on three bowed legs. It must have been the top of its manufacturer's range in about 1870, but now looked like the sort of vessel in which someone in a Jules Verne novel might make a trip to the moon.

'It has a bit of a temperament, I'm afraid,' she told Mrs Barber as she explained the mechanism. 'You have to turn this tap, but *not* this one; you might blow us sky-high if you do. The flame goes here.' She struck a match. 'Best to look the other way at this point. My father lost both his eyebrows doing this once.—There.'

The flame, with a whoosh, had found the gas. The cylinder began to tick and rattle. She frowned at it, her hands at her hips. 'What a beast it is. I am sorry, Mrs Barber.' She gazed right round the room, at the stone sink, the copper in the corner, the mortuary tiles on the wall. 'I do wish this house was more up-to-date for you.'

But Mrs Barber shook her head. 'Oh, please don't wish that.' She tucked back another curl of hair; Frances noticed the piercing for her earring, a little dimple in the lobe. 'I like the house just as it is. It's a house with a history, isn't it? Things—well, they oughtn't always to be modern. There'd be no character if they were.'

And there it was again, thought Frances: that niceness, that kindness, that touch of delicacy. She answered with a laugh. 'Well, as far as character goes, I fear this house might be rather too much of a good thing. But—' She spoke less flippantly. 'I'm glad you like it. I'm very glad. I like it too, though I'm apt to forget that.—Now,

we oughtn't to let this geyser get hot without running some water, or there'll be no house left to like, and no us to do the liking! Do you think you can manage? If the flame goes out—it sometimes does, I'm sorry to say—give me a call.'

Mrs Barber smiled, showing neat white teeth. 'I will. Thank you, Miss Wray.'

Frances left her to it and returned to her wet floor. The scullery door was closed behind her, and quietly bolted.

But the door between the kitchen and the passage was propped open, and as Frances retrieved her cloth she could hear, very clearly, Mrs Barber's preparations for her bath, the rattle of the chain against the tub, followed by the splutter and gush of the water. The gushing, it seemed to her, went on for a long time. She had told a fib about her and her mother's use of the geyser: it was too expensive to light often; they drew their hot water from the boiler in the old-fashioned stove. They bathed, at most, once a week, frequently taking turns with the same bathwater. If Mrs Barber were to want baths like this on a daily basis, their gas bill might double.

But at last the flow was cut off. There came the splash of water and the rub of heels as Mrs Barber stepped into the tub, followed by a more substantial liquid thwack as she lowered herself down. After that there was a silence, broken only by the occasional echoey plink of drips from the tap.

Like the parted kimono, the sounds were unsettling; the silence was most unsettling of all. Sitting at her bureau a short time before, Frances had been picturing her lodgers in purely mercenary terms—as something like two great waddling shillings. But this, she thought, shuffling backward over the tiles, this was what it really meant to have lodgers: this odd, unintimate proximity, this rather peeled-back moment, where the only thing between herself

and a naked Mrs Barber was a few feet of kitchen and a thin scullery door. An image sprang into her head: that round flesh, crimsoning in the heat.

She adjusted her pose on the mat, took hold of her cloth, and rubbed hard at the floor.

The steam was still beading the scullery walls when her mother returned at lunch-time. Frances told her about Mrs Barber's bath, and she looked startled.

'At ten o'clock? In her dressing-gown? You're sure?'

'Quite sure. A satin one, too. What a good job, wasn't it, that you were visiting the vicar, and not the other way round?'

Her mother paled, but didn't answer.

They ate their lunch—a cauliflower cheese—then settled down together in the drawing-room. Mrs Wray made notes for a parish newsletter. Frances worked her way through a basket of mending with *The Times* on the arm of her chair. What was the latest? Awkwardly, she turned the inky pages. But it was the usual dismal stuff. Horatio Bottomley was off to the Old Bailey for swindling the public out of a quarter of a million. An MP was asking that cocaine traffickers be flogged. The French were shooting Syrians, the Chinese were shooting each other, a peace conference in Dublin had come to nothing, there'd been new murders in Belfast . . . But the Prince of Wales looked jolly on a fishing trip in Japan, and the Marchioness of Carisbrooke was about to host a ball 'in aid of the Friends of the Poor'.—So that was all right, then, thought Frances. She disliked *The Times*. But there wasn't the money for a second, less conservative paper. And, in any case, reading the news these days depressed her. In the quaintness of her wartime youth it would have fired her into activity: writing letters, attending meetings. Now the world seemed to her to have become so complex that its problems

defied solution. There was only a chaos of conflicts of interest; the whole thing filled her with a sense of futility. She put the paper aside. She would tear it up tomorrow, for scraps and kindling.

At least the house was silent; very nearly its old self. There had been bumps and creaks earlier, as Mrs Barber had shifted more furniture about, but now she must be in her sitting-room—doing what? Was she still in her kimono? Somehow, Frances hoped she was.

Whatever she was doing, her silence lasted right through tea-time. She didn't come to life again until just before six, when she went charging around as if in a burst of desperate tidying, then began clattering pans and dishes in her little kitchen. Half an hour later, preparing dinner in her own kitchen, Frances was startled to hear the rattle of the front-door latch as someone let themself into the house. It was Mr Barber, of course, coming home from work. This time he sounded like her father, scuffing his feet across the mat.

He went tiredly up the stairs and gave a yodelling yawn at the top, but five minutes later, as she was gathering potato peelings from the counter, she heard him come back down. There was the squeak of his slippers in the passage and then, 'Knock, knock, Miss Wray!' His face appeared around the door. 'Mind if I pass through?'

He looked older than he had the day before, with his hair greased flat for the office. A crimson stripe across his forehead must have been the mark of his bowler hat. Once he had visited the WC he lingered for a moment in the yard: she could see him through the kitchen window, wondering whether or not to go and speak to her mother, who was further down the garden, cutting asparagus. He decided against it and returned to the house, pausing to peer up at the brickwork or the window-frames as he came, and then to examine some crack or chip in the door-step.

'Well, and how are you, Miss Wray?' he asked, when he was back in the kitchen. She saw that there was no way out of a chat. But perhaps she ought to get to know him.

'I'm very well, Mr Barber. And you? How was your day?'

He pulled at his stiff City collar. 'Oh, the usual fun and games.'

'Difficult, you mean?'

'Well, every day's difficult with a chief like mine. I'm sure you know the type: the sort of fellow who gives you a column of numbers to add and, when they don't come out the way that suits him, blames you!' He raised his chin to scratch at his throat, keeping his eyes on hers. 'A public-school chap he's meant to be, too. I thought those fellows knew better, didn't you?'

Now, why would he say that? He might have guessed that her brothers—But, of course, he knew nothing about her brothers, she reminded herself, even though he and his wife were sleeping in their old room. She said, in an attempt to match his tone, 'Oh, I hear those fellows are over-rated. You work in assurance, I think you told us?'

'That's right. For my sins!'

'What is it you do, exactly?'

'Me? I'm an assessor of lives. Our agents send in applications for policies. I pass them on to our medical man and, depending on his report, I say whether the life to be assured counts as good, bad or indifferent.'

'Good, bad or indifferent,' she repeated, struck by the idea. 'You sound like St Peter.'

'St Peter!' He laughed. 'I like that! That's clever, Miss Wray. Yes, I shall try that out on the fellows at the Pearl.'

Once his laughter had faded she assumed that he would move on. But the little exchange had only made him chummier: he sidled into the scullery doorway and settled himself against the

post of it. He seemed to enjoy watching her work. His blue gaze travelled over her and she felt him taking her all in: her apron, her steam-frizzed hair, her rolled-up sleeves, her scarlet knuckles.

She began to chop some mint for a sauce. He asked if the mint had come from the garden. Yes, she said, and he jerked his head towards the window. 'I was just having a look at it out there. Quite a size, isn't it? You and your mother don't take care of it all by yourselves, do you?'

'Oh,' she said, 'we call in a man for the heavier jobs when—' When we can run to it, she thought. 'When they need doing. The vicar's son comes and mows the lawn for us. We manage the rest between us all right.'

That wasn't quite true. Her mother did her genteel best with the weeding and the pruning. As far as Frances was concerned, gardening was simply open-air housework; she had enough of that already. As a consequence, the garden—a fine one, in her father's day—was growing more shapeless by the season, more depressed and unkempt. Mr Barber said, 'Well, I'd be glad to give you a hand with it—you just say the word. I generally help with my father's at home. His isn't half the size of yours, mind. Not a quarter, even. Still, the guvnor's made the most of it. He even has cucumbers in a frame. Beauties, they are—this long!' He held his hands apart, to show her. 'Ever thought of cucumbers, Miss Wray?'

'Well—'

'Growing them, I mean?'

Was there some sort of innuendo there? She could hardly believe that there was. But his gaze was lively, as it had been the night before, and, just as something about his manner then had discomposed her, so, now, she had the feeling that he was poking fun at her, perhaps attempting to make her blush.

Without replying, she turned to fetch vinegar and sugar for the

mint, and when the sauce was mixed and in its bowl she removed her hot-pot from the oven, put in a knife to test the meat; she stood so long with her back to him that he took the hint at last and pushed away from the door-post. It seemed to her that, as he left the kitchen, he was smiling. And once he'd started along the passage she heard him begin to whistle, at a rather piercing pitch. The tune was a jaunty, music-hall one—it took her a moment to recognise it—it was 'Hold Your Hand Out, Naughty Boy'. The whistle faded as he climbed the stairs, but a few minutes later she found that she was whistling the tune herself. She quickly cut the whistle off, but it was as though he'd left a stubborn odour behind him: do what she could, the wretched song kept floating back into her head all evening long.

2

There was more jaunty whistling, in the days that followed. There were more yodelling yawns at the top of the stairs. There were sneezes, too—those loud masculine sneezes, like shouts into the hand, that Frances could remember from the days of her brothers; sneezes that for some reason never came singly, but arrived as a volley and led inevitably to a last-trump blowing of the nose. Then there was the lavatory seat forever left in the upright position; there were the vivid yellow splashes and kinked wet gingerish hairs that appeared on the rim of the pan itself. Finally, on the dot of half-past ten each night, there was the clatter of a spoon in a glass as Mr Barber mixed himself an indigestion powder, followed a few seconds later by the little report of his belch.

None of it was so very irksome. It was certainly not a lot to put up with for the sake of twenty-nine shillings a week. Frances supposed that she would grow used to it, that the Barbers would grow used to her, that the house would settle down into grooves and routines, that they'd all start rubbing along together—as Mr Barber himself, she reflected, might say. She found it hard to imagine herself ever rubbing along with him, it was true, and she had several despondent moments, lying in bed with her cigarette, wondering

again what she had done, what she had let the house in for; trying to remember why she had ever thought that the arrangement would work.

Still, at least Mrs Barber was easy to have about the place. That mid-morning bath, it seemed, had been a freak. She kept herself very much to herself as time went on, doing more of that 'titivating' her husband had pretended to grumble about, adding lengths of beading and swaths of macramé and lace to picture-rails and mantelpieces, arranging ostrich feathers in jars: Frances caught glimpses of it all as she went back and forth to her own room. Once, crossing the landing, she heard a sound like jingling bells, and glanced in through the open doorway of the couple's sitting-room to see Mrs Barber with a tambourine in her hand. The tambourine had trailing ribbons and a gipsy look about it. Gipsyish, too, was Mrs Barber's costume, the fringed skirt, the Turkish slippers; her hair was done up in a red silk scarf. Frances paused, not wanting to disturb her—then called lightly into the room.

'Are you about to dance the tarantella, Mrs Barber?'

Mrs Barber came to the doorway, smiling. 'I'm still deciding what goes where.'

Frances nodded to the tambourine. 'May I see it?' And then, when the thing was in her hand, 'It's pretty.'

Mrs Barber wrinkled her nose. 'It's only from a junk shop. It's really Italian, though.'

'You have exotic tastes, I think.'

'Len says I'm like a savage. That I ought to live in the jungle. I just like things that have come from other places.'

And after all, thought Frances, what was wrong with that? She gave the tambourine a shake, tapped her fingers across its drum-skin. She might have lingered and said more; the moment, somehow, seemed to invite it. But it was Wednesday afternoon, and

she and her mother were off to the cinema. With a touch of reluctance, she handed the tambourine back. 'I hope you find the right spot for it.'

When, a little later, she and her mother left the house, she said, 'I suppose we might have asked Mrs Barber to come along with us today.'

Her mother looked doubtful. 'Mrs Barber? To the picture-house?'

'You'd rather we didn't?'

'Well, perhaps once we know her better. But mightn't it become awkward? Shouldn't we have to ask her every time?'

Frances thought about it. 'Yes, I suppose so.'

In any case, the programme that week was disappointing. The first few films were all right, but the drama was a dud, an American thriller with a plot full of holes. She and her mother slipped away before the final act, hoping not to draw the notice of the small orchestra—Mrs Wray saying, as she often did, what a pity it was that the pictures nowadays had so much unpleasantness in them.

They met a neighbour, Mrs Hillyard, in the foyer. She was leaving early too, but from the dearer seats upstairs. They walked back up the road together, and, 'How are your paying guests?' she asked. She was too polite to call them lodgers. 'Are they settling in? I see the husband in the mornings on his way to the City. He seems a very well-turned-out chap. I must say I rather envy you, having a young man in the house again. And you'll enjoy having some young people about to argue with, Frances, I expect?'

Frances smiled. 'Oh, my arguing days are all behind me.'

'Of course they are. Your mother's grateful for your company, I'm sure.'

That night there was skirt of beef for dinner: Frances worked up a sweat beating it tender with a rolling-pin. The next day, with an

hour to herself, she cleared soot from the kitchen flue. The muck got under her fingernails and into the creases of her palms, and had to be scrubbed off with lemon juice and salt.

The day after that, feeling rather as though she'd earned a Friday treat, she left her mother a cold lunch and bread already buttered for tea, and went into Town.

She liked to go in when she could, sometimes as a shopping expedition, sometimes to call on a friend. Depending on the weather, she had various ways of making the journey; the days had kept fine since the Barbers' arrival so she was able, this time, to make the best of it on foot. She caught a bus as far as Vauxhall, and from there she crossed the river and wandered north, taking any street that caught her eye.

She loved these walks through London. She seemed, as she made them, to become porous, to soak in detail after detail; or else, like a battery, to become charged. Yes, that was it, she thought, as she turned a corner: it wasn't a liquid creeping, it was a tingle, something electric, something produced as if by the friction of her shoes against the streets. She was at her truest, it seemed to her, in these tingling moments—these moments when, paradoxically, she was also at her most anonymous. But it was the anonymity that did it. She never felt the electric charge when she walked through London with someone at her side. She never felt the excitement that she felt now, seeing the fall of the shadow of a railing across a set of worn steps. Was it foolish, to feel like that about the shadow of a railing? Was it whimsy? She hated whimsy. But it only became whimsy when she tried to put it into words. If she allowed herself simply to feel it . . . There. It was like being a string, and being plucked, giving out the single, pure note that one was made for. How odd, that no one else could hear it! If I were to die today, she thought, and someone were to think over my life, they'd

never know that moments like this, here on the Horseferry Road, between a Baptist chapel and a tobacconist's, were the truest things in it.

She crossed the street, swinging her bag, and a couple of gulls wheeled overhead, letting out those seaside cries that could be heard sometimes right in the middle of London, that always made her think that just around the next corner she would find the pier.

She did her shopping at the market stalls of Strutton Ground, going from one stall to another before committing herself, wanting to be sure that she was ferreting out the bargains; she ended up with three reels of sewing thread, half a dozen pairs of flawed silk stockings and a box of nibs. The walk from Vauxhall had made her hungry, and with her purchases stowed away she began to think about her lunch. Often on these trips she ate at the National Gallery, the Tate—somewhere like that, where the refreshment rooms were so bustling that it was possible to order a pot of tea, then sneak out a home-made bun to have with it. That was a spinsterish thing to do, however; she wouldn't be a spinster today. Good grief, she was only twenty-six! She found a 'cosy corner' café and bought herself a hot lunch: egg, chips and bread and butter, all for a shilling and sixpence, including a penny tip for the waitress. She resisted the temptation to mop the plate with the bread and butter, but felt quite vulgar enough to roll herself a cigarette. She smoked it to the satisfying chink and splash of crockery and water that floated up from the basement kitchen: the sound of someone else washing up.

She walked to Buckingham Palace after that, not from any sentimental feeling about the King and Queen—whom, on the whole, she considered to be a pair of inbred leeches—but simply for the pleasure of being there, at the grand centre of things. For the same reason, after she had wandered about in St James's Park she crossed

the Mall and climbed the steps and went up to Piccadilly. She strolled a little way along Regent Street simply for the sake of its curve, pausing to goggle at the prices on the cards in the smart shop windows. Three-guinea shoes, four-guinea hats . . . A place on a corner was selling Persian antiques. A decorated jar was so tall and so round that a thief might hide in it. She thought, with a smile: Mrs Barber would like that.

There were no smart shops once she had crossed Oxford Circus. London made one of its costume changes, like whipping off a cloak; it became a shabby muddle of pianola sellers, Italian grocers, boarding-houses, pubs. But she liked the names of the streets: Great Castle, Great Titchfield, Riding House, Ogle, Clipstone—her friend, Christina, lived on this last one, in two rooms on the top floor of an ugly, newish building. Frances went in by a brown-tiled passage, greeted the porter in his booth, passed on to the open courtyard and began the long climb up the stairs. As she approached Christina's landing she could hear the sound of her typewriter, a fluid, hectic *tap-tap-tap*. She paused to catch her breath, put her finger to the push of the doorbell, and the typewriting ceased. A moment later Christina opened the door, tilting up her small, pale, pointed face for Frances's kiss, but narrowing her eyes and blinking.

'I can't see you! I can only see letters, hopping about like fleas. Oh, I shall go blind, I know I shall. Just a minute, while I bathe my brow.'

She slipped past Frances to wash her hands at the sink on the landing, and then to hold the hands to her forehead. She came back rubbing at an eye with a wet knuckle.

The building was run by a society offering flats to working women. Christina's neighbours were school-mistresses, stenographers, lady clerks; she herself made her living by typing up

manuscripts and dissertations for authors and students, and by odd bits of secretarial and book-keeping work. Just now, she told Frances as she led her into the flat, she was helping out on a new little paper, a little political thing; she had been typing up statistics on the Russian Famine, and the constant fiddling about with the margins had given her a headache. Then, of course, there were the figures themselves, so many hundreds of thousands dead, so many hundreds of thousands still starving. It was miserable work.

'And the worst of it is,' she said guiltily, 'it's made me so hungry! And there isn't a bit of food in the flat.'

Frances opened her bag. 'Hey presto—there is, now. I've made you a cake.'

'Oh, Frances, you haven't.'

'Well, a currant loaf. I've been carrying it about with me, and it weighs a ton. Here you are.'

She brought the loaf out, undid its string, parted its paper. Christina saw the glossy brown crust of it and her blue eyes widened like a child's. There was only one thing to do with a cake like that, she said, and that was to toast it. She set a kettle on the gas-ring for tea, then rummaged about in a cupboard for an electric fire.

'Sit down while this warms up,' she said, as the fire began to tick and hum. 'Oh, but let some air in, would you, so we don't swelter.'

Frances had to move a colander from the window-sill in order to raise the sash. The room was large and light, decorated in fashionable Bohemian colours, but there were untidy piles of books and papers on the floor, and nothing was where it ought to be. The armchairs were comedy-Victorian, one of scuffed red leather, the other of balding velveteen. The velveteen one had a tray balanced on it, bearing the remains of two breakfasts: sticky egg cups and dirty mugs. She passed the tray to Christina, who cleared it, gave

it a wipe, set it with cups, saucers, plates and a smeary bottle of milk, and handed it back. The mugs, the egg cups, the cups and saucers, were all of pottery, heavily glazed, thickly made—all of it with a rather 'primitive' finish. Christina shared this flat with another woman, Stevie. Stevie was a teacher in the art department of a girls' school in Camden Town, but was trying to make a name for herself as a maker of ceramics.

Frances did not dislike Stevie exactly, but she generally timed her visits so that they fell inside school hours; it was Chrissy she came to see. The two of them had known each other since the mid-point of the War. With the coming of Peace, perversely, they had parted on bad terms, but fate had brought them back together—fate, or chance, or whatever it was that, one day last September, had sent Frances into the National Gallery to escape a torrent of rain, had nudged her out of the Flemish rooms and into the Italian, where she had come upon Christina, as sodden as herself, gazing with a mixed expression at *Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time*. There had been no chance of a retreat. While Frances had stood there, disconcerted, Christina had turned, and their eyes had met; after the first awkwardness, the more-than-coincidence of it had been impossible to resist, and now they saw each other two or three times a month. Their friendship sometimes struck Frances as being like a piece of soap—like a piece of ancient kitchen soap that had got worn to the shape of her hand, but which had been dropped to the floor so many times it was never quite free of its bits of cinder.

Today, for example, she saw that Christina had re-styled her hair. The hair had been short at their last meeting, a fortnight before; now it was even more severely shingled at the back, with a straight fringe halfway up Christina's forehead and two flat, pointed curls in front of her ears. Rather wilfully eccentric, Frances

thought the style. She thought the same of Christina's frock, which was a swirl of muddy pinks and greys, and matched the Bloomsbury walls. She thought it of the walls, for that matter; of the whole untidy flat. She never came here without looking at the disorder of it all in a mixture of envy and despair, imagining the cool, calm, ordered place the rooms would be if they were hers.

She didn't mention the haircut. She closed her eyes to the mess. The kettle came to the boil and Christina filled the teapot, cut the cake into slices, produced butter, knives and two brass toasting-forks. 'Let's sit on the floor and do it properly,' she said, so they pushed back the armchairs and made themselves comfortable on the rug. Frances's fork had Mother Shipton for its handle. Christina's had a cat that was playing a fiddle. The bars of the fire had turned from grey to pink to glowing orange, and smelt powerfully of scorching dust.

The cake toasted quickly. With careful fingers they turned their slices, then loaded on the butter, holding plates beneath their chins as they ate, to catch the greasy drips. 'Only think of the poor Russians!' said Christina, gathering crumbs. But that reminded her of the little paper she was working for, and she began to tell Frances all about it. It had its office, she said, in a Clerkenwell basement, in a terrace that looked as though it ought to be condemned. She had spent two days there this week, and had passed the whole time in fear of her life. 'You can hear the house creaking and groaning, like the one in *Little Dorrit*!' The pay was wretched, of course, but the work was interesting. The paper had its own printing press; she was to learn how to set type. Everyone did a bit of everything—that was how the place was run. And she was already 'Christina' to the two young editors, and they were 'David' and 'Philip' to her . . .

What fun it sounded, Frances thought. She herself had only one piece of news to share, and that was the arrival of Mr and Mrs

Barber. For days she had been imagining how she'd describe the couple to Chrissy; the two of them had had long, sparkling conversations about them, in her head. But what with the new haircut, and the Russian Famine, and David and Philip—She finished her cake, saying nothing. In the end it was Christina herself who, yawning, extending her legs, pointing her neat slipperless feet like a ballerina, said, 'You've let me run on like anything! What are the excitements in Camberwell? There must be something, surely?' She patted her mouth, then stopped her hand. 'Wait a bit. Weren't your lodgers due, when I saw you last?'

Frances said, 'We call them paying guests, on Champion Hill.'

'They've arrived? Why didn't you say? How deep you are! Well? How do you like them?'

'Oh—' Frances's smart comments had shrunk away. All she could picture was nice Mrs Barber, the tambourine in her hand. She said at last, 'They're all right. It's odd having people in the house again, that's all.'

'Do you put a tumbler to the wall?'

'Of course I don't.'

'I would. I'm glued to the floor every time the girl downstairs sneaks in her gentleman friend. It's as good as a Marie Stopes lecture. If I had your Mr and Mrs—What are their names?'

'Barber. Leonard and Lilian. Len and Lil, they call each other.'

'Len and Lil, from Peckham Rye!'

'They have to be from somewhere, you know.'

'If I had them in the next room I wouldn't get an ounce of work done.'

'The novelty soon wears off, I assure you.'

'Well, you don't paint much of a picture . . . How's the husband?'

Frances recalled his unsettling blue gaze. 'I'm not sure. I haven't quite got his measure. Pleased with himself. A cock among hens.'

'And the wife?'

'Oh, much better than him. Good-looking, in the fleshy sort of way that men admire. A bit romantic. Really, I can't say. We pass each other on the stairs. We meet on the landing. Everything happens on the landing. I had no idea that landings could be so thrilling. Ours has become the equivalent of Clapham Railway Junction. One of us is always going across it, or backing out of it—or lurking in a siding until the line is clear.'

'And how's your mother taken to it all?'

'Yes, Mother's keeping her end up.'

'She doesn't mind sleeping on the dining-table, or whatever it is she's doing? Rum to picture her as a landlady, I must say! Has she steamed open any post yet?'

Frances made no answer to that. But Christina didn't seem to expect one. She was yawning again, and stretching, making those Lopokova points with her toes. They oughtn't to leave the fire burning, she said, without toasting more cake. Had they room for a second helping? They decided that they had, and speared another two slices.

And they had eaten the cake, and drunk their tea, when they heard the sound of a barrel organ starting up, out on the street. They tilted their heads to listen. The melody was a jumble of notes to begin with; then their ears got the thread of it. It was 'Roses of Picardy', the most banal tune imaginable, but one of the songs of their youth. They looked at each other. Frances, embarrassed, said, 'This old thing.'

But Christina scrambled to her feet. 'Oh, let's go and see.'

The organist was on the pavement directly below them. He was an ex-service man in a trench-coat and Tommy's cap, with a couple of campaign medals just visible at his breast. He had the organ on a set of pram wheels; it appeared to be held together with string.

Its sound was so raw and almost discordant that the music seemed not so much to be rising from the box as tumbling out of it, as if the notes were physical things of glass or metal, landing clanging at the man's feet.

After a minute he looked up, saw the two of them watching, and lifted his cap to them. Frances went to her bag for money. She dithered, for a moment, when she found nothing smaller than a sixpence, but she returned to the open window and carefully threw the coin down. The man caught it in his cap, very neatly, tucked it away, and waved the cap again, keeping the organ going as he did it, without the slightest interruption.

The sun had warmed the window-sill with real, summerish heat. Christina settled herself more comfortably, shutting her eyes, turning up her face. There were crumbs of cake at the corner of her mouth still, and butter on her lips: Frances smiled to see the shine of it, then let her own eyes close, giving herself over to the sunlight, to the niceness of the moment, and to the tune, that was so piercingly reminiscent of a particular phase of wartime.

The note of the music wobbled. The man was moving on, still paying out the melody. As he turned to leave the pavement a board was revealed on the back of his trench-coat, on which he had painted the words:

WILLING TO
GRIND!

WILL YOU
EMPLOY ME?

Frances and Christina watched him cross the road. 'What's to be done for them?' asked Chrissy.

'I don't know.'

'There's to be a meeting at the Conway Hall next week, "Charity versus Challenge". Sidney Webb is to speak—for what that's worth. You ought to come.'

Frances nodded. 'I might.'

'Only, you won't.'

'I'm not sure I believe it'll help, that's all.'

'You'd rather stay at home, scrub a lavatory pan or two.'

'Well, lavatory pans must be scrubbed. Even the Webbs', I expect.'

She didn't want to talk about it. What was the good? In any case, she couldn't quite tug her mind free from the music. The tune came more faintly as the man turned a corner, the last few strands of it like the fine but clinging threads at the edge of a piece of unhemmed linen. *Roses are shining in Picardy, in the hush of the silver dew. Roses are flow'ring in Picardy, but—*

'There's Stevie,' said Christina.

'Stevie? Where?'

'Down there. Just coming.'

Frances leaned, peered over the sill, and spotted the tall, rather handsome figure making for the entrance of the building. 'Oh,' she said, without excitement. 'No school for her today?'

'The school's shut for three days. Some naughty boys broke in and flooded it. She's been at her studio instead. She has a new one, in Pimlico.'

They remained at the window for another few moments, then returned, in silence, to their places on the floor. The electric fire was grey now, ticking again as it cooled. Soon there were footsteps out on the landing, followed by the rattle of a latch-key being put into the lock of the door.

The door opened almost directly on to the room. 'Hullo Stinker,' said Christina, as Stevie appeared.

'Hullo you,' Stevie answered. And then: 'Frances! Good to see you. Your day up in Town, is it?'

She was hatless and coatless and smoking a cigarette. Her short dark hair was brushed back from her forehead, completely against the fashion; her outfit was plain as a canvas overall, the sleeves rolled up to her elbows, showing off her knobbly hands and wrists. But Frances was struck, as she always was, by the dash of her, the queer panache, the air she had of not caring if the world admired her or thought her an oddity. She had a hefty satchel over her shoulder, which she let fall with a thud as she approached the armchairs. She looked at the fire and the toasting-forks, smiling but wary.

'What's the idea? A nursery tea?'

'Isn't it shaming?' said Christina. Her manner had changed with Stevie's arrival, had become arch and brittle in a way Frances knew and disliked. 'When poor Frances comes to see us she has to bring her own tuck. Aren't we lucky she's so clever! Swap you a slice for a couple of cigarettes?'

Stevie fished in a pocket for her case and lighter. 'Done.'

She helped herself to a piece of the loaf, then sat down in the velveteen armchair, her knee just touching Christina's shoulder. Her fingernails were dark with clay, Frances could see now, and there was a dirty thumb-print like a bruise at her left temple. Christina noticed the thumb-print too, and reached up to rub it away.

'You look like a chimney-sweep, Stevie.'

'And you,' said Stevie, surveying with satisfaction Christina's unpressed clothes, 'look like a chimney-sweep's trollop.' She took a large bite of cake. 'Aside from your hair, that is. What do you think of it, Frances?'

Frances was lighting a cigarette. Christina answered for her. 'She hates it, of course.'

Frances said, 'I don't hate it at all. It'd cause a stir on Champion Hill, though.'

Christina snorted. 'Well, that's a point in its favour, in my book. Stevie and I were in Hammersmith last week. The stares I got were out of this world! No one said a word, of course.'

'No one would, to your face,' said Stevie, 'in a place like that.' She polished off her slice of cake and licked her dirty thumb and fingers. 'I lived on the Brompton Road once, you know, Frances. The gentility—my God! My neighbour was a man who worked for one of the big shipping firms. His wife kept a Bible in the window. Church three times on a Sunday, all that. But at night, I'd hear them through the walls, practically hurling the fire irons at each other! That's the clerk class for you. They look tame. They sound tame. But under those doilies and antimacassars they're still rough as all hell. No, give me good honest slum people over people like that, any day. At least they have their brawls in the open.'

Christina put out a foot and nudged Frances with her toes. 'You taking note?' To Stevie she explained, 'Frances has her own little clerk now, and her own little clerk's wife . . . '

Stevie listened to the story of the coming of the Barbers with the sort of wincing expression with which she might have heard out the symptoms of some embarrassing disease. As soon as she could, Frances turned the conversation. How were things, she asked, in the giddy world of ceramics? Stevie answered at length, telling her about a couple of new designs she was trying out. They were nothing avant-garde, unfortunately. No one wanted experiment any more; the art-buying public had become frightfully conservative since the War. But she was doing what she could to push the figurative into the abstract . . . She leaned over the side of the armchair to fetch a book from her satchel, found pictures

and passages to illustrate what she meant, even made a couple of quick sketches for Frances's benefit.

Frances nodded and murmured, glancing now and then at Christina; she was looking on, saying little, fiddling with the lace of one of Stevie's polished flat brown shoes. With her head tilted forward, the line of her fringe seemed blunter than ever, and the curls in front of her ears looked so flat and so pointed they might have been the blades of can-openers. In the old days, her hair had been long; she had worn it puffed around her head in a way that had always made Frances think, fondly, of a marigold. She'd had that marigold hairstyle the very first time Frances had caught sight of her, on a drizzly day in Hyde Park. She had been nineteen, Frances twenty. God, how distant that seemed! Or, no, not distant, but a different life, a different age, as unlike this one as pepper was salt. There had been a pearl brooch on her lapel, and one of her gloves had had a rip in it, showing the pink palm underneath. *My heart fell out of me and into that rip*, Frances had used to tell her, later.

Stevie ran out of steam at last. Frances seized the opportunity to rise and gather together the tea-things, visit the landing, wash her hands. 'Thanks for the smoke,' she said, as she pinned on her hat.

Stevie offered her case. 'Why not take one or two with you? They must make a change from those gaspers of yours.'

'Oh, I'm happy with the gaspers.'

'You are?'

Christina said, in her Bloomsbury voice, 'Let her be a martyr, Stevie. She likes it.'

They parted without a farewell kiss. Down in the lobby, Frances caught sight of the porter's clock and saw with dismay that it was well past five. She had stayed longer than she'd meant to. She would have enjoyed the walk back to Vauxhall, or at least to Westminster, but there was dinner to be started at home. Rather

regretting, now, having given that sixpence to the organ-grinder, and feeling guilty about her cosy-corner lunch, she decided to save a penny by taking a tram instead of a bus. She walked to Holborn for the tram she needed, had to wait an age before it came; then was rattled queasily across the river into the low, close streets of the south.

Almost the moment she left the tram she was approached by another ex-soldier, this one more ragged than the last. He limped along beside her, holding out a canvas bag, telling her the details of his military record: he'd served with the Worcesters in France and Palestine, been wounded in this and that campaign . . . When she shook her head at him he stopped, let her go on a couple of paces, and then called hoarsely after her:

'I hope you're never broke!'

She turned around, embarrassed, and tried to speak lightly. 'What makes you think I'm not broke already?'

He looked disgusted, raising his hand and then bringing it down, turning away. 'You've done all right, you bloody women,' she heard him say.

She had seen the same opinion, scarcely less bald, in the daily papers. But she arrived home more disgruntled than ever. She found her mother in the kitchen and told her all about it.

Her mother said, 'Poor fellow. He oughtn't to have spoken so roughly to you; that was certainly wrong. But one does have sympathy for all these fighting men whose jobs have been lost.'

'I have sympathy for them, too!' cried Frances. 'I was against their going to war in the first place! But to blame women—it's absurd. What have we gained, aside from a vote that half of us can't even use?'

Her mother looked patient. She had heard all this before. 'Well, no one is hurt. No one is injured.' She was watching Frances

unpack her shopping. 'I don't suppose you found a match for my sewing silks?'

'Yes, I did. Here they are.'

Her mother took the reels and held them to the light. 'Oh, clever girl, these are—Oh, but you didn't buy Sylko?'

'These are just as good, Mother.'

'I do find Sylko the best.'

'Well, unfortunately it's also the most expensive.'

'But, surely, now that Mr and Mrs Barber have come—'

'We still need to be careful,' said Frances. 'We still need to be very careful.' She checked that the door was closed; they had already lowered their voices. 'Don't you remember, when I showed you the accounts?'

'Yes, but, well, it did cross my mind—I did just wonder, Frances, whether we mightn't be able to afford a servant again.'

'A servant?' Frances couldn't keep the impatience out of her tone. 'Well, yes, we might. But you know how much a decent cook-general costs nowadays. It would be half the Barbers' rent gone, just like that. And meanwhile our boots are falling in pieces, we dread ever having to send for the doctor, our winter coats look like things from the Dark Ages. And then, another stranger in the house, someone to have to get to know—'

'Yes, all right,' said her mother, hastily. 'I dare say you know best.'

'When I can take care of things perfectly well—'

'Yes, yes, Frances. I do see how impossible it is. Truly I do. Don't let's talk about it any more. Tell me about your day in Town. You made sure to have luncheon, I hope?'

Frances, with an effort, made herself sound less shrewish. 'Yes, I did. At a café.'

'And after that? Where did you go? How did you spend your afternoon?'

'Oh—' Turning away, she answered at random. 'I walked about a bit, that's all. I finished up at the British Museum. I had my tea there.'

'The British Museum? I haven't been there in years. What did you look at?'

'Oh, the usual galleries. Marbles, mummies, that sort of thing.—Look, how hungry are you?' She had opened the meat-safe door. 'We've skirt, again. I might run it through the mincer.' I shall enjoy doing that, she thought.

She did not enjoy it as much as she had hoped to. The beef was poor and kept clogging. She'd meant the meal to be an easy one, but, perhaps because she was discontented, the food seemed to turn against her, the potatoes boiling dry in their pan, the gravy refusing to thicken. Her mother, as sometimes happened, disappeared at the critical moment: she still liked to change her gown and re-pin her hair for dinner, and she tended to misjudge the minutes as she was doing it. By the time she had re-emerged, the food was cooling in its dishes. Frances almost ran with the plates to the drawing-room table. Another delay, then, while her mother said Grace . . .

She swallowed the food without enjoying it. They discussed the various appointments of the days ahead. Tomorrow they were off to the cemetery: it was her father's birthday; they were taking flowers to his grave. On Monday they must remember to change their library books. On Wednesday—

'Oh, now, on Wednesday,' said Frances's mother apologetically, 'I've promised to see Mrs Playfair. I really must see her next week, to discuss the bazaar, and Wednesday afternoon is the only time she can manage. We shall have to miss our trip to the cinema, I'm afraid. Unless we go another day?'

Frances felt absurdly disappointed. Could they make it Monday, instead? But, no, Monday wasn't possible, and neither was Thursday. She could always go alone, of course. She could always invite a friend. She did have friends—not just Christina. She had friends right here in Camberwell. There was Margaret Lamb, a few houses down. There was Stella Noakes, from school—Stella Noakes, with whom she'd once, in a chemistry lesson, laughed so painfully hard that the two of them had wet their flannel drawers.

But Margaret was always so awfully earnest. And Stella Noakes was Stella Rifkind now, with two small children. She might bring the children along. Would that be fun? It hadn't been, last time. No, she'd rather go alone.

But how dismal, at her age, to be so disappointed over something like this! She pushed the food around on her plate, enjoying it less than ever—and picturing Christina and Stevie, who would almost certainly at that moment be eating some jolly scratch supper of macaroni, or bread and cheese, or fried fish and chips, and who might be heading off shortly to the sort of brainy West End entertainment—a lecture or a concert, cheap seats at the Wigmore Hall—to which Frances and Christina had used to like to go together.

Her spirits lifted slightly when, at half-past seven, Mr and Mrs Barber left the house, giving the distinct impression that they would be out until late. The moment they had gone she threw open the drawing-room door. She walked in and out of the kitchen and up and down the stairs, purely for the sake of being able to do so without fear of meeting anyone on the way. She lit the temperamental geyser and ran herself a bath, and as she lay in the water she summoned up a sense of possession and allowed it to expand across the house: she felt it as a physical sensation, a letting-

out of breath, a loosening of nerves, through every blissfully untenanted room.

But by twenty to ten the Barbers were back. She heard the front door open and close and couldn't believe it. Mr Barber came straight out to visit the WC and caught her in the kitchen, in her dressing-gown and bedroom slippers, making cocoa. Oh, no, he said blandly, when she expressed surprise at seeing him, no, he wasn't home earlier than planned. He and Lilian had been for an early evening drink with a friend of his. The friend was an old army chum, and they'd gone to meet his fiancée . . . Not noticing, or not minding, that she gave him no encouragement, he settled himself in what was becoming his 'spot' in the scullery doorway, and told her all about it.

'The girl's a saint,' he said. 'Or else, I dunno, she's after his money! The poor devil lost both his arms, you see, Miss Wray, from here down.' He made a cutting gesture at his elbow. 'She'll have to feed him his dinners, shave him, comb his hair—do everything for him.' His blue eyes held hers. 'The mind fairly boggles, doesn't it?'

There it was, she thought, the little innuendo, as reliable as a cuckoo coming open-mouthed out of a clock. She wished he didn't feel it necessary to go on like this. She wished he'd leave her to herself in her kitchen. She was conscious of her dressing-gown, of the strands of damp hair at her neck, of her slightly downy ankles. She went rigidly back and forth between the counter and the stove, willing him to go; but, just as he had that other time, he seemed to like to watch her working. His colour was high, she noticed. He smelt, distinctly, of beer and cigarettes. She had the sense, perhaps unfair, that he was enjoying having her at a disadvantage.

He headed out to the yard at last. She washed up the milk pan, carried the cocoa through to the drawing-room, and as she handed

the cup to her mother she said, 'I've just been collared by Mr Barber. What an annoying man he is. I've made every effort to like him, but—'

'Mr Barber?' Her mother had been dozing in her chair, and pushed herself up to sit more tidily. 'I am growing quite fond of him.'

Frances sat. 'You can't be serious. When do you see him, even?'

'Oh, we've had our chats. He's always very civil. I find him cheery.'

'He's a menace! How his wife ended up with him, I can't imagine. She seems such a pleasant woman. Not at all his type.'

They were speaking in their special furtive 'Barber' voice. But her mother blew on her cocoa and didn't reply. Frances looked at her. 'Don't you think?'

'Well,' she answered at last, 'Mrs Barber doesn't strike me as the most doting of wives. She might take a little more care, for instance, over her household duties.'

'Doting?' said Frances. 'Duties? How mid-Victorian you sound!'

'It seems to me that "Victorian" is a word that's used nowadays to dismiss all sorts of virtues over which people no longer wish to take the trouble. I always saw to it that the house was nicely kept for your father.'

'What you saw, in fact, was Nelly and Mabel keeping it nice for you.'

'Well, servants don't manage themselves—as you would know, if we still had any. They take a great deal of thought and care. And I always sat down to breakfast alongside your father looking cheerful and nicely dressed. That sort of thing means a great deal to a man. Mrs Barber—well, I am surprised that she returns to bed once her husband has gone to work. And when she does attend to her chores, she seems to do them at a gallop, in order to spend the rest of the day at her leisure.'

Frances had thought the same thing, with envy. She opened her mouth to say as much—then closed it again, and said nothing. She had noticed, perhaps belatedly, how weary her mother was looking tonight. Her cheeks seemed as slack and as dry as overwashed linen. It took her an age to drink her cocoa, and when she had put the cup aside she sat with her hands in her lap, the fingers moving restlessly together with a paper-like sound, her gaze unfixed, on nothing.

In another ten minutes they rose to go to bed. Frances lingered in the drawing-room to put things tidy and to turn down the lights, then headed across the hall, yawning as she went. But as she entered the kitchen passage she heard a cry of alarm or upset; she went running, and found her mother in the scullery, shrinking back in distress from the sight of something that was wriggling in the shadow of the sink.

They had been bothered by mice for a week or two, and Frances had put down traps. Now, at last, a mouse had been caught—but caught badly, pinned by its mangled back legs. It was making frantic efforts to escape.

She moved forward. 'All right.' She spoke calmly. 'I'll see to it.'

'Oh, dear!'

'Now, don't look.'

'Shall we call Mr Barber?'

'Mr Barber? Whatever for? I can do it.'

The mouse grew even more panicked at Frances's approach, its little front paws scrabbling uselessly at the wire that held it. There was no point in attempting to release it; it was too injured for that. But Frances didn't want to leave it to die. After a moment of indecision she ran water into a bucket and dropped the wriggling creature into it, trap and all. A single silvery bubble rose to the surface of the water, along with a line of blood, fine as dark red cotton.

'Those beastly traps!' said her mother, still upset.

'Yes, he was unlucky.'

'What will you do with him?'

She rolled up a sleeve, drew the trap from the bucket and shook off the drips. 'I'll take him outside, down to the ash-heap. You go on to bed.'

The water had made greasy-looking spikes of the mouse's fur, but in death the creature appeared oddly human, with pained, closed eyes and a slack lower jaw. She carefully released the little body, catching hold of it by its gristly tail. On a rack beside the back door were various old coats and shoes. She thought she would do without a coat, but the grass might be damp; she stepped into a pair of galoshes that had once belonged to her brother Noel, and let herself out into the yard. With the mouse dangling from her fingers she clumped across to the lawn, then began to pick her way along the flagstone path that led down the garden.

Lights showed at one or two of her neighbours' windows, but the garden had high walls, a towering linden tree, shaggy laurels and hydrangeas, and was almost completely dark. She went by sense rather than by sight, having made the journey so many times before. Arriving at the low wooden fence that formed a screen around the ash-heap, she tossed the tiny corpse over. There was a percussive little rustle as it landed.

And after that there was a silence, one of those deep, deep hushes that sometimes fell or gathered up here on Champion Hill, even by daylight. They gave the place a lonely air, made it impossible to believe that just a stone's throw in any direction were houses with families and servants in them, that beyond the far garden wall was a cinder lane that led in a trice to a road, an ordinary road with rattling trams and buses on it. Frances thought of her walk through Westminster earlier that day; but she couldn't

recapture it now. All that sort of thing had fallen away. Bricks, pavements, people: all melted away. There were only the trees, the plants, the invisible flowers, a sense of stealthy vegetable activity just below the surface of sound.

It was rather creepy, suddenly. She drew closed the lapels of her dressing-gown and turned to head back to the house.

But as she did it, something caught her eye: a point of light bobbing about on the darkness. A second later, smelling tobacco, she realised that the light was the burning tip of a cigarette. Her eyes changed their focus, and she made out a figure.

Someone was there, in the garden with her.

She let out a yelp of fear and surprise. But it was Mr Barber, that was all. He came forward, laughing, apologising for having given her a fright. The night was such a nice one, he said, that he'd stayed out to make the most of it. He hadn't liked to speak, before; it had seemed a pity to disturb her. He hoped she didn't mind, that he'd wandered down the garden?

For a moment she wanted to hit him. The blood was roaring through her ears; she felt herself quivering like a bell. She'd supposed that he'd gone up to bed ages ago. He must have been out here for—well, close on half an hour. She didn't like to think that he had been near by while she'd been standing at the ash-heap so unguardedly. She wished she hadn't let out that yelp. She was glad, at any rate, that he couldn't see her in Noel's galoshes.

And, after all, he had only done what she herself had done, been tempted to linger out here by the balminess of the night. Her quivering began to subside. She explained stiffly about the mouse, and he chuckled. 'Poor blighter! He just wanted his bit of cheese, didn't he?' He lifted his cigarette to his mouth, so that the blazing point of it reappeared, briefly illuminating his slender hand, his moustache, his foxy jaw.

But when the cigarette had faded he spoke again, and she could tell by the sound of his voice that he had tilted back his head.

'A grand night for star-gazing tonight, Miss Wray! I used to know all about the stars when I was a boy; it was a regular hobby of mine. I used to sneak out my bedroom window after the family were asleep and sit for hours on the scullery roof, with a library book and a bicycle lamp—matching the sky, you know, with the pictures. My brother Dougie caught me at it once, and locked the window on me, so that I had to stay out all night in the rain. He was always pulling stunts like that, my brother. But it was worth it. I had all the names: Arcturus, Regulus, Vega, Capella . . . '

He was murmuring now, and the words had a charm, spoken softly in the darkness. It was odd to be standing there with him, in her night-clothes, in that lonely spot—but then, she thought, it's only the garden. Looking back at the house she saw the lights: the kitchen door standing open, the window with its blind half lowered, the window above it, at the turn of the stairs, with the old Morris curtains not quite meeting in the middle.

And he had been right about the night. The moon was slim, the merest paring; against the deep blue-black of the sky the stars stood out, precise, electric. So she put back her head, and, 'Which one is Capella?' she asked, after a pause. She had been attracted by the name.

He gestured with the hand that held the cigarette. 'The bright little chap above your neighbour's chimney. That's Vega, over there. And up there—' He shifted about, and she turned to follow the glow of the cigarette. 'That's Polaris, the North Star.'

She nodded. 'I know the North Star.'

'You do?'

'I know the Plough, and Orion.'

'You're as good as a Girl Guide. How about Cassiopeia?'

'The ones shaped like an M? Yes, I know them.'

'They're a W tonight. You see them? That's Perseus beside them.'

'No, I don't see that.'

'It's a matter of joining the dots. You have to use your imagination. The fellows who did the naming—well, they were short on entertainments back then. How about Gemini, the twins?' He moved closer, and sketched an outline. 'You see the two of them? Holding hands? And just across from them there's the Lion . . . To the right of him there's the Crab. And there's the Whiting.'

She peered. 'The Whiting?'

'Just over there, beside the Whelk.'

She realised two things at the same moment: one, of course, that he was teasing her; the other that, in order to steer her gaze, he had moved very close to her and raised his free hand to the small of her back. The unexpectedness of the contact gave her a jolt: it made her start away from him, her shoulder clipping his as she did so, her galoshes noisy on the path. He seemed to step back too, to put up his hands in an exaggerated way, like a man caught out at something, playfully pretending innocence.

Or perhaps he really was innocent. She was suddenly uncertain. It was too dark to make out his expression; she could see only faint gleams of starlight at his eyes, his teeth. Was he smiling? Was he laughing at her? She had the tricked, trapped feeling she'd sometimes had with men in the past, the sense that, through no act of her own, she had become a figure of fun, and that whatever she did or said now would only make her more of one.

And she felt the loneliness of the spot again, the moist and crafty garden. It seemed to be on Mr Barber's side, in a way it hadn't been before. She tightened the belt of her dressing-gown, straightened her back, and spoke coldly.

'You oughtn't to linger out here, Mr Barber. Your wife must be wondering where you are.'

As she expected, he laughed, though with a sort of wryness that she didn't understand.

'Oh, I dare say Lily can live without me for another minute or two. I'll just have my smoke out, Miss Wray, and then I'll wend my way to bed.'

She left him without a farewell, stumping back to the house, feeling just as much of a fool as she'd known she would. Once she had kicked off the galoshes she saw to the stove and the breakfast things at top speed, not wanting to have to encounter him for a third time that night. But in any case, he didn't appear. She was up in her room, groping for the pins in her hair, before she heard the back door closed and bolted.

She listened to his step on the stairs with a lingering crossness—but found herself curious, too, as to how he would greet his wife. She thought of Christina asking her if she had put a tumbler to the wall. But it wasn't eavesdropping, was it, if one simply stole closer to the door and tilted one's head?

She heard Mrs Barber's voice first. 'There you are! I thought you'd got lost. What have you been doing?'

He answered with a yawn. 'Nothing.'

'You must have been doing something.'

'Having a smoke, out the back. Looking at the stars.'

'The stars? Did you see your future in them?'

'Oh, I know that already, don't I?'

That was all they said. But the *way* in which they said it—the absolute deadness of their tones, the absence of anything like affection—took Frances aback. It had never occurred to her that their marriage might be anything other than happy. Now, astonished, she thought, Why, they might almost hate each other!

Well, their feelings were their own affair, she supposed. So long as they paid their rent . . . But that was thinking like a landlady;

that was a horrible way to think. She didn't want them to be miserable. But she felt unnerved, too. She was reminded of how little she knew them. And here they were, at the heart of her house! Her mind ran back, unwillingly, to Stevie's warning about the 'clerk class'.

She wished now that she hadn't listened. She crept into bed and blew out her candle, but lay wakeful, open-eyed. She heard the couple moving about between their sitting-room and kitchen, and soon one of them paused on the landing—Mr Barber, yawning again. She watched the shrinking away of the light from under her door as he turned down the gas.