


RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Jackson's Dilemma

Iris Murdoch

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JACKSON'S DILEMMA



IRIS MURDOCH

Chatto & Windus
LONDON

EDWARD LANNION WAS sitting at his desk in his pleasant house in London in Notting Hill. The sun was shining. It was an early morning in June, not quite midsummer. Edward was good-looking. He was tall and slim and pale. He was very well dressed. His hair, slightly curling, thickly tumbling down his neck, was a dark golden brown. He had a long firm mouth, a rather long hawkish nose, and long light brown eyes. He was twenty-eight.

His beautiful mother had died of cancer when he was ten. He had seen her die. When he heard his father's sobs he knew. When he was eighteen, his younger brother was drowned. He had no other siblings. He loved his mother and his brother passionately. He had not got on with his father. His father, who was rich and played at being an architect, wanted Edward to be an architect too. Edward did not want to be an architect. He studied mediaeval history at Cambridge. Informed by his father that he should now earn his living somehow, he joined a small academic publishing house which dealt with the kind of books Edward liked. Unknown to his father he employed himself at publishing for only two mornings a week, devoting the rest to reading, and attempting to write historical novels, even poems. When Edward's father died Edward shed tears and wished he had behaved better to his father who had left him the house in Notting Hill, and the estate, and the handsome house in the country. The name of the house was Hatting Hall, a name regarded as ridiculous by Edward and his brother Randall when they were children.

Hatting Hall, half Tudor half Georgian, having by now lost some of its larger property, was not content to own big beautiful gardens and some miles of adjacent meadows. Through these meadows ran the narrow stream of the river Lip, passing through the village known as Lipcot. Lipcot, high up upon the far side from Hatting, after giving its name to the river, was now becoming nothing more than a hamlet, consisting of a few small houses, some smaller genuine cottages, a few shops, and a pub. Upstream, recently restored, was a sturdy bridge, leading to what the villagers called 'civilisation'. The Hall owned the land on its own side down to the river, together with half of a much disputed fragile bridge, the land on the other side, for a considerable distance, being the property of the only other 'grand house' in the vicinity. Farther down the river, on the Hatting side, reached by an ancient stone bridge, upon a little hill (land owned by Hatting) was a fourteenth-century church complete with a little rectory and a tiny congregation. The other 'grand house', up from the river and among many trees, was called Penndean after the Quaker family which had owned it, and still owned it since the days of William Penn. In fact Penndean was older still, its original name being lost. It had thereafter been diminished by fire as well as being (as Edward's father said) 'messed about by the Victorians'. Edward's grandfather had had some feud with the inhabitants of the 'other House' (the family name was Barnell). Edward's father had been polite. Edward was polite.

Edward's ancestors had not perpetually possessed Hatting Hall, being by descent Cornishmen, and having only acquired Hatting late in the eighteenth century, the previous owners being obligingly bankrupt. This Cornish legend pleased Edward and Randall, but displeased their father, who did not care for piratical ancestors feasting on myths. He preferred to 'take up' the line of the unfortunate b

titled gentry front whom the Lannions seized the charming and romantic residence. Even before the chaotic troubles of his grown-up life Edward had been aware of his *odd* aspect, his being rather *fr* even as being, perhaps because of the Cornish past, under a curse. This withdrawal had also, at school and much later, led to his being called a prig, a prude, a puritan, even a 'weirdo'. He did not greatly mind such treatment, or even being lonely and secluded – but he found himself at times mysteriously frightened. He sometimes had a sensation of being followed. He even pictured himself as a criminal, perhaps a terrorist, who had been reformed, but knew that his erstwhile comrades were on his track and would certainly kill him. He seemed to remember that when a child he had played some sort of game like that with Randall. Later, when he was over twenty, he had another very remarkable and puzzling experience; but of these matters he did not speak to anybody. Edward's father had never recovered from Randall's death, Randall had always been his favourite. Randall was merry, Edward was taciturn. With surprise, moreover, he now found himself the master of Hatting Hall. This discovery which in itself might have cheered him up, filled him at first with alarm, though later he found that things 'went on much as before'. The staff, the 'people' as his father had called them, the butler and gardener Montague, his wife the maid Millie, continued as before, perhaps almost as before, since Edward's father (Gerald Lannion) had been more self-assertive and explicit than the kinder and vaguer 'young master'. Edward continued to stay much of the week in London, abandoning the publishing house, attempting another historical novel and trying to write poetry.

Then, when he was settling down and assuming that now nothing would ever happen, there was a change, a bright light, a fresh wind. He had a little earlier, partly in connection with his father's death, made some sort of mild relationship or 'reconciliation' with the inhabitants of Penndean. At that time these had consisted only of an elderly man, known as 'Uncle Tim', somehow connected with India, and a younger but over forty man, his nephew called Benet. Meeting him in the village, Benet had asked Edward if he would come to lunch. Edward, just returning to London, had said sorry, he could not. A little later Edward, again in London, learnt from Montague by telephone that the 'old man' of Penndean had just died. Edward felt sorry, he realised now that he would have liked to have met him. He sent a letter of condolence to Benet. A little later still he accepted an invitation to lunch. He liked Benet, and was able to glimpse the gardens of the house not visible from the road, but he did not go on with Benet's friends and refused a subsequent visit. The time was now late autumn. Invited yet again a little later he accepted, finding that the party consisted of Benet, the local Rector on visit, a handsome middle-aged woman with a great deal of glossy brown hair (Edward recognised her from the last occasion), another good-looking woman evidently 'from Canada', and her daughters, two pretty young girls, one nineteen, one twenty-one, one called Rosalind, the other Marian. Benet explained to Edward that the girls' surname was that of the (now dead) father, Berran, while the mother, subsequently married to a Canadian whom she later left, was called Ada Fox, that the girls had been to, and now left, a girls' boarding school, and that they had all rented a cottage in Lipcot for holidays. During lunch the girls reminded Edward that they had met him more than once in the street when they were inhabiting their cottage. Ada, sitting next to Edward, told him that the girls had just completed a trip with her to Scotland, after which she would return to Canada leaving them with the new flat in London to amuse and educate themselves. 'London is itself an education,' she said, and Edward, sitting next to Marian on his other side, nodded sagely.

Contrary to his expectations Edward did not see very much of the girls even after the delayed departure of their mother shortly before Christmas, after which the girls went to Paris, returning to London and reappearing in early spring in Lipcot and again meeting Edward in the street, when they told him they had again rented the same cottage. After that – well, after that – the girls now staying o

at their cottage wanted to play tennis. Edward hastily refurbished the tennis court at Hatting. The girls wanted to ride. Edward did not ride, but he arranged for them to have ponies. Edward did not like long walks, but the girls did and they all went on long walks and Edward read the map. The girls wanted a swimming pool and Edward told Benet that there must be a swimming pool. The girls teased Edward and they made fun of him, they called him solemn. They were often with Benet and with Benet's friends, some of whom Edward began to tolerate. In all this time however they had not set foot in Hatting Hall. At last Edward, who was absolutely averse to entertaining, noticed the now continual hints, and gave a lunch party. Indeed it took Edward himself some time before he became thoroughly aware of what was going on, what it was all about, that he was falling madly in love with Marian, who was madly in love with him. Only later did he discover that everyone at Penndean, and at Hatting, was 'in on it', not of course excluding the inhabitants of the village who were taking bets in the pub.

How had it all so gently, so quietly, so inevitably come about? *Can* I be happy, Edward wondered to himself, can my dark soul see the light at last? There he was now, early in the morning, sitting upright at his desk on the first-floor drawing room of his house in Notting Hill. He was breathing deeply and expelling his breath in long gasps. He could feel his heart hitting his ribs violently. He put his hand to his chest, the palm of his hand feeling the force of the blows. He sat there quietly, silently. Tomorrow he was to be married in the little fourteenth-century church upon the hill near Hatting Hall.

Suddenly something terrible and unexpected occurred. The window pane had cracked and fallen inward, showering the carpet with little diamonds of broken glass. The sound of the report seemed to come a second later. A pistol shot? He leapt to his feet, crying out, as he remembered later. An assault, an attempted assassination, a nearby bomb? Then he thought, someone has thrown a stone through the window. He stepped quickly across, grinding the glass under foot, and looking down into the street. He could see no one. He thought of rushing down but decided not to. He turned back into the room and began to pick up the gleaming fragments of glass, looking about him as he did so, at first putting them into his pocket then into the waste paper basket. Yes, it was a stone. He picked up the stone and held it, then dusted it with his other hand to remove the specks of glass. He put the stone carefully upon the mantelpiece. After that he drove in his beautiful red car to Hatting Hall.

On the afternoon of the same day Benet was, or had been, busy making arrangements for the evening dinner party. Arrangements for tomorrow's wedding were, so far as he knew, complete. He had discussed every detail with the Rector, Oliver Caxton. The wedding was to be at twelve o'clock. The service would be the usual Anglican wedding service. The church was normally visited by the Rector who was in charge of other parishes, once or twice a month, and on special occasions such as weddings, funerals, Christmas, and Easter. Curates just now were hard to come by. The congregation on ordinary occasions (Sunday and matins only) consisted sometimes and at most of Benet, Benet's visitors, Clun the Penndean gardener, his daughter Sylvia, three or four women from the village, and in summer perhaps two or three tourists. Uncle Tim, Benet's late uncle, had regularly read the lessons. Benet also used to read the lessons. Now Clun sometimes did. Benet had now given up except for special occasions. Sometimes in winter the Rector conducted the service in the otherwise empty church. Of course the Barnells were Quakers, but there was no Meeting near Lipcot, and the plain Anglican service contained, in accord with wishes from Penndean, periods of silence. There was present no piano. Benet did not object. As for the two beautiful young people, the radiant hero and heroine of the scene, they had at first demanded a scrappy civil wedding, but had been overruled by the bride's mother, Ada Fox, who unfortunately was unable to be present, and by Mildred Smalden,

holy lady, friend of the Barnells. Benet had wanted a 'proper show', as he thought Uncle Tim would have wished. How very sad that Uncle Tim was no longer with them. Concerning the number of the guests, the young pair had prevailed, there were to be *very few*. There was to be champagne and various wines (Benet did not like champagne and all sorts of delicious things to eat, sitting, standing, or walking about, at Penn after the wedding, immediately after which the two children (Mildred called them) were to depart for an undisclosed destination in Edward's Jaguar.

A small number of wedding guests were to be present at Benet's dinner table that final evening. Benet knew Ada well and her daughters very well, having become recently something of a ward to the girls and thus a convenience to their flighty mother. Marian, who loved 'creating' things, was spending the last day and night in London completing some secret 'surprise', and would drive down very early on the wedding day. Edward, in spite of protests, was to return to Hatting on the morning before. Rosalind, who was of course to be her sister's bridesmaid, was also coming 'on the day before', with Mildred. Two other guests, friends of Benet, were Owen Silbery, an eccentric painter and a young man who worked in a bookshop called Thomas Abelson, a friend of Owen, nicknamed 'Tuan' by Uncle Tim, and likely to arrive by taxi from the distant railway station. Rosalind and Mildred were to stay in the house, in the 'old part', usually closed up, supposed to be haunted, bitterly cold in winter, but now delightfully opened up and prettified by the maid Sylvia. Tuan was to stay in the guest bedroom in the main part. Owen stayed in the village pub, as he always insisted on doing, being a special friend of the proprietor. The pub was called the Sea Kings, with a sign of a pirate ship painted by Owen. In fact Lipcot was not near the sea, but the pub had borne that name for a long time, centuries it was said.

Benet was alone in the library. In the library there was silence, as of a huge motionless presence. The books, many of them, were Uncle Tim's books, they had been in their places since Benet was young. Many of the books still glowed, faded a fainter red, a fainter blue, the gold of their titles dusted away, emanating a comforting noiseless breath. Most of Benet's books were still in London. (Why still? Were they planning a sortie to take over the library at Penndean?) Benet's uncle had died leaving Benet so suddenly in absolute possession, here where from childhood he had lived more as a guest or pilgrim, a seeker for healing. But even when Uncle Tim was away in India some pure profound gentleness and magic remained. The books did not know yet, but they would *find out* that Tim had gone, really gone away for ever.

Benet's father, now long deceased, had been Uncle Tim's younger brother. Benet's paternal grandfather, a lover of the classics, had named his elder son Timaeus and his younger son Patroclus, appellations which were promptly altered by their owners to Tim and Pat. Benet (who narrowly escaped being called Achilles) called his father Pat and of course his mother Mat. Benet's full name was William (after William Penn) Benet Barnell. He had early suppressed the William and of course rejected Ben. The origin of Benet, passionately clung to by its owner, was not clear, except that it had something to do with his mother and with Spain. Pat always claimed that he, Pat, was unlucky and 'piled down'. However he made what seemed to be a sensible, even happy, marriage with sweet Eleanor Morton, daughter of an amicable solicitor, and training to be a singer. However Pat did not like music. He was also, as Benet soon found out, dissatisfied with his son. He wanted a daughter. He once asked Benet if he would like a little sister, to which Benet shouted 'No, no, no!' In any case no more

children came. Pat's ill luck continued. Eleanor died quite early on in a car crash, Pat driving. Pat himself, a dedicated smoker, died of lung cancer, by which time Benet had grown up, had left the university, where he had studied philosophy, and followed his father into the Civil Service. Benet had loved his parents and regretted later that he had not revealed his love more openly. Remorse.

Uncle Tim (he did not marry, neither did Benet) was for Benet, and indeed for others, a romantic and somewhat mysterious figure. He had been involved in 'various wars'. He had left the university without a degree but had been (this much was known) a talented mathematician. He became, using that talent no doubt, an engineer, and somehow thereby came in contact with India, where he then spent much of his life, returning at intervals to England. During his absences Pat 'took over' Penndean, but more often, to Benet's chagrin, rented it.

Nobody quite discovered what Uncle Tim did in India, after his war, except perhaps building bridges. Perhaps they simply did not ask him; even Benet, who adored him, did not ask him until late in his life when Tim gave him what sometimes seemed to Benet strange answers. Pat used to say that his brother had 'gone native'. Uncle Tim more than once asked his family to visit India and to see the Himalayas. Benet longed to go but Pat always refused. Late and at last Uncle Tim started spending longer and longer times at Penndean and then settled down there altogether.

Thinking of the books, Benet recalled how Tim, who, though no scholar, loved reading, used to utter, again and again, his 'quotes' or 'sayings', 'Tim's tags', lines out of Shakespeare, sentences out of Conrad, Dostoevsky, Dickens, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Wind in the Willows*, Kipling, Robert Louis Stevenson. 'Another step Mr Hands, and I'll blow your brains out.' When he was dying Benet heard him murmur, 'Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them.' Of course Benet had had his classical education, but had inclined to the philosophical side. His sense of the Greeks had come to him later, distantly from memories of his grandfather, and from Tim and Tim's books. In a strange way the books, which were indeed not all 'classics', were somehow deeply soaked in some spirit of the Ancient World. Benet had sometimes tried to analyse this atmosphere, this rich aroma, this trembling resonance, this *wisdom*, but it eluded him, leaving him simply to bask within it. He recalled now, something which Tim liked to picture again and again, the moment when Caesar, angry with the Tenth Legion, addressed them as *Quirites* (citizens), not as *Commilitones* (fellow soldiers)! Benet even as a child, instantly shared the grief of those devoted men as they hung their heads. There were some magic things which these books and utterances had in common. A favourite inner circle, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, *Lord Jim*, *Treasure Island*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Kim*. Tim also liked Kafka which might have seemed strange, but on reflection Benet understood that too.

Pat used to say of Tim that he remained 'absolutely childish'. This was perhaps an aspect of his character which Benet saw rather as a heroic romanticism. Some years ago Benet, accidentally talking to an Indian diplomat at a Whitehall party, mentioned casually that his uncle worked in India, and was amazed to find that the diplomat had heard of Tim. He said of him, 'Doty, crazy, but brave as a lion.' Benet was sorry that he had then lost track of the diplomat, not having even discovered his name. Tim's books were indeed adventure stories, as Benet saw them in his own childhood; but as he grew up he saw more in his uncle and his tales, a sort of warm ringing undertone, a gentle compassionate light or sound, an awareness of the tragedy of human life, good and evil, crime and punishment, *remorse*. Tim must have seen terrible things in India; perhaps done terrible things, which he might or might not have regretted, but which, in the sunny peace of Penndean, were never spoken of. This strange sound was then a sort of silent pain, which he rehearsed again and again among his broken heroes – Macbeth with bloody hands, Othello having killed his wife, the bizarre devastation of Kafka's people, T.E. Lawrence, Jim jumping from the ship. For consolation, *Kim* and the *Lam*

Another thing which Pat said of Tim was that he was covered all over in sugar. Benet (then adult) objected. It was not sugar. It was a sort of faintly beautiful profound grief. Alice listening to the Mock Turtle weeping. When Tim was dying he was reading *Through the Looking Glass*. This was a strange point at which Benet often paused. Well, why not? Was not Lewis Carroll a mathematician? Tim did not display his mathematical mind to his family, though he did once try to explain Gödel's theorem to Benet. Building bridges? Pat, and Benet when young, thought of Tim's Indian activities as those of some simple labourer; then, after he had (as Pat said) 'gone native', as a descent into some sort of occult necromancy. A regular joke was to ask Tim if he could perform the Indian Rope Trick, the laugh when Tim took this seriously and started to explain. To Benet alone, in later years, Tim, now old (confused some said, but Benet never accepted that) spoke of the magic of mathematics, of calculating prodigies, of the deep reality of human intelligence, beyond words and outside logic. Many people in India, he said, could easily master contrivances beyond the comprehension of the brightest Cambridge scholars. It only dawned later on Benet why Tim tenderly avoided playing chess.

Leaving at last the silence of the library, Benet moved towards the drawing room, pausing in the hall to survey himself in the long mirror. The hall was large and rather dim, deprived of the sunlight of the summer afternoon; it contained an old Sheraton writing desk, never opened, and was the only part of the house to have parquet flooring. The mirror was also dim, a little smudged at the sides. Ever since childhood Benet had wondered what he looked like. This wonder was connected with 'Who am I?' 'What am I?' Benet had discovered quite early in life that Uncle Tim shared this lack of identity. They sometimes discussed it. Does everyone feel like this, Benet had wondered. Tim had said that no, not everyone did, adding that it was a gift, an intimation of a deep truth: 'I am nothing.' This was, he seemed, one of those states, achieved usually by many years of intense meditation, which may be offered by the gods 'free of charge' to certain individuals. Benet laughed at this joke. Later he took the matter more seriously, wondering whether this 'gift' were not more likely to precede a quiet descent into insanity. Later still he decided that, after all, 'I am nothing', far from indicating a selfless mystical condition, was a vague state of self-satisfaction experienced at some time by almost anyone. Yet more profoundly he wondered whether Tim, thought by so many of his friends and acquaintances to be 'rather dotty', were not really a receiver of presents from the gods.

Benet now, looking at himself in the mirror, experienced a usual surprise. He still looked so remarkably young. He also, when thus caught, always seemed to have his mouth open. (Did he always go about with his mouth open?) He was of medium height, about the height of Uncle Tim, though shorter than Pat. He was lean and slender, always neatly dressed even when gardening. He had thick ruffled hair, copious red and brown, flowing down over his ears, without any streaks of grey, a broad calm face, a high bland brow, dark blue eyes, a neat straight nose, full lips which often smiled though their owner was now often sad. Ever since he had left the Civil Service he had had troubles. Tim of course – his unsuccessful return to philosophy – his having never been in love – was that a trouble? What am I to do next? Of course this business with the girls had been a happy distraction.

The drawing room was a big room with glass doors opening on to the main lawn. There were bookshelves here too, in low wooden bookcases, all sorts of books, atlases, cookery books, guides to English Counties, to London, France, Italy, big books on famous painters, books about games, books about animals, trees, the sea, books about machines, about science and scientists, books about poetry, about music. Of these books Benet had read only a few. Benet's numerous philosophy books were beyond the study, a room which opened off the drawing room. The drawing room floor was covered with a huge dark, dark-blue almost black, now very worn, carpet covered with minute trees and flowers and

birds and animals, brought back from India by Uncle Tim when he was still young. There was a fire open fireplace surrounded by a heavy curly mahogany Victorian surround, numerous pictures on the walls, some of Quaker ancestors with dogs, more recent water colours with various views of the house and of the river Lip. Uncle Tim had donated some Indian miniatures, said to be very valuable. There were numerous old armchairs with embroidered cushions, and a (not valuable) piano introduced into the house by Benet's sweet short-lived lovely mother, Eleanor Morton. Benet recalled the happy childhood evenings when she played and they all sang. She soon set her opera music aside. Tim and Pat and indeed Benet preferred '*Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair*', and (a song which brought tears to Tim's eyes) '*The Road to Mandalay*'.

Benet surveyed the room, re-arranging upon the mantelpiece, which still subsisted inside the Victorian surround, the netsuke which Owen Silbery had given him long ago; then he went through into his study. This also looked upon the terrace, and the immense lawn which had been dotted here and there with various tall and bushy trees by Benet's great-grandfather and other far more remote ancestors, even beyond the Quaker time. A little farther off there was a small copse of dainty birch trees, and beyond that the dark forest of huge Wellingtonias. Somewhere else, beyond the fountain and the rose garden, Benet had vaguely dreamed of erecting some little Grecian building with marble columns; within which, the girls had insisted, there might one day be a warm indoor all-the-year-round swimming pool! Had the girls convinced him at last about that pool? Smiling, he opened the window which Sylvia was always shutting, and let in a thick warm pressure of air, filled with the odours of flowers and mown grass and mingled with the music of blackbirds, thrushes, larks, finches, sparrows, robins, collared doves and a distant cuckoo. He thought for a delicious moment how lucky he was – then he turned to worrying about his guests, about tomorrow and the wedding.

After that, and when he was about to leave the room, he looked down at what he had been writing earlier in the day, not upon a typewriter or word-processor, machines which he despised, but upon the inky foolscap pages of his book on Heidegger. Benet had intended for some time to write, or attempt to write, that book. However, he found it difficult to plan the work and to decide what he really, in his heart, *thought* of his huge ambiguous subject. He had made a great many notes, with question marks in fact his book so far consisted largely of notes, unconnected and unexplained. Benet found himself accusing himself of being fascinated by a certain dangerous aspect of Heidegger which was in fact deeply buried in his own, Benet's, soul that he could not scrutinise or even dislodge it. Of course Benet admired *Sein und Zeit* and loved (perhaps *this* was the point) the attractive image of Man as the *Shepherd of Being*. Later Heidegger he detested; Heidegger's sickening acceptance of Hitler, his misuse of the Pre-Socratic Greeks, his betrayal of his early religious picture of man opening the door to Being, his transformation of Being into a cruel ruthless fate, his appropriation of poor innocent Hölderlin, his poeticisation of philosophy, discarding truth, goodness, freedom, love, the individual everything which the philosopher ought to explain and defend. Or was the era of the philosopher nearly over, as Pat used mockingly to tell him? Benet wished now that he had talked more with Uncle Tim about the Indian gods. How close had Tim come to those gods whom Benet himself knew only through Kipling and Tim's rambling talk? Was it too late to learn the Hindu scriptures – was it *all* too late? A big bronze dancing Shiva, dancing within his ring of fire, forever destroying the cosmos and re-creating it, had stood upon Tim's desk, which now was Benet's desk. I wish I had started all this up earlier, thought Benet, I kept putting it off until I retired, I should have *held on* to philosophy, instead of going into the Civil Service, as Pat insisted. Of course Benet had never believed in God, but he had somehow believed in Christ, and in Plato, a Platonic Christ, an icon of goodness. Pat had not believed

in God, indeed he hated Christianity. Eleanor had been a silent Christian. He recalled now how he had intuited her Christianity. Of course he never thought of such things then. And now – well, Heidegger the greatest philosopher of the century? But what was Benet thinking somehow so deeply about when he turned his mind to that remarkable thinker? It seemed to him that after all his philosophical reflections, there was a sound which rang some deeper tremor of the imagination. Perhaps it was his more profound desire to lay out before him the *history* of Heidegger's *inner life*, the nature of his *sufferings*: the man who began as a divinity student and became a follower of Hitler, and then – Remorse? Was that the very concept which sounded the bell? What had Heidegger said to Hannah Arendt after it was all over? What had *that* pain been like – what had those millions of pains been like? A huge tormented life? Was Heidegger really Anti-Christ? 'The darkness, oh the darkness' Benet said aloud.

He rose and left the study and crossed the great carpet to the glass doors and walked out onto the lawn. Here he listened again to the sounds, which he had failed to hear when he was so strangely struggling with that mysterious demon. The sweet sounds of the garden birds, and now, coming from the river, the geese flying overhead uttering their strange tragic gabble. Damn it, he said to himself, I am supposed to be *organising* this evening, *and* tomorrow! Oh I wish it was over and all well. Of course nothing will go wrong, they themselves will orchestrate everything!

Benet was now checking the dining table. The dining room, adjacent to the hall and the front door looked upon the drive where, emerging from among the trees, cars were soon to be expected. Sylvia who loved Benet dearly, almost as much as she had loved Uncle Tim, smiled tolerantly across the table as he intently pushed things about, then she quietly left the room. The *placement* was proving difficult as usual. There were few guests, only from the 'inner circle'. Strictly Benet should have Mildred on his right and Rosalind on his left. However, actually, Benet wanted to have Edward on his right, he wanted very much to talk to Edward, he felt that Edward needed *protecting* and he wanted to be *fatherly* to him. So then Edward would have Mildred on his right. Then there were Owen, and Tuan *alias* Thomas Abelson. But would that do? Owen was always difficult and should not sit next to Mildred whom he knew so well, nor to Rosalind whom he sometimes reduced to tears. Was Tuan, so called by Tim after Conrad's novel, a solution? Hardly, put anywhere he was rather inarticulate. Suppose Benet took him on, upon his left? Benet was shy of this, and would feel bound to talk a lot to him, thus reducing his time to Edward. At last he decided to keep Rosalind on his left, Owen between Rosalind and Tuan, and Tuan thus next to Mildred, who was next to Edward who was next to Benet. Rosalind would have to look after herself, and Tuan would be at the far end of the table facing Benet. He must remember to put out the cards. It was a small table where they would all hear each other, of course it could be lengthened by leaves. Benet reflected upon how rarely he had done that since Tim died. A moth appeared and fluttered quietly across the room. Benet blew it gently away, not wanting to damage its frail antlers. Sylvia was the one who made war on moths.

A small dark car appeared out of the wood and slewed round noisily upon the beautifully raked and weeded gravel. Benet hurried out into the hall and opened the front door. Mildred and Rosalind emerged, waved, then began to unpack various boxes. Benet went forward to help. He had known Rosalind and her sister and their mother, on and off, through summers when they had come back to the cottage in Lipcot. Rosalind had grown up almost as beautiful as Marian, and, following Shakespeare's heroine, persistently dressed as a boy, not in jeans, but as a real trousered well-dressed boy, even with a waistcoat. Her bright straight golden hair, falling beyond her shoulders, was allowed as boys'

Mildred was an old friend. Long ago Benet, or so he claimed, had dissuaded her from becoming a nun. Later, for a while, she was a member of the Salvation Army. However, she remained nun-like. Owen, who had known her longer than Benet, often painted her, spoke of her pale wistful pre-Raphaelite look. She wore long dark brown dresses and her long thick dark brown hair was supported by black tortoiseshell combs. She lived austere in a small flat, worked as a dress-maker, caring for the poor, visiting the sick, assisting the homeless. She also frequented the British Museum; 'her gods are there' Owen used to say. Apparently or perhaps she had some sort of small pension. She had, some time ago, entered the lives of Owen and Benet through Uncle Tim, who said he had found her wandering late one night near Saint Paul's. What Tim, or Mildred, was doing there was never made clear. She spoke in what some called an 'aristocratic voice'. Others said 'like a head mistress'. She too, through Benet, had met the girls some time ago. She quite often went to church and was prepared to be called 'some sort of Christian'.

'Hello, Sylvia,' said Mildred, ignoring Benet, to the pretty girl who had run out too.

Benet kissed Rosalind, Rosalind hugged Sylvia, talking they moved toward the house carrying their bags and boxes. At that moment, out of the trees, more than ever like the Green Man, silent Clun the gardener, Sylvia's father, with a gesture, got into the car and drove it away.

Rosalind went upstairs with Sylvia, and into the rarely used 'old part' of the house. Mildred had 'her own room' there too, though often when visiting she preferred to stay in the inn. Now she followed Benet into the drawing room. They sat down on the sofa and looked at each other. Benet reached out and took her hand.

'Now look here,' said Mildred (a well-known formula), withdrawing her hand, 'how are you going to manage? Will you be able to feed them all after the wedding? Half the village will want to join in, you know. I've hired this car, by the way, Rosalind still hasn't got one.'

Benet, who had not thought too clearly about all this, said, 'Oh, it will be all right. They'll stay at the gate. Only the three or four old faithfuls may decide to come into the church. And afterwards it's just our lot up at Penn.'

'Hmmm. How many guests have you invited to the wedding, not just tonight of course -? Is Ann coming tonight, by the way?'

'No, she is coming tomorrow. Very few guests. *They* wanted a three-minute wedding with the Registrar!'

'I suppose Ada ditched that. But why isn't she coming?'

'Marian says she has just found another man! I don't know. My God, Mildred, I shall be so glad when this is over!'

'Nonsense, you'll enjoy it. Anyway I will. Any friends of Edward's?'

'No. He doesn't want any. He says he hasn't got any!'

'Typical Edward. I'm so glad he is marrying at last, such hawkish looks, but he is pure in heart. So Marian is coming down very early tomorrow morning, upon the *day itself*! She always liked treats and surprises. That's typical too. Oh look!'

Rosalind, now wearing her bridesmaid's dress, had quietly entered the room carrying her bouquet.

When all were assembled and the parade to the dining room began, Benet was delayed by Rosalind (Had Edward got a best man? No, Edward had *not* got a best man!) Thus Mildred, entering the room

first, sat down in her frequent place on Benet's right, and thereafter seeing Edward, standing helplessly signalled him to her other side. Owen, who was longing to talk to Edward, at once sat down beside him, at the same time capturing, by gripping his sleeve, the timid wandering Tuan who was shy and often silent. Rosalind, then entering alone, placed herself on Benet's left, finding herself thus next to the harmless Tuan on the other side. Benet, who had just realised that he had forgotten his instructions, entered last, thus placed, silently cursing, between the two women. Before dinner Mildred and Rosalind had hoped for some music and singing, but Benet had quietly and hastily informed them that Edward would not like it.

The guests, now at table, knew each other in some cases very well, in other cases just fairly well. Mildred and Owen, both 'oddities', were close friends, by some deemed a 'strange couple'. Benet had met them years ago through Uncle Tim, who had discovered Owen in an exhibition of Indian pictures. Tuan was a later acquisition, allegedly 'picked up' by Uncle Tim in a train from Edinburgh. He was extremely slim, even thin, with a long neck and a dark complexion, straight black hair, dark brown eyes, a thin mouth and a shy smile. Tim called him (without any visible evidence) 'the Theology Student', and conjectured that he must have had some sort of awful shock in the past. In any case Tuan said little of his past and nothing of his family. He had been at Edinburgh University, even taught at a London university, and now worked in a bookshop. He had been devoted to Tim and shed many tears at his death. He was also now attached to Benet and to Owen Silbery. He was deemed not to be gay. Owen was a painter, in fact a distinguished and well-known painter. He announced himself sometimes as 'in the style of Goya', and moreover, it was said, painted horrific pornographic pictures which he sold secretly. He was in fact well known as a portrait painter, and one who could satisfy his clients. His pictures were bought at high prices. He was tall, becoming stout, but remained handsome, even 'dashing', a big head, a high and constantly lined brow, a large sturdy nose, watery pale blue eyes and thick lips, and long black straggling hair, said to be dyed. He could smile and laugh a lot and was much addicted to drink, only saved (it was said) by the attentions of the saintly Mildred.

'Are you thinking of opening your house to the public now?' Owen was saying to Edward. 'You thought of doing that, didn't you?'

'I didn't actually,' said Edward. 'My father mentioned it, but he never really wanted to. I certainly don't.'

'I don't blame you,' said Owen. 'After all you don't need the money, and showing the place would be a burden and a nuisance. Yes, I can see, absolutely a nightmare.'

'Quite.'

'Have you still got that Turner, the Pink One it was called?'

'Yes. How did you know about the Turner?'

'It was lent for the Turner exhibition. Your ancestors had very good taste. Of course I am not implying that you and your father lacked it.'

'That is just as well.'

'Of course you have the latest burglar alarms I assume. Are you writing a novel?'

'No. Why should I be writing a novel?'

'Everyone writes novels nowadays. Someone told me you were. I feel that you have much to write about.'

'And you are a painter.'

'Yes, I am a painter. One day soon I shall paint you.'

'How is your swimming pool getting on?' Mildred asked Benet.

‘Oh, it’s rather at a standstill, actually I’m still just planning it.’

‘~~All those marble columns? The girls are longing for it to be ready! Isn’t it good news about Ann~~
pity she isn’t here tonight.’

‘She’s coming tomorrow.’

‘It’s time they came back from France. It’s so sad that Lewen didn’t live to see –’

‘So you’re going into the Courtauld?’ Tuan was saying to Rosalind.

‘No, not yet anyway, I’m just taking a course –’

‘But you are a painter!’

‘I have tried painting, but I’ve given it up for the moment.’

‘You must feel so happy about Marian.’

‘Yes, but I’m rather worried about myself.’

‘What about?’

‘About tomorrow. I’ve never been a bridesmaid before and I’m afraid I shall fall or drop the
bouquet or start to cry.’

Sylvia had gone home. The sequence of her beautiful dishes was nearing its end. She never forgot that
Mildred was a vegetarian. The first dish was vegetarian anyway, consisting of salads of all kinds of
fresh green leaves with a cheese *soufflé*. From here Mildred went on to spinach and leek pie, the other
to a delicate leg of lamb. The pudding was of course summer pudding, but special. Bottles of Uncle
Tim’s claret were consumed. Mildred was not against this, if not taken in excess. They had now been
arguing for some time about politics, Owen dominating as usual.

‘What we need is a return to Marxism, early Marx of course, Marxism was created when Marx and
Engels saw the starving poor of Manchester. We’ve got to get rid of our vile, stupid, rapacious
bourgeois civilisation, capitalism must go, just look at it now, what a senseless government –’

‘I agree with you about the poor people,’ said Mildred, ‘and our unhappy leaders may be
difficulties, but we must hold on to our morals, we must civilise and spiritualise politics, and most
all we must develop a believable form of Christianity before it is too late.’

‘It is already too late. You are a disciple of Uncle Tim, you worship T.E. Lawrence, Simone Weil
worshipped him too, at least the poor girl never knew he was a liar and a cheat –’

‘He wasn’t,’ said Mildred, ‘he was cheated, he didn’t know that he would not be able to help the
Arabs –’

‘Can you believe a single word of what he said happened at Deraa?’

‘I believe it,’ said Benet. This was a touchstone often skirmished around.

‘It was a fantasy, he was after his own glory, then he spent the rest of his life punishing himself
and then he committed suicide –’

‘He didn’t commit suicide,’ said Benet, ‘it was an accident.’

Mildred said, ‘Of course there is such a thing as redemptive suffering, but –’

‘There is no redemptive suffering,’ said Owen, ‘only remorse – remorse is what is real – Uncle
Tim knew it all right – and your philosopher friend Heidegger, Benet, except of course he’s Anti-
Christ –’

‘He’s not my friend,’ said Benet. ‘I daresay he is Anti-Christ.’

‘You love him,’ said Owen. ‘You are sinking into his evil!’

Benet smiled.

Mildred said, 'I think it is time for a rapprochement of philosophy and theology, and Christians must learn from the religions of the east, and they must learn –'

'In that case,' said Owen, 'there will be only two world religions, your oriental Christianity, and Islam. Don't you agree, Tuan?'

'And Judaism,' said Tuan. 'I believe –'

'Judaism of course,' said Owen. 'Our future will be total destruction, Heraclitus was right, war is the king of all things, war is necessity, it brings everything about. Kafka was right too, we are in the Penal Colony, behind our rotten bourgeois civilisation is a world of indescribable pain and horror and sin which alone is real.'

'I'm glad you mention sin,' murmured Mildred.

'Is that what you really believe?' said Edward to Owen.

'He believes in romantic heroism and *discuter les idées générales avec les femmes supérieures*' said Benet.

'It isn't all play!' said Mildred, defending Owen.

'Well, I think we are now drunk enough,' said Benet, 'we must not go on to get cross! Let us now go out into the garden and breathe deeply and admire the marvels of nature. I suggest we rise and give our usual toast, and another very special toast as well.'

The diners were now rising and moving their chairs.

'First to dear Uncle Tim, whom we love and whose spirit is still with us.'

'Uncle Tim!' Glasses were raised and everyone was solemn. After which all remained standing, expectant, during a brief silence. 'And now let us all drink the health of our dear friend and neighbour Edward Lannion, and his absent bride, Marian Berran, who this time tomorrow will be Mrs Lannion. May these two lovely young people have long and happy lives, may they have happy children and may all of us here be privileged to share in their joy and goodness. Marian and Edward!'

'Marian and Edward!' During the toast, Edward, pale, almost alarmed, looking suddenly very young, having hesitated about sitting down, stood, first lowering his head, then lifting it, and looked about upon the company with an air of frightened gratitude. Benet now moved quickly in case Edward should feel that he must now make a speech.

'Come on now, all of you, out into the garden!'

They all crowded out into the garden, passing back from the dining room into the drawing room whose glass doors opened onto the paved terrace and the grass. There was a light on the terrace, revealing the brilliant colours of flowers in big mossy stone urns. Beyond was what at first seemed like darkness but was in a few moments seen to be starlight. The moon was not present, being elsewhere. But a dense light came to them from the innumerable crowding stars of the Milky Way. Upon the grass already damp with dew, they stopped at first, looking up with silent awe, then talking to each other in soft voices, gradually separating, never going too far away as if, though exalted, they were also afraid.

Owen, taking Tuan's arm, led the youth away from the house, past the scattering of bushy shrubs and past the dainty birch copse, towards the Wellingtonias. The great silent trees, faintly visible, were outlined against the starry sky whose crowded curtain reached down to the darkened horizon of the garden. The air was thick with moisture and the smell of dewy earth and the faint perfumes of leaves and flowers and the fresh breathing of the huge tall trees.

Owen led Tuan into a sudden darkness, a great soundless presence. The starry dome was taken from them and they moved upon a different carpet. Owen stopped, releasing Tuan's arm and taking

hold of his hand. He turned the boy gently to face him and sighed, now touching his head, his hair, drawing his fingers gently down over Tuan's brow, his nose and mouth. Things like this had happened before. Tuan, who did not share Owen's inclinations, but loved him, stood quietly dreamily smiling now leaning back against one of the trees. Owen kissed him.

Mildred and Rosalind had crossed the lawn in another direction towards the stone steps, now faintly visible, which led down to the rose garden. There was, now just visible, the lucid wet sound of a fountain, which they approached, and sat down upon the stone rim of the round pool into which the starlit water was murmuringly falling. Velvety bats passed noiselessly by, a distant owl fluted.

They dabbled their hands gratefully in the cool water. They spoke softly.

Mildred said, 'How moving – how happy Tim would be – Edward and Marian together – it's perfect –'

'Yes, yes, indeed –,' said Rosalind. 'Do you know, I think I foresaw it in a dream – they were the King and the Queen – I've just remembered the dream.'

'How beautiful! Marian kept looking about, then she found what she wanted suddenly so close. Could you think she really fixed on Edward long ago?'

'I think she did – or fate did. Of course when we were with Mama we didn't see much of Edward –'

'I think it's better she comes later on, you know what a fuss she always makes! Are you still determined not to marry? Of course I know it's a joke, and anyway you'll change your mind!'

'My mind is fixed on art history at present!'

Benet had firmly laid hold of Edward, seizing his sleeve, as they moved out onto the lawn, stopping just a little way away from the lights of the drawing room. Benet for a moment, and such strange moments sometimes came, felt the spirit of Uncle Tim descending upon him, *clothing* him as it were, and breathing his breath. Edward, pale and tall, loomed over him.

'Edward, if only Tim were here we would really be in heaven. Well, of course now we *are* in heaven anyway! I've longed for you to marry that girl. I didn't make any tiresome hints to either of you – I just prayed! You're a wonderful chap, she's a wonderful girl – forgive me for being slightly drunk –'

'I'm drunk too,' said Edward. 'I think the Grand Marnier was final.'

'Dear me, it's so late, I should have sent you all away long ago! I do hope you'll spend lots of time down here together, you could be in peace writing your historical novel –'

'I'm not writing a historical novel –'

'You do love Hatting Hall, don't you?'

'Yes I do – I increasingly do – and Penndean –'

'I hope you'll have lots of children, I hope you don't mind my saying so, a boy first of course –'

Edward sighed, then laughed as Benet seized hold of the collar of his coat.

Gradually the others came back to the terrace and stood looking up at the Milky Way where the stars were continually falling, tumbling and disappearing.

'It's like the end of the *Paradiso*,' said Tuan.

'You mean in Dante,' said Mildred.

'For us, it is not the end of the *Paradiso*,' said Benet, 'it is the beginning.'

They moved back into the house.

After that there was a lot of fussing about in the drawing room, making sure that everyone knew what they were to do tomorrow. They exclaimed about how few they were, and what a charming little

wedding it was going to be. The Rector was coming over early in the morning, otherwise Benet would have had to invite him to dinner! All the flowers had already been done by Sylvia, who had also arranged most of the eats and drinks. 'How dull we shall be when they've gone,' said Rosalind. 'Edward would not tell where they were going, but I guess it *must* be in France!' Benet was hustling them now through the drawing room and out into the hall. Rosalind and Mildred were to betake themselves to the old part of the house, where the ghosts were. Tuan was to sleep in a small guest room in the main house. Owen was to return to the Sea Kings where he had always stayed and had done so for far back in history. Edward at home was to sleep by himself for the last time! Jokes were being made. Rosalind was said to be falling asleep in the library. Mildred was trying to hustle them all like sheep out into the hall. There was hugging and kissing and holding of hands and picking up coats and wraps.

'Be careful, for heaven's sake,' Benet was saying to the drivers. 'Some police may be hanging around, we don't want you to spoil it all by being arrested!'

Rosalind had moved forward and opened the front door. The lights shone brightly upon the two faithful cars, patiently waiting, Edward's red Jaguar and Owen's blue Volvo. She stepped back again into the hall.

'You're stepping on something,' said Mildred, 'it looks like an envelope.'

Rosalind picked it up. 'Someone must have delivered it when we were talking –'

'We were always talking!' said Mildred.

'It must be for me,' said Benet, 'it's probably a circular or an overdue bill!'

Rosalind gave it to him. He looked at the envelope, tore it open, then pulled out a piece of paper and looked at it.

Benet sat down abruptly upon a chair. For a moment or two the others were talking to each other, then one by one they fell silent, looking at him.

Mildred spoke first. 'Are you all right, Benet? What's the matter?'

Benet had flushed violently, then become pale, his breath, coming in gasps, was loudly audible, his face, anguished, scarcely recognisable.

Mildred said, 'It's a fit, or a heart attack – are you all right?'

Rosalind said, 'It's the letter – someone is –'

They stood about him helplessly. Benet had now bent forward still holding the paper, his head in his hand, he seemed to be gasping for breath. Rosalind cried out, 'Oh he is ill – what is it, what is it?'

Benet stood up suddenly, staggering slightly, his mouth open. Then, as gathering himself, closed his mouth and looked at Edward, who was standing back near the drawing room door. Benet moved towards Edward, the others parting to let him pass. He turned slightly and said, 'Could you wait outside – somewhere else – please?' then to Edward, 'Please come into the drawing room.' Edward moved before him into the drawing room. Benet entered the room and closed the door behind him. The others stood helpless, then moved into the dining room where the remains of the dinner were still in place. Rosalind and Mildred sat down, holding hands. Tuan was standing, his hands at his throat. He undid his tie. Owen poured himself out a glass of wine.

Inside the drawing room, Benet went over to the large settee and sat down. Edward picked up a chair and sat down opposite to him. Edward was trembling. Benet said, 'The message is for you.' He handed Edward the piece of paper. Edward read it. It ran:

'Forgive me, I am very sorry, I cannot marry you. Marian.'

Benet was dragging off his tie and undoing the neck of his shirt. Turning away from Edward he uttered a stifled sob, then controlling his breathing he turned towards Edward again.

Edward was (as Benet recalled and even retailed later) made of steel. He had ceased to tremble. He was no longer pale, but somewhat flushed. He sat silently, very still, frowning and looking down at the paper. Then he handed it back to Benet, and speaking in his ordinary voice, he said, 'So be it.' Then he said, 'We must put off the wedding guests. Is it too late to ring them?'

Benet, now more collected, said, 'That is her writing, isn't it? It could be a hoax –'

'It is her writing – rather hasty – but yes, hers.'

'Perhaps she has been kidnapped, it may be – oh –'

'It is her writing. Anyway now we must tell the others. I'll go and fetch them.'

Edward marched to the door, opened it, and called out 'Come in here, please' to the group in the dining room. They hurried forward and followed Edward back into the drawing room. Edward removing the chair he had been sitting on, sat down beside Benet. He said, 'Please sit down.' They sat down. Mildred began to say something, then fell silent. Edward said 'This letter has come. I shall read it.' He read it out, then held it out to Owen who passed it round.

Rosalind sobbed, Mildred moaned, Tuan hid his face, Owen looked grim. He said, 'Is it her writing?'

'Yes.'

'Perhaps written under duress?'

'Perhaps, but I do not think so,' said Edward. 'Anyway, our problem now is to cancel tomorrow's that is today's, engagements.'

'Who brought the message,' said Owen, 'and when? How long has it been here?'

'That could have been anyone at any time,' said Edward.

'Could it have been *her*? Well, I suppose she wouldn't have – someone might have seen her. But do you know anyone?'

'No. No one. Now please –'

'But *where is she*?' said Mildred. 'We must find her, she might have had an accident and become deranged or something – when did you last see her?'

'Quite recently, I –'

'Let us at least ring her telephone number – she may have changed her mind or –'

'Try if you like, but it will be useless.'

Mildred ran to the telephone and rang the familiar number, but there was no reply.

'Nothing on the envelope?' said Owen. 'No?'

Benet watching Edward was amazed by his coolness, indeed his coldness. He is just preventing himself from breaking down, he thought. Steel, yes, *steel*. He said, 'Edward, did you expect this?'

'No.' He added, 'She means what she said, and that is all.'

'You're *sure* it's her writing?' said Owen.

'Yes. Look.'

It was passed around. Tuan restored it to Edward, who passed it back to Benet. 'You keep it, please.'

'How *can* she,' said Mildred. 'Surely she has had some fit, she has given way under the strain, we have all tried her too much, we must *find* her, *go* to her, – Edward, listen, you must *forgive* her, I see it all, it's all our fault, it's having the grand wedding, in a little while she'll marry you quietly in the Register Office. *Please* don't leave her just for this –'

Edward stood up. 'Of course I shall drive to London now, and yes I have the keys of her flat.'

shall come straight back before six. After six will you please telephone all the guests. I think you have a list.'

Edward made rapidly for the door. Benet, catching him up as he was getting into the Jaguar, seized Edward's arm, then his hand. Edward gripped Benet's hand for a moment, and Benet saw in the bright lights Edward's distorted face.

The sun, which had scarcely been away, returned to Lipcot, the birds who had scarcely been asleep were all singing together. The huge sky was radiant with its empty blue light. Benet sat up and thought what a lovely day for a wedding! Then a black veil fell upon him and he could scarcely breathe. He moaned, bowing his head. He had been lying upon the sofa. How *could* he have been asleep, he had no *right* to sleep, he had thought that sleep was now impossible.

He sat up and looked around as if for his clothes, then found that they were still on. He looked at his watch, it was six o'clock. He got up, still quietly moaning. He could hear that other inhabitants of the house were up already. He went out into the hall.

Mildred was hurrying down the stairs. 'Benet, what can we do, what can we say – I still think –'
'We must ring up all the guests and say it's off, that's all. I've still got the message –'
'But we don't know what has happened, what has *really* happened, she may suddenly turn up and –'

'We must *ring up* –'
'That note was just a protective cry when she realised she'd be married, I could feel like that myself, she may come running back, she may even suddenly turn up here, we don't have to say it's all over –'

'Mildred, return to *reality*, we can't make up stories, we can only give them the facts, we owe it to Edward –'

'Exactly, we owe it to Edward, we don't know whether it's the end of the world, oh can't you see –'
'I think that's his car now.'

Benet ran towards the door followed by Mildred. He passed Tuan standing in the doorway of the dining room. He opened the front door which he had deliberately left unlocked. The door opened to the pale blue radiant sky making a halo round the tall figure on the doorstep. Edward came in.

Mildred said over Benet's shoulder, 'Oh Edward, I've rung her flat. There's no reply, of course you have too, we don't really know what's happened, we don't know what to say, do we –'

Ignoring Mildred, Edward, closing the front door behind him, said to Benet, 'I've got my list here. I expect you have yours. It's a very short list. Now it is after six, I think that's early enough to start ringing round. Could you do the talking please?'

'Yes, yes,' said Benet, 'I imagine you've already tried –'
'Of course.'

Benet led the way back into the drawing room.

'We *must find her*,' said Mildred to Edward, 'she may have terribly regretted that note, she may now be simply *afraid* to say so, *afraid* to come to you – or she may intend to do something awful –'

'Like throwing herself into the Thames. Yes.'

Mildred, who never got on very well with Edward, stepped back, putting her hand to her mouth.

Meanwhile Benet had already reached one of the guests by telephone, a former college friend Edward, and was telling him that the wedding was cancelled. Why? Well, he was not sure – unfortunately it was just not on – postponed, yes perhaps – no, Edward wasn't at Hatting he was here at Penndean – 'I don't know whether Edward would like to have a word –'

Edward, grimacing with exasperation shook his head violently.

'Well, he's not available just now actually – I expect later – yes, yes – I'm so sorry we've had to postpone –' Benet put the phone down. 'Sorry, Edward – if it's going to be like this –'

'I'm going back to London,' said Edward. 'Here's my list. No, keep the message. You can do what you like.'

'Should we alert the police? And there's her mother, only Rosalind doesn't know where she is now –'

Edward strode across the room and across the hall. He banged the front door behind him. Benet prevented Mildred from following him. When he reached the door the car was already vanishing.

'Mildred dear, do sit down, do lie down on the sofa, do, go and lie down *somewhere*, please – I'm just going to ring the Rector.'

Upstairs Rosalind, who had been awake for some time, was up and dressed and sitting on her bed. She was looking at her bridesmaid's dress, laid over a chair, and her bouquet of flowers, which Clu had made up for her so carefully and placed in a jug. Tears were slowly moving down her hot cheeks. She closed her eyes and lowered her head and wailed silently. Where was Marian, oh where, *where*?

Not far away, in the Sea Kings pub, Owen Silbery was still asleep, dreaming that he was sitting at a table in a candlelit room alone with Caravaggio.

The wedding had been arranged for twelve o'clock, but in the bright sunshine some villagers had begun to assemble much earlier. The Rector, Oliver Caxton, alerted early by Benet, had sent out one of his older choristers (there was to be a little choir) to inform these outsiders that the wedding was on. When Caxton, later, came down to address them, they pretended not to believe him. At any rate they had come for a show, and felt sure that there would, somehow or other, be one. They were in fact right since Benet had been unable to reach all the invited guests by telephone. He had, for instance, not been able to warn Anna Dunarven. In any case he and Mildred had agreed they and the others would be on guard to accost any persons who attempted to enter the church under the impression of attending a marriage. After all, various friends of Marian, whom she had invited but forgotten to mention, might have decided to turn up. 'The others' officially in fact comprised only Benet, Mildred, Rosalind, and Tuan. Owen, whom they reached at last, had said he would come along later. Mildred said that was just as well. Edward was an unknown quantity. Would he come back again? Telephone calls were in vain. They had decided to set out for the church soon after nine.

The enormity of the outrage, or rather the tragedy, seemed in daylight even greater. Why didn't she say it earlier, they kept on repeating. It was so terribly cruel to spring it on him like that. Though Mildred said, at least it needed enormous courage to do it at the last moment. The sealed envelope and the messenger remained mysterious. Had *Marian herself* brought the message, dropping it in quiet while they were all shouting and laughing over dinner? The thought of this, the picture of Marian standing in silence outside, crying perhaps, and wondering whether she should leave the terrible message, or take it away or destroy it, was heartrending. It was, it was agreed, equally likely that it would

delivered by someone else – someone who *knew* – or else some hired person, working for some official firm, arriving in the dark, told not to knock? Over and over they made themselves wonder if were a vile joke, a hoax – but then, it was agreed, the writing was certainly Marian's. Poor Edward brave Edward, they kept on saying, and wondering whether after all Marian would come rushing back to him and he would take her in his arms. That would be best, wonderful. Perhaps when the time of the wedding came, the pair would suddenly appear together smiling. Mildred kept wishing and dreaming this. 'And we shall forgive them instantly.' At any rate Edward has not cursed her. A reconciliation later on, or indeed soon, was not at all impossible – and then they might look back upon their present emotions with amused relief. In fact, for each one of them, it was an agonising shock, from which would take them a long time to recover.

As they set off to the church in Benet's car, each pain was deep. They talked of hopes, but really without hopes. And in each of them there were very private griefs, losses, regrets, and disappointments, even feelings of shame. Benet was reflecting that really, profoundly, it was all his fault. He had imagined how wonderful that particular union would be, how absolutely made for each other they were. In fact this idea (obvious enough once thought of) had been put into Benet's head by Uncle Tim a long time ago. How sad Uncle Tim would be now! Or, another thought struck him, Uncle Tim had been alive now of course all would be well – or it would have much earlier been found to be impossible. I have messed it up, Benet thought, I hustled the two of them together, I was always arranging that *they* should pair off, *they* should go walking together, *they* should sit next to each other at dinner! It had all seemed to sail along! Other selfish personal worries now crowded into Benet's head. Suppose Edward were now to marry some awful girl who was hostile to Penndean, or else that Edward would never marry at all, sell Hatting, let it pass into the hands of vile cousins or strangers. Benet had no children. Marian and Rosalind had become his children, I saw them as so happy, I thought, he had pictured himself playing with *their children*! But I was pressing her into a marriage which she increasingly felt to be impossible – at any rate she had the courage to say so at the last moment. And this at least could seem a consoling thought. Mildred, restraining her tears, was thinking it's all our fault, we had not been deep and loving enough to see what the difficulties were, we had not *tried*, we had thought selfishly of our own satisfaction, really we didn't *know* Edward enough, we built up some solemn ideal Edward, and now it's somehow really Edward's fault, he should have seen it coming, he should have been brave enough to have it out with her. Rosalind, restraining her tears, was crying out in her heart, Oh Marian, Marian, what terrible pain you must be in, oh let me find you, let me come to you, oh I love you so much and you are so terribly wounded.

The church, which was dedicated to Saint Michael and All Angels, was strikingly situated upon a grassy hillock on the (from Penndean) far side of the river Lip, reached by an ancient stone bridge. Continuing from the bridge a little lane, just viable for cars, led up the hill, ceasing at the church gate. The church was built out of the local grey stone which often gleamed and sparkled. It had a sturdy square tower, and a statue of the saint, battered it was said by Cromwell's men, over the doorway. The interior was dark, the five windows, mostly decorated, being filled with Victorian stained glass. The east window presented the soldier saint triumphant, leaning upon his sword, the side windows Christ healing and teaching. The crucifixion was represented only by a wooden gilded image, nineteen

century, hanging in the chancel arch. The elaborately carved pulpit was Jacobean, made to glow by many hands which had stroked the saints who were portrayed upon it, the big solid fourteenth-century font was carved with interlaced arches with stars and crosses, there was a kneeling female figure in an alcove, and an alabaster reclining figure of a knight in armour, open-eyed and praying, with his dog at his feet. Tablets remained on the walls, but not in great numbers since some cleansing Rector at the beginning of the century had stripped away many of these. Two memorials, beautifully lettered in slate, commemorated the village victims of two wars, forty-five in the First World War (including a relative of Edward's) and four in the second. The handsome church had contained in its long past many more embellishments and trimmings, only time, warfare, thieves and loss of congregations had dimmed it.

They parked the car over the bridge, on the church side, deciding to walk the rest. Here Benet felt his guilt at having abandoned the attentions which had bound him to the people of the village. Beyond the church, close to it served by little lanes on the other side, was the small but serviceable eighteenth-century Rectory, opened for Oliver Caxton's regular visits. The sun was shining from an almost cloudless sky. Benet and his party neared the church gate.

A large crowd had now gathered outside the gate. Benet was thinking, why on earth have I brought Rosalind, she just insisted on coming, and now this mob will see her tears. The news has got round already! Oliver must have been busy. They look threatening, we shall have to elbow our way through. However, as they approached, there were some friendly and courteous faces, and Benet quickly led his party through. Only a few stared with amusement, most lowered their eyes, some bowed their heads and there were a few incoherent murmurs of sympathy. One youth (on holiday) who said loudly, 'Too bad, chum, she's bolted!' was hushed up by others. Rosalind was not crying. They mounted the little grassy path, Oliver Caxton, standing at the door of the church, ushered them into the cool dark interior. There was a strong scent of innumerable flowers. Mildred and Rosalind sat down near the front. After a moment or two Mildred pulled out one of the kneelers, finely embroidered long ago by the ladies of the parish, and knelt down, gazing up at the gilded figure of Christ which, in the sudden darkness seemed to be poised alone in mid-air above the chancel. Benet stood with Oliver in the aisle. The church was otherwise empty.

'Has anyone arrived yet?'

'Benet, I am so sorry –'

'Has anyone –?'

'No. I've put sentinels out in all the lanes. There'll be some cars I suppose.'

'Yes, we couldn't get hold of all of them by telephone. We – I – have got to collect them and talk with them. We can't just say "go home, the thing is off!"'

'Should we direct them up to Penndean?'

'No, for heaven's sake! I don't want them up there! We can't make it into a kind of muted feast. Have you seen Edward?'

'I was going to ask you that. I've telephoned Hatting –'

'So have I. He has gone to London, I think, only he doesn't answer the phone.'

'Oh dear, what a very tragic business! Look, I've been thinking, let me deal, at least we can give them sandwiches in the Rectory – I've already –'

'Oh *hell*,' said Benet, 'I haven't thought it out –'

'It's remarkable you can think at all. Oh how dreadful for both of them –'

Now Mildred was standing beside them. 'Benet, we must be outside where they'll be parking the

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