

Introduction

Notes on an Unfinished Novel (1969)

THE novel I am writing at the moment (provisionally entitled *The French Lieutenant's Woman*) is set about a hundred years back. I don't think of it as a historical novel, a genre in which I have very little interest. It started four or five months ago, as a visual image. A woman stands at the end of a deserted quay and stares out to sea. That was all. This image rose in my mind one morning when I was still in bed half asleep. It corresponded to no actual incident in my life (or in art) that I can recall, though I have for many years collected obscure books and forgotten prints – all sorts of flotsam and jetsam from the last two or three centuries, relics of past lives, and I suppose this leaves me with a sort of dense hinterland from which such images percolate down to the coast of consciousness.

These mythopoeic 'stills' (they seem almost always static) float into my mind very often. I ignore them, since that is the best way of finding whether they really are the door into a new world.

So I ignored this image; but it recurred. Imperceptibly it stopped coming to me. I began deliberately to recall it and to try to analyse and hypothesise why it held some sort of immanent power. It was obviously mysterious. It was vaguely romantic. It also seemed, perhaps because of the latter quality, not to belong to today. The woman obstinately refused to stare out of the window of an airport lounge; it had to be this ancient quay – and as I happen to live near one, so near that I can see it from the bottom of my garden, it soon became a specific ancient quay. The woman had no face, no particular degree of sexuality. But she was Victorian; and since I always saw her in the same static long shot, with her back turned,

she represented a reproach on the Victorian age. An outcast. I didn't know her crime, but I wished to protect her. That is, I began to fall in love with her. Or with her stance. I didn't know which.

This (not literally) pregnant female image came at a time (the autumn of 1966) when I was already halfway through another novel and had three or four others planned to follow it. It was an interference, but of such power that it soon came to make the previously planned work seem the intrusive element in my life. This accidentality of inspiration has to be allowed for in writing, both in the work one is on (unplanned development of character, unintended incidents, and so on) and in one's work as a whole. Follow the accident, fear the fixed plan – that is the rule.

Narcissism, or pygmalionism, is the essential vice a writer must have. Characters (and even situations) are like children or lovers: they need constant caressing, concern, listening to, watching, admiring. All these occupations become tiring for the active partner – the writer – and only something akin to love can provide the energy. I've heard people say, 'I want to write a book.' But wanting to write a book, however ardently, is not enough. Even to say, 'I want to be possessed by my own creations' is not enough; all natural or born writers are possessed, and in the old magical sense, by their own imaginations long before they even begin to think of writing.

This fluke genesis must break all the rules of creative writing, must sound at best childlike, at worst childish. I suppose the orthodox method is to work out what one wants to say and what one has experience of, and then to correlate the two. I have tried that method and started out with an analytically arrived-at theme and a set of characters all neatly standing for something; but the manuscripts have all petered out miserably. *The Magus* (written before *The Collector*, which also originated in a single image) sprang from a very trivial visit to a villa on a Greek island; nothing in the

least unusual happened. But in my unconscious I kept arriving at the place again and again; something wanted to happen there, something that had not happened to me at the time. Why it should have been at *that* villa, *that* one visit, among so many thousands of other possible launching pads, I do not know. Only a month ago someone showed me some recent photographs of the villa, which is now deserted; and it was just a deserted villa. Its mysterious significance to me fifteen years ago remains mysterious.

Once the seed germinates, reason and knowledge, culture and all the rest have to start to grow it. You cannot create a world by hot instinct; only by cold experience. That is one good reason so many novelists produce nothing until, or do all their best work after, the age of forty.

I find it very difficult to write if I don't know I shall have several days absolutely clear. All visits, all intrusions, all daily duties become irksome. This is during the first draft. I wrote the first draft of *The Collector* in under a month; sometimes ten thousand words a day. Of course a lot of it was poorly written and had to be endlessly amended and revised. First-draft and revision writing are so different they hardly seem to belong to the same activity. I never do any 'research' until the first draft is finished; all that matters to begin with is the flow, the story, the narrating. Having research material then is like swimming in a straitjacket.

During the revision period I try to keep some sort of discipline. I make myself revise whether I feel like it or not; in some ways, the more disinclined and dyspeptic one feels, the better – one is harsher with oneself. All the best cutting is done when one is sick of the writing.

But all this advice from senior writers to establish a discipline always, to get down a thousand words a day whatever one's mood, I find an absurdly puritanical and impractical approach. Writing is like eating or making love: a natural process, not an artificial one. Write, if you must, because you feel like writing; never because you feel you ought to write.

I write memoranda to myself about the book I'm on. On this one: *You are not trying to write something one of the Victorian novelists forgot to write; but perhaps something one of them failed to write. And: Remember the etymology of the word. A novel is something new. It must have relevance to the writer's now – so don't ever pretend you live in 1867; or make sure the reader knows it's a pretence.*

In the matter of clothes, social manners, historical background, and the rest, writing about 1867 is merely a question of research. But I soon get into trouble over dialogue, because the genuine dialogue of 1867 (insofar as it can be heard in books of the time) is far too close to our own to sound convincingly old. It very often fails to agree with our psychological picture of the Victorians – it is not stiff enough, not euphemistic enough, and so on – so here at once I have to start cheating and pick out the more formal and archaic (even for 1867) elements of spoken speech. It is this kind of 'cheating', which is intrinsic to the novel, that takes the most time.

Even in modern-novel dialogue, the most real is not the most conformable to actual current speech. One has only to read a transcribed tape of actual conversation to realise that it is, in the literary context, not very real. Novel dialogue is a form of shorthand, an *impression* of what people actually say; and besides that it has to perform other functions – keep the narrative moving (which real conversation rarely does), reveal character (real conversation often hides it), and so on.

This is the greatest technical problem I have; it is hard enough with modern characters, and doubly so with historical ones.

Memorandum: *If you want to be true to life, start lying about the reality of it.*

And: *One cannot describe reality; only give metaphors that indicate it. All human modes of description (photographic, mathematical, and the rest, as well as literary) are metaphorical. Even the most precise scientific description of an object or movement is a tissue of metaphors.*

Alain Robbe-Grillet's polemical essay 'Pour un nouveau roman' (1963) is indispensable reading for the profession, even where it

produces no more than total disagreement. His key question: *Why bother to write in a form whose great masters cannot be surpassed?* The fallacy of one of his conclusions – that we must discover a new form to write in if the novel is to survive – is obvious. It reduces the purpose of the novel to the discovery of new forms, whereas its other purposes – to entertain, to satirise, to describe new sensibilities, to record life, to improve life, and so on – are clearly just as viable and important. But his obsessive pleading for new form places a kind of stress on every passage one writes today. To what extent am I being a coward by writing inside the old tradition? To what extent am I being panicked into avant-gardism? Writing about 1867 doesn't lessen the stress; it increases it, since so much of the subject matter must of its historical nature be 'traditional'. There are apparent parallels in other arts: Stravinsky's eighteenth-century rehandlings, Picasso's and Francis Bacon's use of Velázquez. But in this context, words are not nearly so tractable as musical notes or brushstrokes. One can parody a rococo musical ornament, a baroque face. Very early on I tried, in a test chapter, to put modern dialogue into Victorian mouths. But the effect was absurd, since the real historical nature of the characters is hopelessly distorted; the only people to get away with this (Julius Caesar speaking with a Brooklyn accent, and so on) are the professional funny men. One is led inevitably, by such a technique, into a comic novel.

My two previous novels were both based on more or less disguised existentialist premises. I want this one to be no exception; and so I am trying to show an existentialist awareness before it was chronologically possible. Kierkegaard was, of course, totally unknown to the British and American Victorians; but it has always seemed to me that the Victorian age, especially from 1850 on, was highly existentialist in many of its personal dilemmas. One can almost invert the reality and say that Camus and Sartre have been trying to lead us, in their fashion, to a Victorian seriousness of purpose and moral sensitivity.

Nor is this the only similarity between the 1960s and the 1860s. The great nightmare of the respectable Victorian mind

was the only too real one created by the geologist Lyell and the biologist Darwin. Until then man had lived like a child in a small room. They gave him – and never was a present less welcome – infinite space and time, and a hideously mechanistic explanation of human reality into the bargain. Just as we ‘live with the bomb’, the Victorians lived with the theory of evolution. They were hurled into space. They felt themselves infinitely isolated. By the 1860s the great iron structures of their philosophies, religions, and social stratifications were already beginning to look dangerously corroded to the more perspicacious.

Just such a man, an existentialist before his time, walks down the quay and sees that mysterious back, feminine, silent, also existentialist, facing the sea and turned on him.

Magnificent though the Victorian novelists were, they almost all (an exception, of course, is the later Hardy) failed miserably in one aspect: nowhere in ‘respectable’ Victorian literature (and most of the pornography was based on the brothel – or on eighteenth-century accounts) does one see a man and a woman described together in bed. We do not know how they made love, what they said to each other in their most intimate moments, what they felt then.

Writing, as I have been today, about two Victorians making love – with no guides except my imagination and vague deductions from the spirit of the age and so on – is really science fiction. A journey is a journey, backwards or forwards.

The most difficult task for a writer is to get the right ‘voice’ for his or her material; by ‘voice’ I mean the overall impression one has of the creator behind what he or she creates. I’ve always liked the ironic voice that the line of the great nineteenth-century novelists, from Austen through to Conrad, all used so naturally. We tend today to remember the failures of that tone – the satirical overkill in Dickens, the facetiousness of Thackeray, the strained sarcasm of Mark Twain, the priggishness in George Eliot

– rather than its virtues. The reason is clear enough: irony needs the assumption of superiority in the ironist. Such an assumption must be anathema to a democratic, egalitarian century like our own. We suspect people who pretend to be omniscient; and that is why so many of us twentieth-century novelists feel driven into first-person narration.

I have heard writers claim that this first-person technique is a last bastion of the novel against the cinema, a form where the camera dictates an inevitable third-person point of view of what happens, however much we may identify with one character. But the matter of whether a contemporary novelist uses ‘he’ or ‘I’ is largely irrelevant. The great majority of modern third-person narration is ‘I’ narration very thinly disguised. The real ‘I’ of the Victorian writers – the writer himself or herself – is as rigorously repressed there (out of fear of seeming pretentious, etc.) as it is, for obvious semantic and grammatical reasons, when the narration is in literal first-person form.

But in this new book I shall try to resurrect this technique. It seems in any case natural to look back at the England of a hundred years ago with a somewhat ironical eye – and ‘I’ – though it is my strong belief that history is horizontal in terms of the ratio between understanding and *available* knowledge, and (far more important) horizontal in terms of the happiness the individual gets from being alive. In short, there is a danger in being ironic about the apparent follies and miseries of any past age. So I have written myself another memorandum: *You are not the ‘I’ who breaks into the illusion, but the ‘I’ who is a part of it.*

In other words, the ‘I’ who will make the first-person commentaries here and there in my story, and who will finally even enter it, will not be my real ‘I’ in 1967, but much more just another character, though in a different category from the purely fictional ones.

An illustration. Here is the beginning of a minor novel (*Lovel the Widower* [1861]) by Thackeray:

Who shall be the hero of this tale? Not I who write it. I am but the Chorus of the Play. I make remarks on the conduct of the characters: I narrate their simple story.

Today I think we should assume (not knowing who the writer was) that the 'I' here is the writer's 'I'. For three or four pages more we might still just believe this; but then suddenly Thackeray introduces his eponymous hero as 'my friend Lovel', and we see we've been misled. 'I' is simply another character. But then a few pages on, the 'I' cuts in again in the description of a character:

She never could speak. Her voice was as hoarse as a fishwoman's. Can that immense stout old-box-keeper at the — — theatre. . . be the once brilliant Emily Montanville? I am told there are no lady box-keepers in the English theatres. This, I submit, is a proof of my consummate care and artifice in rescuing from a prurient curiosity the individual personages from whom the characters of the present story are taken. Montanville is not a box-opener. She may, under another name, keep a trinket-shop in the Burlington Arcade, for what you know: but this secret no torture shall induce me to divulge. Life has its rises and downfalls, and you have had yours, you hobbling old creature. Montanville, indeed! Go thy ways! Here is a shilling for thee. (Thank you, sir.) Take away that confounded footstool, and never let us see thee more!

We can just still suppose that the 'I' is another character here; but the strong suspicion is that it is Thackeray himself. There is the characteristic teasing of the reader, the shocking new angle of the present tense, the compensatory self-mocking in the already revealed 'secret no torture shall induce me to divulge'. But clearly he doesn't mean us to be sure; it is not the whole Thackeray.

Lovel rates poorly by Thackeray's own standards elsewhere; it is nevertheless a brilliant technical exercise in the use of 'voice'. I cannot believe that it is a dead technique. Nothing can get us off

the charge of omniscience – and certainly not the *nouveau roman* theory. Even that theory's most brilliant practical demonstrations – as exemplified by, say, Robbe-Grillet's own *La Jalousie* – fail to answer the accusation. Robbe-Grillet may have removed the writer Robbe-Grillet totally from the text; but he has never denied he wrote it. If the writer really believes in the statement 'I know nothing about my characters except what can be tape-recorded and photographed (and then "mixed" and "cut")', the logical step is to take up tape recording and photography, not writing. But if he or she still writes, and writes well, as Robbe-Grillet does, then he is self-betrayed; he or she belongs to La Cosa Nostra, and is transparently far more deeply implicated than he will admit.

2 September 1967. Now I am about two thirds of the way through. Always a bad stage, when one begins to doubt major things like basic motivations, dramatic design, the whole bloody enterprise; in the beginning one tends to get dazzled by each page, by one's fertility, those nice Muses always at one's shoulder . . . but then the inherent faults in the plot and characters begin to emerge. One starts to doubt the wisdom of the way the latter make things go; the stage in an *affaire* when one begins to thank God that marriage never raised its ugly head. But here one is condemned to a marriage of sorts – I have the woman on the quay (whose name is Sarah) for better or for worse, so to speak; and all seems worse.

I have to break off for a fortnight to go down to Majorca, where they're filming *The Magus*. I have written the script, but like most scripts it's really a team effort. The two producers have had their say, and the director; and a number of non-human factors, such as the budget, the nature of the locations, and the casting of the main roles, have had theirs. Most of the time I feel like a skeleton at the feast: this isn't what I had imagined, either in the book or in the script.

Yet it is interesting to watch, on a big film production, how buttressed each key man is by the other key men; to see how often one will turn to another and say, 'Will it work?' I compare this with the loneliness of the long-distance writer; and I come back with a sort of relief, a reaffirmation in my faith in the novel. For all its faults, it is a statement by one person. In my novels I am the producer, director, and all the actors; I photograph it. This may seem a megalomania beside which the more celebrated cases from Hollywood pale to nothingness. There *is* a vanity about it, a wish to play the godgame, which all the random and author-removing devices of avant-garde technique cannot hide. But there must be a virtue, in an age that is out to exterminate both the individual and the enduring, in the individual's attempt to endure by his or her own efforts alone.

The truth is, the novel is a free form. Unlike the play or the film script, it has no limits other than those of the language. It is like a poem; it can be what it wants. This is its downfall and its glory; and it explains why both forms have been so often used to establish freedom in other fields, social and political.

A charge that all of us who sell film rights have to answer is that we wrote our books with this end in view. What has to be distinguished here is the legitimate and the illegitimate influence of the cinema on the novel. I saw my first film when I was six; I suppose I've seen on average – and discounting television – a film a week ever since; let's say some two and a half thousand films up to now. How can so frequently repeated an experience not have indelibly stamped itself on the *mode* of imagination? At one time I analysed my dreams in detail; again and again I recalled purely cinematic effects: panning shots, close shots, tracking, jump cuts, and the rest. In short, this mode of imagining is far too deep in me to eradicate – and not only in me, but in all my generation.

This doesn't mean we have surrendered to the cinema. I don't share the general pessimism about the so-called decline of the novel and its present status as a minority cult. Except for a brief

period in the nineteenth century, when a literate majority and a lack of other means of entertainment coincided, it has always been a minority cult.

One has in fact only to do a film script to realise how inalienably in possession of a still-vast domain the novel is; how countless the forms of human experience only to be described in and by it. There is too an essential difference in the quality of image evoked by the two media. The cinematic visual image is virtually the same for all who see it; it stamps out personal imagination, the response from individual *visual* memory. A sentence or paragraph in a novel will evoke a different image in each reader. This necessary cooperation between writer and reader – the one to suggest, the other to make concrete – is a privilege of *verbal* form; and the cinema can never usurp it.

Nor is that all. Here (the opening four paragraphs of a novel) is a flagrant bit of writing for the cinema. The man has obviously spent too much time on film scripts and can now think only of his movie sale.

The temperature is in the nineties, and the boulevard is absolutely empty.

Lower down, the inky water of a canal reaches in a straight line. Midway between two locks is a barge full of timber. On the bank, two rows of barrels.

Beyond the canal, between houses separated by workyards, a huge, cloudless, tropical sky. Under the throbbing sun, white facades, slate roofs, and granite quays hurt the eyes. An obscure distant murmur rises in the hot air. All seems drugged by the Sunday peace and the sadness of summer days.

Two men appear.

It first appeared on 25 March 1881. The writer's name is Flaubert. All I have done to his novel *Bouvard et Pécuchet* is to transpose its past historic into the present.

I woke in the small hours, and the book tormented me. All its failings rose up in the darkness. I saw that the novel I'd dropped in order to write *The French Lieutenant's Woman* was much better. This one was not my sort of book; it was an aberration, a folly, a delusion. Sentences from vitriolic reviews floated through my mind: 'a clumsy pastiche of Hardy', 'a pretentious imitation of an inimitable genre', 'a pointless exploration of an already overexplored age . . .', and so on and so on.

Now it is day, I am back on it again, and it denies what I felt in the night. But the horror of such realisations is that someone, some reader or reviewer, *will* realise them. The nightmare of the writer is that all his or her worst private fears and self-criticisms will be made public.

The shadow of Thomas Hardy, the heart of whose 'country' I can see in the distance from my workroom window, I cannot avoid. Since he and Thomas Love Peacock are my two favourite male novelists, I don't mind the shadow. It seems best to use it; and by a curious coincidence, which I didn't recall when I placed my own story in that year, 1867 was the crucial year in Hardy's own mysterious personal life.¹ It is somehow encouraging that while my fictitious characters weave their own story in their 1867, only thirty miles away, in the real 1867, the pale young architect was entering his own fatal life-incident.

The female characters in my books tend to dominate the male ones. I see man as a kind of artifice, and woman as a kind of reality. The one is cold idea, the other is warm fact. Daedalus faces Venus, and Venus must win. If the technical problems hadn't been so great, I should have liked to make Conchis in *The Magus* a woman. The character of Mrs de Seitas at the end of the book was

1. In 1867, Hardy, plagued by ill health, left London, returned to Bockhampton, and began writing his first novel.

simply an aspect of his character, as was Lily. Now Sarah exerts this power. She doesn't realise how. Nor do I yet.

I was stuck this morning trying to find a good answer from Sarah at the climax of a scene. Characters sometimes reject all the possibilities one offers. They say, in effect: *I would never say or do a thing like that*. But they don't say what they *would* say; and one has to proceed negatively, by a very tedious coaxing kind of trial and error. After an hour over this one wretched sentence, I saw that she had in fact been telling me what to do: silence from her was better than any line she might have said.

By the time I left Oxford, I found myself much more at home in French than in English literature. There seems to me to be a vital distinction between the French and Anglo-Saxon cultures in this field. Since 1650 French writers have assumed an international audience, and Anglo-Saxons a national one. This may be no more than a general tendency; the literatures of the two cultures offer hundreds of exceptions, even among the best-known books. Nevertheless, I have always found this French assumption that the proper audience of a book is one without frontiers more attractive than the extreme opposite view, which is still widely held in both Britain and America, that the proper job of a writer is to write of and for his or her own country and countrymen.

I am aware of this when I write, and especially when I revise. English references that will mean nothing to a foreigner I usually cut out, or avoid in the first place. In the present book I have the ubiquity in the West of the Victorian ethos; that helps greatly.

Various things have long made me feel an exile in England. Some years ago I came across a sentence in an obscure French novel: 'Ideas are the only motherland.'² Ever since I have kept it

2. Claire de Duras *Ourika* (1824): 'L'opinion est comme une patrie.' I gave it thus when I translated the book, in 1977. The Modern Languages Association edition of 1995 proposes 'A view of life is like a motherland.'

as the most succinct summary I know of what I believe. Perhaps *believe* is the wrong verb – if you are without national feeling, if you find many of your fellow countrymen and most of their beliefs and their institutions foolish and antiquated, you can hardly *believe* in anything, but only accept the loneliness that results.

So I live completely away from other English writers and the literary life of London. What I have to think of as my ‘public’ self is willy-nilly absorbed into or rejected by (mostly the latter, in my case) the national literary ‘world’. Even to me that public self seems very remote and often distastefully alien and spurious; just one more thing that I feel my real self in exile from.

My real self is here and now, writing. Whenever I think of this (the writing, not the written) experience, images to do with exploring, single-handed voyages, lone mountain ascents always spring unwanted to my mind. They sound romantic, but they’re not meant to. It’s the damned solitude, the fear of failure (by which I do *not* mean bad reviews), the tedium of the novel form, the often nauseating feeling that one is prey to an unhealthy obsession. . . .

When I go out and meet other people, become mixed in their lives and social routines, my own solitude, routine-lessness, and freedom (which is a subtle imprisonment) from economic ‘worries’ often make me feel like a visitor from outer space. I like earthmen, but I’m not quite sure what they’re at. I mean, we regulate things better at home. But there it is – I’ve been posted here. And there’s no transport back.

Something like this lies behind all I write.

This total difference between the written and the writing worlds is what non-writers never realise about us. They see us as we were; we live with what we are. What matters to writers is not subjects, but the experience of handling them; in romantic terms, a difficult pitch scaled, a storm survived, the untrodden moon beneath one’s feet. Such pleasures are unholy; and the world in general does right to regard us with malice and suspicion.

I loathe the day a manuscript is sent to the publisher, because on that day the people one has loved die; they become what they are – petrified, fossil organisms for others to study and collect. I get asked what I meant by this and by that. But what I wrote is what I meant. If it wasn't clear in the book, it shouldn't be clear now.

I find that Americans, especially the kind people who write and ask questions, have a strangely pragmatic view of what books are. Perhaps because of the miserable heresy that creative writing can be taught ('creative' is here a euphemism for 'imitative'), they seem to believe that a writer always knows exactly what he's doing. Obscure books, for them, are a kind of crossword puzzle. Somewhere, they feel, in some number of a paper they missed, all the answers have been given to all the clues.

They believe, in short, that a book is like a machine; that if you have the knack, you can take it to bits.

Ordinary readers can hardly be blamed for thinking like this. Both academic criticism and weekly reviewing have in the last forty years grown dangerously scientific, or pseudo-scientific, in their general tenor. Analysis and categorisation are indispensable scientific tools *in the scientific field*; but the novel, like the poem, is only partly a scientific field. No one wants a return to the kind of belletrist and onanistic accounts of new books that were fashionable in the early years of the century; but we could do with something better than what we have got.

I am an interested party? I confess it. Ever since I began writing *The French Lieutenant's Woman* I've been reading obituaries of the novel; a particularly gloomy one came from Gore Vidal in the December 1967 issue of *Encounter*. And I have been watching novel reviewing in England become this last year increasingly impatient and dismissive. Any moment now I expect one of our fashionable newspapers to decide to drop its 'New Novels' column for good and give the released space over to television or pop music. Of course I am interested – but like Mr Vidal, I can hardly

be personally resentful. If the novel is dead, the corpse remains oddly fertile. We are told that no one reads novels any more; so the authors of *Julian* and *The Collector* must be grateful to the two million or more ghosts who have bought copies of their respective books. But I don't want to be sarcastic. More is at issue here than self-interest.

One has the choice of two views: either that the novel, along with printed-word culture in general, is moribund, or that there is something sadly shallow and blinded in our age. I know which view I hold; and the people who astound me are the ones who are sure that the first view is true. If you want omniscience, you have it there, and it ought to worry you – you the reader who is neither critic nor writer – that this omniscient contempt for print is found so widely among people who make a living out of literary dissection. Surgery is what we want, not dissection. It is not only the extirpation of the mind that kills the body; the heart will do the trick just as well.

27 October 1967. I finished the first draft, which was begun on 25 January. It is about 140,000 words long, and exactly as I imagined it: perfect, flawless, a lovely novel. But that, alas, is indeed only how I imagine it. When I reread it I see 140,000 things that need to be changed; then it will, perhaps, be less imperfect. But I haven't the energy; the dreaded research now, the interminable sentence-picking. I want to get on with another book. I had a strange image last night. . .

THE
FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S
WOMAN

Chapter 1

Stretching eyes west
Over the sea,
Wind foul or fair,
Always stood she
Prospect-impressed;
Solely out there
Did her gaze rest,
Never elsewhere
Seemed charm to be.
HARDY, 'The Riddle'

AN easterly is the most disagreeable wind in Lyme Bay – Lyme Bay being that largest bite from the underside of England's outstretched south-western leg – and a person of curiosity could at once have deduced several strong probabilities about the pair who began to walk down the quay at Lyme Regis, the small but ancient eponym of the inbite, one incisively sharp and blustery morning in the late March of 1867.

The Cobb has invited what familiarity breeds for at least seven hundred years, and the real Lymers will never see much more to it than a long claw of old grey wall that flexes itself against the sea. In fact, since it lies well apart from the main town, a tiny Piraeus to a microscopic Athens, they seem almost to turn their backs on it. Certainly it has cost them enough in repairs through the centuries to justify a certain resentment. But to a less tax-paying, or more discriminating, eye it is quite simply the most beautiful sea-rampart on the south coast of England. And not only

because it is, as the guide-books say, redolent of seven hundred years of English history, because ships sailed to meet the Armada from it, because Monmouth landed beside it . . . but finally because it is a superb fragment of folk-art.

Primitive yet complex, elephantine but delicate; as full of subtle curves and volumes as a Henry Moore or a Michelangelo; and pure, clean, salt, a paragon of mass. I exaggerate? Perhaps, but I can be put to the test, for the Cobb has changed very little since the year of which I write; though the town of Lyme has, and the test is not fair if you look back towards land.

However, if you had turned northward and landward in 1867, as the man that day did, your prospect would have been harmonious. A picturesque congeries of some dozen or so houses and a small boatyard – in which, arklife on its stocks, sat the thorax of a lugger – huddled at where the Cobb runs back to land. Half a mile to the east lay, across sloping meadows, the thatched and slated roofs of Lyme itself; a town that had its heyday in the Middle Ages and has been declining ever since. To the west sombre grey cliffs, known locally as Ware Cleeves, rose steeply from the shingled beach where Monmouth entered upon his idiocy. Above them and beyond, stepped massively inland, climbed further cliffs masked by dense woods. It is in this aspect that the Cobb seems most a last bulwark – against all that wild eroding coast to the west. There too I can be put to proof. No house lay visibly then or, beyond a brief misery of beach-huts, lies today in that direction.

The local spy – and there was one – might thus have deduced that these two were strangers, people of some taste, and not to be denied their enjoyment of the Cobb by a mere harsh wind. On the other hand he might, focusing his telescope more closely, have suspected that a mutual solitude interested them rather more than maritime architecture; and he would most certainly have remarked that they were people of a very superior taste as regards their outward appearance.

The young lady was dressed in the height of fashion, for another

wind was blowing in 1867: the beginning of a revolt against the crinoline and the large bonnet. The eye in the telescope might have glimpsed a magenta skirt of an almost daring narrowness – and shortness, since two white ankles could be seen beneath the rich green coat and above the black boots that delicately trod the revetment; and perched over the netted chignon, one of the impertinent little flat ‘pork-pie’ hats with a delicate tuft of egret plumes at the side – a millinery style that the resident ladies of Lyme would not dare to wear for at least another year; while the taller man, impeccably in a light grey, with his top hat held in his free hand, had severely reduced his dundrearies, which the arbiters of the best English male fashion had declared a shade vulgar – that is, risible to the foreigner – a year or two previously. The colours of the young lady’s clothes would strike us today as distinctly strident; but the world was then in the first fine throes of the discovery of aniline dyes. And what the feminine, by way of compensation for so much else in her expected behaviour, demanded of a colour was brilliance, not discretion.

But where the telescopist would have been at sea himself was with the other figure on that sombre, curving mole. It stood right at the seawardmost end, apparently leaning against an old cannon-barrel up-ended as a bollard. Its clothes were black. The wind moved them, but the figure stood motionless, staring, staring out to sea, more like a living memorial to the drowned, a figure from myth, than any proper fragment of the petty provincial day.

Chapter 2

In that year (1851) there were some 8,155,000 females of the age of ten upwards in the British population, as compared with 7,600,000 males. Already it will be clear that if the accepted destiny of the Victorian girl was to become a wife and mother, it was unlikely that there would be enough men to go round.

E. ROYSTON PIKE, *Human Documents of the Victorian Golden Age*

I'll spread sail of silver and I'll steer towards the sun,
I'll spread sail of silver and I'll steer towards the sun,
And my false love will weep, and my false love will weep,
And my false love will weep for me after I'm gone.

WEST-COUNTRY FOLKSONG:
'As Sylvie was walking'

'My dear Tina, we have paid our homage to Neptune. He will forgive us if we now turn our backs on him.'

'You are not very *galant*.'

'What does that signify, pray?'

'I should have thought you might have wished to prolong an opportunity to hold my arm without impropriety.'

'How delicate we've become.'

'We are not in London now.'

'At the North Pole, if I'm not mistaken.'

'I *wish* to walk to the end.'

And so the man, with a dry look of despair, as if it might be

his last, towards land, turned again, and the couple continued down the Cobb.

'And I wish to hear what passed between you and Papa last Thursday.'

'Your aunt has already extracted every detail of that pleasant evening from me.'

The girl stopped, and looked him in the eyes.

'Charles! Now Charles, you may be as dry a stick as you like with everyone else. But you must not be stick-y with me.'

'Then how, dear girl, are we ever to be glued together in holy matrimony?'

'And you will keep your low humour for your club.' She primly made him walk on. 'I have had a letter.'

'Ah. I feared you might. From Mama?'

'I know that something happened . . . over the port.'

They walked on a few paces before he answered; for a moment Charles seemed inclined to be serious, but then changed his mind.

'I confess your worthy father and I had a small philosophical disagreement.'

'That is very wicked of you.'

'I meant it to be very honest of me.'

'And what was the subject of your conversation?'

'Your father ventured the opinion that Mr Darwin should be exhibited in a cage in the zoological gardens. In the monkey-house. I tried to explain some of the scientific arguments behind the Darwinian position. I was unsuccessful. *Et voilà tout.*'

'How could you – when you know Papa's views!'

'I was most respectful.'

'Which means you were most hateful.'

'He did say that he would not let his daughter marry a man who considered his grandfather to be an ape. But I think on reflection he will recall that in my case it was a titled ape.'

She looked at him then as they walked, and moved her head

in a curious sliding sideways turn away; a characteristic gesture when she wanted to show concern – in this case, over what had been really the greatest obstacle in her view to their having become betrothed. Her father was a very rich man; but her grandfather had been a draper, and Charles's had been a baronet. He smiled and pressed the gloved hand that was hooked lightly to his left arm.

'Dearest, we have settled that between us. It is perfectly proper that you should be afraid of your father. But I am not marrying him. And you forget that I'm a scientist. I have written a monograph, so I must be. And if you smile like that, I shall devote all my time to the fossils and none to you.'

'I am not disposed to be jealous of the fossils.' She left an artful pause. 'Since you've been walking on them now for at least a minute – and haven't even deigned to remark them.'

He glanced sharply down, and as abruptly kneeled. Portions of the Cobb are paved with fossil-bearing stone.

'By jove, look at this. *Certhidium portlandicum*. This stone must come from the oolite at Portland.'

'In whose quarries I shall condemn you to work in perpetuity – if you don't get to your feet at once.' He obeyed her with a smile. 'Now, am I not kind to bring you here? And look.' She led him to the side of the rampart, where a line of flat stones inserted sideways into the wall served as rough steps down to a lower walk. 'These are the very steps that Jane Austen made Louisa Musgrove fall down in *Persuasion*.'

'How romantic.'

'Gentlemen were romantic . . . then.'

'And are scientific now? Shall we make the perilous descent?'

'On the way back.'

Once again they walked on. It was only then that he noticed, or at least realized the sex of, the figure at the end.

'Good heavens, I took that to be a fisherman. But isn't it a woman?'

Ernestina peered – her grey, her very pretty eyes, were short-sighted, and all she could see was a dark shape.

‘Is she young?’

‘It’s too far to tell.’

‘But I can guess who it is. It must be poor Tragedy.’

‘Tragedy?’

‘A nickname. One of her nicknames.’

‘And what are the others?’

‘The fishermen have a gross name for her.’

‘My dear Tina, you can surely –’

‘They call her the French Lieutenant’s . . . Woman.’

‘Indeed. And is she so ostracized that she has to spend her days out here?’

‘She is . . . a little mad. Let us turn. I don’t like to go near her.’

They stopped. He stared at the black figure.

‘But I’m intrigued. Who is this French lieutenant?’

‘A man she is said to have . . .’

‘Fallen in love with?’

‘Worse than that.’

‘And he abandoned her? There is a child?’

‘No. I think no child. It is all gossip.’

‘But what is she doing there?’

‘They say she waits for him to return.’

‘But . . . does no one care for her?’

‘She is a servant of some kind to old Mrs Poulteney. She is never to be seen when we visit. But she lives there. Please let us turn back. I did not see her.’

But he smiled.

‘If she springs on you I shall defend you and prove my poor gallantry. Come.’

So they went closer to the figure by the cannon-bollard. She had taken off her bonnet and held it in her hand; her hair was pulled tight back inside the collar of the black coat – which was bizarre, more like a man’s riding-coat than any woman’s coat

that had been in fashion those past forty years. She too was a stranger to the crinoline; but it was equally plain that that was out of oblivion, not knowledge of the latest London taste. Charles made some trite and loud remark, to warn her that she was no longer alone, but she did not turn. The couple moved to where they could see her face in profile; and how her stare was aimed like a rifle at the farthest horizon. There came a stronger gust of wind, one that obliged Charles to put his arm round Ernestina's waist to support her, and obliged the woman to cling more firmly to the bollard. Without quite knowing why, perhaps to show Ernestina how to say boo to a goose, he stepped forward as soon as the wind allowed.

'My good woman, we can't see you here without being alarmed for your safety. A stronger squall —'

She turned to look at him — or as it seemed to Charles, through him. It was not so much what was positively in that face which remained with him after that first meeting, but all that was not as he had expected; for theirs was an age when the favoured feminine look was the demure, the obedient, the shy. Charles felt immediately as if he had trespassed; as if the Cobb belonged to that face, and not to the Ancient Borough of Lyme. It was not a pretty face, like Ernestina's. It was certainly not a beautiful face, by any period's standard or taste. But it was an unforgettable face, and a tragic face. Its sorrow welled out of it as purely, naturally and unstoppably as water out of a woodland spring. There was no artifice there, no hypocrisy, no hysteria, no mask; and above all, no sign of madness. The madness was in the empty sea, the empty horizon, the lack of reason for such sorrow; as if the spring was natural in itself, but unnatural in welling from a desert.

Again and again, afterwards, Charles thought of that look as a lance; and to think so is of course not merely to describe an object but the effect it has. He felt himself in that brief instant an unjust enemy; both pierced and deservedly diminished.

The woman said nothing. Her look back lasted two or three

seconds at most; then she resumed her stare to the south. Ernestina plucked Charles's sleeve, and he turned away, with a shrug and a smile at her. When they were nearer land he said, 'I wish you hadn't told me the sordid facts. That's the trouble with provincial life. Everyone knows everyone and there is no mystery. No romance.'

She teased him then: the scientist, the despiser of novels.

Chapter 3

But a still more important consideration is that the chief part of the organisation of every living creature is due to inheritance; and consequently, though each being assuredly is well fitted for its place in nature, many structures have now no very close and direct relations to present habits of life.

DARWIN, *The Origin of Species* (1859)

Of all decades in our history, a wise man would choose the eighteen-fifties to be young in.

G. M. YOUNG, *Portrait of an Age*

BACK in his rooms at the White Lion after lunch Charles stared at his face in the mirror. His thoughts were too vague to be described. But they comprehended mysterious elements; a sentiment of obscure defeat not in any way related to the incident on the Cobb, but to certain trivial things he had said at Aunt Tranter's lunch, to certain characteristic evasions he had made; to whether his interest in palaeontology was a sufficient use for his natural abilities; to whether Ernestina would ever really understand him as well as he understood her; to a general sentiment of dislocated purpose originating perhaps in no more – as he finally concluded – than the threat of a long and now wet afternoon to pass. After all, it was only 1867. He was only thirty-two years old. And he had always asked life too many questions.

Though Charles liked to think of himself as a scientific young man and would probably not have been too surprised had news reached him out of the future of the aeroplane, the jet engine,

television, radar: what *would* have astounded him was the changed attitude to time itself. The supposed great misery of our century is the lack of time; our sense of that, *not* a disinterested love of science, and certainly not wisdom, is why we devote such a huge proportion of the ingenuity and income of our societies to finding faster ways of doing things – as if the final aim of mankind was to grow closer not to a perfect humanity, but to a perfect lightning-flash. But for Charles, and for almost all his contemporaries and social peers, the time-signature over existence was firmly *adagio*. The problem was not fitting in all that one wanted to do, but spinning out what one did to occupy the vast colonnades of leisure available.

One of the commonest symptoms of wealth today is destructive neurosis; in his century it was tranquil boredom. It is true that the wave of revolutions in 1848, the memory of the now extinct Chartists, stood like a mountainous shadow behind the period; but to many – and to Charles – the most significant thing about those distant rumblings had been their failure to erupt. The 'sixties had been indisputably prosperous; an affluence had come to the artisanate and even to the labouring classes that made the possibility of revolution recede, at least in Great Britain, almost out of mind. Needless to say, Charles knew nothing of the beavered German Jew quietly working, as it so happened, that very afternoon in the British Museum library; and whose work in those sombre walls was to bear such bright red fruit. Had you described that fruit, or the subsequent effects of its later indiscriminate consumption, Charles would almost certainly not have believed you – and even though, in only six months from this March of 1867, the first volume of *Kapital* was to appear in Hamburg.

There were, too, countless personal reasons why Charles was unfitted for the agreeable role of pessimist. His grandfather the baronet had fallen into the second of the two great categories of English country squires: claret-swilling fox-hunters and scholarly collectors of everything under the sun. He had collected books

principally; but in his latter years had devoted a deal of his money and much more of his family's patience to the excavation of the harmless hummocks of earth that pimpled his three thousand Wiltshire acres. Cromlechs and menhirs, flint implements and neolithic graves, he pursued them ruthlessly; and his elder son pursued the portable trophies just as ruthlessly out of the house when he came into his inheritance. But heaven had punished this son, or blessed him, by seeing that he never married. The old man's younger son, Charles's father, was left well provided for, both in land and money.

His had been a life with only one tragedy – the simultaneous death of his young wife and the still-born child who would have been a sister to the one-year-old Charles. But he swallowed his grief. He lavished if not great affection, at least a series of tutors and drill-sergeants on his son, whom on the whole he liked only slightly less than himself. He sold his portion of land, invested shrewdly in railway stock and unshrewdly at the gaming-tables (he went to Almack's rather than to the Almighty for consolation), in short lived more as if he had been born in 1702 than 1802, lived very largely for pleasure . . . and died very largely of it in 1856. Charles was thus his only heir; heir not only to his father's diminished fortune – the baccarat had in the end had its revenge on the railway boom – but eventually to his uncle's very considerable one. It was true that in 1867 the uncle showed, in spite of a comprehensive reversion to the claret, no sign of dying.

Charles liked him, and his uncle liked Charles. But this was by no means always apparent in their relationship. Though he conceded enough to sport to shoot partridge and pheasant when called upon to do so, Charles adamantly refused to hunt the fox. He did not care that the prey was uneatable, but he abhorred the unspeakability of the hunters. There was worse: he had an unnatural fondness for walking instead of riding; and walking was not a gentleman's pastime except in the Swiss Alps. He had nothing very much against the horse in itself, but he had the born naturalist's

hatred of not being able to observe at close range and at leisure. However, fortune had been with him. One autumn day, many years before, he had shot at a very strange bird that ran from the border of one of his uncle's wheatfields. When he discovered what he had shot, and its rarity, he was vaguely angry with himself, for this was one of the last Great Bustards shot on Salisbury Plain. But his uncle was delighted. The bird was stuffed, and for ever after stared beadily, like an octoroon turkey, out of its glass case in the drawing-room at Winsyatt.

His uncle bored the visiting gentry interminably with the story of how the deed had been done; and whenever he felt inclined to disinherit – a subject which in itself made him go purple, since the estate was in tail male – he would recover his avuncular kindness of heart by standing and staring at Charles's immortal bustard. For Charles had faults. He did not always write once a week; and he had a sinister fondness for spending the afternoons at Winsyatt in the library, a room his uncle seldom if ever used.

He had had graver faults than these, however. At Cambridge, having duly crammed his classics and subscribed to the Thirty-nine Articles, he had (unlike most young men of his time) actually begun to learn something. But in his second year there he had drifted into a bad set and ended up, one foggy night in London, in carnal possession of a naked girl. He rushed from her plump Cockney arms into those of the Church; horrifying his father one day shortly afterwards by announcing that he wished to take Holy Orders. There was only one answer to a crisis of this magnitude: the wicked youth was dispatched to Paris. There his tarnished virginity was soon blackened out of recognition; but so, as his father had hoped, was his intended marriage with the Church. Charles saw what stood behind the seductive appeal of the Oxford Movement – Roman Catholicism *propria terra*. He declined to fritter his negative but comfortable English soul – one part irony to one part convention – on incense and papal fallibility. When he returned to London he fingered and skimmed his way through

a dozen religious theories of the time, but emerged in the clear (*voyant trop pour nier, et trop peu pour s'assurer*) a healthy agnostic.* What little God he managed to derive from existence, he found in Nature, not the Bible; a hundred years earlier he would have been a deist, perhaps even a pantheist. In company he would go to morning service of a Sunday; but on his own, he rarely did.

He returned from his six months in the City of Sin in 1856. His father had died three months later. The big house in Belgravia was let, and Charles installed himself in a smaller establishment in Kensington, more suitable to a young bachelor. There he was looked after by a manservant, a cook and two maids, a staff of almost eccentric modesty for one of his connections and wealth. But he was happy there, and besides, he spent a great deal of time travelling. He contributed one or two essays on his journeys in remoter places to the fashionable magazines; indeed an enterprising publisher asked him to write a book after the nine months he spent in Portugal, but there seemed to Charles something rather *infra dig.* – and something decidedly too much like hard work and sustained concentration – in authorship. He toyed with the idea, and dropped it. Indeed toying with ideas was his chief occupation during his third decade.

Yet he was not, adrift in the slow entire of Victorian time, essentially a frivolous young man. A chance meeting with someone who knew of his grandfather's mania made him realize that it was only in the family that the old man's endless days of supervising bewildered gangs of digging rustics were regarded as a joke. Others remembered Sir Charles Smithson as a pioneer of the archaeology of pre-Roman Britain; objects from his banished collection had been gratefully housed by the British Museum. And slowly Charles realized that he was in temperament nearer to his grandfather than

* Though he would not have termed himself so, for the very simple reason that the word was not coined (by Huxley) until 1870; by which time it had become much needed.

to either of his grandfather's sons. During the last three years he had become increasingly interested in palaeontology; that, he had decided, was his field. He began to frequent the *conversazioni* of the Geological Society. His uncle viewed the sight of Charles marching out of Winsyatt armed with his wedge hammers and his collecting-sack with disfavour; to his mind the only proper object for a gentleman to carry in the country was a riding-crop or a gun; but at least it was an improvement on the damned books in the damned library.

However, there was yet one more lack of interest in Charles that pleased his uncle even less. Yellow ribbons and daffodils, the insignia of the Liberal Party, were anathema at Winsyatt; the old man was the most azure of Tories – and had interest. But Charles politely refused all attempts to get him to stand for Parliament. He declared himself without political conviction. In secret he rather admired Gladstone; but at Winsyatt Gladstone was the arch-traitor, the unmentionable. Thus family respect and social laziness conveniently closed what would have been a natural career for him.

Laziness was, I am afraid, Charles's distinguishing trait. Like many of his contemporaries he sensed that the earlier self-responsibility of the century was turning into self-importance: that what drove the new Britain was increasingly a desire to seem respectable, in place of the desire to do good for good's sake. He knew he was over-fastidious. But how could one write history with Macaulay so close behind? Fiction or poetry, in the midst of the greatest galaxy of talent in the history of English literature? How could one be a creative scientist, with Lyell and Darwin still alive? Be a statesman, with Disraeli and Gladstone polarizing all the available space?

You will see that Charles set his sights high. Intelligent idlers always have, in order to justify their idleness to their intelligence. He had, in short, all the Byronic ennui with neither of the Byronic outlets: genius and adultery.

But though death may be delayed, as mothers with marriageable daughters have been known to foresee, it kindly always comes

in the end. Even if Charles had not had the further prospects he did, he was an interesting young man. His travels abroad had regrettably rubbed away some of that patina of profound humourlessness (called by the Victorians earnestness, moral rectitude, probity, and a thousand other misleading names) that one really required of a proper English gentleman of the time. There was outwardly a certain cynicism about him, a sure symptom of an inherent moral decay; but he never entered society without being ogled by the mamas, clapped on the back by the papas and simpered at by the girls. Charles quite liked pretty girls and he was not averse to leading them, and their ambitious parents, on. Thus he had gained a reputation for aloofness and coldness, a not unmerited reward for the neat way – by the time he was thirty he was as good as a polecat at the business – he would sniff the bait and then turn his tail on the hidden teeth of the matrimonial traps that endangered his path.

His uncle often took him to task on the matter; but as Charles was quick to point out, he was using damp powder. The old man would grumble.

‘I never found the right woman.’

‘Nonsense. You never looked for her.’

‘Indeed I did. When I was your age . . .’

‘You lived for your hounds and the partridge season.’

The old fellow would stare gloomily at his claret. He did not really regret having no wife; but he bitterly lacked not having children to buy ponies and guns for. He saw his way of life sinking without trace.

‘I was blind. Blind.’

‘My dear uncle, I have excellent eyesight. Console yourself. I too have been looking for the right girl. And I have not found her.’

Chapter 4

What's DONE, is what remains! Ah, blessed they
Who leave completed tasks of love to stay
And answer mutely for them, being dead,
Life was not purposeless, though Life be fled.

MRS NORTON, *The Lady of La Garaye* (1863)

Most British families of the middle and upper classes lived above their own cesspool . . .

E. ROYSTON PIKE, *Human Documents of the Victorian Golden Age*

THE basement kitchen of Mrs Poulteney's large Regency house, which stood, an elegantly clear simile of her social status, in a commanding position on one of the steep hills behind Lyme Regis, would no doubt seem today almost intolerable for its functional inadequacies. Though the occupants in 1867 would have been quite clear as to who was the tyrant in their lives, the more real monster, to an age like ours, would beyond doubt have been the enormous kitchen range that occupied all the inner wall of the large and ill-lit room. It had three fires, all of which had to be stoked twice a day, and riddled twice a day; and since the smooth domestic running of the house depended on it, it could never be allowed to go out. Never mind how much a summer's day sweltered, never mind that every time there was a south-westerly gale the monster blew black clouds of choking fumes – the remorseless furnaces had to be fed. And then the colour of those walls! They cried out for some light shade, for white. Instead they were a bilious leaden green – one that was, unknown to the occupants (and to be fair, to the tyrant

upstairs), rich in arsenic. Perhaps it was fortunate that the room was damp and that the monster disseminated so much smoke and grease. At least the deadly dust was laid.

The sergeant-major of this Stygian domain was a Mrs Fairley, a thin, small person who always wore black, but less for her widowhood than by temperament. Perhaps her sharp melancholy had been induced by the sight of the endless torrent of lesser mortals who cascaded through her kitchen. Butlers, footmen, gardeners, grooms, upstairs maids, downstairs maids – they took just so much of Mrs Poulteney's standards and ways and then they fled. This was very disgraceful and cowardly of them. But when you are expected to rise at six, to work from half past six to eleven, to work again from half past eleven to half past four, and then again from five to ten, *and* every day, thus a hundred-hour week, your reserves of grace and courage may not be very large.

A legendary summation of servant feelings had been delivered to Mrs Poulteney by the last butler but four: 'Madam, I should rather spend the rest of my life in the poorhouse than live another week under this roof.' Some gravely doubted whether anyone could actually have dared to say these words to the awesome lady. But the sentiment behind them was understood when the man came down with his bags and claimed that he had.

Exactly how the ill-named Mrs Fairley herself had stood her mistress so long was one of the local wonders. Most probably it was because she would, had life so fallen out, have been a Mrs Poulteney on her own account. Her envy kept her there; and also her dark delight in the domestic catastrophes that descended so frequently on the house. In short, both women were incipient sadists; and it was to their advantage to tolerate each other.

Mrs Poulteney had two obsessions: or two aspects of the same obsession. One was Dirt – though she made some sort of exception of the kitchen, since only the servants lived there – and the other was Immorality. In neither field did anything untoward escape her eagle eye.

She was like some plump vulture, endlessly circling in her endless leisure, and endowed in the first field with a miraculous sixth sense as regards dust, fingermarks, insufficiently starched linen, smells, stains, breakages and all the ills that houses are heir to. A gardener would be dismissed for being seen to come into the house with earth on his hands; a butler for having a spot of wine on his stock; a maid for having slut's wool under her bed.

But the most abominable thing of all was that even outside her house she acknowledged no bounds to her authority. Failure to be seen at church, both at matins and at evensong, on Sunday was tantamount to proof of the worst moral laxity. Heaven help the maid seen out walking, on one of her rare free afternoons – one a month was the reluctant allowance – with a young man. And heaven also help the young man so in love that he tried to approach Marlborough House secretly to keep an assignation: for the gardens were a positive forest of humane man-traps – 'humane' in this context referring to the fact that the great waiting jaws were untoothed, though quite powerful enough to break a man's leg. These iron servants were the most cherished by Mrs Poulteney. *Them*, she had never dismissed.

There would have been a place in the Gestapo for the lady; she had a way of interrogation that could reduce the sturdiest girls to tears in the first five minutes. In her fashion she was an epitome of all the most crassly arrogant traits of the ascendant British Empire. Her only notion of justice was that she must be right; and her only notion of government was an angry bombardment of the impertinent populace.

Yet among her own class, a very limited circle, she was renowned for her charity. And if you had disputed that reputation, your opponents would have produced an incontrovertible piece of evidence: had not dear, kind Mrs Poulteney taken in the French Lieutenant's Woman? I need hardly add that at the time the dear, kind lady knew only the other, more Grecian, nickname.

This remarkable event had taken place in the spring of 1866, exactly a year before the time of which I write; and it had to do with the great secret of Mrs Poulteney's life. It was a very simple secret. She believed in hell.

The vicar of Lyme at that time was a comparatively emancipated man theologically, but he also knew very well which side his pastoral bread was buttered. He suited Lyme, a traditionally Low Church congregation, very well. He had the knack of a certain fervid eloquence in his sermons; and he kept his church free of crucifixes, images, ornaments and all other signs of the Romish cancer. When Mrs Poulteney enounced to him her theories of the life to come, he did not argue, for incumbents of not notably fat livings do not argue with rich parishioners. Mrs Poulteney's purse was as open to calls from him as it was throttled where her thirteen domestics' wages were concerned. In the winter (winter also of the fourth great cholera onslaught on Victorian Britain) of that previous year Mrs Poulteney had been a little ill, and the vicar had been as frequent a visitor as the doctors who so repeatedly had to assure her that she was suffering from a trivial stomach upset and not the dreaded oriental killer.

Mrs Poulteney was not a stupid woman; indeed, she had acuity in practical matters, and her future destination, like all matters pertaining to her comfort, was a highly practical consideration. If she visualized God, He had rather the face of the Duke of Wellington; but His character was more that of a shrewd lawyer, a breed for whom Mrs Poulteney had much respect. As she lay in her bedroom she reflected on the terrible mathematical doubt that increasingly haunted her: whether the Lord calculated charity by what one had given or by what one could have afforded to give. Here she had better data than the vicar. She had given considerable sums to the church; but she knew they fell far short of the prescribed one-tenth to be parted with by serious candidates for paradise. Certainly she had regulated her will to ensure that the account would be handsomely balanced after her death; but God

might not be present at the reading of that document. Furthermore it chanced, while she was ill, that Mrs Fairley, who read to her from the Bible in the evenings, picked on the parable of the widow's mite. It had always seemed a grossly unfair parable to Mrs Poulteney; it now lay in her heart far longer than the enteritis bacilli in her intestines. One day, when she was convalescent, she took advantage of one of the solicitous vicar's visits and cautiously examined her conscience. At first he was inclined to dismiss her spiritual worries.

'My dear madam, your feet are on the Rock. The Creator is all-seeing and all-wise. It is not for us to doubt His mercy – or His justice.'

'But supposing He should ask me if my conscience is clear?'

The vicar smiled. 'You will reply that it is troubled. And with His infinite compassion He will –'

'But supposing He did not?'

'My dear Mrs Poulteney, if you speak like this I shall have to reprimand you. We are not to dispute *His* understanding.'

There was a silence. With the vicar Mrs Poulteney felt herself with two people. One was her social inferior, and an inferior who depended on her for many of the pleasures of his table, for a substantial fraction of the running costs of his church and also for the happy performance of his non-liturgical duties among the poor; and the other was the representative of God, before whom she had metaphorically to kneel. So her manner with him took often a bizarre and inconsequential course. It was *de haut en bas* one moment, *de bas en haut* the next; and sometimes she contrived both positions all in one sentence.

'If only poor Frederick had not died. He would have advised me.'

'Doubtless. And his advice would have resembled mine. You may rest assured of that. I know he was a Christian. And what I say is sound Christian doctrine.'

'It was a warning. A punishment.'

The vicar gave her a solemn look. 'Beware, my dear lady, beware. One does not trespass lightly on Our Maker's prerogative.'

She shifted her ground. Not all the vicars in creation could have justified her husband's early death to her. It remained between her and God; a mystery like a black opal, that sometimes shone as a solemn omen and sometimes stood as a kind of sum already paid off against the amount of penance she might still owe.

'I have given. But I have not done good deeds.'

'To give is a most excellent deed.'

'I am not like Lady Cotton.'

This abruptly secular descent did not surprise the vicar. He was well aware, from previous references, that Mrs Poulteney knew herself many lengths behind in that particular race for piety. Lady Cotton, who lived some miles behind Lyme, was famous for her fanatically eleemosynary life. She visited, she presided over a missionary society, she had set up a home for fallen women – true, it was of such repentant severity that most of the beneficiaries of her Magdalen Society scrambled back down to the pit of iniquity as soon as they could – but Mrs Poulteney was as ignorant of that as she was of Tragedy's more vulgar nickname.

The vicar coughed. 'Lady Cotton is an example to us all.' This was oil on the flames – as he was perhaps not unaware.

'I should visit.'

'That would be excellent.'

'It is that visiting always so distresses me.' The vicar was unhelpful. 'I know it is wicked of me.'

'Come come.'

'Yes. Very wicked.'

A long silence followed, in which the vicar meditated on his dinner, still an hour away, and Mrs Poulteney on her wickedness. She then came out, with an unaccustomed timidity, with a compromise solution to her dilemma.

'If you knew of some lady, some refined person who has come upon adverse circumstances . . .'

'I am not quite clear what you intend.'

'I wish to take a companion. I have difficulty in writing now. And Mrs Fairley reads so poorly. I should be happy to provide a home for such a person.'

'Very well. If you so wish it. I will make inquiries.'

Mrs Poulteney flinched a little from this proposed wild casting of herself upon the bosom of true Christianity. 'She must be of irreproachable moral character. I have my servants to consider.'

'My dear lady, of course, of course.' The vicar stood.

'And preferably without relations. The relations of one's dependants can become so very tiresome.'

'Rest assured that I shall not present anyone unsuitable.'

He pressed her hand and moved towards the door.

'And Mr Forsythe, not too young a person.'

He bowed and left the room. But halfway down the stairs to the ground floor, he stopped. He remembered. He reflected. And perhaps an emotion not absolutely unconnected with malice, a product of so many long hours of hypocrisy – or at least a not always complete frankness – at Mrs Poulteney's bombazined side, at any rate an impulse made him turn and go back to her drawing-room. He stood in the doorway.

'An eligible has occurred to me. Her name is Sarah Woodruff.'

Chapter 5

O me, what profits it to put
 An idle case? If Death were seen
 At first as Death, Love had not been,
Or been in narrowest working shut.

Mere fellowship of sluggish moods,
 Or in his coarsest Satyr-shape
 Had bruised the herb and crush'd the grape,
And bask'd and batten'd in the woods.

TENNYSON, *In Memoriam* (1850)

The young people were all wild to see Lyme.
 JANE AUSTEN, *Persuasion*

ERNESTINA had exactly the right face for her age; that is, small-chinned, oval, delicate as a violet. You may see it still in the drawings of the great illustrators of the time – in Phiz's work, in John Leech's. Her grey eyes and the paleness of her skin only enhanced the delicacy of the rest. At first meetings she could cast down her eyes very prettily, as if she might faint should any gentleman dare to address her. But there was a minute tilt at the corner of her eyelids, and a corresponding tilt at the corner of her lips – to extend the same comparison, as faint as the fragrance of February violets – that denied, very subtly but quite unmistakably, her apparent total obeisance to the great god Man. An orthodox Victorian would perhaps have mistrusted that imperceptible hint of a Becky Sharp; but to a man like Charles she proved irresistible.

She was so very nearly one of the prim little moppets, the Georginas, Victorias, Albertinas, Matildas and the rest who sat in their closely guarded dozens at every ball; yet not quite.

When Charles departed from Aunt Tranter's house in Broad Street to stroll a hundred paces or so down to his hotel, there gravely – are not all declared lovers the world's fool? – to mount the stairs to his rooms and interrogate his good-looking face in the mirror, Ernestina excused herself and went to her room. She wanted to catch a last glimpse of her betrothed through the lace curtains; and she also wanted to be in the only room in her aunt's house that she could really tolerate.

Having duly admired the way he walked and especially the manner in which he raised his top hat to Aunt Tranter's maid, who happened to be out on an errand; *and* hated him for doing it, because the girl had pert little Dorset peasant eyes and a provokingly pink complexion, and Charles had been strictly forbidden ever to look again at any woman under the age of sixty – a condition Aunt Tranter mercifully escaped by just one year – Ernestina turned back into her room. It had been furnished for her and to her taste, which was emphatically French; as heavy then as the English, but a little more gilt and fanciful. The rest of Aunt Tranter's house was inexorably, massively, irrefutably in the style of a quarter-century before: that is, a museum of objects created in the first fine rejection of all things decadent, light and graceful, and to which the memory or morals of the odious Prinny, George IV, could be attached.

Nobody could dislike Aunt Tranter; even to contemplate being angry with that innocently smiling and talking – especially talking – face was absurd. She had the profound optimism of successful old maids; solitude either sours or teaches self-dependence. Aunt Tranter had begun by making the best of things for herself; and ended by making the best of them for the rest of the world as well.

However, Ernestina did her best to be angry with her; on the

impossibility of having dinner at five; on the subject of the funereal furniture that choked the other rooms; on the subject of her aunt's over-solicitude for her fair name (she would not believe that the bridegroom and bride-to-be might wish to sit alone, and walk out alone); and above all on the subject of Ernestina's being in Lyme at all.

The poor girl had had to suffer the agony of every only child since time began – that is, a crushing and unrelenting canopy of parental worry. Since birth her slightest cough would bring doctors; since puberty her slightest whim summoned decorators and dress-makers; and always her slightest frown caused her mama and papa secret hours of self-recrimination. Now this was all very well when it came to new dresses and new wall-hangings, but there was one matter upon which all her *bouderies* and complaints made no impression. And that was her health. Her mother and father were convinced she was consumptive. They had only to smell damp in a basement to move house, only to have two days' rain on a holiday to change districts. Half Harley Street had examined her, and found nothing; she had never had a serious illness in her life; she had none of the lethargy, the chronic weaknesses, of the condition. She could have – or could have if she had ever been allowed to – danced all night; and played, without the slightest ill effect, battle-dore all the next morning. But she was no more able to shift her doting parents' fixed idea than a baby to pull down a mountain. Had they but been able to see into the future! For Ernestina was to outlive all her generation. She was born in 1846. And she died on the day that Hitler invaded Poland.

An indispensable part of her quite unnecessary regimen was thus her annual stay with her mother's sister in Lyme. Usually she came to recover from the season; this year she was sent early to gather strength for the marriage. No doubt the Channel breezes did her some good, but she always descended in the carriage to Lyme with the gloom of a prisoner arriving in Siberia. The society of the place was as up-to-date as Aunt Tranter's lumbering