1

On this day, which is the Ninth day of November in the year 1683, a most singular thing has occurred.

I was taking my habitual midday dinner (of boiled chicken with carrots and small ale) when my Manservant, Will, came into my Dining Room at Bidnold Manor, bearing in his gnarled old hands a package, wrapped in torn paper and bound with faded ribbon. He placed this object at my right hand, thus causing a cloud of dust to puff onto my plate of food.

'Take care, Will,' said I, feeling all my breath drawn in and then expelled in such an almighty sneeze that it flecked the tablecloth with tiny morsels of carrot. 'What is this Relic?'

'I do not know, Sir Robert,' said Will, attempting a dispersal of the dust, by waving his misshapen fingers back and forth.

'You do not know? But how has it arrived in the house?'

'Chambermaid, Sir.'

'You got it from one of the maids?'

'Found under your mattress.'

I wiped my mouth and blew my nose (with a striped, very faded dinner napkin once given to me by the King) and laid my hands upon the parcel, which, in truth, appeared like a thing purloined from some Pharaoh's Tomb, far down in the dry earth. I would have questioned Will further about its unlikely provenance and the reason of its sudden discovery on this particular day, but Will had already turned and was embarked on his slow and limping return journey from the dining table to the door, and to have called him back might well have occasioned some physical Catastrophe, which I had no heart to risk.

Alone once more, I tugged at the ribbon, noting some stains upon it, as of Mouse or Fly droppings, and the notion that some creature might have had its whole lowly existence beneath my mattress caused me a brief moment of amusement.

Then I had the package open and saw before me a thing so long forgotten by me, I think it would never have come back into my mind of its own accord by any means.

It was a Book. Rather, it had once aspired to the immortal status of a Book, but never did acquire any such immortality, but only remained a collation of pages, written in my inky, looping hand. Long ago, in the year 1668, when I returned here at last to Bidnold Manor, I contemplated destroying this Book, but I did not. I gave it to Will – with the instruction to consign it in some hiding-place of his own choosing and to contrive to forget where that hiding-place might be.

The pages contained the story of my Former Life. I had set down this story at a time of great confusion in the last years of my fourth decade, when I felt for the first time the radiance of King Charles II fall upon my insignificant shoulders.

I had hoped the writing of it would enable me to understand what role I might play in my profession as a Physician, in my country and in the world. But though in all my frenzied Scribblings I believed myself to be moving towards some kind of Wisdom, I cannot now recall that I ever arrived there. I was driven from place to place like a hungry dog. It was a time of marvels and glories, crammed with sorrows. And now, to read my own words and see this Life again unfold before me, brought to my heart an almost unbearable overload of Feeling.

I take up the Book and go to my Library. I lay the Book on my escritoire and attend to the feebly burning fire, placing more logs upon it and exhorting it to remember why it was lit – and that reason was to warm me. But I am still shivering. I wonder whether I shall send again for Will who, from long and weary habit, has a knack for coaxing flames into life. But in these late times of the 1680s, when I am approaching my fifty-seventh birthday, I am more and more reluctant to assign to Will any task whatsoever, owing to his extreme age (seventy-four years) and his many Infirmities.

Indeed, the whole Question of Will is one which hugely vexes me, for I do clearly see that, in regard to this faithful Servant of mine, I am caught in a very painful Trap.

I have known William Gates (ever and always called 'Will' by me) since the year 1664 when the King gifted to me the Order of the Garter, together with my Norfolk Estates. These Rewards I got for an important service I had rendered His Majesty, which changed utterly the course of my life.

Will came into my household, along with my cook, Cattlebury, in that same year and, in all my many joys and tribulations, never for one moment showed me anything but loyalty and consideration of the most touching order.

Though my interior Decorations were, at one time, very loud and vulgar, Will pretended his admiration for them. Though I myself behaved towards my young wife Celia in ways loathsome to her and to the world, never at any moment did Will throw me the least glance of sorrow or reproach. And when I and my beloved house had, for some years, to part company, on account of my innumerable follies, Will became its de facto guardian, faithfully writing to me with News of the comings and goings within it, and of the changing colours in the park, as some several seasons passed. In short, no man could have had by his side for almost twenty years a more admirable, loyal, honest and hard-working Servant.

Now, however, Will's body and mind are much decayed. Though I pay him handsomely, he is no longer able to perform to any satisfactory degree the Tasks about my house and person for which he receives his money. He cannot walk without his knees bend outwards and his spine curves over, like the spine of a little rat, so that his progress across any room is most painful and slow. When attempting to carry any Article, whether a tureen of soup or a tankard of ale, he is like to let it fall and smash or spill, for that his hands have some Disease of Curvature and cannot fasten themselves securely round an object.

Other afflictions are come upon him, viz. Forgetfulness, near-Blindness and a Deafness, which I fancy may be dictated more by Whim than by any true loss of hearing. For if I give Will an order that he does not relish, such as that of accompanying me on one of

my visits to my Patients, he affects not to hear a word that I have uttered, whereas any command that is to his liking he obeys without question or hesitation.

He has become very fearful of the world beyond the gates of Bidnold. Where, once upon a memorable time, he came with me by fast coach to London and waited patiently in the gardens at Whitehall while I endured an encounter with the King which almost broke my heart, and Will's too, now he keeps close within the house and is barely to be seen taking the air of the park, 'lest,' he says to me one day, 'it give me a bitter Winter Ague, Sir Robert, or that I might trip upon a grassy tussock and break my Shin and fall, and be not able to raise myself up and lie undiscovered till night come, or morning, when frost or snow obliterate me quite.'

'Ah, is that what you think of me, Will,' say I to this, 'that I would leave you lying alone and wounded under the stars or out in the snow?'

'Well, I do, Sir,' says he, 'for the reason that you would not *know* of my falling, for I am a Servant, Sir Robert, and have practised the Art of Invisibility for these twenty years, so that the sight of me, whether upright or lying down, be never troubling to you.'

I wanted to remark that, in recent years, the Sight of Will causes me *nothing but trouble*, but I did not. For to say anything wounding to Will appears to be quite beyond my powers. And when I think of what I should rightly do, which is to dismiss him from my service, I feel in my heart a terrible Ache. For the truth is that I feel for Will a most profound affection, as though he might be a sort of Father to me, a Father who, in his goodness, has chosen to overlook my many imperfections and to see me as an Honourable Man.

What am I do, then?

If I take from Will his seniority in the Servants' Hierarchy at Bidnold Manor and assign to him lighter duties, such as those a mere Footman might easily perform, I know that he will feel the pain of this demotion through to his heart's core. He will deduce that I no longer value him. The sweetness of his nature will turn sour towards those who would now be above him in rank.

If I call him to me and tell him that I wish him to Take his Ease henceforth and do no more work, but live in honourable Retirement

here in my house, with all his pecuniary needs accommodated by me, it is possible that – such being the intensity of the bodily pain he suffers – he might fall at my feet and bless me and shed tears of gratitude and tell me that no kinder being than I, Sir Robert Merivel, lives and breathes in the world.

But though I admit I do like to imagine this scene, with my poor old Servant prostrate at my feet as though I were the King Himself, with all his inestimable power, I do also foresee, alas, great perturbation coming from another source, namely the rest of my Household, including Cattlebury, who is not far behind Will in age and Mental Confusion, and who has alarmed me with his occasional bouts of violent, seditious Agitation, during which he is fond of blaspheming against the Monarch and the Stuart dynasty and all their works.

Indeed, I dread that I might find myself the butt of a jealous Mutiny, upbraided for my unfairness and for my lack of consideration towards Cattlebury, but also towards the housemaids, footmen, washerwomen, woodcutters, grooms, and kitchen maids et cetera et cetera. And then I see in my mind a terrible Cavalcade of all my servants (without whose presence this household would soon enough fall into chaos) disappearing down the drive, and I left alone but for Will, to whom, in time, I would become a Nurse . . . thus performing a neat but vexing turn upon the Wheel of Fortune.

Better, say I to myself, to harden my heart and let Will perform his solitary Exit, with the destination 'Workhouse' writ upon his retreating back. But a Trap closes even upon this notion. For I have seen the Workhouses. Indeed I have. Not only are they cold and inhospitable places, and full of vermin and noise and stench, they must also, by law, live up to their name and so demand of their inhabitants that they *work*. Thus we return by a dread circle to the one thing of which Will Gates is well-nigh incapable: labour.

I ask again, what am I to do?

I cannot put Will out, to beg in the lanes and fields of Norfolk. He has no Family anywhere (nor ever has had, as far as I can ascertain) to take him in.

And so I conclude that – as with very many vexing things in this

life – the only course is to *do nothing*, in the vain hope that the Question of Will may somehow be resolved by Nature.

But no sooner has it entered my head that Will might soon *die*, than a feeling of the utmost Panic seizes upon me and I ask for Will to be sent to me in the Library straight away, so that I may verify that he is *not dead yet*.

Some time lapses between my command and Will's arrival at my door. As it lengthens – by virtue of the Slowness with which Will moves – I find myself drawn again to the sight of the Book lying on my escritoire and remembering that within its pages are numerous accounts of Will's kindnesses to me, as when I was commanded to ride in haste to London for an Audience with the King, without my supper, and Will thrust two Roasted Quail into the pocket of my riding coat and tied a flask of Alicante to the saddle of my mare, Danseuse, without which repast I might have fallen down in a faint when at last summoned into The Presence.

It has been, indeed, as though, for almost twenty years, Will's mind had kept a vigil upon mine, anticipating its many vacancies and shortcomings, and attempting to remedy these before I had become aware of them. And this realisation moves me to sudden tears, so that when at last Will enters the Library, he finds me blubbing by the fire. Though his sight is poor, he can tell at once that I am crying and says: 'Oh, not again, Sir Robert! Upon my soul, I think you will wear out all your handkerchiefs before the year is gone.'

'Luckily,' I say, 'it is November, Will. So there is not much more of the year in which to wear them out.'

'True, Sir,' he says, 'but I do not know, and nor does any of us here at Bidnold know why you must always be weeping.'

'No,' say I, blowing my nose on a silk foulard once given to me by my former Amour, Lady Bathurst, and now worn to a gossamer thinness. 'I do not know either. Now, Will, I have sent for you to ask you about this Book. It is the same Book, written by me in the years 1664 to 1667, which I gave into your possession when this House was restored to me in 1668. Was it then that you placed it under my mattress?'

Will's eyes go wandering about the space before him, as though it might be some dark cave where no light entered. His gaze falls at last upon the package containing the Book.

'1668?' he says. 'That was long ago, Sir Robert.'

'I know it was. It was fifteen years ago to be precise. Was it then that you laid the parcel under my mattress?'

'Must have been, Sir.'

'But you cannot be certain?'

'Of what thing in the world can a man be certain, Sir Robert?'

'Well. There is such a thing as Memory. Do you have any recollection of placing this object in my bed?'

'Yes, Sir.'

'You do?'

'Yes. I took it and laid it under your mattress, where you would not see it.'

I leave the fireside and begin to pace about the room, stuffing away my foulard and, in a general way, trying to assert in my person some semblance of Dignity and mastery of the moment. Then I turn and stare accusingly at Will.

'Do you mean to say, therefore,' I say, 'that my mattress has not been turned in *sixteen years*?'

Will does not move, but stands by the escritoire, holding fast to its edge, as though he might be about to fall. At length he says: 'It is not my job to turn mattresses, Sir Robert.'

'I know. But all the same, Will. Sixteen years! Do you not think that you, as head of the staff at Bidnold, should take some responsibility? Could not fleas and bedbugs have clustered there and done me harm?'

'Done you harm?'

'Yes.'

'I would never do you harm, Sir Robert.'

'I know, Will. All I am asking—'

'But there is another thing.'

'Yes?'

'A person does not always see a thing when it is there.'

'What d'you mean?'

'I mean . . . this Book of yours, it is so faded and snowed with dust and time, it might have looked – to the chambermaid – as a mere Wedge, to hold fast the corners of the bedstead.'

A Wedge to hold fast the corners of the bedstead.

I will freely admit, this last utterance of Will's does make me smile. My smile turns quickly to laughter, at which Will looks mightily relieved. I suppose it is not very agreeable to work for a Master who is so frequently overcome by Melancholy and childish tears, and I know that I must devise some way to become more buoyant in my existence. For the moment, however, I am at a loss to know how to go about this task.

I send Will away. I once again open the Book (which I shall henceforth refer to as *The Wedge*) and begin to read.

I read so long that the November Darkness begins to fall. No servant appears in the Library to light a lamp, so that the room becomes very blue with shadows.

And one darker shadow creeps out of the Story and seems to stand in silence beside me. I fancy I can smell the fustian of his clothes and see his white hands folded round an object I know to be a blue-and-white china soup ladle. His name is John Pearce.

2

I cannot think about John Pearce without a feeling, almost, of Suffocation coming into me. For this reason I endeavour not to think about him at all. But I am not always successful.

He was once my friend and fellow student of medicine at Cambridge. All his life he held to the Quaker religion, about which I used to tease him very frequently, hoping to engrave on the sombre map of his features the small indentation of a Smile, or even to hear his laughter, which was a singular croaking sound, like the mutterings of a bullfrog.

Though Pearce showed me much kindness, I know now that the Person I am, with all my uncontainable appetites, my mockery of the World and my failure to overcome my abiding Melancholy, was never truly loved by him.

When he visited me here at Bidnold, he looked about him at all my scarlet and gold Furnishings, at my gilded mirrors, my tapestries and marble statuettes and collections of pewter, and told me that Luxury was 'snuffing out my Vital Flame'. And when – after his being struck down with fever – Will and I kept Vigil at Pearce's bedside for thirty-seven hours, he gave neither of us any thanks whatsoever.

It was to Pearce that I went, however, when the King saw fit to cast me out of the Paradise into which he had put me.

I strove to be of use in the Quaker Bedlam at Whittlesea where Pearce and his Friends offered care to some of those who had collapsed into madness beneath the burden of the world. But the follies I committed there were very great and, as if in sorrow at all

that I was capable of by way of Debauchery and Stupidity, Pearce's frail body brewed up a very violent Consumption, from which he died.

We laid branches of pear blossom in his coffin. Into his hands I placed the blue-and-white china soup ladle, to which he had been passionately attached, for it was the only Thing he possessed from his Mother. The dark Fenland earth was heaped upon him.

From time to time I return to Pearce's grave. When she was nine or ten years old, I took my beloved daughter, Margaret, with me, so that I might present her to the Quaker Friends who had been so kind to me. (She is and always was a very beautiful child, with soft white skin and an abundance of fiery curls, and a dimpled smile of great sweetness.) I am immoderately proud of her.

When we came to the causeway known as Earls Bride, leading to the place where the Bedlam Hospital once stood, I saw at once that the buildings were deserted and the land about them overgrown, and that not one soul remained there. As we dismounted from the coach, a freezing wind howled round about us. I took Margaret's hand and led her forward into the first of the Houses, where, still, some straw sleeping pallets lay, and I saw her eyes very wide with wonder and confusion, and she said to me: 'Oh, Papa, where are all the people? Are they drowned?'

'Margaret,' said I, 'I do not know. But it seems certain that they are gone.'

And then I found myself in a Quandary. I had planned to leave Margaret in the care of the Quaker Keepers for a little moment, in order to walk out and stand beside Pearce's grave. I did not wish her to look upon his sad mound, (for so far Death had not made any imprint upon her innocent mind) and yet, having made this long journey, I was reluctant to drive away without standing for a moment under the sky, to commune with my dead friend.

Margaret and I stumbled together about the place, where weeds grew tall and rank, and I showed her the gnarled and twisted oak tree in the courtyard, where once I played my oboe and my young friend Daniel played his fiddle and we – the Keepers and the mad people

all together – danced a Tarantella – but I did not tell her that her Mother was one among the mad.

'What is a Tarantella?' said Margaret.

'Oh,' said I, 'it is a wild whirling jig, like this . . .' And I held her, two hands and began to prance about with her and she hopped and skipped with joy, and her laughter was like a cluster of bells, shaken under the vast, vaulting sky. And then I lifted her up and carried her to the coach and said to her: 'Rest here a moment, while I make one last tour of the houses, to be certain no one has been left behind, and I shall be back in a trice.'

I had brought with us a bag of dried currants and I gave her a handful of these, and she began to eat them obediently as I told the Coachman to wait for me, and I strode away towards the place where Pearce lies.

The grave, marked by a plain wooden cross (for that everything, with the Quakers, has to be Plain) was very choked with Elder and rough Briars, and I could not help myself from trying to get these away. And so, tearing the skin of my hands in my haste, I heard in my mind Pearce's disdain for what I was doing, saying to me: 'Merivel, tell me what purpose your actions serve. For, in all truth, I see none.'

'No,' I said. 'None at all. Except that these things Offend me.' And then I burst out with a cry, saying: 'Where has everybody gone, Pearce? Tell me where they have gone!'

But of course there was no answer from beneath the neglected mound. I cleared all the weeds away and bound my hand with a handkerchief, and touched the black clay with my fingers.

'John Pearce,' I said, 'you are with me always.'

Margaret has now reached the age of seventeen. She has lived here with me at Bidnold all her life and I have striven to be both Father and Mother to her, and, to my joy and relief, I observe – without any boasting or paternal Blindness – that she is a most beautiful, chaste and affectionate young girl, with a trusting nature not unlike my own, but miraculously devoid of her father's Silliness.

She loves me, I know, as much as any father could ask of a child, but as she has grown up, she has become more and more fond of

spending time in the House of my near Neighbour in Norfolk, Sir James Prideaux, Baronet, who is a man most venerated and learned in the Law and who presides at the Sessions House in Norwich three times a week.

This house of Prideaux's, Shottesbrooke Hall, is a very lively place, on account of the presence of his admirable wife, Arabella, and their four daughters, Jane, Mary, Virginia and Penelope. And I do see that Margaret has more to make her joyful there than here at Bidnold with me.

That Prideaux has no son must be, to a man of his stature and ambition, a disappointment, but he never speaks of it. To his girls he shows nothing but affectionate kindness, endeavouring to get for them all that they could possibly want. Music masters, dancing teachers, young professors of Mathematics and Geography, no less than Pattern-makers, Seamstresses and Haberdashers (such as my dear parents once were), come and go from Shottesbrooke, and the Prideaux girls demonstrate, each one, a fine curiosity about the world.

Towards Margaret, who is the same age as Mary, all the family shows a most touching care – just as though she might be a true part of the household. They recognise that although I, too, have taken some pains with Margaret's education – to the end that she plays the harpsichord admirably well and can speak French quite fluently, and dances like a beautiful Sprite of the Woods – she must often find her days with me a little dull. She is now studying Geography with Mary and over this is in rhapsodies, saying to me: 'Oh, Papa, never until now did I see that the world was so wide and vast. And never did I know that Great Rivers began as little Springs in the bosom of the mountains, and did you know that there are more than two hundred languages spoken on the Earth?'

'No,' say I, 'God be praised that I did not. The mastery of French is quite difficult enough for me.'

Margaret is staying at Shottesbrooke Hall now, in this grey November, when *The Wedge* has suddenly come into my possession.

I note that when I first set down my Story, I speculated that there

may have been more than one Beginning to it. I suggested indeed Five Beginnings. For I understood then that no life begins only when it begins, but has many additional inceptions, and each of these determines the course of what is to come.

And I now see with equal clarity that a man's life may have more than one Ending. But alas, the endings I may have earned present themselves to me, each and every one, in a sombre light. If there are five, as there were Five Beginnings, then these must surely be they.

An Ending through Loneliness. I cling to Margaret. She it is who stands between Myself and a very paramount feeling of the Void round about me. Whatever is good or noble in me, I see only in her. But I know that Margaret must soon enough marry. She will leave Bidnold for some other (and better) life.

Already, I am colluding with this Future, conferring with Prideaux and other Norfolk acquaintances about the suitability of certain young sons of the County Squires – or even of the Aristocracy – as husband to the daughter of a Knight of the Garter and Close Confidant of the King.

Hugo Mulholland, the son and heir of Sir Gerald Mulholland, a handsome youth, but with a strange stuttering speech, has called upon Margaret more than once. I can tell that she thinks Nothing of him and, when he is gone, laughs at his stutter and imitates it to perfection.

The last time this poor Hugo called, when he was safely in his Departing Carriage, Margaret folds her arms round my neck and says: 'Papa, do not cast me off to some stammering husband, I beg you!' And I kiss her hair and reassure her that she will only marry when she herself desires it and that, as far as it concerns myself, I would keep her with me at Bidnold to the end of time. But I know that I must not do this. Margaret will marry one day and that is that.

An Ending through Poverty. Though I am still practising Medicine, attending to the sores and sufferings of my neighbours in Norfolk as best I can, I seem to be one of those individuals to whom others prefer to become Indebted, rather than to pay him what they have contracted to pay.

From time to time I make up Accounts of what is owed to me and these sums are always large, and for a short time I endeavour to pursue my debtors with Firmness and Resolution. Some have the goodness to settle my bills, but little by little, in the absence of the rest of the money appearing, my Firmness and Resolution in regard to it die away, and I weary absolutely of my pursuit, as though it might be of some Unicorn, lost in the forests of Legend, which I am never going to find.

Thus, in time, my income may fall to almost nothing, and – unless the King keeps up the very generous Stipend or *loyer* that he allotted me when he returned my house to me in 1668, to ensure that I would always be ready at any moment in Time to receive him at Bidnold Manor – I may pass into a State of Destitution for which there will be no remedy. Without the *loyer* I would certainly be a discomfited man.

An Ending from Poisoning. My cook, Cattlebury – as already mentioned – is not so far behind Will in human Muddle that he can any longer be trusted to perform his culinary tasks with any real skill or competence. Last week, Cattlebury sugared a meat pie and fried a herring in molasses. When I returned these concoctions to the kitchen, Cattlebury appeared like an Ogre in my Dining Room, all awash with sweat and steam and holding in his hands not a cudgel, but a wooden Colander, through the holes of which his brains seemed to have slithered away, and asked me why, when he has taken so much trouble to Invent new dishes for me, I was so scornful of them.

'Cattlebury,' said I, 'if these are Inventions, pray return to what has already been invented.'

Will stood at his side, half bent in two and looking mournful. 'He did not mean any harm, Sir Robert,' said Will.

'He may have *meant* no harm,' said I, 'but harm there was, nevertheless. A good herring and a quantity of beef have been wasted.'

'He did not mean it,' repeated Will.

'If he did not mean it,' said I, 'then he did it through inattention or confusion, neither of which Commodity do I wish to find in abundance in a kitchen.'

The two men appeared at a Loss, the one leaning at a rightangle to himself, the other looking as though he had been boiled in a vat

of broth, and I looked at them and thought, you will be the Death of me. I shall not survive the Chaos that you bring.

An Ending from Suicide. I learn from Sir James Prideaux, who has attended many an Execution at the scaffold on Mouse Hill, behind Norwich, that among all the robbers, counterfeiters, pickpockets, debtors, pirates and murderers who pass along the thronged way to their Ends, few go there without what he calls 'some element of Pride'. It seems that the Condemned Man sees his last journey on this earth as a veritable Moment of Glory, as though he were raised, suddenly, to be celebrated for his wondrous deeds, instead of hanged for his knavery and deceit.

He will wear the best coat that he has, and his wig, if he has one, will be powdered, and the buckles of his shoes polished, and upon his face – so says Prideaux – resides invariably a beatific smile. Then he waves, even like a Royal Prince, to the crowds, and when the moment comes for him to mount the scaffold he swaggers up there, still waving and showing off the dirty lace at his cuff or the bedraggled plume of his hat.

And I do truly marvel at this and think to myself, why, Merivel, if such men do not fear Death, are you so craven before the thought of it? And so I now instruct myself to cast off this terror and steel my cowardly soul to outdistance my own predestined end by running like a Highwayman into the arms of my Maker. My only difficulty is in trying to imagine that Maker. I see him always and only as my poor Father, who died in a fire in 1662, burning with the feathers and ribbons of his humble Haberdasher's trade.

An Ending through Meaninglessness. This, I think, is the prospective ending that most dismays me. Despite a most almighty Struggle with God and with my Vocation, endeavouring always (as once exhorted by the King) to discover my own Usefulness and Purpose, I arrive very frequently at the suspicion that my life is a trifling thing, ill-lived, full of Misjudgement, Indulgence and Sloth, leading me only deeper and deeper into an abyss of Confusion and Emptiness, in which I no longer recall why I am alive. And a man who has lost this particular recall must surely be destined soon to Ultimate Oblivion.

*

Today, Margaret is returning to Bidnold.

Fittingly, a pathway discovers itself among the clouds, and in my park the sun shines copper and golden on the beeches and oaks. I take a turn about the gardens, where I have recently established an alley of pleached Hornbeams, with which I am mightily pleased, and watch the Deer contentedly grazing, untroubled by the winds of November, flicking their tails in the pretty light. And I note, as I have noted a hundred times before, what beauty is here.

When the carriage containing Margaret begins to make its way down the drive, I hasten back to the house, where I find Will already trying to assemble himself to greet his young Mistress. Margaret's maid, Tabitha, comes out also, and smooths her apron and pats her hair to rearrange what the wind has disturbed, and I see on both these faces expressions of great gladness.

Margaret steps down, wearing a new brown Cape, which I think must be a gift from Lady Prideaux, and I hasten to her and fold my arms about her and tell her how glad is all of Bidnold to see her. Though she is my own child, I am struck afresh, each time I see her, by the Glory that she brings with her. She is like a rainbow, or like some dazzle of light, where before there was none.

At supper Margaret says to me: 'Papa, I have some news to tell you: Sir James and his family are going to his mother's estates in the County of Cornwall for all of December and onwards past Twelfth Night. And they have invited me to go with them.'

We are eating a Carbonado, which is one of the few dishes seldom adulterated or burned by Cattlebury. I had been enjoying its excellence until this moment, but now, at once, I feel my appetite fade.

'Cornwall?' I say helplessly.

'Yes,' says Margaret. 'Mary says there are warm winds in that part of the country that blow all year round, and flowers that bloom at Christmas, and pathways of sand and camomile, leading from the house to the sea . . .'

I say nothing. In my mind's eye I see Margaret descending these scented pathways to the sea, wearing her new brown Cape, and walking onwards and onwards, always further and further away from me, until she is out of sight.

'Papa,' says Margaret. 'I hope that you will give me leave to go. There is an island, to which we may sail in a little barque, and on the island are Puffins, and I have never seen a Puffin.'

'Ah,' say I. 'Nor have I.'

I think I have gone pale, for Margaret stares at me and says: 'Are you well, Father? What's the matter?'

'Non . . . nothing . . .' I stammer (like Hugo Mulholland). 'I was merely trying to recall the colours of Puffins and what tail feathers they possess.'

'Their colours are black-and-white, with a yellow or orange bill, according to Penelope, but as to tail feathers, I will, if you let me travel to Cornwall, try to make some drawings or paintings of the birds for you, and then we will both be certain about Puffins.'

I take a gulp of wine. 'That will be a Great Relief,' I say, 'to have all uncertainty about Puffins cast aside!'

We laugh and I try to resume my consumption of the Carbonado, while I tell Margaret that of course she must go to Cornwall, which, in all of England, is one of the kindest places. And so it is accepted. Margaret will be away for some two months. And I hear myself promise to give her money for new clothes and a new fur muffler, in case it be a little breezy aboard the barque. But all the while I am thinking, not about Margaret, but about myself and I see come towards me the spectre of my Death through Loneliness, and I cannot help but feel the sadness of it and its slow chill.

The morning before she left for Shottesbrooke – a day of cold winds and a perturbation of hail, which spattered all the parkland with its white stones – I sat with Margaret beside the Library fire, trying to fortify my spirits with a continuous sip-sipping of some fine Alicante, yet knowing how horribly visible my Melancholy appeared. (I have lately acquired the habit, from the reading of the French philosopher Michel de Montaigne, of trying to see myself *de près*, or 'close up', not looking only outwards, but inwards upon my own demeanour and my own responses, with the eternal aim of acquiring some wisdom about the Person that I am, or might become.)

Trying to cheer me a little, Margaret began promising she would send me frequent letters from Cornwall, describing the beauty of the

secret coves where the sea washes in and ebbs out in its perpetual restlessness, and the intricacy of the shells that she and Mary might discover there.

'Ah,' said I, 'and the intricacy of all the Wrecked Ships attacked by Pirates, then torn apart upon the rocks, and of all the Dead washed ashore . . .'

Margaret regarded me with sorrow, as a mother disappointed by the behaviour of her child. 'Father,' she said, after a moment of silence, 'I have been thinking about something.'

'I am glad of that,' I said, 'for a mind empty of thought is prone to terrible Error.'

'Hush and do not mock, for once.'

'Puffins again, I suppose? You have been thinking of those?'

'No. I have been thinking of a thing Sir James said to me when I was last at Shottesbrooke, and that was the Importance – in a man's brief time on the earth – of embarking on some Life's Work.'

'I agree with him. But do not look at your father in that accusatory way, Margaret. You know that I have a great deal of *work* already, and—'

'He was talking about writing, Papa: the composition of a treatise upon some subject of Importance. He himself is embarked upon a very long and substantial Work he has entitled *Observations upon the Poor and upon the Prevalence of Crime in England*. And he told me that this labour of his gives him much satisfaction, for it takes him quite out of his own world . . .'

'You cannot say entirely out,' I snapped. 'Sir James is a magistrate, as you know, and his dealings with the Criminal Poor are therefore very frequent.'

'Indeed. But he is not one of them. He does not have to try to make his way in the world by selling oysters or by petty thievery. He is not shuffled onwards and always onwards from one parish to another, because no one wishes to have the expense of his care . . .'

'True. However—'

'The proposition I am trying to make, Father, is that I think, were *you* to embark upon some great enterprise of Writing, you might be less sunk into yourself and more contented with the world.'

I gaped at my daughter. It is true that I have brought her up to

perfect a certain Independence of Thought, but when that same Independence appears directed, like a barbed Arrow, against myself, I feel . . . well, what do I feel? I suppose that I simply feel Foolish. Yet it is a Foolishness mixed with Fear. (Was not the life of old King Lear brought all to naught by the Independence of Thought of his most beloved daughter?)

I drew nearer the fire, stretching out my hands to warm them. I was within a whisper of relating to Margaret – as some pitiful Defence of what she sees as my idleness and absence of cheer – my earlier attempts to set down the Story of my Life in *The Wedge*, but I remembered in the Nick of Time that this Life reveals, in all their naked horror, many of my Follies and Wickednesses, including the Wickedness I showed towards her own mother. I thus drew back from presenting it to her.

I resumed my sipping of the Alicante. Warmed a little by this, I said: 'It is very kind of you to be devoting your thoughts to my Welfare and do not think that I am not touched by this. And you are right that we are held to the world by our Endeavours in it, and yet . . .'

'And yet what?'

'Oh, Margaret,' I said, 'you did not know me when I was young! For then I was All Endeavour. For every minute of my Existence I was composing some great and Marvellous Plan. I even tried to become an Artist – until some vainglorious portraitist told me I had no talent. There were not hours in the day, nor days in the year, sufficient for all my Schemes. But after you were born and when Bidnold was restored to me, I resolved that I would calm my restless ways and settle down here in Norfolk to take care of you and pursue my profession, and to think no more of Glory or Preferment, or any worldly thing.'

Margaret rose from her chair and came to kneel by my feet, and rested her arms on my knees. 'Papa,' she said gently, 'I was not speaking about Glory.'

I lingered long in my chair after Margaret had gone to bed. 'Merivel,' said I to myself, 'to sit alone like this, day after day, while Margaret is gone to Cornwall, will assuredly bring you to a dark despondency. You must rise up and look about you, in some new place.'

Perhaps it was Margaret's mention of the word 'Glory' that brought to my mind the idea of travelling to France, to the Court of Louis XIV? I knew that what I longed for in these, my declining years, was to be dazzled by Wonders. At Versailles I would surely find them.

3

I have come to London.

I am attired in a very smart Russet Coat and brown Breeks, with a Cascade of lace at my neck and upon my head a very Lively Hat, which seems to shift its own warm weight from time to time as though it might be some tame, nesting Pheasant I had reared in Norfolk.

My wig is full and shiny and new. And I am wearing the Sword – a thing I have not done for some while, so that it keeps dragging upon my coat and threatening to make me stumble and topple me into the gutter. Luckily, I have also brought with me one of my ebony walking Canes and, with this to steady me, I am able to make a reasonably elegant progress down Birdcage Walk.

I am on my way to visit the King, having secured my Audience most easily by messenger and receiving from His Majesty a most delightful short Response, which reads as follows:

> *Ah, my dear Merivel,*
> *You cannot know, in these sombre and Difficult Times, how much it cheers Us to have word of you. You may come to the Apartments of the Duchess of Portsmouth (our sweet 'Fubbs') at Noon, where you will find Us more Grey and Grave than when last we met, but not lacking in Gladness to see you. And I hope that we may coax Laughter from our hearts.*
>
> *Charles Rex*

In the Walk, so called for its many airy Birdcages installed by the path, I am jostled by a great quantity of people, who perambulate

up and down within that vast shadow still cast by the Palace of Whitehall upon the nation's heart.

I know that the King, who seems to have wearied of every one of his Parliaments and now rules without them Absolutely, is less admired and revered than at his Coming In, when he appeared to us like a god. Indeed, there is a restless or even seditious spirit abroad in the Coffee Houses – or so I am told – and the country would much prefer England to be steered towards war with Catholic France by a Parliament, than to behold in the King's chambers a French mistress planted in splendour, and no Parliament anywhere to be seen. But yet I think there are many men (and women) who still suffer, as I suffer, from an old Disease and that is the Disease of Loving the King.

Though John Pearce, in his Quaker hatred of Monarchy and the Hierarchy of the so-called Nobility that it begets, tried to his dying moment to cure me of this malady, and though I struggled always to be the person that Pearce wanted me to be, I find, still, that the sight of the King – or even the mere *thought* of his arrival at Bidnold – wakes in my heart an extraordinary gladness that I am not able to suppress. And I think it may now be true that I no longer care to suppress it. The King's nature is very like mine, a composite of yearning appetite and sullen hypochondria, so we console each other, and this Consolation is very well understood by both of us.

I go on, without tripping or stumbling, into St James's Park, my heavy Sword making a vexing clicking noise as it bounces against my thighs, and come to a stop by the canal there, where a group of fops are gawping at a Crocodile, which is paddling itself out of the water.

'*Mon dieu! Mon dieu!*' yelp the fops, pointing at the creature and clutching at each other's shoulders in mock terror. 'What a Brute! Oh, but imagine that great Jaw opening and closing upon one's leg!'

'Or upon one's torso!'

'Oh, horror! Or upon one's *parts*!'

And they scuttle away at a jaunty run, laughing like Choirboys, with all their Swords clicking together and the silk of their stockings catching little glints of sunlight as their legs skip up.

I stand and stare at the Crocodile. It lies upon the grass in an