Chawdron, Aldous Leonard Huxley

Chawdron

From behind the outspread Times I broke a silence. 'Your friend Chawdron's dead, I see.'

'Dead?' repeated Tilney, half incredulously. 'Chawdron dead?'

'"Suddenly, of heart failure,"' I went on, reading from the obituary, '"at his residence in St James's Square."'

'Yes, his heart. . . .' He spoke meditatively. 'How old was he? Sixty?'

'Fifty-nine. I didn't realize the ruffian had been rich for so long. ". . . the extraordinary business instinct, coupled with a truly Scottish doggedness and determination, which raised him, before he was thirty-five, from obscurity and comparative poverty to the height of opulence." Don't you wish you could write like that? My father lost a quarter of a century's savings in one of his companies.'

'Served him right for saving!' said Tilney with a sudden savagery. Surprised, I looked at him over the top of my paper. On his gnarled and ruddy face was an expression of angry gloom. The news had evidently depressed him. Besides, he was always ill-tempered at breakfast. My poor father was paying. 'What sort of jam is that by you?' he asked fiercely.

'Strawberry.'

'Then I'll have some marmalade.'

I passed him the marmalade and, ignoring his bad temper, 'When the Old Man,' I continued, 'and along with him, of course, most of the other shareholders, had sold out at about eighty per cent dead loss, Chawdron did a little quiet conjuring and the price whizzed up again. But by that time he was the owner of practically all the stock.'

'I'm always on the side of the ruffians,' said Tilney. 'On principle.'

'Oh, so am I. All the same, I do regret those twelve thousand pounds.'

Tilney said nothing. I returned to the obituary.

'What do they say about the New Guinea Oil Company scandal?' he asked after a silence.

'Very little; and the touch is beautifully light. "The findings of the Royal Commission were on the whole favourable, though it was generally considered at the time that Mr Chawdron had acted somewhat inconsiderately."'

Tilney laughed. '"Inconsiderately" is good. I wish I made fourteen hundred thousand pounds each time I was inconsiderate.'

'Was that what he made out of the New Guinea Oil business?'

'So he told me, and I don't think he exaggerated. He never lied for pleasure. Out of business hours he was remarkably honest.'

'You must have known him very well.'

'Intimately,' said Tilney, and, pushing away his plate, he began to fill his pipe.

'I envy you. What a specimen for one's collection! But didn't you get rather bored with living inside the museum, so to speak, behind the menagerie bars? Being intimate with a specimen—it must be trying.'

'Not if the specimen's immensely rich,' Tilney answered. 'You see, I'm partial to Napoleon brandy and Corona Coronas; parasitism has its rewards. And if you're skilful, it needn't have too many penalties. It's possible to be a high-souled louse, an independent tapeworm. But Napoleon brandy and Coronas weren't the only attractions Chawdron possessed for me. I have a disinterested, scientific curiosity about the enormously wealthy. A man with an income of more than fifty thousand a year is such a fantastic and improbable being. Chawdron was specially interesting because he'd made all his money—mainly dishonestly; that was the fascinating thing. He was a large-scale, Napoleonic crook. And, by God, he looked it! Did you know him by sight?'

I shook my head.

'Like an illustration to Lombroso. A criminal type. But intelligently criminal, not brutally. He wasn't brutal.'

'I thought he was supposed to look like a chimpanzee,' I put in.

'He did,' said Tilney. 'But, after all, a chimpanzee isn't brutal-looking. What you're struck by in a chimpanzee is its all-but-human appearance. So very intelligent, so nearly a man. Chawdron's face had just that look. But with a difference. The chimpanzee looks gentle and virtuous and quite without humour. Whereas Chawdron's intelligent all-but-humanity was sly and, underneath the twinkling jocularity, quite ruthless. Oh, a strange, interesting creature! I got a lot of fun out of my study of him. But in the end, of course, he did bore me. Bored me to death. He was so drearily uneducated. Didn't know the most obvious things, couldn't understand a generalization. And then quite disgustingly without taste, without aesthetic sense or understanding. Metaphysically and artistically a cretin.'

'The obituarist doesn't seem to be of your opinion.' I turned again to The Times. 'Where is it now? Ah! "A remarkable writer was lost when Chawdron took up finance. Not entirely lost, however; for the brilliant Autobiography, published in 1921, remains as a lasting memorial to his talents as a stylist and narrator." What do you say to that?' I asked, looking up at Tilney.

He smiled enigmatically. 'It's quite true.'

'I never read the book, I confess. Is it any good?'

'It's damned good.' His smile mocked, incomprehensibly.

'Are you pulling my leg?'

'No, it was really and genuinely good.'

'Then he can hardly have been such an artistic cretin as you make out.'

'Can't he?' Tilney echoed and, after a little pause, suddenly laughed aloud. 'But he was a cretin,' he continued on a little gush of confidingness that seemed to sweep away the barriers of his willed discretion, 'and the book was good. For the excellent reason that he didn't write it. I wrote it.'

'You?' I looked at him, wondering if he were joking. But his face, after the quick illumination of laughter, had gone serious, almost gloomy. A curious face, I reflected. Handsome in its way, intelligent, aware, yet with something rather sinister about it, almost repulsive. The superficial charm and good humour of the man seemed to overlie a fundamental hardness, an uncaringness, a hostility even. Too much good living, moreover, had left its marks on that face. It was patchily red and lumpy. The fine features had become rather gross. There was a coarseness mingled with the native refinement. Did I like Tilney or did I not? I never rightly knew. And perhaps the question was irrelevant. Perhaps Tilney was one of those men who are not meant to be liked or disliked as men—only as performers. I liked his conversation, I was amused, interested, instructed by what he said. To ask myself if I also liked what he was—this was, no doubt, beside the point.

Tilney got up from the table and began to walk up and down the room, his pipe between his teeth, smoking. 'Poor Chawdron's dead now, so there's no reason . . .' He left the sentence unfinished, and for a few seconds was silent. Standing by the window, he looked out through the rain-blurred glass on to the greens and wet greys of the Kentish landscape. 'England looks like the vegetables at a Bloomsbury boarding-house dinner,' he said slowly. 'Horrible! Why do we live in this horrible country? Ugh!' He shuddered and turned away. There was another silence. The door opened and the maid came in to clear the breakfast table.

I say 'the maid'; but the brief impersonal term is inaccurate. Inaccurate, because wholly inadequate to describe Hawtrey. What came in, when the door opened, was personified efficiency, was a dragon, was stony ugliness, was a pillar of society, was the Ten Commandments on legs. Tilney, who did not know her, did not share my terror of the domestic monster. Unaware of the intense disapproval which I could feel her silently radiating (it was after ten; Tilney's slug-a-bed habits had thrown out of gear the whole of her morning's routine) he continued to walk up and down, while Hawtrey busied herself round the table. Suddenly he laughed. 'Chawdron's Autobiography was the only one of my books I ever made any money out of,' he said.

I listened apprehensively, lest he should say anything which might shock or offend the dragon. 'He turned over all the royalties to me,' Tilney went on. 'I made the best part of three thousand pounds out of his Autobiography. Not to mention the five hundred he gave me for writing it.' (Was it quite delicate, I wondered, to talk of such large sums of money in front of one so incomparably more virtuous than ourselves and so much poorer? Fortunately, Tilney changed the subject.) 'You ought to read it,' he said. 'I'm really quite offended that you haven't. All that lower middle-class childhood in Peebles—it's really masterly.' ('Lower middle-class'—I shuddered. Hawtrey's father had owned a shop; but he had had misfortunes.) 'It's Clayhanger and L'Éducation Sentimentale and David Copperfield all rolled into one.

Really superb. And the first adventurings into the world of finance were pure Balzac—magnificent.' He laughed again, this time without bitterness, amusedly; he was warming to his subject. 'I even put in a Rastignac soliloquy from the top of the dome of St Paul's, made him shake his fist

at the City. Poor old Chawdron! he was thrilled. "If only I'd known what an interesting life I'd had," he used to say to me. "Known while the life was going on."' (I looked at Hawtrey to see if she was resenting the references to an interesting life. But her face was closed; she worked as though she were deaf.) '"You wouldn't have lived it," I told him. "You must leave the discovery of the excitingness to the artists."'

He was silent again. Hawtrey laid the last spoon on the tray and moved towards the door. Thank heaven! 'Yes, the artists,' Tilney went on in a tone that had gone melancholy again. 'I really was one, you know.' (The departing Hawtrey must have heard that damning confession. But then, I reflected, she always did know that I and my friends were a bad lot.) 'Really am one,' he insisted. 'Qualis artifex! But pereo, pereo. Somehow, I've never done anything but perish all my life. Perish, perish, perish. Out of laziness and because there always seemed so much time. But I'm going to be forty-eight next June. Forty-eight! There isn't any time. And the laziness is such a habit. So's the talking. It's so easy to talk. And so amusing. At any rate for oneself.'

'For other people too,' I said; and the compliment was sincere. I might be uncertain whether or no I liked Tilney. But I genuinely liked his performance as a talker. Sometimes, perhaps, that performance was a little too professional. But, after all, an artist must be a professional.

'It's what comes of being mostly Irish,' Tilney went on. 'Talking's the national vice. Like opium-smoking with the Chinese!' (Hawtrey re-entered silently to sweep up the crumbs and fold the table-cloth.) 'If you only knew the number of masterpieces I've allowed to evaporate at dinner tables, over the cigars and the whisky!' (Two things of which, I knew, the Pillar of Society virtuously disapproved.) 'A whole library. I might have been—what? Well, I suppose I might have been a frightful old bore,' he answered himself with a forced self-mockery. '"The Complete Works of Edmund Tilney, in Thirty-Eight Volumes, post octavo." I dare say the world ought to be grateful to me for sparing it that. All the same, I get a bit depressed when I look over the back numbers of the Thursday Review and read those measly little weekly articles of mine. Parturiunt montes . . .'

'But they're good articles,' I protested. If I had been more truthful, I would have said that they were sometimes good—when he took the trouble to make them good. Sometimes, on the contrary . . .

'Merci, cher maître!' he answered ironically. 'But hardly more perennial than brass, you must admit. Monuments of wood pulp. It's depressing being a failure. Particularly if it's your fault, if you might have been something else.'

I mumbled something. But what was there to say? Except as a professional talker, Tilney had been a failure. He had great talents and he was a literary journalist who sometimes wrote a good article. He had reason to feel depressed.

'And the absurd, ironical thing,' he continued, 'is that the one really good piece of work I ever did is another man's autobiography. I could never prove my authorship even if I wanted to. Old Chawdron was very careful to destroy all the evidences of the crime. The business arrangements were all verbal. No documents of any kind. And the manuscript, my manuscript—he bought it off me. It's burnt.'

I laughed. ‘He took no risks with you.’ Thank heaven! The dragon was preparing to leave the room for good.

‘None whatever,’ said Tilney. ‘He was going to be quite sure of wearing his laurel wreath. There was to be no other claimant. And at the time, of course, I didn’t care two pins. I took the high line about reputation. Good art—and Chawdron’s Autobiography was good art, a really first-rate novel—good art is its own reward.’ (Hawtrey’s comment on this was almost to slam the door as she departed.) ‘You know the style of thing? And in this case it was more than its own reward. There was money in it. Five hundred down and all the royalties. And I was horribly short of money at the moment. If I hadn’t been, I’d never have written the book. Perhaps that’s been one of my disadvantages—a small independent income and not very extravagant tastes. I happened to be in love with a very expensive young woman at the time when Chawdron made his offer.

You can’t go dancing and drinking champagne on five hundred a year. Chawdron’s cheque was timely. And there I was, committed to writing his memoirs for him. A bore, of course. But luckily the young woman jilted me soon afterwards; so I had time to waste. And Chawdron was a ruthless taskmaster. And besides, I really enjoyed it once I got started. It really was its own reward. But now—now that the book’s written and the money’s spent and I’m soon going to be fifty, instead of forty as it was then—now, I must say, I’d rather like to have at least one good book to my credit. I’d like to be known as the author of that admirable novel, The Autobiography of Benjamin Chawdron, but, alas, I shan’t be.’ He sighed. ‘It’s Benjamin Chawdron, not Edmund Tilney, who’ll have his little niche in the literary histories.

Not that I care much for literary history. But I do rather care, I must confess, for the present anticipations of the niche. The drawing-room reputation, the mentions in the newspapers, the deference of the young, the sympathetic curiosity of the women. All the by-products of successful authorship. But there, I sold them to Chawdron. For a good price. I can’t complain. Still, I do complain. Have you got any pipe tobacco? I’ve run out of mine.’

I gave him my pouch. ‘If I had the energy,’ he went on, as he refilled his pipe, ‘or if I were desperately hard up, which, thank heaven and at the same time alas! I’m not at the moment, I could make another book out of Chawdron. Another and a better one. Better,’ he began explaining, and then interrupted himself to suck at the flame of the match he had lighted, ‘because . . . so much more . . . malicious.’ He threw the match away. ‘You can’t write a good book without being malicious. In the Autobiography I made a hero of Chawdron. I was paid to; besides, it was Chawdron himself who provided me with my documents. In this other book he’d be the villain.

Or in other words, he’d be himself as others saw him, not as he saw himself. Which is, incidentally, the only valid difference between the virtuous and the wicked that I’ve ever been able to detect. When you yourself indulge in any of the deadly sins, you’re always justified—they’re never deadly. But when anyone else indulges, you’re very properly indignant. Old Rousseau had the courage to say that he was the most virtuous man in the world. The rest of us only silently believe it. But to return to Chawdron. What I’d like to do now is to write his biography, not his autobiography. And the biography of a rather different aspect of the man. Not about the man of action, the captain of industry, the

Napoleon of finance and so forth. But about the domestic, the private, the sentimental Chawdron.'

'The Times had its word about that,' said I; and picking up the paper once more, I read: '"Under a disconcertingly brusque and even harsh manner Mr Chawdron concealed the kindliest of natures. A stranger meeting him for the first time was often repelled by a certain superficial roughness. It was only to his intimates that he revealed"—guess what!—"the heart of gold beneath."'

'Heart of gold!' Tilney took his pipe out of his mouth to laugh.

'And he also, I see, had "a deep religious sense".' I laid the paper down.

'Deep? It was bottomless.'

'Extraordinary,' I reflected aloud, 'the way they all have hearts of gold and religious senses. Every single one, from the rough old man of science to the tough old businessman and the gruff old statesman.'

'Hearts of gold!' Tilney repeated. 'But gold's much too hard. Hearts of putty, hearts of vaseline, hearts of hog-wash. That's more like it. Hearts of hog-wash. The tougher and bluffer and gruffer they are outside, the softer they are within. It's a law of nature. I've never come across an exception. Chawdron was the rule incarnate. Which is precisely what I want to show in this other, potential book of mine—the ruthless Napoleon of finance paying for his ruthlessness and his Napoleonism by dissolving internally into hog-wash. For that's what happened to him: he dissolved into hog-wash. Like the Strange Case of Mr Valdemar in Edgar Allan Poe.

I saw it with my own eyes. It's a terrifying spectacle. And the more terrifying when you realize that, but for the grace of God, there goes yourself—and still more so when you begin to doubt of the grace of God, when you see that there in fact you do go. Yes, you and I, my boy. For it isn't only the tough old businessmen who have the hearts of hog-wash. It's also, as you yourself remarked just now, the gruff old scientists, the rough old scholars, the bluff old admirals and bishops, and all the other pillars of Christian society. It's everybody, in a word, who has made himself too hard in the head or the carapace; everybody who aspires to be non-human—whether angel or machine it doesn't matter. Super-humanity is as bad as sub-humanity, is the same thing finally. Which shows how careful one should be if one's an intellectual. Even the mildest sort of intellectual. Like me, for example.

I'm not one of your genuine ascetic scholars. God forbid! But I'm decidedly high-brow, and I'm literary; I'm even what the newspapers call a "thinker". I suffer from a passion for ideas. Always have, from boyhood onwards. With what results? That I've never been attracted by any woman who wasn't a bitch.'

I laughed. But Tilney held up his hand in a gesture of protest. 'It's a serious matter,' he said. 'It's disastrous, even. Nothing but bitches. Imagine!'

'I'm imagining,' I said. 'But where do the books and the ideas come in? Post isn't necessarily propter.'

'It's propter in this case all right. Thanks to the books and the ideas, I never learnt how to deal with real situations, with solid people and things. Personal relationships—I've never been able to manage them effectively. Only ideas. With ideas I'm at home. With the idea of personal relationships, for example. People think I'm an excellent psychologist. And I suppose I am. Spectatorially. But I'm a bad experiencer. I've lived most of my life posthumously, if you see what I mean; in reflections and conversations after the fact. As though my existence were a novel or a textbook of psychology or a biography, like any of the others on the library shelves. An awful situation. That was why I've always liked the bitches so much, always been so grateful to them—because they were the only women I ever contrived to have a non-posthumous, contemporary, concrete relation with. The only ones.' He smoked for a moment in silence.

'But why the only ones?' I asked.

'Why?' repeated Tilney. 'But isn't it rather obvious? For the shy man, that is to say the man who doesn't know how to deal with real situations and people, bitches are the only possible lovers, because they're the only women who are prepared to come to meet him, the only ones who'll make the advances he doesn't know how to make.'

I nodded. 'Shy men have cause to be drawn to bitches: I see that. But why should the bitches be drawn to the shy men? What's their inducement to make those convenient advances? That's what I don't see.'

'Oh, of course they don't make them unless the shy man's attractive,' Tilney answered. 'But in my case the bitches always were attracted. Always. And, quite frankly, they were right. I was tolerably picturesque, I had that professional Irish charm, I could talk, I was several hundred times more intelligent than any of the young men they were likely to know. And then, I fancy, my very shyness was an asset. You see, it didn't really look like shyness. It exteriorized itself as a kind of god-like impersonality and remoteness—most exciting for such women. I had the charm in their eyes of Mount Everest or the North Pole—something difficult and unconquered that aroused the record-breaking instincts in them.

And at the same time my shy remoteness made me seem somehow superior; and, as you know, few pleasures can be compared with the sport of dragging down superiority and proving that it's no better than oneself. My air of disinterested remoteness has always had a succès fou with the bitches. They all adore me because I'm so "different". "But you're different, Edmund, you're different,"' he fluted in falsetto. 'The bitches! Under their sentimentalities, their one desire, of course, was to reduce me as quickly as possible to the most ignoble un-difference. . . .'

'And were they successful?' I asked.

'Oh, always. Naturally. It's not because a man's shy and bookish that he isn't a porco di prim' ordine. Indeed, the more shyly bookish, the more likely he is to be secretly porkish. Or if not a porco, at least an asino, an oca, a vitello. It's the rule, as I said just now; the law of nature. There's no escaping.'

I laughed. 'I wonder which of the animals I am?'

Tilney shook his head. 'I'm not a zoologist. At least,' he added, 'not when I'm talking to the specimen under discussion. Ask your own conscience.'

'And Chawdron?' I wanted to hear more about Chawdron. 'Did Chawdron grunt, or bray, or moo?'

'A little of each. And if earwigs made a noise . . . No, not earwigs. Worse than that. Chawdron was an extreme case; and the extreme cases are right outside the animal kingdom.'

'What are they, then? Vegetables?'

'No, no. Worse than vegetables. They're spiritual. Angels, that's what they are: putrefied angels. It's only in the earlier stages of the degeneration that they bleat and bray. After that they twang the harp and flap their wings. Pigs' wings, of course. They're Angels in pigs' clothing. Hearts of hog-wash. Did I ever tell you about Chawdron and Charlotte Salmon?'

'The 'cellist?'

He nodded. 'What a woman!'

'And her playing! So clotted, so sagging, so greasy . . .' I fumbled for the apt description.

'So terribly Jewish, in a word,' said Tilney. 'That retching emotionalism, that, sea-sickish spirituality—purely Hebraic. If only there were a few more Aryans in the world of music! The tears come into my eyes whenever I see a blonde beast at the piano. But that's by the way. I was going to tell you about Charlotte. You know her, of course?'

'Do I not!'

'Well, it was Charlotte who first revealed to me poor Chawdron's heart of hog-wash. Mine too, indirectly. It was one evening at old Cryle's. Chawdron was there, and Charlotte, and myself, and I forget who else. People from all the worlds, anyhow. Cryle, as you know, has a foot in each. He thinks it's his mission to bring them together. He's the match-maker between God and Mammon. In this case he must have imagined that he'd really brought off the marriage. Chawdron was Mammon all right; and though you and I would be chary of labelling Charlotte as God, old Cryle, I'm sure, had no doubts. After all, she plays the 'cello; she's an Artist. What more can you want?'

'What indeed!'

'I must say, I admired Charlotte that evening,' he went on. 'She knew so exactly the line to take with Chawdron; which was the more surprising as with me she's never quite pulled it off. She tries the siren on me, very dashing and at the same time extremely mysterious. Her line is to answer my most ordinary remarks with something absolutely incomprehensible, but obviously very significant. If I ask her, for example: "Are you going to the Derby this year?" she'll smile a really Etruscan smile and answer: "No, I'm too busy watching the boat-race in my own heart." Well, then, obviously it's my cue to be terribly intrigued. "Fascinating Sphinx," I ought to say, "tell me more about your visceral boat-race," or words to that effect. Whereupon it would almost certainly turn out that I was rowing stroke in the winning boat. But I'm afraid I can't bring myself to

do what’s expected of me. I just say: “What a pity! I was making up a party to go to Epsom”—and hastily walk away. No doubt, if she was less blackly Semitic I’d be passionately interested in her boat-race.

But as it is, her manoeuvre doesn’t come off. She hasn’t yet been able to think of a better one. With Chawdron, however, she discovered the correct strategy from the first moment. No siren, no mystery for him. His heart was too golden and hog-washy for that. Besides, he was fifty. It’s the age when clergymen first begin to be preoccupied with the underclothing of little schoolgirls in trains, the age when eminent archaeologists start taking a really passionate interest in the Scout movement. Under Chawdron’s criminal mask Charlotte detected the pig-like angel, the sentimental Pickwickian child-lover with a taste for the détournement de mineurs. Charlotte’s a practical woman: a child was needed, she immediately became the child. And what a child! I’ve never seen anything like it. Such prattling! Such innocent big eyes! Such merry, merry laughter! Such a wonderfully ingenuous way of saying extremely risqué things without knowing (sweet innocent) what they meant! I looked on and listened—staggered. Horrified too.

The performance was really frightful. Suffer little children . . . But when the little child’s twenty-eight and tough for her age—ah, no; of such is the kingdom of hell. For me, at any rate. But Chawdron was enchanted. Really did seem to imagine he’d got hold of something below the age of consent. I looked at him in amazement. Was it possible he should be taken in? The acting was so bad, so incredibly unconvincing. Sarah Bernhardt at seventy playing L’Aiglon looked more genuinely like a child than our tough little Charlotte.

But Chawdron didn’t see it. This man who had lived by his wits, and not merely lived, but made a gigantic fortune by them:—was it possible that the most brilliant financier of the age should be so fabulously stupid? “Youth’s infectious,” he said to me after dinner, when the women had gone out. And then—you should have seen the smile on his face: beatific, lubrically tender—“She’s like a jolly little kitten, don’t you think?” But what I thought of was the New Guinea Oil Company. How was it possible?

And then suddenly I perceived that it wasn’t merely possible; it was absolutely necessary. Just because he’d made fourteen hundred thousand pounds out of the New Guinea Oil scandal, it was inevitable that he should mistake a jolly little tarantula like Charlotte for a jolly little kitten. Inevitable. Just as it was inevitable that I should be bowled over by every bitch that came my way. Chawdron had spent his life thinking of oil and stock markets and flotations. I’d spent mine reading the Best that has been Thought or Said. Neither of us had had the time or energy to live—completely and intensely live, as a human being ought to, on every plane of existence. So he was taken in by the pseudo-kitten, while I succumbed to the only too genuine bitch. Succumbed, what was worse, with full knowledge. For I was never really taken in. I always knew that the bitches were bitches and not milk-white hinds.

And now I also know why I was captivated by them. But that, of course, didn’t prevent me from continuing to be captivated by them. Experientia doesn’t, in spite of Mrs Micawber’s Papa. Nor does knowledge.’ He paused to relight his pipe.

‘What does, then?’ I asked.

Tilney shrugged his shoulders. ‘Nothing does, once you’ve gone off the normal instinctive rails.’

‘I wonder if they really exist, those rails?’

‘So do I, sometimes,’ he confessed. ‘But I piously believe.’

‘Rousseau and Shelley piously believed too. But has anybody ever seen a Natural Man? Those Noble Savages . . . Read Malinowsky about them; read Frazer; read . . .’

‘Oh, I have, I have. And of course the savage isn’t noble. Primitives are horrible. I know. But then the Natural Man isn’t Primitive Man. He isn’t the raw material of humanity; he’s the finished product. The Natural Man is a manufactured article—no, not manufactured; rather, a work of art. What’s wrong with people like Chawdron is that they’re such bad works of art. Unnatural because inartistic. Ary Scheffer instead of Manet. But with this difference.

An Ary Scheffer is statically bad; it doesn’t get worse with the passage of time. Whereas an inartistic human being degenerates, dynamically. Once he’s started badly, he becomes more and more inartistic. It needs a moral earthquake to arrest the process. Mere fleabites, like experience or knowledge, are quite unavailing. Experientia doesn’t. If it did, I should never have succumbed as I did, never have got into financial straits, and therefore never have written Chawdron’s autobiography, never have had an opportunity for collecting the intimate and discreditable materials for the biography that, alas, I shall never write. No, no; experience didn’t save me from falling a victim yet once more. And to such a ruinously expensive specimen. Not that she was mercenary,’ he put in parenthetically. ‘She was too well off to need to be.

So well off, however, that the mere cost of feeding and amusing her in the style she was accustomed to being fed and amused in was utterly beyond my means. Of course she never realized it. People who are born with more than five thousand a year can’t be expected to realize. She’d have been terribly upset if she had; for she had a heart of gold—like all the rest of us.’ He laughed mournfully. ‘Poor Sybil! I expect you remember her.’

The name evoked for me a pale-eyed, pale-haired ghost. ‘What an astonishingly lovely creature she was!’

‘Was, was,’ he echoed. ‘Fuit. Lovely and fatal. The agonies she made me suffer! But she was as fatal to herself as to other people. Poor Sybil! I could cry when I think of that inevitable course of hers, that predestined trajectory.’ With a stretched forefinger he traced in the air a curve that rose and fell away again. ‘She had just passed the crest when I knew her. The descending branch of the curve was horribly steep. What depths awaited her! That horrible little East-Side Jew she even went to the trouble of marrying! And after the Jew, the Mexican Indian. And meanwhile a little champagne had become rather a lot of champagne, rather a lot of brandy; and the occasional Good Times came to be incessant, a necessity, but so boring, such a dismal routine, so terribly exhausting. I didn’t see her for four years after our final quarrel; and then (you’ve no idea how painful it was) I suddenly found myself shaking hands with a Memento Mori. So worn and ill and tired, so terribly old. Old at thirty-four.

And the last time I'd seen her, she'd been radiant. Eighteen months later she was dead; but not before the Indian had given place to a Chinaman and the brandy to cocaine. It was all inevitable, of course, all perfectly foreseeable. Nemesis had functioned with exemplary regularity. Which only made it worse. Nemesis is all right for strangers and casual acquaintances. But for oneself, for the people one likes—ah, no! We ought to be allowed to sow without reaping. But we mayn't. I sowed books and reaped Sybil. Sybil sowed me (not to mention the others) and reaped Mexicans, cocaine, death. Inevitable, but an outrage, an insulting denial of one's uniqueness and difference. Whereas when people like Chawdron sow New Guinea Oil and reap kittenish Charlottes, one's delighted; the punctuality of fate seems admirable.'

'I never knew that Charlotte had been reaped by Chawdron,' I put in. 'The harvesting must have been done with extraordinary discretion. Charlotte's usually so fond of publicity, even in these matters. I should never have expected her . . .'

'But the reaping was very brief and partial,' Tilney explained.

That surprised me even more. 'Charlotte who's always so determined and clinging! And with Chawdron's millions to cling to. . . .'

'Oh, it wasn't her fault that it went no further. She had every intention of being reaped and permanently garnered. But she had arranged to go to America for two months on a concert tour. It would have been troublesome to break the contract; Chawdron seemed thoroughly infatuated; two months are soon passed. So she went. Full of confidence. But when she came back, Chawdron was otherwise occupied.'

'Another kitten?'

'A kitten? Poor Charlotte was a grey-whiskered old tigress by comparison. She even came to me in her despair. No enigmatic subtleties this time; she'd forgotten she was the Sphinx. "I think you ought to warn Mr Chawdron against that woman," she told me. "He ought to be made to realize that she's exploiting him. It's outrageous." She was full of righteous indignation. Not unnaturally. Even got angry with me because I wouldn't do anything. "But he wants to be exploited," I told her. "It's his only joy in life." Which was perfectly true. But I couldn't resist being a little malicious. "What makes you want to spoil his fun?" I asked. She got quite red in the face. "Because I think it's disgusting."' Tilney made his voice indignantly shrill. '"It really shocks me to see a man like Mr Chawdron being made a fool of in that way." Poor Charlotte! Her feelings did her credit. But they were quite unavailing. Chawdron went on being made a fool of, in spite of her moral indignation. Charlotte had to retreat. The enemy was impregnably entrenched.'

'But who was she—the enemy?'

'The unlikeliest femme fatale you ever saw. Little; rather ugly; sickly—yes, genuinely sickly, I think, though she did a good deal of pathetic malingering too; altogether too much the lady—refrained; you know the type. A governess; not the modern breezy, athletic sort of governess—the genteel, Jane Eyre, daughter-of-clergyman kind. Her only visible merit was that she was young. About twenty-five, I suppose.'

'But how on earth did they meet? Millionaires and governesses.'

‘A pure miracle,’ said Tilney. ‘Chawdron himself detected the hand of Providence. That was the deep religious sense coming in. “If it hadn’t been for both my secretaries falling ill on the same day,” he said to me solemnly (and you’ve no idea how ridiculous he looked when he was being solemn—the saintly forger, the burglar in the pulpit), “if it hadn’t been for that—and after all, how unlikely it is that both one’s secretaries should fall ill at the same moment, what a fateful thing to happen!—I should never have got to know my little Fairy.” And you must imagine the last words pronounced with a reverent and beautiful smile—indescribably incongruous on that crook’s mug of his. “My little Fairy” (her real name, incidentally, was Maggie Spindell), “my little Fairy!”’ Tilney seraphically smiled and rolled up his eyes. ‘You can’t imagine the expression. St Charles Borromeo in the act of breaking into the till.’

‘Painted by Carlo Dolci,’ I suggested.

‘With the assistance of Rowlandson. Do you begin to get it?’

I nodded. ‘But the secretaries?’ I was anxious to hear the story.

‘They had orders to deal summarily with all begging letters, all communications from madmen, inventors, misunderstood geniuses, and, finally, women. The job was a heavy one, I can tell you. You’ve no idea what a rich man’s post-bag is like. Fantastic. Well, as I say, Providence had given both private secretaries the ’flu. Chawdron happened to have nothing better to do that morning (Providence again); so he started opening his own correspondence. The third letter he opened was from the Fairy. It bowled him over.’

‘What was in it?’

Tilney shrugged his shoulders. ‘He never showed it me. But from what I gathered, she wrote about God and the Universe in general and her soul in particular, not to mention his soul. Having no taste, and being wholly without education, Chawdron was tremendously impressed by her philosophical rigmarole. It appealed to that deep religious sense! Indeed, he was so much impressed that he immediately wrote giving her an appointment. She came, saw, and conquered. “Providential, my dear boy, providential.” And of course he was right. Only I’d have dechristened the power and called it Nemesis. Miss Spindell was the instrument of Nemesis; she was Atè in the fancy dress that Chawdron’s way of life had caused him to find irresistible. She was the finally ripened fruit of sowings in New Guinea Oil and the like.’

‘But if your account’s correct,’ I put in, ‘delicious fruit—that is, for his taste. Being exploited by kittens was his only joy; you said it yourself. Nemesis was rewarding him for his offences, not punishing.’

Tilney paused in his striding up and down the room, meditatively knitted his brows and, taking his pipe out of his mouth, rubbed the side of his nose with the hot bowl. ‘Yes,’ he said slowly, ‘that’s an important point. I’ve had it vaguely in my head before now; but now you’ve put it clearly. From the point of view of the offender, the punishments of Nemesis may actually look like rewards. Yes, it’s quite true.’

‘In which case your Nemesis isn’t much use as a policewoman.’

He held up his hand. 'But Nemesis isn't a policewoman. Nemesis isn't moral. At least she's only incidentally moral, more or less by accident. Nemesis is something like gravitation, indifferent. All that she does is to guarantee that you shall reap what you sow. And if you sow self-stultification, as Chawdron did with his excessive interest in money, you reap grotesque humiliation. But as you're already reduced by your offences to a sub-human condition, you won't notice that the grotesque humiliation is a humiliation. There's your explanation why Nemesis sometimes seems to reward. What she brings is a humiliation only in the absolute sense—for the ideal and complete human being; or at any rate, in practice, for the nearly complete, the approaching-the-ideal human being. For the sub-human specimen it may seem a triumph, a consummation, a fulfilment of the heart's desire. But then, you must remember, the desiring heart is a heart of hog-wash. . . .'

'Moral,' I concluded: 'Live sub-humanly and Nemesis may bring you happiness.'

'Precisely. But what happiness!'

I shrugged my shoulders.

'But after all, for the relativist, one sort of happiness is as good as another. You're taking the God's-eye view.'

'The Greek's-eye view,' he corrected.

'As you like. But anyhow, from the Chawdron's-eye view the happiness is perfect. Therefore we ought to make ourselves like Chawdron.'

Tilney nodded. 'Yes,' he said, 'you need to be a bit of a platonist to see that the punishments are punishments. And of course if there were another life . . . Or better still, metempsychosis: there are some unbelievably disgusting insects . . . But even from the merely utilitarian point of view Chawdronism is dangerous. Socially dangerous. A society constructed by and for men can't work if all its components are emotionally sub-men. When the majority of hearts have turned to hog-wash, something catastrophic must happen. So that Nemesis turns out to be a policewoman after all. I hope you're satisfied.'

'Perfectly.'

'You always did have a very discreditable respect for law and order and morality,' he complained.

'They must exist. . . .'

'I don't know why,' he interrupted me.

'In order that you and I may be immoral in comfort,' I explained. 'Law and order exist to make the world safe for lawless and disorderly individualists.'

'Not to mention ruffians like Chawdron. From whom, by the way, we seem to have wandered. Where was I?'

'You'd just got to his providential introduction to the Fairy.'

'Yes, yes. Well, as I said, she came, saw, conquered. Three days later she was installed in the house. He made her his librarian.'

'And his mistress, I suppose.'

Tilney raised his shoulders and threw out his hands in a questioning gesture. 'Ah,' he said, 'that's the question. There you're touching the heart of the mystery.'

'But you don't mean to tell me . . .'

'I don't mean to tell you anything, for the good reason that I don't know. I only guess.'

'And what do you guess?'

'Sometimes one thing and sometimes another. The Fairy was genuinely enigmatic. None of poor Charlotte's fabricated sphinxishness; a real mystery. With thee Fairy anything was possible.'

'But not with Chawdron surely. In these matters, wasn't he . . . well, all too human?'

'No, only sub-human. Which is rather different. The Fairy roused in him all his sub-human spirituality and religiosity. Whereas with Charlotte it was the no less sub-human passion for the détournement de mineurs that came to the surface.'

I objected. 'That's too crude and schematic to be good psychology. Emotional states aren't so definite and clear-cut as that. There isn't one compartment for spirituality and another, water-tight, for the détournement de mineurs. There's an overlapping, a fusion, a mixture.'

'You're probably right,' said Tilney. 'And, indeed, one of my conjectures was precisely of such a fusion. You know the sort of thing: discourses insensibly giving place to amorous action—though "action" seems too strong a word to describe what I have in mind. Something ever so softly senile and girlish. Positively spiritual contacts. The loves of the angels—so angelic that, when it was all over, one wouldn't be quite sure whether there had been any interruption in the mystical conversation or not. Which would justify the Fairy in her righteous indignation when she heard of anyone's venturing to suppose that she was anything more than Chawdron's librarian. She could almost honestly believe she wasn't. "I think people are too horrid," she used to say to me on these occasions. "I think they're simply disgusting. Can't they even believe in the possibility of purity?" Angry she was, outraged, hurt. And the emotion seemed absolutely real. Which was such a rare occurrence in the Fairy's life—at any rate, so it seemed to me—that I was forced to believe it had a genuine cause.'

'Aren't we all genuinely angry when we hear that our acquaintances say the same sort of things about us as we say about them?'

'Of course; and the truer the gossip, the angrier we are. But the Fairy was angry because the gossip was untrue. She insisted on that—and insisted so genuinely (this is the point I was trying to make) that I couldn't help believing she had some justification. Either nothing had happened, or else something so softly and slimily angelic that it slipped past the attention, escaped notice, counted for nothing.'

'But after all,' I protested, 'it's not because one looks truthful that one's telling the truth.'

'No. But then you didn't know the Fairy. She hardly ever looked or sounded truthful. There was hardly anything she said that didn't strike me as being in one way or another a manifest lie. So that when she did seem to be telling the truth (and it was incredible how rarely that happened), I was always impressed. I couldn't help thinking there must be a reason. That's why I attach such importance to the really heart-felt way she got angry when doubts were cast on the purity of her relations with Chawdron. I believe that they really were pure, or else, more probably, that the impurity was such a little one, so to speak, that she could honestly regard it as non-existent. You'd have had the same impression too, if you'd heard her.

The genuineness of the anger, the outraged protest, was obvious. And then suddenly she remembered that she was a Christian, practically a saint; she'd start forgiving her enemies. "One's sorry for them," she'd say, "because they don't know any better. Poor people! ignorant of all the finer feelings, all the more beautiful relationships." I can't tell you how awful the word "beautiful" was in her mouth! Really blood-curdling. Be-yütiful. Very long-drawn-out, with the oo sound thinned and refined into German u-modified. Be-yütiful. Ugh!' He shuddered. 'It made one want to kill her. But then the whole tone of these Christian sentiments made one want to kill her. When she forgave the poor misguided people who couldn't see the be-yüty of her relations with Chawdron you were horrified, you felt sick, you went cold all over. For the whole thing was such a lie, so utterly and bottomlessly false. After the genuine anger against the scandalmongers, the falseness rang even falser than usual. Obvious, unmistakable, painful—like an untuned piano, like a cuckoo in June. Chawdron was deaf to it, of course; just didn't hear the falseness. If you have a deep religious sense, I suppose you don't notice those things.

"I think she has the most beautiful character I've ever met with in a human being," he used to tell me. ("Beautiful" again, you notice. Chawdron caught the trick from her. But in his mouth it was merely funny, not gruesome.) "The most beautiful character"—and then his beatific smile. Grotesque! It was just the same as with Charlotte; he swallowed her whole. Charlotte played the jolly kitten and he accepted her as the jolly kitten. The Fairy's ambition was to be regarded as a sanctified Christian kitten; and duly, as a Christian kitten, a confirmed, communicant, Catholic, canonized Kitten, he did regard her. Incredible; but, there! if you spend all your wits and energies knowing about oil, you can't be expected to know much about anything else. You can't be expected to know the difference between tarantulas and kittens, for example; nor the difference between St Catherine of Siena and a little liar like Maggie Spindell.'

'But did she know she was lying?' I asked. 'Was she consciously a hypocrite?'

Tilney repeated his gesture of uncertainty. 'Chi lo sa?' he said. 'That's the finally unanswerable question. It takes us back to where we were just now with Chawdron—to the borderland between biography and autobiography. Which is more real: you as you see yourself, or you as others see you? you in your intentions and motives, or you in the product of your intentions? you in your actions, or you in the results of your actions? And anyhow, what are your intentions and motives? And who is the "you" who has intentions? So that when you ask if the Fairy was a conscious liar and hypocrite, I just have to say that I don't know. Nobody knows. Not even the Fairy herself. For, after all, there were several Fairies.

There was one that wanted to be fed and looked after and given money and perhaps married one day, if Chawdron's wife happened to die.'

'I didn't know he had a wife,' I interrupted in some astonishment.

'Mad,' Tilney telegraphically explained. 'Been in an asylum for the last twenty-five years. I'd have gone mad too, if I'd been married to Chawdron. But that didn't prevent the Fairy from aspiring to be the second Mrs C. Money is always money. Well, there was that Fairy—the adventuress, the Darwinian specimen struggling for existence. But there was also a Fairy that genuinely wanted to be Christian and saintly. A spiritual Fairy. And if the spirituality happened to pay with tired businessmen like Chawdron—well, obviously, tant mieux.'

'But the falseness you spoke of, the lying, the hypocrisy?'

'Mere inefficiency,' Tilney answered. 'Just bad acting. For, when all's said and done, what is hypocrisy but bad acting? It differs from saintliness as a performance by Lucien Guitry differed from a performance by his son. One's artistically good and the other isn't.'

I laughed. 'You forget I'm a moralist; at least, you said I was. These aesthetic heresies. . .'

'Not heresies; just obvious statements of the facts. For what is the practice of morality? It's just pretending to be somebody that by nature you aren't. It's acting the part of a saint, or a hero, or a respectable citizen. What's the highest ethical ideal in Christianity? It's expressed in A Kempis's formula—"The Imitation of Christ". So that the organized Churches turn out to be nothing but vast and elaborate Academies of Dramatic Art. And every school's a school of acting. Every family's a family of Crummleses. Every human being is brought up as a mummer. All education, aside from merely intellectual education, is just a series of rehearsals for the part of Jesus or Podsnap or Alexander the Great, or whoever the local favourite may be. A virtuous man is one who's learned his part thoroughly and acts it competently and convincingly. The saint and the hero are great actors; they're Kembles and Siddonses—people with a genius for representing heroic characters not their own; or people with the luck to be born so like the heroic ideal that they can just step straight into the part without rehearsal.

The wicked are those who either can't or won't learn to act. Imagine a scene-shifter, slightly drunk, dressed in his overalls and smoking a pipe; he comes reeling on to the stage in the middle of the trial scene in the Merchant of Venice, shouts down Portia, gives Antonio a kick in the stern, knocks over a few Magnificos and pulls off Shylock's false beard. That's a criminal. As for a hypocrite—he's either a criminal interrupter disguised, temporarily and for his own purposes, as an actor (that's Tartuffe); or else (and I think this is the commoner type) he's just a bad actor. By nature, like all the rest of us, he's a criminal interrupter; but he accepts the teaching of the local Academies of Dramatic Art and admits that man's highest duty is to act star parts to applauding houses. But he is wholly without talent. When he's thinking of his noble part, he mouths and rants and gesticulates, till you feel really ashamed as you watch him—ashamed for yourself, for him, for the human species. "Methinks the lady, or gentleman, doth protest too much," is what you say.

And these protestations seem even more excessive when, a few moments later, you observe that the protester has forgotten altogether that he's

playing a part and is behaving like the interrupting criminal that it's his nature to be. But he himself is so little the mummer, so utterly without a talent for convincing representation, that he simply doesn't notice his own interruptions; or if he notices them, does so only slightly and with the conviction that nobody else will notice them. In other words, most hypocrites are more or less unconscious hypocrites. The Fairy, I'm sure, was one of them. She was simply not aware of being an adventuress with an eye on Chawdron's millions. What she was conscious of was her role—the role of St Catherine of Siena. She believed in her acting; she was ambitious to be a high-class West-End artiste.

But, unfortunately, she was without talent. She played her part so unnaturally, with such grotesque exaggerations, that a normally sensitive person could only shudder at the shameful spectacle. It was a performance that only the spiritually deaf and blind could be convinced by. And, thanks to his preoccupations with New Guinea Oil, Chawdron was spiritually deaf and blind. His deep religious sense was the deep religious sense of a sub-man. When she paraded the canonized kitten, I felt sea-sick; but Chawdron thought she had the most be-yütiful character he'd ever met with in a human being. And not only did he think she had the most beautiful character; he also, which was almost funnier, thought she had the finest mind. It was her metaphysical conversation that impressed him. She'd read a few snippets from Spinoza and Plato and some little book on the Christian mystics and a fair amount of that flabby theosophical literature that's so popular in Garden Suburbs and among retired colonels and ladies of a certain age; so she could talk about the cosmos very profoundly.

And, by God, she was profound! I used to lose my temper sometimes, it was such drivel, so dreadfully illiterate. But Chawdron listened reverently, fairly goggling with rapture and faith and admiration. He believed every word. When you're totally uneducated and have amassed an enormous fortune by legal swindling, you can afford to believe in the illusoriness of matter, the non-existence of evil, the oneness of all diversity and the spirituality of everything. All his life he'd kept up his childhood's Presbyterianism—most piously. And now he grafted the Fairy's rigmarole on to the Catechism, or whatever it is that Presbyterians learn in infancy. He didn't see that there was any contradiction between the two metaphysics, just as he'd never seen that there was any incongruity in his being both a good Presbyterian and a consummate swindler. He had acted the Presbyterian part only on Sundays and when he was ill, never in business hours. Religion had never been permitted to invade the sanctities of private life.

But with the advance of middle age his mind grew flabbier; the effects of a misspent life began to make themselves felt. And at the same time his retirement from business removed almost all the external distractions. His deep religious sense had more chance to express itself. He could wallow in sentimentality and silliness undisturbed. The Fairy made her providential appearance and showed him which were the softest emotional and intellectual muck-heaps to wallow on. He was grateful—loyally, but a little ludicrously. I shall never forget, for example, the time he talked about the Fairy's genius. We'd been dining at his house, he and I and the Fairy. A terrible dinner, with the Fairy, as a mixture between St Catherine of Siena and Mahatma Gandhi, explaining why she was a vegetarian and an ascetic. She had that awful genteel middle-class food complex which makes table manners at Lyons' Corner Houses so appallingly good—that haunting fear of being low or vulgar which causes people to eat as though they weren't eating.

They never take a large mouthful, and only masticate with their front teeth, like rabbits. And they never touch anything with their fingers. I've actually seen a woman eating cherries with a knife and fork at one of those places. Most extraordinary and most repulsive. Well, the Fairy had that complex—it's a matter of class—but it was rationalized, with her, in terms of ahimsa and ascetic Christianity. Well, she'd been chattering the whole evening about the spirit of love and its incompatibility with a meat diet, and the necessity of mortifying the body for the sake of the soul, and about Buddha and St Francis and mystical ecstasies and, above all, herself. Drove me almost crazy with irritation, not to mention the fact that she really began putting me off my food with her rhapsodies of pious horror and disgust. I was thankful when at last she left us in peace to our brandy and cigars.

But Chawdron leaned across the table towards me, spiritually beaming from every inch of that forger's face of his. "Isn't she wonderful?" he said. "Isn't she simply wonderful?" "Wonderful," I agreed. And then, very solemnly, wagging his finger at me, "I've known three great intellects in my time," he said, "three minds of genius—Lord Northcliffe, Mr John Morley, and this little girl. Those three." And he leant back in his chair and nodded at me almost fiercely, as though challenging me to deny it.'

'And did you accept the challenge?' I asked, laughing.

Tilney shook his head. 'I just helped myself to another nip of his 1820 brandy; it was the only retort a rational man could make.'

'And did the Fairy share Chawdron's opinion about her mind?'

'Oh, I think so,' said Tilney, 'I think so. She had a great conceit of herself. Like all these spiritual people. An inordinate conceit. She played the superior role very badly and inconsistently. But all the same she was convinced of her superiority. Inevitably; for, you see, she had an enormous capacity for autosuggestion. What she told herself three times became true. For example, I used at first to think there was some hocus-pocus about her asceticism. She ate so absurdly little in public and at meals that I fancied she must do a little tucking-in privately in between whiles. But later I came to the conclusion that I'd maligned her. By dint of constantly telling herself and other people that eating was unspiritual and gross, not to mention impolite and lower-class, she'd genuinely succeeded, I believe, in making food disgust her.

She'd got to a point where she really couldn't eat more than a very little. Which was one of the causes of her sickliness. She was just under-nourished. But under-nourishment was only one of the causes. She was also diplomatically sick. She threatened to die as statesmen threaten to mobilize, in order to get what she wanted. Blackmail, in fact. Not for money; she was curiously disinterested in many ways. What she wanted was his interest, was power over him, was self-assertion. She had headaches for the same reason as a baby howls. If you give in to the baby and do what it wants, it'll howl again, it'll make a habit of howling. Chawdron was one of the weak-minded sort of parents.

When the Fairy had one of her famous headaches, he was terribly disturbed. The way he fluttered round the sick-room with ice and hot-water bottles and eau-de-Cologne! The Times obituarist would have wept to see him; such a touching exhibition of the heart of gold! The result was that the Fairy use to have a headache every three or four days. It was absolutely intolerable.'

'But were they purely imaginary, these headaches?'

Tilney shrugged his shoulders. 'Yes and no. There was certainly a physiological basis. The woman did have pains in her head from time to time. It was only to be expected; she was run down, through not eating enough; she didn't take sufficient exercise, so she had chronic constipation; chronic constipation probably set up a slight chronic inflammation of the ovaries; and she certainly suffered from eye-strain—you could tell that from the beautifully vague, spiritual look in her eyes, the look that comes from uncorrected myopia. There were, as you see, plenty of physiological reasons for her headaches. Her body made her a present, so to speak, of the pain. Her mind then proceeded to work up this raw material. Into what remarkable forms! Touched by her imagination, the headaches became mystic, transcendental. It was infinity in a grain of sand and eternity in an intestinal stasis.

Regularly every Tuesday and Friday she died—died with a beautiful Christian resignation, a martyr's fortitude. Chawdron used to come down from the sick-room with tears in his eyes. He'd never seen such patience, such courage, such grit. There were few men she wouldn't put to shame. She was a wonderful example. And so on. And I dare say it was all quite true. She started by malingering a little, by pretending that the headaches were worse than they were. But her imagination was too lively for her; it got beyond her control. Her pretendings gradually came true and she really did suffer martyrdom each time; she really did very nearly die. And then she got into the habit of being a martyr, and the attacks came on regularly; imagination stimulated the normal activities of inflamed ovaries and poisoned intestines; the pain made its appearance and at once became the raw material of a mystic, spiritual martyrdom taking place on a higher plane. Anyhow, it was all very complicated and obscure.

And, obviously, if the Fairy herself had given you an account of her existence at this time, it would have sounded like St Lawrence's reminiscences of life on the grill. Or rather it would have sounded like the insincere fabrication of such reminiscences. For the Fairy, as I've said before, was without talent, and sincerity and saintliness are matters of talent. Hypocrisy and insincerity are the products of native incompetence. Those who are guilty of them are people without skill in the arts of behaviour and self-expression. The Fairy's talk would have sounded utterly false to you. But for her it was all genuine. She really suffered, really died, really was good and resigned and courageous. Just as the paranoiac is really Napoleon Bonaparte and the young man with dementia praecox is really being spied on and persecuted by a gang of fiendishly ingenious enemies.

If I were to tell the story from her point of view, it would sound really beautiful—not be-yütiful, mind you; but truly and genuinely beautiful; for the good reason that I have a gift of expression, which the poor Fairy hadn't. So that, for all but emotional cretins like Chawdron, she was obviously a hypocrite and liar. Also a bit of a pathological case. For that capacity for autosuggestion really was rather pathological. She could make things come too true. Not merely diseases and martyrdoms and saintliness, but also historical facts, or rather historical not-facts. She authenticated the not-facts by simply repeating that they had happened. For example, she wanted people to believe—she wanted to believe herself—that she had been intimate with Chawdron for years and years, from childhood, from the time of her birth.

The fact that he had known her since she was "so high" would explain and justify her present relationship with him. The scandalmongers would have no excuse for talking. So she proceeded bit by bit to fabricate a lifelong intimacy, even a bit of an actual kinship, with her Uncle Benny. I told you that that was what she called him, didn't I? That nickname had its significance; it planted him at once in the table of consanguinity and so disinfected their relations, so to speak, automatically made them innocent.'

'Or incestuous,' I added.

'Or incestuous. Quite. But she didn't consider the D'Annunzioesque refinements. When she gave him that name, she promoted Chawdron to the rank of a dear old kinsman, or at least a dear old family friend. Sometimes she even called him "Nunky Benny," so as to show that she had known him from the cradle—had lisped of nunkies, for the nunkies came. But that wasn't enough. The evidence had to be fuller, more circumstantial. So she invented it—romps with Nunky in the hay, visits to the pantomime with him, a whole outfit of childish memories.'

'But what about Chawdron?' I asked. 'Did he share the invented memories?'

Tilney nodded. 'But for him, of course, they were invented. Other people, however, accepted them as facts. Her reminiscences were so detailed and circumstantial that, unless you knew she was a liar, you simply had to accept them. With Chawdron himself she couldn't, of course, pretend that she'd known him, literally and historically, all those years. Not at first, in any case. The lifelong intimacy started by being figurative and spiritual. "I feel as though I'd known my Uncle Benny ever since I was a tiny baby," she said to me in his presence, quite soon after she'd first got to know him; and as always, on such occasions, she made her voice even more whiningly babyish than usual.

Dreadful that voice was—so whiny-piny, so falsely sweet. "Ever since I was a teeny, tiny baby. Don't you feel like that, Uncle Benny?" And Chawdron heartily agreed; of course he felt like that. From that time forward she began to expatiate on the incidents which ought to have occurred in that far-off childhood with darling Nunky. They were the same incidents, of course, as those which she actually remembered when she was talking to strangers and he wasn't there. She made him give her old photographs of himself—visions of him in high collars and frock-coats, in queer-looking Norfolk jackets, in a top-hat sitting in a victoria. They helped her to make her fancies real. With their aid and the aid of his reminiscences she constructed a whole life in common with him. "Do you remember, Uncle Benny, the time we went to Cowes on your yacht and I fell into the sea?" she'd ask. And Chawdron, who thoroughly entered into the game, would answer: "Of course I remember. And when we'd fished you out, we had to wrap you in hot blankets and give you warm rum and milk.

And you got quite drunk." "Was I funny when I was drunk, Uncle Benny?" And Chawdron would rather lamely and ponderously invent a few quaintnesses which were then incorporated in the history. So that on a future occasion the Fairy could begin: "Nunky Benny, do you remember those ridiculous things I said when you made me drunk with rum and hot milk that time I fell into the sea at Cowes?" And so on. Chawdron loved the game, thought it simply too sweet and whimsical and touching—positively like something out of Barrie or A. A. Milne—and was never tired of playing it. As for the Fairy—for her it wasn't a game at all. The not-facts had been repeated till they became facts. "But, come, Miss Spindell," I said to her once, when she'd been telling me—me!—about some

adventure she'd had with Uncle Benny when she was a toddler, "come, come, Miss Spindell" (I always called her that, though she longed to be my Fairy as well as Chawdron's, and would have called me Uncle Ted if I'd given her the smallest encouragement; but I took a firm line; she was always Miss Spindell for me), "come," I said, "you seem to forget that it's only just over a year since you saw Mr Chawdron for the first time." She looked at me quite blankly for a moment without saying anything. "You can't seriously expect me to forget too," I added. Poor Fairy! The blankness suddenly gave place to a painful, blushing embarrassment. "Oh, of course," she began, and laughed nervously.

"It's as though I'd known him for ever. My imagination . . ." She tailed off into silence, and a minute later made an excuse to leave me. I could see she was upset, physically upset, as though she'd been woken up too suddenly out of a sound sleep, jolted out of one world into another moving in a different direction. But when I saw her the next day, she seemed to be quite herself again. She had suggested herself back into the dream world; from the other end of the table, at lunch, I heard her talking to an American business acquaintance of Chawdron's about the fun she and Uncle Benny used to have on his grouse moor in Scotland. But from that time forth, I noticed, she never talked to me about her apocryphal childhood again. A curious incident; it made me look at her hypocrisy in another light. It was then I began to realize that the lie in her soul was mainly an unconscious lie, the product of pathology and a lack of talent. Mainly; but sometimes, on the contrary, the lie was only too conscious and deliberate. The most extraordinary of them was the lie at the bottom of the great Affair of the Stigmata.'

'The stigmata?' I echoed. 'A pious lie, then.'

'Pious.' He nodded. 'That was how she justified it to herself. Though, of course, in her eyes, all her lies were pious lies. Pious, because they served her purposes and she was a saint; her cause was sacred. And afterwards, of course, when she'd treated the lies to her process of imaginative disinfection, they ceased to be lies and fluttered away as snow-white pious truths. But to start with they were undoubtedly pious lies, even for her. The Affair of the Stigmata made that quite clear. I caught her in the act. It all began with a boil that developed on Chawdron's foot.'

'Curious place to have a boil.'

'Not common,' he agreed. 'I once had one there myself, when I was a boy. Most unpleasant, I can assure you. Well, the same thing happened to Chawdron. He and I were down at his country place, playing golf and in the intervals concocting the Autobiography. We'd settle down with brandy and cigars and I'd gently question him. Left to himself, he was apt to wander and become incoherent and unchronological. I had to canalize his narrative, so to speak. Remarkably frank he was. I learned some curious things about the business world, I can tell you. Needless to say, they're not in the Autobiography. I'm reserving them for the Life. Which means, alas, that nobody will ever know them. Well, as I say, we were down there in the country for a long weekend, Friday to Tuesday. The Fairy had stayed in London. Periodically she took her librarianship very seriously and protested that she simply had to get on with the catalogue. "I have my duties," she said when Chawdron suggested that she should come down to the country with us. "You must let me get on with my duties.

I don't think one ought to be just frivolous; do you, Uncle Benny? Besides, I really love my work." God, how she enraged me with that whiny-

piny talk! But Chawdron, of course, was touched and enchanted. "What an extraordinary little person she is!" he said to me as we left the house together. Even more extraordinary than you suppose, I thought. He went on rhapsodizing as far as Watford. But in a way, I could see, when we arrived, in a way he was quite pleased she hadn't come. It was a relief to him to be having a little masculine holiday. She had the wit to see that he needed these refreshments from time to time. Well, we duly played our golf, with the result that by Sunday morning poor Chawdron's boil, which had been a negligible little spot on the Friday, had swollen up with the chafing and the exercise into a massive red hemisphere that made walking an agony. Unpleasant, no doubt; but nothing, for any ordinary person, to get seriously upset about. Chawdron, however, wasn't an ordinary person where boils were concerned.

He had a carbuncle-complex, a boilophobia. Excusably, perhaps; for it seems that his brother had died of some awful kind of gangrene that had started, to all appearances harmlessly, in a spot on his cheek. Chawdron couldn't develop a pimple without imagining that he'd caught his brother's disease. This affair on his foot scared him out of his wits. He saw the bone infected, the whole leg rotting away, amputations, death. I offered what comfort and encouragement I could and sent for the local doctor. He came at once and turned out to be a young man, very determined and efficient and confidence-inspiring. The boil was anaesthetized, lanced, cleaned out, tied up. Chawdron was promised there'd be no complications. And there weren't. The thing healed up quite normally. Chawdron decided to go back to town on the Tuesday, as he'd arranged. "I wouldn't like to disappoint Fairy," he explained. "She'd be so sad if I didn't come back when I'd promised. Besides, she might be nervous. You've no idea what an intuition that little girl has—almost uncanny, like second sight. She'd guess something was wrong and be upset; and you know how bad it is for her to be upset." I did indeed; those mystic headaches of hers were the bane of my life.

No, no, I agreed. She mustn't be upset. So it was decided that the Fairy should be kept in blissful ignorance of the boil until Chawdron had actually arrived. But the question then arose: how should he arrive? We had gone down into the country in Chawdron's Bugatti. He had a weakness for speed. But it wasn't the car for an invalid. It was arranged that the chauffeur should drive the Bugatti up to town and come back with the Rolls. In the unlikely event of his seeing Miss Spindell, he was not to tell her why he had been sent to town. Those were his orders. The man went and duly returned with the Rolls. Chawdron was installed, almost as though he were in an ambulance, and we rolled majestically up to London. What a homecoming! In anticipation of the sympathy he would get from the Fairy, Chawdron began to have a slight relapse as we approached the house. "I feel it throbbing," he assured me; and when he got out of the car, what a limp! As though he'd lost a leg at Gallipoli. Really heroic. The butler had to support him up to the drawing-room.

He was lowered on to the sofa. "Is Miss Spindell in her room?" The butler thought so. "Then ask her to come down here at once." The man went out; Chawdron closed his eyes—wearily, like a very sick man. He was preparing to get all the sympathy he could and, I could see, luxuriously relishing it in advance. "Still throbbing?" I asked, rather irreverently. He nodded, without opening his eyes. "Still throbbing." The manner was grave and sepulchral. I had to make an effort not to laugh. There was a silence; we waited. And then the door opened. The Fairy appeared. But a maimed Fairy. One foot in a high-heeled shoe, the other in a slipper. Such a limp! "Another leg lost at Gallipoli," thought I. When he heard the door open, Chawdron shut his eyes tighter than ever and turned his

face to the wall, or at any rate the back of the sofa. I could see that this rather embarrassed the Fairy. Her entrance had been dramatic; she had meant him to see her disablement at once; hadn't counted on finding a death-bed scene.

She had hastily to improvise another piece of stage business, a new set of lines; the scene she had prepared wouldn't do. Which was the more embarrassing for her as I was there, looking on—a very cool spectator, as she knew; not in the least a Maggie Spindell fan. She hesitated a second near the door, hoping Chawdron would look round; but he kept his eyes resolutely shut and his face averted. He'd evidently decided to play the moribund part for all it was worth. So, after one rather nervous glance at me, she limped across the room to the sofa. "Uncle Benny?" He gave a great start, as though he hadn't known she was there. "Is that you, Fairy?" This was pianissimo, con espressione. Then, molto agitato from the Fairy: "What is it, Nunky Benny? What is it? Oh, tell me." She was close enough now to lay a hand on his shoulder. "Tell me." He turned his face towards her—the tenderly transfigured burglar. His heart overflowed—"Fairy!"—a slop of hog-wash. "But what's the matter, Nunky Benny?" "Nothing, Fairy."

The tone implied that it was a heroic understatement in the manner of Sir Philip Sidney. "Only my foot." "Your foot!" The fairy registered such astonishment that we both fairly jumped. "Something wrong with your foot?" "Yes, why not?" Chawdron was rather annoyed; he wasn't getting the kind of sympathy he'd looked forward to. She turned to me. "But when did it happen, Mr Tilney?" I was breezy. "A nasty boil," I explained. "Walking round the course did it no good. It had to be lanced on Sunday." "At about half past eleven on Sunday morning?" "Yes, I suppose it was about half past eleven," I said, thinking the question was an odd one. "It was just half past eleven when this happened," she said dramatically, pointing to her slippered foot. "What's 'this'?" asked Chawdron crossly. He was thoroughly annoyed at being swindled out of sympathy.

I took pity on the Fairy; things seemed to be going so badly for her. I could see that she had prepared a coup and that it hadn't come off. "Miss Spindell also seems to have hurt her foot," I explained. "You didn't see how she limped." "How did you hurt it?" asked Chawdron. He was still very grumpy. "I was sitting quietly in the library, working at the catalogue," she began: and I guessed, by the way the phrases came rolling out, that she was at last being able to make use of the material she had prepared, "when suddenly, almost exactly at half past eleven (I remember looking at the clock), I felt a terrible pain in my foot. As though someone were driving a sharp, sharp knife into it. It was so intense that I nearly fainted." She paused for a moment, expecting appropriate comment. But Chawdron wouldn't make it.

So I put in a polite "Dear me, most extraordinary!" with which she had to be content. "When I got up," she continued, "I could hardly stand, my foot hurt me so; and I've been limping ever since. And the most extraordinary thing is that there's a red mark on my foot, like a scar." Another expectant pause. But still no word from Chawdron. He sat there with his mouth tight shut, and the lines that divided his cheeks from that wide simian upper lip of his were as though engraved in stone. The Fairy looked at him and saw that she had taken hopelessly the wrong line. Was it too late to remedy the mistake? She put the new plan of campaign into immediate execution. "But you poor Nunky Benny!" she began, in the sort of tone in which you'd talk to a sick dog. "How selfish of me to talk about my ailments, when you're lying there with your poor foot bandaged up!" The dog began to wag his tail at once. The beatific look

returned to his face. He took her hand. I couldn't stand it. "I think I'd better be going," I said; and I went.'

'But the foot?' I asked. 'The stabbing pain at exactly half past eleven?'

'You may well ask. As Chawdron himself remarked, when next I saw him, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."' Tilney laughed. 'The Fairy had triumphed. After he'd had his dose of mother love and Christian charity and kittenish sympathy, he'd been ready, I suppose, to listen to her story. The stabbing pain at eleven-thirty, the red scar. Strange, mysterious, unaccountable. He discussed it all with me, very gravely and judiciously. We talked of spiritualism and telepathy. We distinguished carefully between the miraculous and the super-normal. "As you know," he told me, "I've been a good Presbyterian all my life, and as such have been inclined to dismiss as mere fabrications all the stories of the Romish saints. I never believed in the story of St Francis's stigmata, for example.

But now I accept it!" Solemn and tremendous pause. "Now I know it's true." I just bowed my head in silence. But the next time I saw M'Crae, the chauffeur, I asked a few questions. Yes, he had seen Miss Spindell that day he drove the Bugatti up to London and came back with the Rolls. He'd gone into the secretaries' office to see if there were any letters to take down for Mr Chawdron, and Miss Spindell had run into him as he came out. She'd asked him what he was doing in London and he hadn't been able to think of anything to answer, in spite of Mr Chawdron's orders, except the truth. It had been on his conscience ever since; he hoped it hadn't done any harm. "On the contrary," I assured him, and that I certainly wouldn't tell Mr Chawdron. Which I never did. I thought . . . But good heavens!' he interrupted himself; 'what's this?' It was Hawtrey, who had come in to lay the table for lunch. She ignored us, actively. It was not only as though we didn't exist; it was as though we also had no right to exist. Tilney took out his watch. 'Twenty past one. God almighty! Do you mean to say I've been talking here the whole morning since breakfast?'

'So it appears,' I answered.

He groaned. 'You see,' he said, 'you see what it is to have a gift of the gab. A whole precious morning utterly wasted.'

'Not for me,' I said.

He shrugged his shoulders. 'Perhaps not. But then for you the story was new and curious. Whereas for me it's known, it's stale.'

'But for Shakespeare so was the story of Othello, even before he started to write it.'

'Yes, but he wrote, he didn't talk. There was something to show for the time he'd spent. His Othello didn't just disappear into thin air, like my poor Chawdron.' He sighed and was silent. Stone-faced and grim, Hawtrey went rustling starchily round the table; there was a clinking of steel and silver as she laid the places. I waited till she had left the room before I spoke again. When one's servants are more respectable than one is oneself (and nowadays they generally are), one cannot be too careful.

'And how did it end?' I asked.

‘How did it end?’ he repeated in a voice that had suddenly gone flat and dull; he was bored with his story, wanted to think of something else. ‘It ended, so far as I was concerned, with my finishing the Autobiography and getting tired of its subject. I gradually faded out of Chawdron’s existence. Like the Cheshire Cat.’

‘And the Fairy?’

‘Faded out of life about a year after the Affair of the Stigmata. She retired to her mystic death-bed once too often. Her pretending came true at last; it was always the risk with her. She really did die.’

The door opened; Hawtrey re-entered the room, carrying a dish.

‘And Chawdron, I suppose, was inconsolable?’ Inconsolability is, happily, a respectable subject.

Tilney nodded. ‘Took to spiritualism, of course. Nemesis again.’

Hawtrey raised the lid of the dish; a smell of fried soles escaped into the air. ‘Luncheon is served,’ she said, with what seemed to me an ill-concealed contempt and disapproval.

‘Luncheon is served,’ Tilney echoed, moving towards his place. He sat down and opened his napkin. ‘One meal after another, punctually, day after day, day after day. Such is life. Which would be tolerable enough if something ever got done between meals. But in my case nothing does. Meal after meal, and between meals a vacuum, a kind of . . .’ Hawtrey, who had been offering him the sauce tartare for the past several seconds, here gave him the discreetest nudge. Tilney turned his head. ‘Ah, thank you,’ he said, and helped himself.

The end