

The Rest Cure, Aldous Leonard Huxley

The Rest Cure

She was a tiny woman, dark-haired and with grey-blue eyes, very large and arresting in a small pale face. A little girl's face, with small, delicate features, but worn-prematurely; for Mrs Tarwin was only twenty-eight; and the big, wide-open eyes were restless and unquietly bright. 'Moira's got nerves,' her husband would explain when people inquired why she wasn't with him. Nerves that couldn't stand the strain of London or New York. She had to take things quietly in Florence. A sort of rest cure. 'Poor darling!' he would add in a voice that had suddenly become furry with sentiment; and he would illuminate his ordinarily rather blankly intelligent face with one of those lightning smiles of his—so wistful and tender and charming. Almost too charming, one felt uncomfortably. He turned on the charm and the wistfulness like electricity. Click! his face was briefly illumined. And then, click! the light went out again and he was once more the blankly intelligent research student. Cancer was his subject.

Poor Moira! Those nerves of hers! She was full of caprices and obsessions. For example, when she leased the villa on the slopes of Bellosguardo, she wanted to be allowed to cut down the cypresses at the end of the garden. 'So terribly like a cemetery,' she kept repeating to old Signor Bargioni. Old Bargioni was charming, but firm. He had no intention of sacrificing his cypresses. They gave the finishing touch of perfection to the loveliest view in all Florence; from the best bedroom window you saw the dome and Giotto's tower framed between their dark columns. Inexhaustibly loquacious, he tried to persuade her that cypresses weren't really at all funereal. For the Etruscans, on the contrary (he invented this little piece of archaeology on the spur of the moment), the cypress was a symbol of joy; the feasts of the vernal equinox concluded with dances round the sacred tree. Boecklin, it was true, had planted cypresses on his Island of the Dead. But then Boecklin, after all . . . And if she really found the trees depressing, she could plant nasturtiums to climb up them. Or roses. Roses, which the Greeks . . .

'All right, all right,' said Moira Tarwin hastily. 'Let's leave the cypresses.'

That voice, that endless flow of culture and foreign English! Old Bargioni was really terrible. She would have screamed if she had had to listen a moment longer. She yielded in mere self-defence.

'E la Tarwinné?' questioned Signora Bargioni when her husband came home.

He shrugged his shoulders. 'Una donnina piuttosto sciocca,' was his verdict.

Rather silly. Old Bargioni was not the only man who had thought so. But he was one of the not so many who regarded her silliness as a fault. Most of the men who knew her were charmed by it; they adored while they smiled. In conjunction with that tiny stature, those eyes, that delicate childish face, her silliness inspired avuncular devotions and protective loves. She had a faculty for making men feel, by contrast, agreeably large, superior and intelligent. And as luck, or perhaps as ill luck, would have it, Moira had passed her life among men who were really intelligent and what is called superior. Old Sir Watney Croker, her

grandfather, with whom she had lived ever since she was five (for her father and mother had both died young), was one of the most eminent physicians of his day. His early monograph on duodenal ulcers remains even now the classical work on the subject. Between one duodenal ulcer and another Sir Watney found leisure to adore and indulge and spoil his little granddaughter.

Along with fly-fishing and metaphysics she was his hobby. Time passed; Moira grew up, chronologically; but Sir Watney went on treating her as a spoilt child, went on being enchanted by her birdy chirrupings and ingenuousnesses and impertinent enfant-terrible-isms. He encouraged, he almost compelled her to preserve her childishness. Keeping her a baby in spite of her age amused him. He loved her babyish and could only love her so. All those duodenal ulcers—perhaps they had done something to his sensibility, warped it a little, kept it somehow stunted and un-adult, like Moira herself. In the depths of his unspecialized, unprofessional being Sir Watney was a bit of a baby himself. Too much preoccupation with the duodenum had prevented this neglected instinctive part of him from fully growing up. Like gravitates to like; old baby Watney loved the baby in Moira and wanted to keep the young woman permanently childish. Most of his friends shared Sir Watney's tastes. Doctors, judges, professors, civil servants—every member of Sir Watney's circle was professionally eminent, a veteran specialist.

To be asked to one of his dinner parties was a privilege. On these august occasions Moira had always, from the age of seventeen, been present, the only woman at the table. Not really a woman, Sir Watney explained; a child. The veteran specialists were all her indulgent uncles. The more childish she was, the better they liked her. Moira gave them pet names. Professor Stagg, for example, the neo-Hegelian, was Uncle Bonzo; Mr Justice Gidley was Giddy Goat. And so on. When they teased, she answered back impertinently. How they laughed! When they started to discuss the Absolute or Britain's Industrial Future, she interjected some deliciously irrelevant remark that made them laugh even more heartily. Exquisite! And the next day the story would be told to colleagues in the law-courts or the hospital, to cronies at the Athenaeum. In learned and professional circles Moira enjoyed a real celebrity. In the end she had ceased not only to be a woman; she had almost ceased to be a child. She was hardly more than their mascot.

At half past nine she left the dining-room, and the talk would come back to ulcers and Reality and Emergent Evolution.

'One would like to keep her as a pet,' John Tarwin had said as the door closed behind her on that first occasion he dined at Sir Watney's.

Professor Broadwater agreed. There was a little silence. It was Tarwin who broke it.

'What's your feeling,' he asked, leaning forward with that expression of blank intelligence on his eager, sharp-featured face, 'what's your feeling about the validity of experiments with artificially grafted tumours as opposed to natural tumours?'

Tarwin was only thirty-three and looked even younger among Sir Watney's veterans. He had already done good work, Sir Watney explained to his assembled guests before the young man's arrival, and might be expected to do much more. An interesting fellow too. Had been all over the place—tropical Africa, India, North and South America. Well off. Not tied to an academic job to earn his living. Had worked here in London, in Germany,

at the Rockefeller Institute in New York, in Japan. Enviably opportunities. A great deal to be said for a private income. 'Ah, here you are, Tarwin. Good evening. No, not at all late. This is Mr Justice Gidley, Professor Broadwater, Professor Stagg and—bless me! I hadn't noticed you, Moira; you're really too ultramicroscopic—my granddaughter.' Tarwin smiled down at her. She was really ravishing.

Well, now they had been married five years, Moira was thinking, as she powdered her face in front of the looking-glass. Tonino was coming to tea; she had been changing her frock. Through the window behind the mirror one looked down between the cypress trees on to Florence—a jumble of brown roofs, and above them, in the midst, the marble tower and the huge, up-leaping, airy dome. Five years. It was John's photograph in the leather travelling-frame that made her think of their marriage. Why did she keep it there on the dressing-table? Force of habit, she supposed. It wasn't as though the photograph reminded her of days that had been particularly happy.

On the contrary. There was something, she now felt, slightly dishonest about keeping it there. Pretending to love him when she didn't . . . She looked at it again. The profile was sharp and eager. The keen young research student intently focused on a tumour. She really liked him better as a research student than when he was having a soul, or being a poet or a lover. It seemed a dreadful thing to say—but there it was: the research student was of better quality than the human being.

She had always known it—or, rather, not known, felt it. The human being had always made her rather uncomfortable. The more human, the more uncomfortable. She oughtn't ever to have married him, of course. But he asked so persistently; and then he had so much vitality; everybody spoke so well of him; she rather liked his looks; and he seemed to lead such a jolly life, travelling about the world; and she was tired of being a mascot for her grandfather's veterans. There were any number of such little reasons. Added together, she had fancied they would be the equivalent of the one big, cogent reason. But they weren't; she had made a mistake.

Yes, the more human, the more uncomfortable. The disturbing way he turned on the beautiful illumination of his smile! Turned it on suddenly, only to switch it off again with as little warning when something really serious, like cancer or philosophy, had to be discussed. And then his voice, when he was talking about Nature, or Love, or God, or something of that sort—furry with feeling! The quite unnecessarily moved and tremulous way he said Good-bye! 'Like a Landseer dog,' she told him once, before they were married, laughing and giving a ludicrous imitation of his too heart-felt 'Good-bye, Moira.' The mockery hurt him. John prided himself as much on his soul and his feelings as upon his intellect; as much on his appreciation of Nature and his poetical love-longings as upon his knowledge of tumours. Goethe was his favourite literary and historical character. Poet and man of science, deep thinker and ardent lover, artist in thought and in life—John saw himself in the rich part. He made her read Faust and Wilhelm Meister. Moira did her best to feign the enthusiasm she did not feel. Privately she thought Goethe a humbug.

'I oughtn't to have married him,' she said to her image in the glass, and shook her head.

John was the pet-fancier as well as the loving educator. There were times when Moira's childishness delighted him as much as they had delighted Sir Watney and his veterans, when he laughed at every naïveté or

impertinence she uttered, as though it were a piece of the most exquisite wit; and not only laughed, but drew public attention to it, led her on into fresh infantilities and repeated the stories of her exploits to anyone who was prepared to listen to them. He was less enthusiastic, however, when Moira had been childish at his expense, when her silliness had in any way compromised his dignity or interests. On these occasions he lost his temper, called her a fool, told her she ought to be ashamed of herself. After which, controlling himself, he would become grave, paternal, pedagogic. Moira would be made to feel, miserably, that she wasn't worthy of him. And finally he switched on the smile and made it all up with caresses that left her like a stone.

'And to think,' she reflected, putting away her powder-puff, 'to think of my spending all that time and energy trying to keep up with him.'

All those scientific papers she had read, those outlines of medicine and physiology, those textbooks of something or other (she couldn't even remember the name of the science), to say nothing of all that dreary stuff by Goethe! And then all the going out when she had a headache or was tired! All the meeting of people who bored her, but who were really, according to John, so interesting and important! All the travelling, the terribly strenuous sight-seeing, the calling on distinguished foreigners and their generally less distinguished wives! It was difficult for her to keep up even physically—her legs were so short and John was always in such a hurry. Mentally, in spite of all her efforts, she was always a hundred miles behind.

'Awful!' she said aloud.

Her whole marriage had really been awful. From that awful honeymoon at Capri, when he had made her walk too far, too fast, uphill, only to read her extracts from Wordsworth when they reached the Aussichtspunkt; when he had talked to her about love and made it, much too frequently, and told her the Latin names of the plants and butterflies—from that awful honeymoon to the time when, four months ago, her nerves had gone all to pieces and the doctor had said that she must take things quietly, apart from John. Awful! The life had nearly killed her. And it wasn't (she had come at last to realize), it wasn't really a life at all. It was just a galvanic activity, like the twitching of a dead frog's leg when you touch the nerve with an electrified wire. Not life, just galvanized death.

She remembered the last of their quarrels, just before the doctor had told her to go away. John had been sitting at her feet, with his head against her knee. And his head was beginning to go bald! She could hardly bear to look at those long hairs plastered across the scalp. And because he was tired with all that microscope work, tired and at the same time (not having made love to her, thank goodness! for more than a fortnight) amorous, as she could tell by the look in his eyes, he was being very sentimental and talking in his furriest voice about Love and Beauty and the necessity for being like Goethe. Talking till she felt like screaming aloud. And at last she could bear it no longer.

'For goodness sake, John,' she said in a voice that was on the shrill verge of being out of control, 'be quiet!'

'What is the matter?' He looked up at her questioningly, pained.

'Talking like that!' She was indignant. 'But you've never loved anybody, outside yourself. Nor felt the beauty of anything. Any more than that old humbug Goethe. You know what you ought to feel when there's a woman

about, or a landscape; you know what the best people feel. And you deliberately set yourself to feel the same, out of your head.'

John was wounded to the quick of his vanity. 'How can you say that?'

'Because it's true, it's true. You only live out of your head. And it's a bald head too,' she added, and began to laugh, uncontrollably.

What a scene there had been! She went on laughing all the time he raged at her; she couldn't stop.

'You're hysterical,' he said at last; and then he calmed down. The poor child was ill. With an effort he switched on the expression of paternal tenderness and went to fetch the sal volatile.

One last dab at her lips and there! she was ready. She went downstairs to the drawing-room, to find that Tonino had already arrived—he was always early—and was waiting. He rose as she entered, bowed over her outstretched hand and kissed it. Moira was always charmed by his florid, rather excessive Southern good manners. John was always too busy being the keen research student or the furry-voiced poet to have good manners. He didn't think politeness particularly important. It was the same with clothes. He was chronically ill-dressed. Tonino, on the other hand, was a model of dapper elegance. That pale grey suit, that lavender-coloured tie, those piebald shoes of white kid and patent leather—marvellous!

One of the pleasures or dangers of foreign travel is that you lose your class-consciousness. At home you can never, with the best will in the world, forget it. Habit has rendered your own people as immediately legible as your own language. A word, a gesture are sufficient; your man is placed. But in foreign parts your fellows are unreadable. The less obvious products of upbringing—all the subtler refinements, the finer shades of vulgarity—escape your notice. The accent, the inflexion of voice, the vocabulary, the gestures tell you nothing. Between the duke and the insurance clerk, the profiteer and the country gentleman, your inexperienced eye and ear detect no difference.

For Moira, Tonino seemed the characteristic flower of Italian gentility. She knew, of course, that he wasn't well off; but then, plenty of the nicest people are poor. She saw in him the equivalent of one of those younger sons of impoverished English squires—the sort of young man who advertises for work in the Agony Column of THE Times. 'Public School education, sporting tastes; would accept any well-paid position of trust and confidence.' She would have been pained, indignant, and surprised to hear old Bargioni describing him, after their first meeting, as 'il tipo del parrucchiere napoletano'—the typical Neapolitan barber. Signora Bargioni shook her head over the approaching scandal and was secretly delighted.

As a matter of actual fact Tonino was not a barber. He was the son of a capitalist—on a rather small scale, no doubt; but still a genuine capitalist. Vasari senior owned a restaurant at Pozzuoli and was ambitious to start a hotel. Tonino had been sent to study the tourist industry with a family friend who was the manager of one of the best establishments in Florence. When he had learnt all the secrets, he was to return to Pozzuoli and be the managing director of the rejuvenated boarding-house which his father was modestly proposing to rechristen the Grand Hotel Ritz-Carlton.

Meanwhile, he was an underworked loungeur in Florence. He had made Mrs Tarwin's acquaintance romantically, on the highway. Driving, as was her custom, alone, Moira had run over a nail. A puncture. Nothing is easier than changing wheels—nothing, that is to say, if you have sufficient muscular strength to undo the nuts which hold the punctured wheel to its axle. Moira had not. When Tonino came upon her, ten minutes after the mishap, she was sitting on the running-board of the car, flushed and dishevelled with her efforts, and in tears.

'Una signora forestiera.' At the café that evening Tonino recounted his adventure with a certain rather fatuous self-satisfaction. In the small bourgeoisie in which he had been brought up, a Foreign Lady was an almost fabulous creature, a being of legendary wealth, eccentricity, independence. 'Inglese,' he specified. 'Giovane,' and 'bella, bellissima.' His auditors were incredulous; beauty, for some reason, is not common among the specimens of English womanhood seen in foreign parts. 'Ricca,' he added. That sounded less intrinsically improbable; foreign ladies were all rich, almost by definition. Juicily, and with unctiousness, Tonino described the car she drove, the luxurious villa she inhabited.

Acquaintance had ripened quickly into friendship. This was the fourth or fifth time in a fortnight that he had come to the house.

'A few poor flowers,' said the young man in a tone of soft, ingratiating apology; and he brought forward his left hand, which he had been hiding behind his back. It held a bouquet of white roses.

'But how kind of you!' she cried in her bad Italian. 'How lovely!' John never brought flowers to anyone; he regarded that sort of thing as rather nonsensical. She smiled at Tonino over the blossoms. 'Thank you a thousand times.'

Making a deprecating gesture, he returned her smile. His teeth flashed pearly and even. His large eyes were bright, dark, liquid, and rather expressionless, like a gazelle's. He was exceedingly good-looking. 'White roses for the white rose,' he said.

Moira laughed. The compliment was ridiculous; but it pleased her all the same.

Paying compliments was not the only thing Tonino could do. He knew how to be useful. When, a few days later, Moira decided to have the rather dingy hall and dining-room redistempered, he was invaluable. It was he who haggled with the decorator, he who made scenes when there were delays, he who interpreted Moira's rather special notions about colours to the workmen, he who superintended their activities.

'If it hadn't been for you,' said Moira gratefully, when the work was finished, 'I'd have been hopelessly swindled and they wouldn't have done anything properly.'

It was such a comfort, she reflected, having a man about the place who didn't always have something more important to do and think about; a man who could spend his time being useful and a help. Such a comfort! And such a change! When she was with John, it was she who had to do all the tiresome, practical things. John always had his work, and his work took precedence of everything, including her convenience. Tonino was just an ordinary man, with nothing in the least superhuman about either himself or his functions. It was a great relief.

Little by little Moira came to rely on him for everything. He made himself universally useful. The fuses blew out; it was Tonino who replaced them. The hornets nested in the drawing-room chimney; heroically Tonino stank them out with sulphur. But his speciality was domestic economy. Brought up in a restaurant, he knew everything there was to be known about food and drink and prices. When the meat was unsatisfactory, he went to the butcher and threw the tough beefsteak in his teeth, almost literally. He beat down the extortionate charges of the greengrocer. With a man at the fish market he made a friendly arrangement whereby Moira was to have the pick of the soles and the red mullet. He bought her wine for her, her oil—wholesale, in huge glass demijohns; and Moira, who since Sir Watney's death could have afforded to drink nothing cheaper than Pol Roger 1911 and do her cooking in imported yak's butter, exulted with him in long domestic conversations over economies of a farthing a quart or a shilling or two on a hundredweight. For Tonino the price and the quality of victuals and drink were matters of gravest importance.

To secure a flask of Chianti for five lire ninety instead of six lire was, in his eyes, a real victory; and the victory became a triumph if it could be proved that the Chianti was fully three years old and had an alcohol content of more than fourteen per cent. By nature Moira was neither greedy nor avaricious. Her upbringing had confirmed her in her natural tendencies. She had the disinterestedness of those who have never known a shortage of cash; and her abstemious indifference to the pleasures of the table had never been tempered by the housewife's pre-occupation with other people's appetites and digestions. Never; for Sir Watney had kept a professional housekeeper, and with John Tarwin, who anyhow hardly noticed what he ate, and thought that women ought to spend their time doing more important and intellectual things than presiding over kitchens, she had lived for the greater part of their married life in hotels or service flats, or else in furnished rooms and in a chronic state of picnic. Tonino revealed to her the world of markets and the kitchen.

Still accustomed to thinking, with John, that ordinary domestic life wasn't good enough, she laughed at first at his earnest pre-occupation with meat and halfpence. But after a little she began to be infected by his almost religious enthusiasm for housekeeping; she began to discover that meat and halfpence were interesting after all, that they were real and important—much more real and important, for example, than reading Goethe when one found him a bore and a humbug. Tenderly brooded over by the most competent of solicitors and brokers, the late Sir Watney's fortune was bringing in a steady five per cent free of tax. But in Tonino's company Moira could forget her bank balance. Descending from the financial Sinai on which she had been lifted so high above the common earth, she discovered, with him, the preoccupations of poverty. They were curiously interesting and exciting.

'The prices they ask for fish in Florence!' said Tonino, after a silence, when he had exhausted the subject of white roses. 'When I think how little we pay for octopus at Naples! It's scandalous.'

'Scandalous!' echoed Moira with an indignation as genuine as his own. They talked, interminably.

Next day the sky was no longer blue, but opaquely white. There was no sunshine, only a diffused glare that threw no shadows. The landscape lay utterly lifeless under the dead and fishy stare of heaven. It was very hot, there was no wind, the air was hardly breathable and as though

woolly. Moira woke up with a headache, and her nerves seemed to have an uneasy life of their own, apart from hers. Like caged birds they were, fluttering and starting and twittering at every alarm; and her aching, tired body was their aviary. Quite against her own wish and intention she found herself in a temper with the maid and saying the unkindest things. She had to give her a pair of stockings to make up for it. When she was dressed, she wanted to write some letters; but her fountain-pen made a stain on her fingers and she was so furious that she threw the beastly thing out of the window.

It broke to pieces on the flagstones below. She had nothing to write with; it was too exasperating. She washed the ink off her hands and took out her embroidery frame. But her fingers were all thumbs. And then she pricked herself with the needle. Oh, so painfully! The tears came into her eyes; she began to cry. And having begun, she couldn't stop. Assunta came in five minutes later and found her sobbing. 'But what is it, signora?' she asked, made most affectionately solicitous by the gift of the stockings. Moira shook her head. 'Go away,' she said brokenly. The girl was insistent. 'Go away,' Moira repeated. How could she explain what was the matter when the only thing that had happened was that she had pricked her finger? Nothing was the matter. And yet everything was the matter, everything.

The everything that was the matter resolved itself finally into the weather. Even in the best of health Moira had always been painfully conscious of the approach of thunder. Her jangled nerves were more than ordinarily sensitive. The tears and furies and despairs of this horrible day had a purely meteorological cause. But they were none the less violent and agonizing for that. The hours passed dismally. Thickened by huge black clouds, the twilight came on in a sultry and expectant silence, and it was prematurely night. The reflection of distant lightnings, flashing far away below the horizon, illuminated the eastern sky. The peaks and ridges of the Apennines stood out black against the momentary pale expanses of silvered vapour and disappeared again in silence; the attentive hush was still unbroken.

With a kind of sinking apprehension—for she was terrified of storms—Moira sat at her window, watching the black hills leap out against the silver and die again, leap out and die. The flashes brightened; and then, for the first time, she heard the approaching thunder, far off and faint like the whisper of the sea in a shell. Moira shuddered. The clock in the hall struck nine, and, as though the sound were a signal prearranged, a gust of wind suddenly shook the magnolia tree that stood at the crossing of the paths in the garden below. Its long stiff leaves rattled together like scales of horn. There was another flash. In the brief white glare she could see the two funereal cypresses writhing and tossing as though in the desperate agitation of pain. And then all at once the storm burst catastrophically, it seemed directly overhead.

At the savage violence of that icy downpour Moira shrank back and shut the window. A streak of white fire zigzagged fearfully just behind the cypresses. The immediate thunder was like the splitting and fall of a solid vault. Moira rushed away from the window and threw herself on the bed. She covered her face with her hands. Through the continuous roaring of the rain the thunder crashed and reverberated, crashed again and sent the fragments of sound rolling unevenly in all directions through the night. The whole house trembled. In the window-frames the shaken glasses rattled like the panes of an old omnibus rolling across the cobbles.

'Oh God, oh God,' Moira kept repeating. In the enormous tumult her voice was small and, as it were, naked, utterly abject.

'But it's too stupid to be frightened.' She remembered John's voice, his brightly encouraging, superior manner. 'The chances are thousands to one against your being struck. And anyhow, hiding your head won't prevent the lightning from. . . .'

How she hated him for being so reasonable and right! 'Oh God!' There was another. 'God, God, God. . . .'

And then suddenly a terrible thing happened; the light went out. Through her closed eyelids she saw no longer the red of translucent blood, but utter blackness. Uncovering her face, she opened her eyes and anxiously looked round—on blackness again. She fumbled for the switch by her bed, found it, turned and turned; the darkness remained impenetrable.

'Assunta!' she called.

And all at once the square of the window was a suddenly uncovered picture of the garden, seen against a background of mauve-white sky and shining, down-pouring rain.

'Assunta!' Her voice was drowned in a crash that seemed to have exploded in the very roof. 'Assunta, Assunta!' In a panic she stumbled across the grave-dark room to the door. Another flash revealed the handle. She opened. 'Assunta!'

Her voice was hollow above the black gulf of the stairs. The thunder exploded again above her. With a crash and a tinkle of broken glass one of the windows in her room burst open. A blast of cold wind lifted her hair. A flight of papers rose from her writing-table and whirled with crackling wings through the darkness. One touched her cheek like a living thing and was gone. She screamed aloud. The door slammed behind her. She ran down the stairs in terror, as though the fiend were at her heels. In the hall she met Assunta and the cook coming towards her, lighting matches as they came.

'Assunta, the lights!' She clutched the girl's arm.

Only the thunder answered. When the noise subsided, Assunta explained that the fuses had all blown out and that there wasn't a candle in the house. Not a single candle, and only one more box of matches.

'But then we shall be left in the dark,' said Moira hysterically.

Through the three blackly reflecting windows of the hall three separate pictures of the streaming garden revealed themselves and vanished. The old Venetian mirrors on the walls blinked for an instant into life, like dead eyes briefly opened.

'In the dark,' she repeated with an almost mad insistence.

'Aie!' cried Assunta, and dropped the match that had begun to burn her fingers. The thunder fell on them out of a darkness made denser and more hopeless by the loss of light.

When the telephone bell rang, Tonino was sitting in the managerial room of his hotel, playing cards with the proprietor's two sons and another

friend. 'Someone to speak to you, Signor Tonino,' said the underporter, looking in. 'A lady.' He grinned significantly.

Tonino put on a dignified air and left the room. When he returned a few minutes later, he held his hat in one hand and was buttoning up his rain-coat with the other.

'Sorry,' he said. 'I've got to go out.'

'Go out?' exclaimed the others incredulously. Beyond the shuttered windows the storm roared like a cataract and savagely exploded. 'But where?' they asked. 'Why? Are you mad?'

Tonino shrugged his shoulders, as though it were nothing to go out into a tornado, as though he were used to it. The signora forestiera, he explained, hating them for their inquisitiveness; the Tarwin—she had asked him to go up to Bellosguardo at once. The fuses . . . not a candle in the house . . . utterly in the dark . . . very agitated . . . nerves. . . .

'But on a night like this . . . But you're not the electrician.' The two sons of the proprietor spoke in chorus. They felt, indignantly, that Tonino was letting himself be exploited.

But the third young man leaned back in his chair and laughed. 'Vai, caro, vai,' he said, and then, shaking his finger at Tonino knowingly, 'Ma fatti pagare per il tuo lavoro,' he added. 'Get yourself paid for your trouble.' Berto was notoriously the lady-killer, the tried specialist in amorous strategy, the acknowledged expert. 'Take the opportunity.' The others joined in his rather unpleasant laughter. Tonino also grinned and nodded.

The taxi rushed splashing through the wet deserted streets like a travelling fountain. Tonino sat in the darkness of the cab ruminating Berto's advice. She was pretty, certainly. But somehow—why was it?—it had hardly occurred to him to think of her as a possible mistress. He had been politely gallant with her—on principle almost, and by force of habit—but without really wanting to succeed; and when she had shown herself unresponsive, he hadn't cared. But perhaps he ought to have cared, perhaps he ought to have tried harder. In Berto's world it was a sporting duty to do one's best to seduce every woman one could.

The most admirable man was the man with the greatest number of women to his credit. Really lovely, Tonino went on to himself, trying to work up an enthusiasm for the sport. It would be a triumph to be proud of. The more so as she was a foreigner. And very rich. He thought with inward satisfaction of that big car, of the house, the servants, the silver. 'Certo,' he said to himself complacently, 'mi vuol bene.' She liked him; there was no doubt of it. Meditatively he stroked his smooth face; the muscles stirred a little under his fingers. He was smiling to himself in the darkness; naively, an ingenuous prostitute's smile. 'Moirra,' he said aloud. 'Moirra. Strano, quel nome. Piuttosto ridicolo.'

It was Moirra who opened the door for him. She had been standing at the window, looking out, waiting and waiting.

'Tonino!' She held out both her hands to him; she had never felt so glad to see anyone.

The sky went momentarily whitish-mauve behind him as he stood there in the open doorway. The skirts of his rain-coat fluttered in the wind; a wet gust blew past him, chilling her face. The sky went black again. He slammed the door behind him. They were in utter darkness.

'Tonino, it was too sweet of you to have come. Really too . . .'

The thunder that interrupted her was like the end of the world. Moira shuddered. 'Oh God!' she whimpered; and then suddenly she was pressing her face against his waistcoat and crying, and Tonino was holding her and stroking her hair. The next flash showed him the position of the sofa. In the ensuing darkness he carried her across the room, sat down and began to kiss her tear-wet face. She lay quite still in his arms, relaxed, like a frightened child that has at last found comfort. Tonino held her, kissing her softly again and again. 'Ti amo, Moira,' he whispered. And it was true. Holding her, touching her in the dark, he did love her. 'Ti amo.' How profoundly! 'Ti voglio un bene immenso,' he went on, with a passion, a deep warm tenderness born almost suddenly of darkness and soft blind contact.

Heavy and warm with life, she lay pressed against him. Her body curved and was solid under his hands, her cheeks were rounded and cool, her eyelids rounded and tremulous and tear-wet, her mouth so soft, so soft under his touching lips. 'Ti amo, ti amo.' He was breathless with love, and it was as though there were a hollowness at the centre of his being, a void of desiring tenderness that longed to be filled, that could only be filled by her, an emptiness that drew her towards him, into him, that drank her as an empty vessel eagerly drinks the water. Still, with closed eyes, quite still she lay there in his arms, suffering herself to be drunk up by his tenderness, to be drawn into the yearning vacancy of his heart, happy in being passive, in yielding herself to his soft insistent passion.

'Fatti pagare, fatti pagare.' The memory of Berto's words transformed him suddenly from a lover into an amorous sportsman with a reputation to keep up and records to break. 'Fatti pagare.' He risked a more intimate caress. But Moira winced so shudderingly at the touch that he desisted, ashamed of himself.

'Ebbene,' asked Berto when, an hour later, he returned, 'did you mend the fuses?'

'Yes, I mended the fuses.'

'And did you get yourself paid?'

Tonino smiled an amorous sportsman's smile. 'A little on account,' he answered, and at once disliked himself for having spoken the words, disliked the others for laughing at them. Why did he go out of his way to spoil something which had been so beautiful? Pretexting a headache, he went upstairs to his bedroom. The storm had passed on, the moon was shining now out of a clear sky. He opened the window and looked out. A river of ink and quicksilver, the Arno flowed whispering past. In the street below the puddles shone like living eyes. The ghost of Caruso was singing from a gramophone, far away on the other side of the water. 'Stretti, stretti, nell' estast d'amor . . .'

Tonino was profoundly moved.

The sky was blue next morning, the sunlight glittered on the shiny leaves of the magnolia tree, the air was demurely windless. Sitting at her

dressing-table, Moira looked out and wondered incredulously if such things as storms were possible. But the plants were broken and prostrate in their beds; the paths were strewn with scattered leaves and petals. In spite of the soft air and the sunlight, last night's horrors had been more than a bad dream. Moira sighed and began to brush her hair. Set in its leather frame, John Tarwin's profile confronted her, brightly focused on imaginary tumours. Her eyes fixed on it, Moira went on mechanically brushing her hair. Then, suddenly, interrupting the rhythm of her movements, she got up, took the leather frame and, walking across the room, threw it up, out of sight, on to the top of the high wardrobe. There! She returned to her seat and, filled with a kind of frightened elation, went on with her interrupted brushing.

When she was dressed, she drove down to the town and spent an hour at Settepassi's, the jewellers. When she left, she was bowed out on to the Lungarno like a princess.

'No, don't smoke those,' she said to Tonino that afternoon as he reached for a cigarette in the silver box that stood on the drawing-room mantelpiece. 'I've got a few of those Egyptian ones you like. Got them specially for you.' And, smiling, she handed him a little parcel.

Tonino thanked her profusely—too profusely, as was his custom. But when he had stripped away the paper and saw the polished gold of a large cigarette-case, he could only look at her in an embarrassed and inquiring amazement.

'Don't you think it's rather pretty?' she asked.

'Marvellous! But is it . . . ' He hesitated. 'Is it for me?'

Moira laughed with pleasure at his embarrassment. She had never seen him embarrassed before. He was always the self-possessed young man of the world, secure and impregnable within his armour of Southern good manners. She admired that elegant carapace. But it amused her for once to take him without it, to see him at a loss, blushing and stammering like a little boy. It amused and it pleased her; she liked him all the more for being the little boy as well as the polished and socially competent young man.

'For me?' she mimicked, laughing. 'Do you like it?' Her tone changed; she became grave. 'I wanted you to have something to remind you of last night.' Tonino took her hands and silently kissed them. She had received him with such off-handed gaiety, so nonchalantly, as though nothing had happened, that the tender references to last night's happenings (so carefully prepared as he walked up the hill) had remained unspoken. He had been afraid of saying the wrong thing and offending her. But now the spell was broken—and by Moira herself. 'One oughtn't to forget one's good actions,' Moira went on, abandoning him her hands. 'Each time you take a cigarette out of this case, will you remember how kind and good you were to a silly ridiculous little fool?'

Tonino had had time to recover his manners. 'I shall remember the most adorable, the most beautiful . . . ' Still holding her hands, he looked at her for a moment in silence, eloquently. Moira smiled back at him. 'Moira!' And she was in his arms. She shut her eyes and was passive in the strong circle of his arms, soft and passive against his firm body. 'I love you, Moira.' The breath of his whispering was warm on her cheek. 'Ti amo.' And suddenly his lips were on hers again, violently, impatiently kissing. Between the kisses his whispered words came passionate to her ears. 'Ti amo pazzamente . . . piccina . . . tesoro . . . amore . . .

cuore . . .' Uttered in Italian, his love seemed somehow specially strong and deep. Things described in a strange language themselves take on a certain strangeness. 'Amami, Moira, amami. Mi ami un po?' He was insistent. 'A little, Moira—do you love me a little?'

She opened her eyes and looked at him. Then, with a quick movement, she took his face between her two hands, drew it down and kissed him on the mouth. 'Yes,' she whispered, 'I love you.' And then, gently, she pushed him away. Tonino wanted to kiss her again. But Moira shook her head and slipped away from him. 'No, no,' she said with a kind of peremptory entreaty. 'Don't spoil it all now.'

The days passed, hot and golden. Summer approached. The nightingales sang unseen in the cool of the evening.

'L'usignuolo,' Moira whispered softly to herself as she listened to the singing. 'L'usignuolo.' Even the nightingales were subtly better in Italian. The sun had set. They were sitting in the little summer-house at the end of the garden, looking out over the darkening landscape. The white-walled farms and villas on the slope below stood out almost startlingly clear against the twilight of the olive trees, as though charged with some strange and novel significance. Moira sighed. 'I'm so happy,' she said; Tonino took her hand. 'Ridiculously happy.' For, after all, she was thinking, it was rather ridiculous to be so happy for no valid reason.

John Tarwin had taught her to imagine that one could only be happy when one was doing something 'interesting' (as he put it), or associating with people who were 'worth while.' Tonino was nobody in particular, thank goodness! And going for picnics wasn't exactly 'interesting' in John's sense of the word; nor was talking about the respective merits of different brands of car; nor teaching him to drive; nor going shopping; nor discussing the problem of new curtains for the drawing-room; nor, for that matter, sitting in the summer-house and saying nothing. In spite of which, or because of which, she was happy with an unprecedented happiness. 'Ridiculously happy,' she repeated.

Tonino kissed her hand. 'So am I,' he said. And he was not merely being polite. In his own way he was genuinely happy with her. People envied him sitting in that magnificent yellow car at her side. She was so pretty and elegant, so foreign too; he was proud to be seen about with her. And then the cigarette-case, the gold-mounted, agate-handled cane she had given him for his birthday . . . Besides, he was really very fond of her, really, in an obscure way, in love with her.

It was not for nothing that he had held and caressed her in the darkness of that night of thunder. Something of that deep and passionate tenderness, born suddenly of the night and their warm sightless contact, still remained in him—still remained even after the physical longings she then inspired had been vicariously satisfied. (And under Berto's knowing guidance they had been satisfied, frequently.) If it hadn't been for Berto's satirical comments on the still platonic nature of his attachment, he would have been perfectly content.

'Alle donne,' Berto sententiously generalized, 'piace sempre la violenza. They long to be raped. You don't know how to make love, my poor boy.' And he would hold up his own achievements as examples to be followed. For Berto, love was a kind of salacious vengeance on women for the crime of their purity.

Spurred on by his friend's mockeries, Tonino made another attempt to exact full payment for his mending of the fuses on the night of the storm. But his face was so soundly slapped, and the tone in which Moira threatened never to see him again unless he behaved himself was so convincingly stern, that he did not renew his attack. He contented himself with looking sad and complaining of her cruelty. But in spite of his occasionally long face, he was happy with her. Happy like a fireside cat. The car, the house, her elegant foreign prettiness, the marvellous presents she gave him, kept him happily purring.

The days passed and the weeks. Moira would have liked life to flow on like this for ever, a gay bright stream with occasional reaches of calm sentimentality but never dangerously deep or turbulent, without fall or whirl or rapid. She wanted her existence to remain for ever what it was at this moment—a kind of game with a pleasant and emotionally exciting companion, a playing at living and loving. If only this happy play-time could last for ever!

It was John Tarwin who decreed that it should not. 'ATTENDING CYTOLOGICAL CONGRESS ROME WILL STOP FEW DAYS ON WAY ARRIVING THURSDAY LOVE JOHN.' That was the text of the telegram Moira found awaiting her on her return to the villa one evening. She read it and felt suddenly depressed and apprehensive. Why did he want to come? He would spoil everything. The bright evening went dead before her eyes; the happiness with which she had been brimming when she returned with Tonino from that marvellous drive among the Apennines was drained out of her. Her gloom retrospectively darkened the blue and golden beauty of the mountains, put out the bright flowers, dimmed the day's laughter and talk. 'Why does he want to come?' Miserably and resentfully, she wondered. 'And what's going to happen, what's going to happen?' She felt cold and rather breathless and almost sick with the questioning apprehension.

John's face, when he saw her standing there at the station, lit up instantaneously with all its hundred-candle-power tenderness and charm.

'My darling!' His voice was furry and tremulous. He leaned towards her; stiffening, Moira suffered herself to be kissed. His nails, she noticed disgustedly, were dirty.

The prospect of a meal alone with John had appalled her; she had asked Tonino to dinner. Besides, she wanted John to meet him. To have kept Tonino's existence a secret from John would have been to admit that there was something wrong in her relations with him. And there wasn't. She wanted John to meet him just like that, naturally, as a matter of course. Whether he'd like Tonino when he'd met him was another question. Moira had her doubts. They were justified by the event. John had begun by protesting when he heard that she had invited a guest. Their first evening—how could she? The voice trembled—fur in a breeze. She had to listen to outpourings of sentiment.

But finally, when dinner-time arrived, he switched off the pathos and became once more the research student. Brightly inquiring, blankly intelligent, John cross-questioned his guest about all the interesting and important things that were happening in Italy. What was the real political situation? How did the new educational system work? What did people think of the reformed penal code? On all these matters Tonino was, of course, far less well-informed than his interrogator. The Italy he knew was the Italy of his friends and his family, of shops and cafés and girls and the daily fight for money. All that historical, impersonal Italy, of which John so intelligently read in the high-class reviews, was

utterly unknown to him. His answers to John's questions were childishly silly. Moira sat listening, dumb with misery.

'What do you find in that fellow?' her husband asked, when Tonino had taken his leave. 'He struck me as quite particularly uninteresting.'

Moira did not answer. There was a silence. John suddenly switched on his tenderly, protectively, yearningly marital smile. 'Time to go to bed, my sweetheart,' he said. Moira looked up at him and saw in his eyes that expression she knew so well and dreaded. 'My sweetheart,' he repeated, and the Landseer dog was also amorous. He put his arms round her and bent to kiss her face. Moira shuddered—but helplessly, dumbly, not knowing how to escape. He led her away.

When John had left her, she lay awake far into the night, remembering his ardours and his sentimentalities with a horror that the passage of time seemed actually to increase. Sleep came at last to deliver her.

Being an archaeologist, old Signor Bargioni was decidedly 'interesting'.

'But he bores me to death,' said Moira when, next day, her husband suggested that they should go and see him. 'That voice! And the way he goes on and on! And that beard! And his wife!'

John flushed with anger. 'Don't be childish,' he snapped out, forgetting how much he enjoyed her childishness when it didn't interfere with his amusements or his business. 'After all,' he insisted, 'there's probably no man living who knows more about Tuscany in the Dark Ages.'

Nevertheless, in spite of darkest Tuscany, John had to pay his call without her. He spent a most improving hour, chatting about Romanesque architecture and the Lombard kings. But just before he left, the conversation somehow took another turn; casually, as though by chance, Tonino's name was mentioned. It was the signora who had insisted that it should be mentioned. Ignorance, her husband protested, is bliss. But Signora Bargioni loved scandal, and being middle-aged, ugly, envious, and malicious, was full of righteous indignation against the young wife and of hypocritical sympathy for the possibly injured husband. Poor Tarwin, she insisted—he ought to be warned. And so, tactfully, without seeming to say anything in particular, the old man dropped his hints.

Walking back to Bellosguardo, John was uneasily pensive. It was not that he imagined that Moira had been, or was likely to prove, unfaithful. Such things really didn't happen to oneself. Moira obviously liked the uninteresting young man; but, after all, and in spite of her childishness, Moira was a civilized human being. She had been too well brought up to do anything stupid. Besides, he reflected, remembering the previous evening, remembering all the years of their marriage, she had no temperament; she didn't know what passion was, she was utterly without sensuality. Her native childishness would reinforce her principles.

Infants may be relied on to be pure; but not (and this was what troubled John Tarwin) worldly-wise. Moira wouldn't allow herself to be made love to; but she might easily let herself be swindled. Old Bargioni had been very discreet and noncommittal; but it was obvious that he regarded this young fellow as an adventurer, out for what he could get. John frowned as he walked, and bit his lip.

He came home to find Moira and Tonino superintending the fitting of the new cretonne covers for the drawing-room chairs.

'Carefully, carefully,' Moira was saying to the upholsterer as he came in. She turned at the sound of his footsteps. A cloud seemed to obscure the brightness of her face when she saw him; but she made an effort to keep up her gaiety. 'Come and look, John,' she called. 'It's like getting a very fat old lady into a very tight dress. Too ridiculous!'

But John did not smile with her; his face was a mask of stony gravity. He stalked up to the chair, nodded curtly to Tonino, curtly to the upholsterer, and stood there watching the work as though he were a stranger, a hostile stranger at that. The sight of Moira and Tonino laughing and talking together had roused in him a sudden and violent fury. 'Disgusting little adventurer,' he said to himself ferociously behind his mask.

'It's a pretty stuff, don't you think?' said Moira. He only grunted.

'Very modern too,' added Tonino. 'The shops are very modern here,' he went on, speaking with all the rather touchy insistence on up-to-dateness which characterizes the inhabitants of an under-bathroomed and over-monumented country.

'Indeed?' said John sarcastically.

Moira frowned. 'You've no idea how helpful Tonino has been,' she said with a certain warmth.

Effusively Tonino began to deny that she had any obligation towards him. John Tarwin interrupted him. 'Oh, I've no doubt he was helpful,' he said in the same sarcastic tone and with a little smile of contempt.

There was an uncomfortable silence. Then Tonino took his leave. The moment he was gone, Moira turned on her husband. Her face was pale, her lips trembled. 'How dare you speak to one of my friends like that?' she asked in a voice unsteady with anger.

John flared up. 'Because I wanted to get rid of the fellow,' he answered; and the mask was off, his face was nakedly furious. 'It's disgusting to see a man like that hanging round the house. An adventurer. Exploiting your silliness. Sponging on you.'

'Tonino doesn't sponge on me. And anyhow, what do you know about it?'

He shrugged his shoulders. 'One hears things.'

'Oh, it's those old beasts, is it?' She hated the Bargionis, hated them. 'Instead of being grateful to Tonino for helping me! Which is more than you've ever done, John. You, with your beastly tumours and your rotten old Faust!' The contempt in her voice was blasting. 'Just leaving me to sink or swim. And when somebody comes along and is just humanly decent to me, you insult him. And you fly into a rage of jealousy because I'm normally grateful to him.'

John had had time to readjust his mask. 'I don't fly into any sort of rage,' he said, bottling his anger and speaking slowly and coldly. 'I just don't want you to be preyed upon by handsome, black-haired young pimps from the slums of Naples.'

'John!'

'Even if the preying is done platonically,' he went on. 'Which I'm sure it is. But I don't want to have even a platonic pimp about.' He spoke coldly, slowly, with the deliberate intention of hurting her as much as he could. 'How much has he got out of you so far?'

Moira did not answer, but turned and hurried from the room.

Tonino had just got to the bottom of the hill, when a loud insistent hooting made him turn round. A big yellow car was close at his heels.

'Moira!' he called in astonishment. The car came to a halt beside him.

'Get in,' she commanded almost fiercely, as though she were angry with him. He did as he was told.

'But where did you think of going?' he asked.

'I don't know. Anywhere. Let's take the Bologna road, into the mountains.'

'But you've got no hat,' he objected, 'no coat.'

She only laughed and, throwing the car into gear, drove off at full speed. John spent his evening in solitude. He began by reproaching himself. 'I oughtn't to have spoken so brutally,' he thought, when he heard of Moira's precipitate departure. What tender, charming things he would say, when she came back, to make up for his hard words! And then, when she'd made peace, he would talk to her gently, paternally about the dangers of having bad friends. Even the anticipation of what he would say to her caused his face to light up with a beautiful smile. But when, three-quarters of an hour after dinner-time, he sat down to a lonely and overcooked meal, his mood had changed. 'If she wants to sulk,' he said to himself, 'why, let her sulk.' And as the hours passed, his heart grew harder. Midnight struck. His anger began to be tempered by a certain apprehension. Could anything have happened to her? He was anxious. But all the same he went to bed, on principle, firmly. Twenty minutes later he heard Moira's step on the stairs and then the closing of her door. She was back; nothing had happened; perversely, he felt all the more exasperated with her for being safe. Would she come and say good night? He waited.

Absently, meanwhile, mechanically, Moira had undressed. She was thinking of all that had happened in the eternity since she had left the house. The marvellous sunset in the mountains! Every westward slope was rosily gilded; below them lay a gulf of blue shadow. They had stood in silence, gazing. 'Kiss me, Tonino,' she had suddenly whispered, and the touch of his lips had sent a kind of delicious apprehension fluttering under her skin. She pressed herself against him; his body was firm and solid within her clasp. She could feel the throb of his heart against her cheek, like something separately alive. Beat, beat, beat—and the throbbing life was not the life of the Tonino she knew, the Tonino who laughed and paid compliments and brought flowers; it was the life of some mysterious and separate power.

A power with which the familiar individual Tonino happened to be connected, but almost irrelevantly. She shuddered a little. Mysterious and terrifying. But the terror was somehow attractive, like a dark precipice that allures. 'Kiss me, Tonino, kiss me.' The light faded; the hills died away into featureless flat shapes against the sky. 'I'm cold,' she said at last, shivering. 'Let's go.' They dined at a little inn, high

up between the two passes. When they drove away, it was night. He put his arm round her and kissed her neck, at the nape, where the cropped hair was harsh against his mouth. 'You'll make me drive into the ditch,' she laughed. But there was no laughter for Tonino. 'Moira, Moira,' he repeated; and there was something like agony in his voice. 'Moira.' And finally, at his suffering entreaty, she stopped the car. They got out. Under the chestnut trees, what utter darkness!

Moira slipped off her last garment and, naked before the mirror, looked at her image. It seemed the same as ever, her pale body; but in reality it was different, it was new, it had only just been born.

John still waited, but his wife did not come. 'All right, then,' he said to himself, with a spiteful little anger that disguised itself as a god-like and impersonal serenity of justice; 'let her sulk if she wants to. She only punishes herself.' He turned out the light and composed himself to sleep. Next morning he left for Rome and the Cytological Congress without saying good-bye; that would teach her. But 'thank goodness!' was Moira's first reflection when she heard that he had gone. And then suddenly, she felt rather sorry for him. Poor John! Like a dead frog, galvanized; twitching, but never alive. He was pathetic really. She was so rich in happiness, that she could afford to be sorry for him. And in a way she was even grateful to him. If he hadn't come, if he hadn't behaved so unforgivably, nothing would have happened between Tonino and herself. Poor John! But all the same he was hopeless.

Day followed bright serene day. But Moira's life no longer flowed like the clear and shallow stream it had been before John's coming. It was turbulent now, there were depths and darkneses. And love was no longer a game with a pleasant companion; it was violent, all-absorbing, even rather terrible. Tonino became for her a kind of obsession. She was haunted by him—by his face, by his white teeth and his dark hair, by his hands and limbs and body.

She wanted to be with him, to feel his nearness, to touch him. She would spend whole hours stroking his hair, ruffling it up, rearranging it fantastically, on end, like a golliwog's, or with hanging fringes, or with the locks twisted up into horns. And when she had contrived some specially ludicrous effect, she clapped her hands and laughed, laughed, till the tears ran down her cheeks. 'If you could see yourself now!' she cried. Offended by her laughter, 'You play with me as though I were a doll,' Tonino would protest with a rather ludicrous expression of angry dignity. The laughter would go out of Moira's face and, with a seriousness that was fierce, almost cruel, she would lean forward and kiss him, silently, violently, again and again.

Absent, he was still unescapably with her, like a guilty conscience. Her solitudes were endless meditations on the theme of him. Sometimes the longing for his tangible presence was too achingly painful to be borne. Disobeying all his injunctions, breaking all her promises, she would telephone for him to come to her, she would drive off in search of him. Once, at about midnight, Tonino was called down from his room at the hotel by a message that a lady wanted to speak to him. He found her sitting in the car. 'But I couldn't help it, I simply couldn't help it,' she cried, to excuse herself and mollify his anger. Tonino refused to be propitiated. Coming like this in the middle of the night! It was madness, it was scandalous! She sat there, listening, pale and with trembling lips and the tears in her eyes. He was silent at last. 'But if you knew, Tonino,' she whispered, 'if you only knew . . .' She took his hand and kissed it, humbly.

Berto, when he heard the good news (for Tonino proudly told him at once), was curious to know whether the signora forestiera was as cold as Northern ladies were proverbially supposed to be.

'Macchè!' Tonino protested vigorously. On the contrary. For a long time the two young sportsmen discussed the question of amorous temperatures, discussed it technically, professionally.

Tonino's raptures were not so extravagant as Moira's. So far as he was concerned, this sort of thing had happened before. Passion with Moira was not diminished by satisfaction, but rather, since the satisfaction was for her so novel, so intrinsically apocalyptic, increased. But that which caused her passion to increase produced in his a waning. He had got what he wanted; his night-begotten, touch-born longing for her (dulled in the interval and diminished by all the sporting love-hunts undertaken with Berto) had been fulfilled. She was no longer the desired and unobtainable, but the possessed, the known. By her surrender she had lowered herself to the level of all the other women he had ever made love to; she was just another item in the sportsman's grand total.

His attitude towards her underwent a change. Familiarity began to blunt his courtesy; his manner became offhandedly marital. When he saw her after an absence, 'Ebbene tesoro,' he would say in a genially unromantic tone, and pat her once or twice on the back or shoulder, as one might pat a horse. He permitted her to run her own errands and even his. Moira was happy to be his servant. Her love for him was, in one at least of its aspects, almost abject. She was dog-like in her devotion. Tonino found her adoration very agreeable so long as it expressed itself in fetching and carrying, in falling in with his suggestions, and in making him presents. 'But you mustn't, my darling, you shouldn't,' he protested each time she gave him something.

Nevertheless, he accepted a pearl tie-pin, a pair of diamond and enamel links, a half-hunter on a gold and platinum chain. But Moira's devotion expressed itself also in other ways. Love demands as much as it gives. She wanted so much—his heart, his physical presence, his caresses, his confidences, his time, his fidelity. She was tyrannous in her adoring abjection. She pestered him with devotion. Tonino was bored and irritated by her excessive love. The omniscient Berto, to whom he carried his troubles, advised him to take a strong line. Women, he pronounced, must be kept in their places, firmly. They love one all the better if they are a little maltreated.

Tonino followed his advice and, pretexting work and social engagements, reduced the number of his visits. What a relief to be free of her importunity! Disquieted, Moira presented him with an amber cigar-holder. He protested, accepted it, but gave her no more of his company in return. A set of diamond studs produced no better effect. He talked vaguely and magniloquently about his career and the necessity for unremitting labour; that was his excuse for not coming more often to see her. It was on the tip of her tongue, one afternoon, to say that she would be his career, would give him anything he wanted, if only . . . But the memory of John's hateful words made her check herself. She was terrified lest he might make no difficulties about accepting her offer. 'Stay with me this evening,' she begged, throwing her arms round his neck. He suffered himself to be kissed.

'I wish I could stay,' he said hypocritically. 'But I have some important business this evening.' The important business was playing billiards with Berto.

Moira looked at him for a moment in silence; then, dropping her hands from his shoulders, turned away. She had seen in his eyes a weariness that was almost a horror.

Summer drew on; but in Moira's soul there was no inward brightness to match the sunshine. She passed her days in a misery that was alternately restless and apathetic. Her nerves began once more to lead their own irresponsible life apart from hers. For no sufficient cause and against her will, she would find herself uncontrollably in a fury, or crying, or laughing. When Tonino came to see her, she was almost always, in spite of all her resolutions, bitterly angry or hysterically tearful. 'But why do I behave like this?' she would ask herself despairingly. 'Why do I say such things? I'm making him hate me.' But the next time he came, she would act in precisely the same way.

It was as though she were possessed by a devil. And it was not her mind only that was sick. When she ran too quickly upstairs, her heart seemed to stop beating for a moment and there was a whirling darkness before her eyes. She had an almost daily headache, lost appetite, could not digest what she ate. In her thin sallow face her eyes became enormous. Looking into the glass, she found herself hideous, old, repulsive. 'No wonder he hates me,' she thought, and she would brood, brood for hours over the idea that she had become physically disgusting to him, disgusting to look at, to touch, tainting the air with her breath. The idea became an obsession, indescribably painful and humiliating.

'Questa donna!' Tonino would complain with a sigh, when he came back from seeing her. Why didn't he leave her, then? Berto was all for strong measures. Tonino protested that he hadn't the courage; the poor woman would be too unhappy. But he also enjoyed a good dinner and going for drives in an expensive car and receiving sumptuous additions to his wardrobe. He contented himself with complaining and being a Christian martyr. One evening his old friend Carlo Menardi introduced him to his sister. After that he bore his martyrdom with even less patience than before. Luisa Menardi was only seventeen, fresh, healthy, provocatively pretty, with rolling black eyes that said all sorts of things and an impertinent tongue. Tonino's business appointments became more numerous than ever. Moira was left to brood in solitude on the dreadful theme of her own repulsiveness.

Then, quite suddenly, Tonino's manner towards her underwent another change. He became once more assiduously tender, thoughtful, affectionate. Instead of hardening himself with a shrug of indifference against her tears, instead of returning anger for hysterical anger, he was patient with her, was lovingly and cheerfully gentle. Gradually, by a kind of spiritual infection, she too became loving and gentle. Almost reluctantly—for the devil in her was the enemy of life and happiness—she came up again into the light.

'My dear son,' Vasari senior had written in his eloquent and disquieting letter, 'I am not one to complain feebly of Destiny; my whole life has been one long act of Faith and unshatterable Will. But there are blows under which even the strongest man must stagger—blows which' The letter rumbled on for pages in the same style. The hard unpleasant fact that emerged from under the eloquence was that Tonino's father had been speculating on the Naples stock exchange, speculating unsuccessfully. On

the first of the next month he would be required to pay out some fifty thousand francs more than he could lay his hands on. The Grand Hotel Ritz-Carlton was doomed; he might even have to sell the restaurant. Was there anything Tonino could do?

'Is it possible?' said Moira with a sigh of happiness. 'It seems too good to be true.' She leaned against him; Tonino kissed her eyes and spoke caressing words. There was no moon; the dark-blue sky was thickly constellated; and, like another starry universe gone deliriously mad, the fire-flies darted, alternately eclipsed and shining, among the olive trees. 'Darling,' he said aloud, and wondered if this would be a propitious moment to speak. 'Piccina mia.' In the end he decided to postpone matters for another day or two. In another day or two, he calculated, she wouldn't be able to refuse him anything.

Tonino's calculations were correct. She let him have the money, not only without hesitation, but eagerly, joyfully. The reluctance was all on his side, in the receiving. He was almost in tears as he took the cheque, and the tears were tears of genuine emotion. 'You're an angel,' he said, and his voice trembled. 'You've saved us all.' Moira cried outright as she kissed him. How could John have said those things? She cried and was happy. A pair of silver-backed hair-brushes accompanied the cheque—just to show that the money had made no difference to their relationship. Tonino recognized the delicacy of her intention and was touched. 'You're too good to me,' he insisted, 'too good.' He felt rather ashamed.

'Let's go for a long drive tomorrow,' she suggested.

Tonino had arranged to go with Luisa and her brother to Prato. But so strong was his emotion, that he was on the point of accepting Moira's invitation and sacrificing Luisa.

'All right,' he began, and then suddenly thought better of it. After all, he could go out with Moira any day. It was seldom that he had a chance of jaunting with Luisa. He struck his forehead, he made a despairing face. 'But what am I thinking of!' he cried. 'Tomorrow's the day we're expecting the manager of the hotel company from Milan.'

'But must you be there to see him?'

'Alas!'

It was too sad. Just how sad Moira only fully realized the next day. She had never felt so lonely, never longed so ardently for his presence and affection. Unsatisfied, her longings were an unbearable restlessness. Hoping to escape from the loneliness and ennui with which she had filled the house, the garden, the landscape, she took out the car and drove away at random, not knowing whither. An hour later she found herself at Pistoia, and Pistoia was as hateful as every other place; she headed the car homewards. At Prato there was a fair. The road was crowded; the air was rich with a haze of dust and the noise of brazen music. In a field near the entrance to the town, the merry-go-rounds revolved with a glitter in the sunlight. A plunging horse held up the traffic.

Moira stopped the car and looked about her at the crowd, at the swings, at the whirling roundabouts, looked with a cold hostility and distaste. Hateful! And suddenly there was Tonino sitting on a swan in the nearest merry-go-round, with a girl in pink muslin sitting in front of him between the white wings and the arching neck. Rising and falling as it went, the swan turned away out of sight. The music played on. But poor

poppa, poor poppa, he's got nothin' at all. The swan reappeared. The girl in pink was looking back over her shoulder, smiling. She was very young, vulgarly pretty, shining and plumped with health. Tonino's lips moved; behind the wall of noise what was he saying? All that Moira knew was that the girl laughed; her laughter was like an explosion of sensual young life. Tonino raised his hand and took hold of her bare brown arm.

Like an undulating planet, the swan once more wheeled away out of sight. Meanwhile, the plunging horse had been quieted, the traffic had begun to move forward. Behind her a horn hooted insistently. But Moira did not stir. Something in her soul desired that the agony should be repeated and prolonged. Hoot, hoot, hoot! She paid no attention. Rising and falling, the swan emerged once more from eclipse. This time Tonino saw her. Their eyes met; the laughter suddenly went out of his face. 'Porco madonna!' shouted the infuriated motorist behind her, 'can't you move on?' Moira threw the car into gear and shot forward along the dusty road.

The cheque was in the post; there was still time, Tonino reflected, to stop the payment of it.

'You're very silent,' said Luisa teasingly, as they drove back towards Florence. Her brother was sitting in front, at the wheel; he had no eyes at the back of his head. But Tonino sat beside her like a dummy. 'Why are you so silent?'

He looked at her, and his face was grave and stonily unresponsive to her bright and dimpling provocations. He sighed; then, making an effort, he smiled, rather wanly. Her hand was lying on her knee, palm upward, with a pathetic look of being unemployed. Dutifully doing what was expected of him, Tonino reached out and took it.

At half past six he was leaning his borrowed motorcycle against the wall of Moira's villa. Feeling like a man who is about to undergo a dangerous operation, he rang the bell.

Moira was lying on her bed, had lain there ever since she came in; she was still wearing her dust-coat, she had not even taken off her shoes. Affecting an easy cheerfulness, as though nothing unusual had happened, Tonino entered almost jauntily.

'Lying down?' he said in a tone of surprised solicitude. 'You haven't got a headache, have you?' His words fell, trivial and ridiculous, into abysses of significant silence. With a sinking of the heart, he sat down on the edge of the bed, he laid a hand on her knee. Moira did not stir, but lay with averted face, remote and unmoving. 'What is it, my darling?' He patted her soothingly. 'You're not upset because I went to Prato, are you?' he went on, in the incredulous voice of a man who is certain of a negative answer to his question.

Still she said nothing. This silence was almost worse than the outcry he had anticipated. Desperately, knowing it was no good, he went on to talk about his old friend, Carlo Menardi, who had come round in his car to call for him; and as the director of the hotel company had left immediately after lunch—most unexpectedly—and as he'd thought Moira was certain to be out, he had finally yielded and gone along with Carlo and his party. Of course, if he'd realized that Moira hadn't gone out, he'd have asked her to join them. For his own sake her company would have made all the difference.

His voice was sweet, ingratiating, apologetic. 'A black-haired pimp from the slums of Naples.' John's words reverberated in her memory. And so Tonino had never cared for her at all, only for her money. That other woman. . . . She saw again that pink dress, lighter in tone than the sleek, sunburnt skin; Tonino's hand on the bare brown arm; that flash of eyes and laughing teeth. And meanwhile he was talking on and on, ingratiatingly; his very voice was a lie.

'Go away,' she said at last, without looking at him.

'But, my darling' Bending over her, he tried to kiss her averted cheek. She turned and, with all her might, struck him in the face.

'You little devil!' he cried, made furious by the pain of the blow. He pulled out his handkerchief and held it to his bleeding lip. 'Very well, then.' His voice trembled with anger. 'If you want me to go, I'll go. With pleasure.' He walked heavily away. The door slammed behind him.

But perhaps, thought Moira, as she listened to the sound of his footsteps receding on the stairs, perhaps it hadn't really been so bad as it looked; perhaps she had misjudged him. She sat up; on the yellow counterpane was a little circular red stain—a drop of his blood. And it was she who had struck him.

'Tonino!' she called; but the house was silent. 'Tonino!' Still calling, she hurried downstairs, through the hall, out on to the porch. She was just in time to see him riding off through the gate on his motor-cycle. He was steering with one hand; the other still pressed a handkerchief to his mouth.

'Tonino, Tonino!' But either he didn't, or else he wouldn't hear her. The motor-cycle disappeared from view. And because he had gone, because he was angry, because of his bleeding lip, Moira was suddenly convinced that she had been accusing him falsely, that the wrong was all on her side. In a state of painful, uncontrollable agitation she ran to the garage. It was essential that she should catch him, speak to him, beg his pardon, implore him to come back. She started the car and drove out.

'One of these days,' John had warned her, 'you'll go over the edge of the bank, if you're not careful. It's a horrible turning.'

Coming out of the garage door, she pulled the wheel hard over as usual. But too impatient to be with Tonino, she pressed the accelerator at the same time. John's prophecy was fulfilled. The car came too close to the edge of the bank; the dry earth crumbled and slid under its outer wheels. It tilted horribly, tottered for a long instant on the balancing point, and went over. But for the ilex tree, it would have gone crashing down the slope. As it was, the machine fell only a foot or so and came to rest, leaning drunkenly sideways with its flank against the bole of the tree. Shaken, but quite unhurt, Moira climbed over the edge of the car and dropped to the ground. 'Assunta! Giovanni!' The maids, the gardener came running. When they saw what had happened, there was a small babel of exclamations, questions, comments.

'But can't you get it on to the drive again?' Moira insisted to the gardener; because it was necessary, absolutely necessary, that she should see Tonino at once.

Giovanni shook his head. It would take at least four men with levers and a pair of horses. . . .

'Telephone for a taxi, then,' she ordered Assunta and hurried into the house. If she remained any longer with those chattering people, she'd begin to scream. Her nerves had come to separate life again; clenching her fists, she tried to fight them down.

Going up to her room, she sat down before the mirror and began, methodically and with deliberation (it was her will imposing itself on her nerves) to make up her face. She rubbed a little red on to her pale cheeks, painted her lips, dabbed on the powder. 'I must look presentable,' she thought, and put on her smartest hat. But would the taxi never come? She struggled with her impatience. 'My purse,' she said to herself. 'I shall need some money for the cab.' She was pleased with herself for being so full of foresight, so coolly practical in spite of her nerves. 'Yes, of course; my purse.'

But where was the purse? She remembered so clearly having thrown it on to the bed, when she came in from her drive. It was not there. She looked under the pillow, lifted the counterpane. Or perhaps it had fallen on the floor. She looked under the bed; the purse wasn't there. Was it possible that she hadn't put it on the bed at all? But it wasn't on her dressing-table, nor on the mantelpiece, nor on any of the shelves, nor in any of the drawers of her wardrobe. Where, where, where? And suddenly a terrible thought occurred to her. Tonino . . . Was it possible? The seconds passed.

The possibility became a dreadful certainty. A thief as well as . . . John's words echoed in her head. 'Black-haired pimp from the slums of Naples, black-haired pimp from the slums . . .' And a thief as well. The bag was made of gold chain-work; there were more than four thousand lire in it. A thief, a thief . . . She stood quite still, strained, rigid, her eyes staring. Then something broke, something seemed to collapse within her. She cried aloud as though under a sudden intolerable pain.

The sound of the shot brought them running upstairs. They found her lying face downwards across the bed, still faintly breathing. But she was dead before the doctor could come up from the town. On a bed standing, as hers stood, in an alcove, it was difficult to lay out the body. When they moved it out of its recess, there was the sound of a hard, rather metallic fall. Assunta bent down to see what had dropped.

'It's her purse,' she said. 'It must have got stuck between the bed and the wall.'

The End