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A DANCE TO THE MUSIC OF TIME



ANTHONY POWELL

A Buyer's Market

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A NOVEL

Book 2

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THE LAST TIME I saw any examples of Mr. Deacon's work was at a sale, held obscurely in the neighbourhood of Euston Road, many years after his death. The canvases were none of them familiar but they recalled especially, with all kind of other things, dinner at the Walpole-Wilsons', reviving with a jerk that phase of early life. They made me think of long-forgotten conflicts and compromises between the imagination and the will, reason and feeling, power and sensuality; together with many more specifically personal sensations, experienced in the past, of pleasure and of pain. Outside, the spring weather was cool and sunny: Mr. Deacon's favourite season of the year. Within doors, propped against three sides of a washstand, the oil-paintings seemed, for some reason, appropriate to the surroundings, dusty, though not displeasing; even suggesting, in their way, the kind of home Mr. Deacon favoured for himself and his belongings: the sitting-room over the shop, for example, informal, not too permanent, more than a trifle decayed. His haunts, I remembered, had bordered on these northern confines of London.

Accumulations of unrelated objects brought together for auction, acquire, in their haphazard manner, a certain dignity of their own: items not to be tolerated in any inhabited dwelling finding each its own level in these expansive, anonymous caverns, where, making no claim to individual merit, odds and ends harmonise quietly with each other, and with the general sobriety of background. Such precincts have something of museums about them, the roving crowd on the whole examining the assembled relics with an expert, unselfconscious intensity, not entirely commercial or acquisitive.

On these particular premises almost every man-made thing seemed represented. Comparative new mowing machines: scabbardless and rusty cavalry sabres: ebony fragments of African fetish: nineteenth-century typewriter, poised uncertainly on metal stilts in the midst of a tea-set in Liverpool ware, the black-and-white landscapes of its design irreparably chipped. Several pillows and bolsters covered with the Union Jack gave a disturbing hint, that somewhere beneath, a corpse awaited burial with military honours. Farther off, high rolls of linoleum, coloured blue, green and pink, were ranged against the wall like pillars, a Minoan colonnade from which wicker armchairs and much-used pieces of luggage formed a semicircle. Within this open space, placed rather like an emblem arranged for worship, stood the washstand round which the pictures were grouped. On its marble top rested an empty bird-cage, two men-at-arms in lead, probably German, and a dog-eared pile of waltz music. In front of a strip of Axminster carpet, displayed like faded tapestry from the side of a nearby wardrobe in pitch pine, a fourth painting stood upside down.

All four canvases belonged to the same school of large, untidy, exclusively male figure compositions, light in tone and mythological in subject: Pre-Raphaelite in influence without being precisely Pre-Raphaelite in spirit: a compromise between, say, Burne-Jones and Alma-Tadema, with perhaps a touch of Watts in method of applying the paint. One of them—ripping away from its stretcher at the top—was dated 1903. A decided weakness of drawing was emphasised by the certitude—which overtakes, after all, some of the greatest artists—that none of Mr. Deacon's pictures could possibly have been painted at any epoch other than its own: this hallmark of Time being especially attributable to the painter's inclination towards large, blank expanses of colour, often recklessly laid on. Yet, in spite of obvious imperfections, the pictures, as I have said, were not utterly unsympathetic in that situation. Even the forest of inverted legs, moving furiously towards their goal in what appeared to be one of the running events of the Olympic Games, were manifested to what might easily have been greater advantage in that reversed position, conveying, as they did, an immense sense of nervous urgency, the flesh tints of the athletes' straining limbs contrasting strangely with pink and yellow contours of three cupids in debased Dresden who tripped alongside on top of

pedestal cupboard.

In due course two bucolic figures in cloth caps, shirtsleeves, and green baize aprons held up Mr. Deacon's pictures, one by one, for examination by a small knot of dealers: a depressed gang of men looking as if they had strayed into that place between more congenial interludes on the race-course. I was not sure how this display might strike other people, and was glad, when exposure took place, that no unfriendly comment was aroused. The prodigious size of the scenes depicted might in itself reasonably have provoked laughter; and, although by that time I knew enough of Mr. Deacon to regard his painting as nothing more serious than one of a number of other warring elements within him, open ridicule of his work would have been distressing. However, all four elevations were received, one after another, in apathetic silence; although the "lot" was finally knocked down for a few pounds only. The bidding was reasonably brisk: possibly on account of the frames, which were made of some black substance, ornamented with gold in a floral pattern, conceivably of the painter's own design.

Mr. Deacon must have visited the house at least half a dozen times when I was a child, occasionally when, by some unlikely chance, I had seen and spoken with him more than once; though I do not know why our paths should have crossed in this manner, because he was always reported "not to like children" so that our meetings, such as they were, would not have been deliberately arranged on the part of my parents. My father, amused by his conversation, was in the habit of referring to Mr. Deacon's painting without enthusiasm; and when, as he sometimes did, Mr. Deacon used to assert that he preferred to keep—rather than sell—his own works, the remark usually aroused mildly ironic comment at home after he was gone. It would not be fair, however, to suggest that, professionally, Mr. Deacon was unable to find a market for his classical subjects. On the contrary, he could always name several faithful patrons, mostly business people from the Midlands. One of these, especially, spoke of as a "big iron man"—whom I used to envisage as physically constructed of the metal from which he derived his income—would, for example, come down from Lancashire once a year: always returning northward in possession of an oil sketch of Antinous, or sheaf of charcoal studies of Spartan youth at exercise. According to Mr. Deacon, one of these minor works had even found its way into the ironmaster's local art gallery, a fulfilment which evidently gave great satisfaction to the painter, although Mr. Deacon would mention the matter in a deprecatory sort of way, because he disapproved of what he called "official art," and used to speak with great bitterness of the Royal Academy. When I met him in later life I discovered that he disliked the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists almost equally; and was, naturally, even more opposed to later trends like Cubism, or the works of the Surrealists. In fact Puvis de Chavannes and Simeon Solomon, the last of whom I think he regarded as his master, were the only painters I ever heard him speak of with unqualified approval. Nature had no doubt intended him to be in some manner an adjunct to the art movement of the Eighteen-Nineties, but somehow Mr. Deacon had missed that spirit in his youth, a moral separateness that perhaps accounted for a later lack of integration.

He was not rich, although his income, in those days, allowed the preservation of a fairly independent attitude towards the more material side of being an artist. He had once, for example, turned down the opportunity to decorate the interior of a fish restaurant in Brighton—where he lived—on grounds that the sum offered was incommensurate with the demeaning nature of the work demanded. His means had also enabled him to assemble what was said to be an excellent little collection of hour-glasses, silhouettes, and bric-à-brac of various kinds. At the same time he liked to describe how, from time to time, in order to avoid the expense and responsibility of domestic staff, he deliberately underwent long periods of undertaking his own cooking. "I could always earn my living as a chef," he used to say; adding, in joke, that he would look "enormously ornamental" in a white cap. When travelling on the Continent he commonly went on foot with a haversack on his back, rather than by trains, which he found "stuffy and infinitely filled with tedious persons." He was careful, even

rather fussy, about his health, especially in relation to personal cleanliness and good sanitation; so that some of the more sordid aspects of these allegedly *terre-à-terre* excursions abroad must at times have been a trial to him. Perhaps his Continental visits were, in fact, more painful for managers of hotels and restaurants frequented by him; for he was a great believer in insisting absolutely upon the minutest observance by others of his own wishes. Such habits of travelling, in so much as they were indeed voluntary and not to some degree enforced by financial consideration, were no doubt also connected with his mind with his own special approach to social behaviour, in which he was guided by an aversion often expressed, for conduct that might be looked upon either as conventional or conservative.

In this last respect Mr. Deacon went further than my Uncle Giles, whose creed of being “a bit of a radical” was also well publicised within his own family circle; or, indeed, wherever he might find himself. My uncle, however, dealt in substance he knew and, although he would never have admitted as much, even to some extent revered, merely desiring most aspects of that familiar world to be more nicely adjusted to his own taste. Mr. Deacon, on the other hand, was in favour of abolishing, or ignoring, the existing world entirely, with a view to experimenting with one of an entirely different order. He was a student of Esperanto (or, possibly, one of the lesser-known artificial languages), intermittently vegetarian, and an advocate of decimal coinage. At the same time he was strongly opposed to the introduction of “spelling reform” for the English language (on grounds that for him such changes would mar *Paradise Lost*), and I can remember it said that he hated “suffragettes.”

These preferences, with the possible exception of decimal coinage, would have been regarded as mere quirks in my uncle; but, as they were presented in what was almost always a moderate and entertaining manner, they were tolerated by my parents to a far greater degree than were similar prejudices disseminated by Uncle Giles, whose heartily deplored opinions were naturally associated in the minds of most of his relations with threat of imminent financial worry for themselves, not to mention potential scandal within the family. In any case, aggressive personal opinions, whatever the kind, might justly be regarded as uncalled for, or at best allowed only slight weight, when voiced by a man whose career had been so uniformly unsuccessful as had that of my uncle. Mr. Deacon's persuasions, on the other hand, could be regarded with tolerance as part of the stock-in-trade of a professional artist, by no means a failure in life, and to be accepted, however unwillingly, as the inevitable adjunct of a Bohemian profession: even valuable in their way as illustrating another side of human experience.

At the same time, although no doubt they rather enjoyed his occasional visits, my parents legitimately considered Mr. Deacon an eccentric, who, unless watched carefully, might develop into a bore, and it would not be precisely true to say that they liked him; although I believe that, in his way, Mr. Deacon liked both of them. The circumstances of their first meeting were unrecorded. A mutual introduction may have taken place at one of the concerts held at the Pavilion, which they sometimes attended when my father was stationed near Brighton in the years before the war. During that period a call was certainly paid on Mr. Deacon in his studio: several small rooms converted to that use at the top of a house in one of the quiet squares remote from “the front.” He had chosen this retired position because the sight of the sea disturbed him at his work: a prejudice for which psychological explanation would now certainly be available.

I never saw the studio myself, but often heard it spoken of as well stocked with curiosities of one kind or another. We moved from that neighbourhood before the war came in 1914, and, I suppose, lost touch with Mr. Deacon; but for a long time I remember the impression of height he gave when, on the day after tea, he presented me with a wooden paint-box—the pigments contained in tubes—the heavy scent of the tobacco he smoked hanging round the pleats and belt of his Norfolk jacket, a garment already beginning to look a little old-fashioned, and the sound of his voice, deep and earnest, while he explained the range of colours to be found within the box, and spoke of the principles of light and

shade: principles—I could not help reflecting as I examined the canvases in the sale-room—which brush must have so often and so violently abused.

By the stage of life when I happened on these four pictures, I had, of course, during our brief latter-day acquaintance, had opportunity to observe Mr. Deacon in surroundings rather different from my parents' domestic interior, where I had first heard his peculiarities discussed; and I had also, by the time I found myself in the auction-room, talked over his character with persons like Barnby, who knew him at closer range than I myself ever experienced. All the same, I could not help pondering once again the discrepancy that existed between a style of painting that must have been unfashionable and at best aridly academic, even in his early days; and its contrast with the revolutionary principles that he preached and—in spheres other than aesthetic—to some considerable extent practised. I wondered once again whether this apparent inconsistency of approach, that had once disconcerted me, symbolised antipathetic sides of his nature; or whether his life and work and judgment at some point coalesced with each other, resulting in a standpoint that was really all of a piece—as he himself would have said—that “made a work of art.”

Certainly I could not decide that question there and then in the auction-room among the furniture and linoleum, to the sound of bidding and taps of the hammer, even in the light of later circumstances in which I had known him, and I have never really succeeded in coming to a positive conclusion on the subject. Undoubtedly his painting, in its own direction, represented the farthest extremity of Mr. Deacon's romanticism, and I suppose it could be argued that upon such debris of classical imagery the foundations of at least certain specific elements of twentieth century art came to be built. At the same time lack of almost all imaginative quality in Mr. Deacon's painting resulted, finally, in a product that suggested not “romance”—far less “classicism”—as some immensely humdrum pattern of everyday life: the Greek and Roman episodes in which he dealt belonging involuntarily to a world of cosy parlours and “nice cups of tea”—“At least when thought of,” as Barnby used to say, “in terms of pictorial reproduction in, say, photogravure”—even though Barnby himself, in some moods, would attempt a defence at least of certain aspects of Mr. Deacon's art. In short, the pictures recalled something given away with a Christmas Number, rather than the glories of Sunium's marbled steep, that blue Sicilian sea that had provided a back-cloth for the Victorian Hellenism propagated at school by my housemaster, Le Bas. Mr. Deacon's painting might, indeed, have been compared, though at a greatly inferior level of the imagination's faculties, with Le Bas's day-dreams of Hellas; and perhaps in the last resort, Mr. Deacon, too, would have been wiser to have chosen teaching as a career. Undeniably there was something didactic about his manner, although, as a child, I had naturally never speculated on his idiosyncrasies, of which I knew only by hearing them particularised by my parents or the servants.

This touch of pedantry had been apparent at a later date, when we ran across Mr. Deacon in the Louvre, during summer holidays taken soon after the termination of the war, when my father was still on duty in Paris. That afternoon, although I did not immediately recognise him, I had already wondered who might be the tall, lean, rather bent figure, moving restlessly about at the far end of the gallery; and his name, spoken again after so many years, at once identified him in my mind. When we had come up with him he was inspecting with close attention Perugino's St. Sebastian, for the better examination of which, stooping slightly, he had just produced a small magnifying-glass with a gold rim. He wore a thickish pepper-and-salt suit—no longer cut with belt and side-pleats—and he carried in his hand a hat, broad-brimmed and furry, the general effect of the whole outfit being, perhaps intentionally, a trifle down-at-heel: together with the additionally disturbing suggestion that his slightly curved torso might be enclosed within some form of imperfectly fitting corset. His grey hair, which needed cutting, was brushed straight back, showing off a profile distinguished rather than otherwise: a little like that of an actor made up to play the part of Prospero, the face heavily lined and

grave, without conveying any sense of dejection.

He recognised my parents at once, greeting them with an odd, stilted formality, again like an old-fashioned actor's. My father—who was not in uniform—began to explain that he was attached to the staff of the Conference. Mr. Deacon, listened with an absorbed expression, failed or, perhaps it would be truer to say, pretended for reasons of his own to misunderstand the nature of this employment. In his resonant, faintly ironical voice, he asked: "And what might you be conferring about?"

At that period Paris was full of missions and delegates, emissaries and plenipotentiaries of one kind and another, brought there by the traffic of the Peace Treaty; and probably my father could not imagine why Mr. Deacon should appear to want further details about his job (which had, I believe something to do with disarmament), a matter which could, after all, at least in its details, be only a professional interest. He certainly did not guess that Mr. Deacon must have decided for the moment to close his eyes to the Conference, together with much—if not all—that had led to its existence; or, at least, preferred, anyway at that juncture, to ignore all its current circumstances. My father's reply, no doubt intentionally discreet, was therefore worded in general terms; and the explanation, so far as could be seen, took Mr. Deacon no farther in discovering why we were at that hour in the Louvre.

"In connection with those *expositions* the French love so much?" he suggested. "So you are no longer *militaire*?"

"As a matter of fact, they have not given nearly so much trouble as you might expect," said my father, who must have taken this query to be a whimsical manner of referring to some supposed form of intransigence over negotiation on the part of the French staff-officer constituting his "opposing number."

"I don't know much about these things," Mr. Deacon admitted.

The matter rested there, foundations of conversation changing to the delineation of St. Sebastian. Mr. Deacon suddenly showing an unexpected grasp of military hierarchy—at least of a somewhat obsolete order—by pointing out that the Saint, holding as he did the rank of centurion—and being therefore, a comparatively senior non-commissioned or warrant officer—probably possessed a less youthful and altogether more rugged appearance than that attributed to him by Perugino: and, indeed, commonly, by most other painters of hagiographical subjects. Going on to speak more generally of the Peruginos to be found throughout the rest of the gallery, Mr. Deacon alleged that more than one was labelled "Raphael." We did not dispute this assertion. Questioned as to how long he had himself been living in Paris, Mr. Deacon was vague; nor was it clear how he had occupied himself during the war, the course of which he seemed scarcely to have noticed. He implied that he had "settled abroad" more or less permanently; anyway, for a long time.

"There really are moments when one feels one has more in common with the French than with one's own countrymen," he said. "Their practical way of looking at things appeals to a certain side of me—though perhaps not the best side. If you want something here, the question is: Have you got the money to pay for it? If the answer is 'yes,' all is well; if 'no,' you have to go without. Besides, there is a freer atmosphere. That is something that revolutions do. There is really nowhere else in the world like Paris."

He was living, he told us, "in a little place off the Boul' Mich'."

"I'm afraid I can't possibly ask you there in its present state," he added. "Moving in always takes an age. And I have so many treasures."

He shook his head after an inquiry regarding his painting.

"Much more interested in my collections now," he said. "One of the reasons I am over here is that I have been doing a little buying for friends as well as for myself."

"But I expect you keep your own work up now and then."

"After all, why should one go on adding to the detritus in this transitory world?" asked Mr. Deacon.

raising his shoulders and smiling. “Still I sometimes take a sketchbook to a café—preferably some little estaminet in one of the working-class quarters. One gets a good head here, and a vigorous pot there. I collect heads—and necks—as you may remember.”

He excused himself politely, though quite definitely, from an invitation to luncheon at the Interallié, a club of which he had, apparently, never heard; though he complained that Paris was more expensive than formerly, expressing at the same time regret at the “Americanisation” of the Latin Quarter.

“I sometimes think of moving up to Montmartre, like an artist of Whistler’s time,” he said.

Conversation waned after this. He asked how long we were staying in France, seeming, if anything, relieved to hear that we should all of us be back in England soon. On parting, there was perhaps a suggestion that the encounter had been, for no obvious reason, a shade uncomfortable; in this respect not necessarily worse than such meetings are apt to turn out between persons possessing little in common who run across each other after a long separation, and have to rely on common interests, but then half-forgotten. This faint sense of tension may also have owed something to Mr. Deacon’s apparent unwillingness to go even so far in comparing autobiographical notes as might have been thought allowably free from the smallest suggestion of an undue display of egotism; especially when the conversation was limited chiefly because one side lacked any idea of what the other had been doing for a number of years.

“I was glad to see Deacon again,” my father said afterwards, when, that afternoon, we were on our way to tea at the Walpole-Wilsons’ flat in Passy. “He looked a lot older.”

That must have been almost the last time that I heard either of my parents refer to Mr. Deacon or his affairs.

However, the meeting at the Louvre, among other experiences of going abroad for the first time, remained in my mind as something rather important. Mr. Deacon’s reappearance at that season seemed not only to indicate divorce of maturity from childhood, but also to emphasise the dependence of those two states one upon the other. “Grown-up” in the “old days,” Mr. Deacon was grown-up still; I myself, on the other hand, had changed. There was still distance to travel, but I was on the way, drawing level with Mr. Deacon, as a fellow grown-up, himself no longer a figment of memory from childhood, but visible proof that life had existed in much the same way before I had begun to assume a serious extent to take part; and would, without doubt, continue to prevail long after he and I had ceased to participate. In addition to this appreciation of his status as a kind of milestone on the winding and dusty road of existence, I found something interesting—though not entirely comfortable—about Mr. Deacon’s personality. He had given me a long, appraising glance when we shook hands, an action in itself, for some reason, rather unexpected, and later he had asked which were my favourite pictures in the gallery, and elsewhere, in the same deep, grave voice with which he had formerly explained his views on tone values: listening to the reply as if the information there contained might possess considerable importance for himself.

This apparent deference to what was necessarily unformed opinion seemed so flattering that I remembered him clearly long after our return to England; and, six or seven years later, when I saw the signature “E. Bosworth Deacon” in the corner of an oil-painting that hung high on the wall of the innermost part of the hall in the Walpole-Wilsons’ house in Eaton Square, the atmosphere of that occasion in the Louvre, the talk about the Conference and St. Sebastian, the feeling of constraint—embarrassment, almost—the visit, later in the day, to the Walpole-Wilsons themselves, came back at once very clearly: even the illusion of universal relief that belonged to that historical period: of war being, surprisingly, at an end: of the imminence of “a good time”: of all that odd sense of intellectual emancipation that belonged, or, at least, seemed, perhaps rather spuriously, to belong, to the art of that epoch: its excitement and its melancholy mingling with kaleidoscopic impressions of a first sight

Paris. All these thoughts briefly and speedily suggested themselves, when, taking off my overcoat on my first visit to the house in Eaton Square—after I had come to live in London—I observed Mr Deacon's picture. The canvas, comparatively small for a "Deacon," evidently not much considered by its owners, had been placed beyond the staircase above a Victorian barometer in a polished mahogany case. The subject was in a similar vein to those other scenes lying in the sale-room: the gold tablet at the foot of the frame baldly stating, without mentioning the artist's name, "*Boyhood of Cyrus*" That was in fact, the first "Deacon" I had ever set eyes upon.

The importance that *Boyhood of Cyrus* eventually assumed had, however, nothing to do with the painter, or the merits, such as they were, of the picture itself: its significance being attained simply and solely as symbol of the probable physical proximity of Barbara Goring, Lady Walpole-Wilson's niece. This association of ideas was, indeed, so powerful that even years after I had ceased to be a guest at the Walpole-Wilson table I could not hear the name "Cyrus" mentioned—fortunately, in the circumstances, a fairly rare occurrence in everyday life—without being reminded of the pains of early love; while at the time of which I write almost any oil-painting illustrative of a remotely classic scene (such as one sees occasionally in the windows of dealers round St. James's normal, specialising in *genre* pictures) would be liable to recall the fact, if by some unlikely chance forgotten, that I had not seen Barbara for a longer or shorter period.

I must have been about twenty-one or twenty-two at the time, and held then many rather wild ideas on the subject of women: conceptions largely the result of having read a good deal without simultaneous opportunity to modify by personal experience the recorded judgment of others upon the matter: estimates often excellent in their conclusions if correctly interpreted, though requiring practical knowledge to be appreciated at their full value.

At school I had known Tom Goring, who had later gone into the Sixtieth, and, although we had never had much to do with each other, I remembered some story of Stringham's of how both of them had put up money to buy a crib for Horace—or another Latin author whose works they were required to render into English—and of trouble that ensued from the translation supplied having contained passages omitted in the official educational textbook. This fact of her elder brother having been my contemporary—the younger son, David, was still at school—may perhaps have had something to do with finding myself, immediately after our first meeting, on good terms with Barbara; though the matter of getting on well with young men in no circumstances presented serious difficulty to her.

"Do be quick, if you are going to ask me for a dance," she had said, when her cousin, Eleanor Walpole-Wilson, had first introduced us. "I can't wait all night while you make up your mind."

I was, I must admit, enchanted on the spot by this comportment, which I found far from discouraging. On some earlier occasion a dowager had referred to Barbara in my presence as "the rather noisy little Goring girl," and the description was a just one. She was small and dark, with hair cut in a square "bob," which—other girls used to complain—was always hopelessly untidy. Her restlessness was of that deceptive kind that usually indicates a fundamental deficiency, rather than a surplus of energy, though I cannot claim, either in principle, or with particular reference to Barbara herself, to have speculated on this diagnosis until many years later. I remember, however, that when we met fortuitously in Hyde Park one Sunday afternoon quite a long time later (as it seemed to me), I still retained some sense of proportion about her, although we had by then seen a good deal of each other. She was walking in the Park that afternoon with Eleanor Walpole-Wilson, fated apparently to be a witness of the various stages of our relationship. I had not managed to get away from London that week-end, and to fall in by chance with these two seemed a wonderful piece of luck. That was the last day for many months that I woke up in the morning without immediately thinking of Barbara.

"Oh, what fun to meet like this," she had said.

I felt immediately a sense of extraordinary exhilaration at this harmless remark. It was June, and

there had been rain the day before, so that the grass smelt fresh and luxuriant. The weather, though warm, was not disagreeably hot. The precise location of our meeting was a spot not far from the Achilles statue. We strolled, all three, towards Kensington Gardens. The Row was empty. Sparkles of light radiated this way and that from the clusters of white statuary and nodular gilt pinnacles of the Albert Memorial, towards which we were steadily moving. Eleanor Walpole-Wilson, a square, broad-shouldered girl, rather above the average in height, wore her hair plaited in a bun at the back, which always looked as if it were about to come down at any moment: and did sometimes, in fact, descend piecemeal. She had brought with her Sultan, a labrador, and was trying to train this dog by blasts on a whistle, which she accompanied with harsh, monosyllabic shouting. That enterprise, the training of Sultan, was in keeping with Eleanor's habit of behaviour, as she was always accustomed to act, in principle, as if London were the country, an exercise of will she rarely relaxed.

We ascended the steps of the Albert Memorial and inspected the figures of the Arts and Sciences loitering in high relief round the central mass of that monument. Eleanor, still blowing her whistle fitfully, made some comment regarding the muscles of the bearded male figure belonging to the group called "Manufactures" which caused Barbara to burst out laughing. This happened on the way down the steps at the south-east corner, approaching the statues symbolising Asia, where, beside the kneeling elephant, the Bedouin for ever rests on his haunches in hopeless contemplation of Kensington Gardens' trees and thickets, the blackened sockets of his eyes ranging endlessly over the rich foliage of these oases of the mirage.

For some reason Eleanor's words seemed immensely funny at that moment. Barbara stumbled, and for a brief second, took my arm. It was then, perhaps, that a force was released, no less powerful for its action proving somewhat delayed; for emotions of that kind are not always immediately grasped. We sat on chairs for a time, and then walked to the north side of the park, in the direction of the Budds' house in Sussex Square, where the girls were invited to tea. When I said good-bye at the gate I experienced a sense of unaccountable loss, similar in its suddenness to that earlier exhilaration at our meeting. The rest of the day dragged, that feeling of anxiety—which haunts youth so much more than maturity—descending, coupled with almost unbearable nervous fatigue. I dined alone, and retired early to bed.

My parents' acquaintance—not a very close one—with the Walpole-Wilsons dated from that same period of the Peace Conference during which we had run across Mr. Deacon in the Louvre, a time when Sir Gavin Walpole-Wilson had also been working in Paris. He had by then already left the Diplomatic Service, and was associated with some voluntary organisation—of dubious practical importance, so my father used to hint—devoted to the assistance of certain specialised categories of refugee; for Sir Gavin's career had been brought to a close soon after receiving his K. C. M. G., as Minister to a South American republic. There had been trouble connected with the dispatch of a telegram; His Majesty's Government, so it subsequently appeared, having already recognised the Leader of the Opposition as Head of the State in place of the Junta that had enjoyed power for some years previously. It was generally agreed that Sir Gavin, whatever the misdemeanour, had been guilty of nothing worse than a perfectly correct effort to "keep in" with both sides: coupled, possibly, with a certain denseness of comprehension regarding potential fallibility of Foreign Secretaries, and changes recently observable in the political stature of General Gomez; but he had taken the matter to heart, and resigned. Pressure from above may have made this course involuntary, a point upon which opinions varied.

Although not at all inclined to under-estimate the personal part he had played in the Councils of Europe, or, indeed, of the World, Sir Gavin was apt to give the impression that he was always anxious, even in the smallest matters, to justify himself; so that an air of supposing life to have treated him less generously than his talents deserved made him, although a far more forceful personality, sometimes

seem to resemble Uncle Giles. He was, for example, also fond of proclaiming that he set little store by rank—rank, at least, when contrasted with ability—a taste which he shared with my uncle. It was possible that in days before his marriage Sir Gavin may have suffered similar financial anxieties, for I believe his own family had been far from rich, with difficulty scraping together the money then required for entering the Diplomatic Service. After retirement—I had, of course, not known him before—he wore his hair rather long, and favoured loose, shaggy suits. A firm belief that things were more likely than not to go wrong was another characteristic of Sir Gavin's approach to life, induced not in doubt by his own regrets. Indeed, he could not be entirely absolved from suspicion of rather enjoying the worst when it happened: at times almost of engineering disaster of a purely social kind.

“For lust of knowing what we should not know,” he was fond of intoning, “we take the Golden Road to Samarkand.”

This quotation may have offered to his mind some explanation of human adversity, though scarcely applicable in his own case, as he was a man singularly lacking in intellectual curiosity, and it was generally supposed that the inopportune step in his career had been the result of too much caution rather than any disposition to experiment in that exploration, moral or actual, to which the lines seem to refer. That trait, as it happened, was more noticeable in his wife. She was one of the two daughters of Lord Aberavon, a shipping magnate, now deceased, to whom, as I had discovered in due course of my *Boyhood of Cyrus* had once belonged; Mr. Deacon's picture, for some inexplicable reason, being almost the sole residue from wholesale disposal on the collector's death of an accumulation of paintings unsympathetic to the taste of a later generation. Lady Walpole-Wilson suffered from “nerves,” though less oppressively than her sister, Barbara's mother, who even regarded herself as semi-invalid on that account. Indeed, I had scarcely ever seen Lady Goring, or her husband: for, like his niece, Eleanor, Lord Goring shunned London whenever possible. He was said to be an expert of scientific methods of cultivation, and possessed an experimental fruit farm that was, I believe, rather famous for daring methods.

Uncle Giles was fond of calling people richer or in a general way more advantageously placed than himself, against whom he could at the same time level no specifically disparaging charge, “we are connected enough, I don't doubt,” a descriptive phrase which he would sometimes indiscriminately apply; but I suppose that the Gorings might truthfully have been so labelled. They used to take a house in Upper Berkeley Street for the first part of the summer, though dinner-parties were rare there, and not as a rule convivial. Most of the responsibility for Barbara's “season” fell on her aunt, who probably regarded her niece's lively character as an alleviation of difficulties posed by her own daughter, rather than any additional burden on the household.

Lady Walpole-Wilson, for whom I felt a decided affection, was a tall, dark, distinguished-looking woman, with doe-like eyes, to whose appearance some vice-regal or ambassadorial marriage seemed appropriate. Her comparative incapacity to control her own dinner-parties, at which she was almost always especially discomposed, seemed to me a kind of mute personal protest against circumstances—in the shape of her husband's retirement—having deprived her of the splendours, such as they were, of that position in life owed to her statuesque presence; for in those days I took a highly romantic view, not only of love, but also of such things as politics and government: supposing, for example, that eccentricity and ineptitude were unknown in circles where they might, in fact, be regarded—least so far as the official entertaining of all countries is concerned—almost as the rule rather than the exception. I can now see that Lady Walpole-Wilson's past experience may have made her aware of this tendency on the part of wives of distinguished public figures to be unable, or unwilling, to make suitable hostesses: a knowledge, coupled with her natural diffidence, that caused her to give an impression sometimes that at all costs she would like to escape from her own house: not because dispensation of hospitality was in itself in the least disagreeable to her as much as on account

accumulated memories from the past of wounded feelings when matters had “gone wrong.”

To these sentiments was no doubt added the self-inflicted embarrassment implicit in the paraphernalia of launching a daughter—and, if it could be remarked without unkindness, “what daughter”—on to an obdurate world; not to mention grappling with purely hypothetical questions such as the enigma, universally insoluble, of what other mothers would think of the manner in which she herself, as a mother, was sustaining this load of care. In this last affliction Sir Gavin’s attitude was often of no great help, and it is hard to say whether either of them really believed that Eleanor, who had always been more or less of a “problem”—there were endless stories of nose-bleeds and headaches—would ever find a husband. Eleanor had always disliked feminine pursuits. When we had met in Paris before either of us had grown up, she had told me that she would at that moment much prefer to be staying with her cousins in Oxfordshire: an attitude of mind that had culminated in a detestation of dances. This resentment, since I had known her in those early days, did not seem so strange to me as to many of the young men who encountered her for the first time at the dinner-table where she could be both abrupt and sulky. Barbara used to say: “Eleanor should never have been removed from the country. It is cruelty to animals.” She was also fond of remarking: “Eleanor is not a bad old girl when you get to know her,” a statement unquestionably true; but, since human life is lived largely at surface level, that encouraging possibility, true or false, did not appreciably lighten the burden of Eleanor’s partners.

The Walpole-Wilsons, accordingly, provided not only the foundation, but frequently the immediate locality, also, for my association with Barbara, whom I used to meet fairly often at dances, after our walk together in the park. Sometimes we even saw a film together, or went to a matinée. That was in the summer. When she came to London for a few weeks before Christmas, we met again. By the opening of the following May I was beginning to wonder how the situation was to be resolved. Such scuffles as had, once in a way, taken place between us, on the comparatively rare occasions when we found ourselves alone together, were not exactly encouraged by her; in fact she seemed only to like an intermittent attack for the pleasure of repulsing it. Certainly such aggression carried neither of us any farther. She liked ragging; but ragging—and nothing more—these rough-and-tumbles remained. “Don’t get sentimental,” she used to say; and so far as it went, avoidance of sentiment—as much an avoidance of sentimentality—appeared, on her side, a genuine inclination.

This affair with Barbara, although taking up less than a year, seemed already to have occupied a substantial proportion of my life; because nothing establishes the timelessness of Time like those episodes of early experience seen, on re-examination at a later period, to have been crowded together with such unbelievable closeness in the course of a few years; yet equally giving the illusion of being so infinitely extended during the months when actually taking place. My frame of mind—perhaps I should say the state of my heart—remained unchanged, and dances seemed pointless unless Barbara was present. During that summer *Boyhood of Cyrus* developed its mystic significance, representing on my arrival in front of it a two-to-one chance of seeing Barbara at dinner. If we both ate at the Walpole-Wilsons’, she was at least under my eye. She herself was always quite unaware of the sentimental meaning thus attached to Mr. Deacon’s picture. When first asked about it, she could not for a long time make out what picture I spoke of; and once, when we were both in the hall at the same time and I drew her attention to where it hung, she assured me that she had never before noticed its existence. Eleanor was equally vague on the subject.

“Are they going bathing?” she had asked. “I don’t care for it.”

This matter of being able to establish Barbara’s whereabouts for a specific number of hours brought at least limited relief from agonies of ignorance as to what her movements might be, with consequent inability to exercise control over her in however slight a degree; for love of that sort—the sort where the sensual element has been reduced to a minimum—must after all, largely if not entirely

resolve itself to the exercise of power: a fact of which Barbara was, of course, more aware than I.

These torments, as I have said, continued for a number of months, sometimes with great severity and then one afternoon, when I was correcting proofs in the office, Barbara rang up and asked if I would dine at Eaton Square that evening for the Huntercombes' dance. I decided immediately that I would put off Short (my former undergraduate acquaintance, now become a civil servant), with whom earlier in the week, I had arranged to have a meal, and at once agreed to come. I had experienced the usual feeling of excitement while talking with her on the telephone; but suddenly as I hung up the receiver—thinking that perhaps I was leaving Short rather ruthlessly in the lurch so far as his evening was concerned—I found myself wondering whether I was still in love. Barbara's voice had sounded peremptory, and it was clear that someone else had failed her at the last moment. In that there was, of course, nothing to be taken reasonably amiss. Obviously I could not expect to sit next to her at dinner every night of our lives—unless I married her; perhaps not even then. And yet my heart seemed a shade lighter. Was the fever passing? I was myself still barely conscious of its declension. I had not at that time met Barnby, nor had opportunity to digest one of his favourite maxims: "A woman always overplays her hand."

I had, naturally, given a good deal of thought at one time or another to the question of love. Barbara did not represent the first attack. There had been, for example, Peter Templer's sister, Jean, and Madame Leroy's niece, Suzette; but Jean and Suzette now seemed dim, if desirable, memories; and I felt, for no particular reason, more sure now of the maturity of my approach. At the same time there was certainly little to boast about in my handling of the problem of Barbara. I could not even make up my mind—should anything of the sort have been practicable—whether or not I really wanted to marry her. Marriage appeared something remote and forbidding, with which desire for Barbara had little or no connection. She seemed to exist merely to disturb my rest: to be possessed neither by lawful nor unlawful means: made of dreams, yet to be captured only by reality. Such, at least, were the terms in which I thought of her as I approached the Walpole-Wilsons' that evening.

Taxis were drawing up in the late sunshine before several of the houses in the square, and young men in tails and girls in evening dress, looking rather selfconscious in the bright daylight, were paying fares or ringing front-door bells. It was that stagnant London weather without a breath of air. One might almost have been in the Tropics. Even Archie Gilbert, who had immediately preceded me in the hall—he had never been known to be late for dinner—looked that night as if he might be feeling the heat a little. His almost invisibly fair moustache suggested the same pique material as the surface of his stiff shirt; and, as usual, he shed about him an effect of such unnatural cleanliness that some secret chemical process seemed to have been applied, in preparation for the party, both to himself and his clothes: making body and its dazzling integument, sable and argent rather than merely black and white, proof against smuts and dust. Shirt, collar, tie, waistcoat, handkerchief, and gloves were like snow: all these trappings, as always apparently assumed for the first time: even though he himself looked a shade pinker than usual in the face owing to the oppressive climatic conditions.

His whole life seemed so irrevocably concentrated on "debutante dances" that it was impossible to imagine Archie Gilbert finding any tolerable existence outside a tailcoat. I could never remember attending any London dance that could possibly be considered to fall within the category named, which he had not also been present for at least a few minutes; and, if two or three balls were held on the same evening, it always turned out that he had managed to look in at each one of them. During the day he was said to "do something in the City"—the phrase "non-ferrous metals" had once been hesitantly mentioned in my presence as applicable, in some probably remote manner to his daily employment. He himself never referred to any such subordination, and I used sometimes to wonder whether this putative job was not, in reality, a polite fiction, invented on his own part out of genuine modesty, of which I am sure he possessed a great deal, in order to make himself appear a little

remarkable person than in truth he was: even a kind of superhuman ordinariness being undesirable perhaps, for true perfection in this role of absolute normality which he had chosen to play with such *éclat*. He was unthinkable in everyday clothes; and he must, in any case, have required that rest and sleep during the hours of light which his nocturnal duties could rarely, if ever, have allowed him. He seemed to prefer no one woman—*débutante* or chaperone—to another; and, although not indulging in much conversation, as such, he always gave the impression of being at ease with, or without, words, and of having danced at least once with every one of the three or four hundred girls who constituted, in the last resort, the final cause, and only possible justification, of that social organism. He appeared also to be known by name, and approved, by the mother of each of these girls: in a general way, as I have said, getting on equally well with mothers and daughters.

Even Eleanor's consistently severe manner with young men was modified appreciably for Archie Gilbert, and we had hardly arrived in the drawing-room before she was asking him to help her in the forcible return of Sultan to the huge wicker hutch, occupying one complete corner of the room, in which the labrador had his being. Together Archie Gilbert and Eleanor dragged back the dog, which Sultan thumped his tail noisily on the carpet, and Lady Walpole-Wilson protested a little that the struggle would mar the beauty of Archie Gilbert's clothes.

Her own eagerness of manner always suggested that Lady Walpole-Wilson would have enjoyed asking congenial people to her parties if only she could have found people who were, indeed, congenial to her; and she was, of course, not the only hostess who must, from time to time, have suffered a twinge of misgiving on account of more than one of the young men who formed the shifting male population of the London ballrooms. Supposing most other people to live a more amusing life than herself, her humility in this respect was combined with a trust, never entirely relinquished, that with a different collection of guests in the house things might take a turn for the better. This inward condition, in which hope and despair constantly gave place to one another, undeniably contributed to her lack of ease in her drawing-room.

Sir Gavin was moving about dramatically, even rather tragically, in the background. He was, as I have suggested, inclined to affect a few mild eccentricities of dress. That evening, for example, he was wearing an old-fashioned straight-ended white tie like a butler's: his large, almost square horn-rimmed spectacles, tanned complexion, and moustache, bristling, but at the same time silky, giving him a rather fierce expression, like that of an angry rajah. Although deeper-chested and more weather-beaten, he certainly recalled Uncle Giles. Walking, as he did at times, with a slight limp, the cause of which was unknown to me—possibly it was assumed to indicate a certain state of mind—he took my arm almost fiercely, rather as if acting in an amateur production of Shakespeare; and, no doubt because he prided himself on putting young men at their ease, drew my attention to another guest already arrived in the room before Archie Gilbert and myself. This person was standing under Lavery's portrait of Lady Walpole-Wilson, painted at the time of her marriage, in a white dress and blue sash, a picture he was examining with the air of one trying to fill in the seconds before introductions begin to take place, rather than on account of a deep interest in art.

"Have you met Mr. Widmerpool?" asked Sir Gavin, disconsolately, suddenly dropping his energetic demeanour, as if suffering all at once from unaccountable foreboding about the whole party.

Widmerpool's advent in Eaton Square that night did not strike me at the time as anything more than a matter of chance. He had cropped up in my life before, and, if I considered him at all as a recurrent factor, I should have been prepared to admit that he might crop up again. I did not, however, as yet see him as one of those symbolic figures, of whom most people possess at least one example, and not more, round whom the past and the future have a way of assembling. We had not met for years since the summer after I had left school, when both of us had been trying to learn French staying with the Leroy's in Touraine—the place, in fact, where I had supposed myself in love with Suzette. I had

hardly thought of him since the moment when he had climbed ponderously into the *grogard's* tax and coasted in a cloud of white dust down the hill from La Grenadière. Now he had exchanged his metal-edged glasses for spectacles with a tortoise-shell frame, similar, though of lesser proportions, to those worn by his host, and in general smartened up his personal appearance. True to the old form there was still something indefinably odd about the cut of his white waistcoat; while he retained the curiously piscine cast of countenance, projecting the impression that he swam, rather than walked through the rooms he haunted.

Just as the first sight of *Boyhood of Cyrus*, by its association with Mr. Deacon and life before the war, had brought back memories of childhood, the sight of Widmerpool called up in a similar manner—almost like some parallel scene from Mr. Deacon's brush entitled *Boyhood of Widmerpool*—a kind of recollections of days at school. I remembered the interest once aroused in me by Widmerpool's determination to become a success in life, and the brilliance with which Stringham used to mimic his movements and manner of speech. Indeed, Widmerpool's presence in the flesh seemed even now less real than Stringham's former imitations of him: a thought that had often struck me before, now renewed unexpectedly in the Walpole-Wilson's drawing-room. Widmerpool still represented to my mind a kind of embodiment of thankless labour and unsatisfied ambition. When we had met at La Grenadière, he had talked of his activities in London, but somehow I had never been able to picture his life as an adult; idly fancying him, if thought of at all, for ever floundering towards the tape in races never won. Certainly it had not once occurred to me that I should meet him at a dinner-party given for a dance, although I recalled now that he had talked of dances; and, when I came to consider the matter, there was not the smallest reason why he should not turn up upon an occasion such as this—at the Walpole-Wilson's house or anywhere else. That had to be admitted without question. He seemed in the best of spirits. We were immediately left together by Sir Gavin, who wandered off muttering to himself in a dissatisfied undertone about some impenetrable concerns of his own.

“Good gracious, Jenkins,” said Widmerpool, in that thick voice of his which remained quite unchanged, “I had no idea that you were a dancing man.”

“I had formed the same wrong impression about yourself.”

“But I have never seen you anywhere before.” He sounded rather aggrieved.

“We must be asked to different parties.”

This reply, made on the spur of the moment without any suggestion of seriousness—certainly not intended to discredit the dances frequented by Widmerpool—must, for some reason, have sounded caustic to his ears. Perhaps I had inadequately concealed surprise felt on learning from his manner that he evidently regarded himself as a kind of standard “spare man”: in short something closely akin to Archie Gilbert. Whatever the cause, the words had obviously given offence. He went red in the face and made one of those awkward jerks of the body which Stringham used to imitate so deftly.

“As a matter of fact, I have been about very little this summer,” he said, frowning. “I found I had been working a shade too hard, and had to—well—give myself a bit of a rest.”

I remembered the interest he had always taken, even while still a schoolboy, in his own health and its diurnal changes. In France it had been the same. A whole afternoon had been spent in Tours trying to find the right medicine to adjust the effect on him of the local wine, of which the Leroy's vintage drunk the night before, had been of disastrously recent growth.

“Then, the year before, I got jaundice in the middle of the season,”

“Are you fit again now?”

“I am better.”

He spoke with gravity.

“But I intend to take care of myself,” he added. “My mother often tells me I go at things too hard.”

Besides, I don't really get enough air and exercise—without which one can never be truly robust.”

“Do you still go down to Barnes and drive golf-balls into a net?”

“Whenever feasible.”

He made not the smallest acknowledgment of the feat of memory on my part—with which personally, I felt rather satisfied—that had called to mind this detail (given years before at the Leroy's) of his athletic exercises in outer London. The illusion that egoists will be pleased, flattered, by interest taken in their habits persists throughout life; whereas, in fact, persons like Widmerpool, in complete subjection to the ego, are, by the nature of that infirmity, prevented from supposing that the minds of others could possibly be occupied by any subject far distant from the egoist's own affairs.

“Actually, one can spend too much time on sport if one is really going to get on,” said Widmerpool. “And then I have my Territorials.”

“You were going to be a solicitor when we last met.”

“That would hardly preclude me from holding a Territorial officer's commission,” said Widmerpool, smiling as broadly as his small mouth would allow, as if this were a repartee of quite unusual neatness.

“Of course it wouldn't.”

His remark seemed to me immensely silly.

“I am with a firm of solicitors—Turnbull, Welford and Puckering, to be exact,” he said. “But you may be sure that I have other interests too. Some of them not unimportant, I might add.”

He smiled with some self-satisfaction, but clearly did not wish to be questioned further, at least there and then, regarding his professional activities. That was reasonable enough in the circumstances. However, his next words surprised me. Giving a short intake of breath, he said in a lower voice, with one of those unexpected outbursts of candour that I remembered from La Grenadière: “Do you know our host and hostess well? I have been on excellent terms with the family for a number of years, but this is the first time I have been asked to dinner. Of course I really know the Gorings better.”

This admission regarding his invitation to dine at Eaton Square was apparently intended to convey some hint, or confession, of past failure; although at the same time Widmerpool seemed half inclined by his tone to impart the news of his better acquaintance with the Gorings equally as a matter of congratulation. Indeed, he was evidently unable to decide in his own mind whether this allegedly long familiarity with the Walpole-Wilsons was—in the light of this being his first appearance in the house—something to boast of, or conceal.

Our conversation, taking place intermittently, while people continually arrived in the room, was several times broken off when one or other of us was introduced to, or spoke with, another guest. Two of the girls present I had not met before. The taller, Lady Anne Stepney, wore an evening dress that I had seen better days: which looked, indeed, rather like an old nightdress furbished up for the occasion. She seemed quite unconcerned about her decidedly untidy appearance, her bearing in some respects resembling Eleanor's, though she was much prettier than Eleanor, with large dark eyes and reddish hair. Her name was familiar to me, for what reason I could not at first recall. The lively, gleaming little Jewess in a scarlet frock, who came into the room on the heels of Lady Anne, was announced as “Miss Manasch,” and addressed by the Walpole-Wilsons as “Rosie.” Both girls were immediately, and simultaneously, engaged by Archie Gilbert, who happened to be free at their moment of entering the room.

Over by the window, Margaret Budd, a beauty, was talking to Pardoe, a Grenadier; and laughing while he demonstrated with a small shovel taken from the fireplace a scooping shot, successful or the reverse, that he, or someone known to him had recently performed on the links. When she laughed Margaret looked like an immensely—almost ludicrously—pretty child. She was, as it were, the fema

equivalent of Archie Gilbert: present at every dance, always lovely, always fresh, and yet somehow quite unreal. She scarcely spoke at all, and might have been one of those huge dolls which, when inclined backwards, say "Ma-ma" or "Pa-pa": though impossible to imagine in any position so undignified as that required for the mechanism to produce these syllables: equally hard to conceive her dishevelled, or bad-tempered, or, indeed, capable of physical passion—though appearances may be deceptive in no sphere so much as the last. Never without a partner, usually booked up six or seven dances ahead, this was her third or fourth season—so Barbara had once pointed out—and there had, yet, been no sign of her getting engaged. "Margaret is rather a Guardee's girl," Barbara had added, evidently intending the label to imply no great compliment in her own eyes.

Widmerpool's presence reminded me that Margaret was cousin of the Budd who had been Captain of the Eleven one year at school; and I remembered the story Stringham had told me, years before, of Widmerpool's pleased acceptance—delight almost—on being struck in the face with a banana thrown by that comparatively notable cricketer. I could not help toying with the fantasy that some atavistic strain, deep-seated in the Budd family, might cause Margaret to assail Widmerpool in similar manner perhaps later in the evening when dessert, tempting as a missile, appeared at the Walpole-Wilson table. Such a vision was improbable to an almost infinite degree, because Margaret was the kindest and quietest creature imaginable; really, I think, almost wholly unaware, in gentle concentration of herself, of the presence of most of the people moving about her. Even her laughter was rare, and inaudible provocation before dinner that evening by his strokes in the air with the shovel did Pardoe no credit.

From a girl's point of view, there was no doubt something to be said for considering Pardoe the most interesting person present that evening. He had recently inherited a house on the Welsh Border (Jacobean in architecture, though with more ancient historical associations going back to the Wars of the Roses), together with enough money, so it was said, to "keep up" the estate. He was an agreeable, pink-faced ensign, very short, square, and broad-shouldered, with a huge black moustache, brushed off so forcibly that it seemed to be false and assumed for a joke. Such affluent young men were known to have a tendency to abandon dances and frequent night-clubs. Pardoe, however, was still available, so he appeared; no one could tell for how long. Unlike Archie Gilbert, he had a great deal to say for himself—though his newly acquired possessions made small-talk scarcely necessary—and, as he modestly treated his own appearance as a matter for laughter, the moustache was a considerable asset in his anecdotes. He had at last abandoned the shovel, and, mildly interested in music had become engaged in some operatic argument with Miss Manasch. To this discussion Sir Gavin, from the background where he had been hovering, his moustache bristling more than ever, now cut in with the emphatic words:

"No one could sing it like Slezak."

"Did you ever hear him in *Lohengrin*?" demanded Pardoe, taking the ends of his own moustache with both hands, as if about to tear it off and reveal himself in a new identity.

"Many a time and oft," said Sir Gavin, defiantly. "But what was that you were saying about *Idomeneo*?"

All three of them embarked clamorously on a new musical dispute. The rest of us chatted in a desultory way. Barbara arrived late. She was wearing her gold dress that I knew of old did not suit her, and that spirit of contradiction that especially governs matters of the heart caused the fact that she was not looking her best to provoke in me a stab of affection. Even so, I was still able to wonder whether the situation between us—between myself and her, would perhaps be more accurate—remained quite unchanged; and, as I let go of her small cluster of fingers—each one of which I was conscious of as a single entity while I held her hand—I thought that perhaps that night I should not, as in past months, experience the same recurrent torments as she danced with other men. As soon as she had come in

the room, Widmerpool skirted the sofa and made towards her, leaving me with the impression that might in some manner have appeared unfriendly to him after our comparative intimacy in France, decided to try to correct this apprehension, should it exist, later in the evening when suitable opportunity might arise.

The minutes passed: conversation flagged. The Louis Seize clock standing on a wall-bracket gave out a threatening tick-tock. One of the male guests had still not yet turned up. In those days, at this sort of party, there were no drinks before dinner; and, while Eleanor told me about her Girl Guides, the evening sun deflected huge golden squares of phosphorescent colour (spread rather in the manner advocated by Mr. Deacon, giving formal juxtaposition to light and shade) against the peacock-green shot-silk shadows of the sofa cushions. Outside, the detonation of loudly-slammed taxi doors suggesting the opening of a cannonade, had died down. In place of those sounds some cats were quarrelling, or making love, in the gardens running the length of the square. I began to long for the meal to begin. After total silence had fallen on the room for the second time, Lady Walpole-Wilson, apparently with an effort, for her lips faltered slightly when she spoke, came to a decision to await the late-comer no further.

“Let’s go down in a troop,” she said, “and—as Mr. Tomsitt is so unpunctual—not bother about ‘taking in’. I really do not think we can delay dinner any longer.”

In speaking to each other the Walpole-Wilsons were inclined to give an impression that they were comparative strangers, who had met for the first time only a week or two before, but at this remark her husband, no doubt wanting food as much as—perhaps even more than—the rest of those present, replied rather gruffly: “Of course, Daisy, of course.”

He added, without any suggestion of complaint—on the contrary, if anything, with approbation: “Young Tomsitt is always late.”

The news that Tomsitt had been invited would once have filled me with dismay. Even at that moment, sudden mention of his name caused an instinctive hope that his absence was due to illness or accident, something that might prevent him from putting in any appearance at all, preferably grave enough to exclude him from dances for many months: perhaps for ever. He was one of various young men moving within Barbara’s orbit whose relationship with her, though impossible to estimate at all precisely, was yet in a general way disturbing for someone who might have claims of his own to put forward in that quarter. In that respect Tomsitt’s connection was of a particularly distasteful kind in that Barbara evidently found him not unattractive; while his approach to her, or so it seemed to me, was conditioned entirely by the ebb and flow of his own vanity: no inconsiderable element which I gauged at any given moment, though laying a course hard for an unsympathetic observer to chart. This is to say he was obviously flattered by the fact that Barbara found him, apparently, prepossessing enough; and, at the same time, not sufficiently stirred within himself to spend more than comparatively brief spells in her company, especially when there were other girls about, who might be supposed, for one reason or another, to represent in his eyes potentially superior assets.

That was what I used, perhaps unjustly, to reflect; at the same time having to admit to myself that Tomsitt’s attitude towards Barbara posed, from my own point of view, a dilemma as to what, short of his own bodily removal, would constitute a change for the better. His relative lack of enthusiasm, though acceptable only with all kinds of unpalatable reservations, had, in its way, to be approved while apprehension that his feelings towards Barbara might suddenly undergo some violent emotional stimulation was—or had certainly been until that evening—an ever present anxiety. At last, however, I felt, anyway on second thoughts, fairly indifferent as to whether or not Tomsitt turned up. Inwardly I was becoming increasingly convinced of this, and I might even have looked forward to Tomsitt’s entry if there had been serious threat of dinner being further delayed on his account.

In the dining-room I found myself sitting at the oval-ended table between Barbara and Ann

Stepney, the second of whom was on Sir Gavin's right. The Walpole-Wilsons defied prevailing mod- by still employing a table-cloth, a preference of Sir Gavin's, who prided himself on combining in his own home tastes of "the old school" with a progressive point of view in worldly matters. The scent of geranium leaf usually to be found floating in the finger-bowls could be attributed to his wife's leaning towards a more exotic way of life. Beyond Barbara was Archie Gilbert, probably placed on Lady Walpole-Wilson's left to make up for having Tomsitt—or rather an empty chair, where in due course he would sit, if he had not forgotten the invitation—on her right. Tomsitt, a protégé of Sir Gavin's, was not greatly liked either by Eleanor or her mother.

This chasm left by Tomsitt divided Margaret Budd, who had Widmerpool on her other side, from her hostess. Widmerpool's precise channel of invitation to the house was still obscure, and the fact that he himself seemed on the whole surprised to find himself dining there made his presence even more a matter for speculation. He had been placed next to Eleanor, who had presumably been consulted on the subject of seating accommodation at the dinner table, though he seemed by his manner towards her to know her only slightly, while she herself showed signs, familiar to me from observing her behaviour on past occasions, of indifference, if not dislike, for his company. Barbara had been the only member of the party greeted by him as an old acquaintance, though she had done more than wring him rather warmly by the hand when she arrived, quickly passing on to someone else at which he had looked discouraged. Pardoe sat between Eleanor and Miss Manasch—who brought the party round once more to Sir Gavin. The table had perhaps not been easy to arrange. Its complications of seating must have posed problems that accounted for Lady Walpole-Wilson's more than usually agitated state.

"There does not seem any substantial agreement yet on the subject of the Haig statue," said Widmerpool, as he unfolded his napkin. "Did you read St. John Clarke's letter?"

He spoke to Eleanor, though he had glanced round the table as if hoping for a larger audience to hear his views on the matter. The subject, as it happened, was one upon which I knew Eleanor to hold decided opinions, and was therefore a question to be avoided, unless driven to conversation to extremities, as she much preferred statement to discussion. The fact of broaching it was yet another indication that Widmerpool could not have seen a great deal of her at all recently.

"Surely they can find someone to carve a horse that looks like a horse."

She spoke with truculence even at the outset.

"The question, to my mind," said Widmerpool, "is whether a statue is, in reality, an appropriate form of recognition for public services in modern times."

"Don't you think great men ought to be honoured?" Eleanor asked, rather tensely. "I do."

She clenched her lips tightly together as if prepared to contest the point to the death—with Widmerpool or anyone else.

"Nobody—least of all myself—denies the desirability of honouring great men," he said in return rather sharply, "but some people think the traffic problem—already severe enough in all conscience—might be adversely affected if any more space is taken up by monuments in busy thoroughfares."

"I can't see why they can't make a model of a real horse," said Barbara. "Couldn't they do it in plaster of Paris or something. Don't you think?"

This last question, propitiatory in tone, and addressed in a fairly low voice to myself, could still make me feel, for reasons quite subjective in origin, that there might be something to be said for this unconventional method of solving what had become almost the chief enigma of contemporary aesthetic.

"Need there be a horse?" asked Lady Walpole-Wilson, putting a brave face on the discussion though evidently well aware, even apart from Eleanor's potential pronouncements on the subject, of its manifold dangers.

“You can’t very well have him sitting at his desk,” said Sir Gavin, bluffly, “though I expect that was where he spent a good deal of his time. When I saw him in Paris at the time of the Conference—

“Why shouldn’t he be on a horse?” demanded Eleanor, angrily. “He used to ride one, didn’t he?”

“We all agree that he used to ride one,” said Widmerpool, indulgently this time. “And that, commemoration is to take the form proposed, the Field-Marshal should certainly be represented mounted on his charger. I should have supposed there was no doubt upon that point.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Pardoe, shooting out his moustache once more. “Why not put him in a staff-car? You could have the real thing, with his flag flying at the bonnet.”

“Of course if you want to make a joke of it ...” said Eleanor, casting a look of great contempt in Pardoe’s direction.

Archie Gilbert and Margaret Budd appeared to hold no strong convictions regarding the statue. Miss Manasch made the practical suggestion that they should pay off the sculptor of the work under discussion, if—as it certainly appeared—this had not met with general approval, and make a fresh start with another candidate who might provide something of a more popular nature.

“I think they ought to have got Mestrovic in the first place,” said Lady Anne, coldly, during the silence that followed Miss Manasch’s proposal.

This unexpected opinion was plainly issued as a challenge; but controversy regarding the memorial was now cut short by the sudden arrival in the dining-room of Tomsitt.

After somewhat perfunctory apology for his lateness, he sat down between Lady Walpole-Wilson and Margaret Budd, though without taking a great deal of notice of either of them. Lady Walpole-Wilson shot him a look to suggest her collusion in his apparent inclination to assume that the time for regrets and excuses was now long past; though her glance was also no doubt intended to urge—even to plead with—him to make amends best by showing himself agreeable to his neighbour, since Eleanor had relapsed into further argument that demanded Widmerpool’s close attention, leaving Margaret Budd, for all her beauty, high and dry so far as personal attention was concerned.

However, now that he had arrived, formal conversation seemed the last thing to which Tomsitt was at all disposed. He smiled across the table to Barbara, who had crooked her finger at him as he entered the room. Then, picking up the menu, he studied it carefully. The card was inscribed for some reason—probably because she had looked in at tea-time and Eleanor hated the job—in Barbara’s own scratchy, laborious hand that I knew so well; not because I had ever received many letters from her in the course of our relationship, but on account of the fact that such scrawled notes as I possessed used to live for months in my pocket, seeming to retain in their paper and ink some atom of Barbara herself to be preserved and secreted until our next meeting. I wondered whether that schoolgirl script breathed any such message to Tomsitt, as it broke the news that he was about to eat the identical meal he must have consumed at every dinner-party—if given specifically for a London dance—that he had ever attended.

He was a large, fair young man, with unbrushed hair and a grey smudge on the left-hand side of his shirt-front: cramming for—perhaps by then even admitted to—the Foreign Office. Sir Gavin held strong views on “broadening the basis” of the selection of candidates for governmental service, and he took an interest in Tomsitt as prototype of a newer and less constricted vehicle for handling foreign affairs. Certainly Tomsitt’s appearance was calculated to dispose effectually of the myth, dear to the public mind, of the “faultlessly dressed diplomat,” and he had been educated—the details were elusive—in some manner not absolutely conventional: though his air of incivility that so delighted Sir Gavin could no doubt have been inculcated with at least equal success at any public school. It was perhaps fair to regard him a young man rather different from those normally recruited for the purpose, and, in return for this patronage, Tomsitt, supercilious in his manner to most people, accorded a deep respect to Sir Gavin’s utterances; although, a posture not uncommon in such dual relationships, this deference

sometimes took the more flattering form of apparent disagreement. They had met a year or two before at a gathering of some local branch of the League of Nations Union, where Sir Gavin had given a talk on "Collective Security."

All the time he was reading the menu, Tomsitt smiled to himself, as if exceedingly content to exist in a world from which most, if not all, surrounding distractions had been effectively eliminated. It had to be agreed that there was some forcefulness in his complete disregard for the rest of the party. Lady Walpole-Wilson began to look rather despairing. Widmerpool, on the other hand, seemed to share, as if by instinct, Sir Gavin's approbation for Tomsitt, or at least felt distinct interest in his personality, because after a time he ceased to give his views on the Horse in Sculpture, and cast several searching glances down the table. Sir Gavin, whose conversation was habitually diversified by a murmur of "m'm ... m'm...m'm..." repeated under his breath while his interlocutor was speaking—a technique designed to discourage over-long disquisitions on the other side—did no more than nod approvingly at Tomsitt. For the first few minutes of dinner Sir Gavin had contrived to monopolise the conversation of the girls he sat between. Now, however, he concentrated more particularly on Miss Manasch, from whom, with much laughter and by-play on his part, he appeared to be attempting to extract certain concrete opinions supposedly held by her father regarding the expansion of the Donners-Brebner Company in the Balkans. His attitude suggested that he also found Miss Manasch rather unusually attractive physically.

Now that the small, though appreciable, disturbance caused by Tomsitt's entry had finally settled down, the moment had come for some sort of conversational skirmish to begin between Lady Anne Stepney and myself. Ever since we had been introduced, I had been wondering why her name suggested some episode in the past: an incident vaguely unsatisfactory or disturbing. The mention of Donners-Brebner now reminded me that, the uneasy recollections were in connection with this girl's sister, Peggy, whom Stringham on that night years before at the Donners-Brebner building had spoken perhaps not very seriously, of marrying. In fact, I remembered now that he had been on his way to dinner with their parents, the Bridgnorths. That was the last time I had seen Stringham; it must have been—I tried to remember—four or five years before. The link seemed to provide a suitable topic for broach.

"Have you ever come across someone called Charles Stringham? I think he knows your sister."

"Oh, yes," she said, "one of Peggy's pompous friends, isn't he?"

I found this a staggering judgment. There were all kinds of things to be said against Stringham's conduct—he could be offhand, even thoroughly bad-mannered—but "pompous" was the last adjective in the world I ever expected to hear applied to him. It occurred to me, a second later, that she used the word with specialised meaning; or perhaps—this was most probable—merely intended to imply that her sister and Stringham were asked to grander parties than herself. Possibly she became aware that her remark had surprised me, because she added: "I hope he isn't a great friend of yours."

I was about to reply that Stringham was, indeed, a "great friend" of mine, when I remembered that by now this description could scarcely be held to be true, since I had not seen nor heard of him for so long that I had little or no idea what he was doing with himself; and, for all I knew, he might almost have forgotten my existence. I had to admit to myself that, for my own part, I had not thought much about him either, since we had last met; though this sudden realisation that we now barely knew one another was, for a moment, oddly painful. In any event, nothing seemed to have come out of his talk of wanting to marry Peggy Stepney, and mention of his name had been, in the circumstances, perhaps tactless.

"I haven't seen him for three or four years."

"Oh, I thought you might know him well."

"I used to."

“As a matter of fact, Peggy hasn’t spoken of Charles Stringham for ages,” she said.

She did not actually toss her head—as girls are sometimes said to do in books—but that would have been the gesture appropriate to the tone in which she made this comment. It was evident that the subject of Stringham could supply no basis for discussion between us. I searched my mind for other themes. Lady Anne herself showed no sign of making any immediate contribution. She left the remains of her clear soup, and fixed her eyes on Miss Manasch; whether to satisfy herself about technical detail regarding the red dress, or to observe how well she was standing up to Sir Gavin’s interrogation, which hovered between flirtation and apprisement how best to handle his investments, was unable to decide. Whatever the question, it was settled fairly quickly in her mind during the brief period in which soup plates were removed and fried sole presented.

“What do you do?” she asked. “I think men always enjoy talking about their work.”

I had the disturbing impression that she was preparing for some sort of a war between the sexes—as represented by herself and me—to break out at any moment. What vehement role she saw herself playing in the life that surrounded us was problematical; some deep-felt resentment, comparable to Eleanor’s and yet widely differing from hers, clearly existed within her: her clothes, no doubt outward and visible sign of this rebellion against circumstance. I told her my firm specialised in art books, and attempted to steer a line from Mestrovic with unsuccessful results. We talked for a time of Botticelli—the only painter in whom she appeared to feel any keen interest, a subject which led to the books of Sir John Clarke, one of which was a story of Renaissance Italy. This was the author mentioned by Widmerpool as writing to *The Times* regarding the Haig statue.

“And then there was one about the French Revolution.”

“I was on the side of the People,” she said, resolutely.

This assertion opened the road to discussion deeper, and altogether more searching, than I felt prepared to pursue at that stage of dinner. As it happened, there were by then signs all round the table of conversation becoming moribund. Lady Walpole-Wilson must have noticed this falling off, because she remarked at large that there were two dances being given that evening.

“And both in Belgrave Square,” said Archie Gilbert.

He sounded relieved that for once at least his self-imposed duties would not keep him travelling all over London; his worst nights being no doubt those experienced—as must happen once in a way—on occasions when a party was given in some big house at Richmond or Roehampton, while there were also, on the same night, perhaps more than one ball to be attended in the heart of London.

“The Spaniards are having some sort of a reception there, too,” said Tomsitt, who, having satisfied his immediate hunger, seemed disposed to show himself more genial than earlier. “At the new Embassy.”

“I’m rather glad we don’t have to attend those big official crushes any more as a duty,” said Lady Walpole-Wilson, with a sigh. “We had to turn out in honour of Prince Theodoric the other night, and, really, it was too exhausting. Now that one is rather out of touch with that world one does so much prefer just to see one’s own friends.”

“Is Prince Theodoric over for long?” asked Widmerpool, assuming an air of importance. I understand he is here largely for economic reasons—I believe Donners-Brebner are considering big expansions in his country.”

“Base metals, for one thing,” said Tomsitt, with at least equal *empressement*. “There has also been talk of installing a railway to the coast. Am I right, Sir Gavin?”

At the phrase “base metals” there had passed over Archie Gilbert’s face perhaps the most imperceptible flicker of professional interest, that died down almost immediately as he turned once more to speak with Barbara of dance bands.

“No doubt about it,” said Sir Gavin. “I used to see a lot of Theodoric’s father when I was charged

d'affaires there. We often went fishing together."

"Gavin was a great favourite with the old King," said Lady Walpole-Wilson, as if it were a matter of mild surprise to her that her husband could be a favourite with anyone. "I am afraid Prince Theodoric's brother is quite a different sort of person from their father. Do you remember the awkward incident when Janet was staying with us and how nice the King was?"

Sir Gavin glanced across the table at his wife, possibly apprehensive for a moment that she seemed inclined to particularise more precisely than might be desirable at the dinner table this contrast between father and son. Perhaps he did not wish to bring up the episode, whatever it had been, which "Janet"—his sister—had been involved.

"Theodoric, on the other hand, is a serious young man," he said. "A pity, really, that he is not King. The party given for him at their Legation was certainly dull enough—though personally I enjoy such jollifications as, for example, the court ball when our own King and Queen visited Berlin in 1913."

"For the wedding of the Kaiser's daughter?" Tomsitt asked, briskly.

"Princess Victoria Louise," said Sir Gavin, nodding with approval at this scoring of a point by his satellite. "I went quite by chance, in place of Saltonstall, who—"

"Though, of course, it makes one feel quite ill to think of dancing with a German now," said Lady Walpole-Wilson, anxiously.

She had taken the war hard.

"Do you really think so, Lady Walpole-Wilson?" said Widmerpool. "Now, you know, I can feel no prejudice against the Germans. None whatever. French policy, on the other hand, I regard at the moment as very mistaken. Positively disastrous, in fact."

"They did the Torch Dance," said Sir Gavin, not to be put off nostalgic reminiscences so easily. "The King and the Tsar danced, with the bride between them. A splendid sight. Ah, well, little w thought..."

"I loved the Swiss Guard when we were in Rome last winter," said Miss Manasch. "And the Noble Guard were divine, too. We saw them at our audience."

"But what a demoralising life for a young man," said Lady Walpole-Wilson. "I am sure many of them must make unsuitable marriages."

"I can just imagine myself checking a Papal Guardsman's arms and equipment," said Pardoe. "Sergeant-Major, this halbert is filthy."

"I'd love to see you in those red and yellow and blue stripes, Johnny," said Miss Manasch, with perhaps a touch of unfriendliness. "They'd suit you."

Discussion as to whether or not ceremony was desirable lasted throughout the cutlets and ice. Lady Anne and Tomsitt were against pomp and circumstance; Eleanor and Widmerpool now found themselves on the same side in defending a reasonable degree of outward show. Tomsitt was rather pleased at the general agreement that he would go to pieces in the Tropics as a result of not changing for dinner, and certainly, so far as his evening clothes were concerned, he put his principles into practice.

"You should cart our Regimental Colour round," said Pardoe. "Then you'd all know what heavenly ceremonial means. It's like a Salvation Army banner."

"I'm always trying to get a decent Colour for the Guides," said Eleanor, "and not have to cart about a thing like a child's Union Jack. Not that anyone cares."

"You won't be too long, Gavin, will you?" said Lady Walpole-Wilson at this, hastily rising from the table.

By then I had only exchanged a word or two with Barbara, though this, in a way, was a mark of intimacy rather than because she had been unwilling to talk, or because any change had already consciously taken place in our relationship. Most of dinner she had spent telling Archie Gilbert rather

a long story about some dance. Now she turned towards me, just before she went through the door, and gave one of those half-smiles that I associated with moments—infrequent moments—when she was not quite sure of herself: smiles which I found particularly hard to resist, because they seemed to show a less familiar, more mysterious side of her that noisiness and ragging were partly designed to conceal. On that occasion her look seemed to be intended perhaps to reconcile the fact that throughout the meal she had allowed me so little of her attention. Sir Gavin assured his wife that we would “not be long” in further occupation of the dining-room; and, when the door was closed, he moved the pointer in the direction of Pardoe.

“I hear you’re letting your shooting,” he remarked.

“Got to cut down somewhere,” said Pardoe. “That seemed as good a place as anywhere to begin.”

“Outgoings very heavy?”

“A lot of things to be brought up to date.”

The two of them settled down to discuss Shropshire coverts, with which Sir Gavin had some familiarity since his father-in-law, Lord Aberavon, had settled on the borders of that county during the latter part of his life; though the house had been sold at his death. Archie Gilbert, having successfully undertaken the operation of releasing the ladies from the room, returned to the chair next to mine, and asked who was giving the other dance that night.

“Mrs. Samson.”

“What will it be like?”

“Probably better than the Huntercombes’. Mrs. Samson has got Ambrose—though of course the band is not everything.”

“Are you going to Mrs. Samson’s.”

He gave the ghost of a smile at what he must have regarded as a question needlessly asked.

“I expect I shall look in.”

“Is it for Daphne?”

“For Cynthia, the youngest girl,” he said, with gentle reproof at the thoughtlessness once more shown in putting this inquiry, which betrayed an altogether insufficiently serious approach to the world of dances. “Daphne has been out for ages.”

On the other side of the table Widmerpool seemed, for some reason, determined to make a good impression on Tomsitt. Together they had begun to talk over the question of the Far East; Tomsitt treating Widmerpool’s views on that subject with more respect than I should have expected him to show.

“I see the Chinese marshals have announced their victory to the spirit of the late Dr. Sun Yat-sen,” Widmerpool was saying.

He spoke rather as if he had himself expected an invitation to the ceremony, but was prepared to overlook its omission on this occasion. Tomsitt, pursing his lips, rather in Widmerpool’s own manner, concurred that such solemn rites had indeed taken place.

“And the Nationalists have got to Peking,” Widmerpool pursued.

“But who are the Nationalists?” asked Tomsitt, in a measured voice, gazing round the table with an air of quiet aggression. “Can anyone tell me that?”

Neither Archie Gilbert nor I ventured any attempt to clarify the confused situation in China; and not even Widmerpool seemed disposed to hazard any immediate interpretation of conflicting political aims there. There was a pause, at the end of which he said: “I dare say we shall have to consider tariff autonomy—with reservations, of course.”

Tomsitt nodded, biting his lip a trifle. Widmerpool’s face assumed a dramatic expression that made him look rather like a large fish moving swiftly through opaque water to devour a smaller one. Sir Gavin had begun to grow restive as scraps of this stimulating dialogue were wafted across to him.

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