

IRIS

MURDOCH

THE ITALIAN GIRL





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THE ITALIAN GIRL

Iris Murdoch



To Patsy and John Grigg

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A Biography of Iris Murdoch

1. A Moonlight Engraving

I pressed the door gently. It had always been left open at night in the old days. When I became quite certain that it was locked, I stepped back into the moonlight and looked up at the house. Although it was barely midnight, there was not a light showing. They were all abed and asleep. I felt a resentment against them. I had expected a vigil, for her, and for me.

I moved through a soft tide of groundsel and small thistles to try the two front casements, but they were both firm and a greater blackness breathed at me from within. Calling out or throwing stones at the windows in such a silence, these were abhorrent things. Yet to wait quietly in the light of the moon, a solitary excluded man, an intruder, this was abhorrent too. I walked a little, with dewy steps, and my shadow, thin and darkest blue, detached itself from the bulk of the house and stealthily followed. At the side it was all dark too and protected by such a dense jungle of ash saplings and young elder trees that it would have been impossible to reach a window, even had there been one unlatched. I measured by the growth of these rank neglected plants, how long it was since I had last been in the north: it must be all of six years.

It had been foolish, entirely foolish, to come. I ought to have come earlier when she was ill, early when she wanted me and wrote in letters which for anger and guilt I could scarcely bear to read, come, come, come. To have come then would have made sense in the light of the last abstract consideration I had for her: after all she was my mother. But to come now that she was dead, to come merely to bury her, to stand in her dead presence with those half-strangers, my brother and my sister-in-law, this was senseless, a mere self-punishment.

I returned across the lawn, following my own tracks in the dew. The clouded moon had spread a luminous transparent limb across the sky, and showed me the silhouettes of the great trees which surrounded the house. It was still the skyline I knew best in the world. I felt for a moment almost tempted to go away, to try the door once again and then to go, like the mysterious traveller of the poem. 'Tell them I came and no one answered.' I looked again at the familiar shapes of the trees and shivered at the sudden proximity of my childhood. These were the old June smells, the wisteria, the midsummer night smells, the sound of the river and the distant waterfall. An owl hooted, slowly and deliberately, casting out one inside the other his expanding rings of sound. That too I remembered.

The thought that I might go away and leave them all there asleep made me pause with a sort of elation. There was an air of vengeance about it. That would be to leave them forever, since if I went away now I was sure I would never return. Indeed, whatever happened I would probably never, after this one time, return. My mother's existence here had been the reason for my not coming. Now her non-existence would provide an even stronger reason.

I must have been standing there for some time in a sad reverie when I saw what for a weird second figure looked like a reflection of myself. I had so vividly, I now realized, pictured myself as a dark figure upon that silver expanse that when I saw, emerged into the dim light in front of me, another such figure I thought it could only be me. I shivered, first with this weird intuition, and the next moment with a more ordinary nervousness of this second night intruder. I knew at once from the outline of the man that it was not my brother Otto. Otto and I are both very big men, but Otto is bigger, although his stooping six foot three may pass for no more than my upright six foot one. The figure that now slowly advanced towards me was small and slim.

Although I am not especially a coward I have always been afraid of the dark and of things that

happen in the dark: and this night illumination was worse than darkness. The sense that I was alone, frightening the other man simply made me more alarmed. In a horrible silence I moved slowly towards him until we were near enough to catch a glint from each other's eyes.

A soft voice said, 'Ah – you must be the brother.'

'Yes. Who are you?'

'I am your brother's apprentice. My name is David Levkin. For a moment you frightened me. Are you locked out?'

'Yes.' I hated saying this to him, and suddenly all my old love for the place, my old patriotism for it, filled me with pain. I was locked out. It was monstrous.

'Don't worry. I'll let you in. They are all gone to bed.'

He moved across the lawn to the shadow of the house and I followed him. The moonlight fell in streaks through the overgrown lattice of the porch, weighed down with honeysuckle, and revealed the fumbling hand and the key. Then the door gave softly to show the thick waiting blackness of the house, and I followed the boy out of the honeysuckle fragrance into the old stuffy foxy darkness of the hall. The door closed and he turned on a light and we looked at each other.

I recalled now that my sister-in-law Isabel, the news-giver of the family, had written to me some time ago about a new apprentice. Otto's apprentices were something of a sad tale and a cause of scandal always to my mother. With unerring care he had attracted to himself a notable sequence of juvenile delinquents, each one worse than the last. I scanned the boy, but could not for the moment recall anything Isabel had said about him. He seemed about twenty. He did not look English. He was slim and long-necked, with big prominent lips and a lot of very straight brown hair. His nose was wide with big suspicious nostrils and he eyed me now with narrow eyes, very doubtfully, his lips apart. Then he smiled, and as the eyes almost vanished the cheeks broadened out in great wreaths of welcome. 'So you have come.'

The locution might have been impertinent or merely foreign. I could not see his face properly. My mother, intensely mean with money, had always insisted on using the weakest possible electric light bulbs, so that there was scarcely more to be seen within than by the light of the moon. It was a weak, dirty, weary sort of dimness. I wished to be rid of him, and said, 'Thank you. I can look after myself now.'

'I do not sleep in the house.' He said it solemnly and now with a perceptible foreignness. 'You will know where to go?'

'Yes, thank you. I can always wake my brother.'

'He does not sleep in the house now either.' I felt unable to discuss this.

I felt suddenly utterly tired and ill-used. 'Well, good night, and thank you for letting me in.'

'Good night.' He was gone, dissolving in the pale, uncertain, yellow light, and the door was closing. I turned and began to go slowly up the stairs with my suitcase.

At the top of the stairs I paused as the familiar pattern of the house seemed to enter into my bones magnetically: Otto's room, my room, my father's room, my mother's room. I turned toward my own room, where I assumed a bed would have been made up for me; and then I paused. I had not yet really conceived of her as dead. I had thought about journeys and times, about the cremation which was to take place tomorrow, about the nature of the ceremony, about Otto, even about the property, but not about her. My thoughts, my feelings about her belonged to some other dimension of time, belonged before whatever it was that had happened to her twenty-four or thirty-six hours ago. The sense of her mortality invaded me now, and it became inevitable that I should enter her room.

The dim electric light revealed the big landing, the oak chest and the fern which never grew but

never died either, the fine but entirely threadbare Shiraz rug, the picture which might have been by Constable but wasn't which my father had got in a sale at a price for which my mother never forgave him: and the closed silent doors of the rooms. Before the sick feeling should make me feel positive I faint I went to my mother's door and quickly opened it and turned on the light within.

I had not expected her face to be uncovered. I closed the door behind me and leaned back against it with a violently beating heart. She lay, raised up rather high upon the pillows, her eyes closed and her hair undone. She could not have been sleeping, though it would have been hard to say quite how that was evident. Her face was a yellowish white and narrowed, shrunk already away from life, altogether smaller. But her long hair which had been bronze once, now a dark brown striped with grey, seemed vital still, as if the terrible news had not yet come to it. It seemed even to move a little at my entrance perhaps in a slight draught from the door. Her dead face had an expression which I had known upon her in life, a sort of soft crazed expression, like a Grünewald Saint Antony, a look of elated madness and suffering.

My mother's name was Lydia, and she had always insisted that we call her by this name. This had displeased my father, but he did not cross her in this or indeed in anything else. My mother's affections had early turned away from her husband and focused with rapacious violence upon her sons with whom she had had, as it were, a series of love-affairs, transferring the centre of her affection and fro between us: so that our childhood passed in an alternate frenzy of jealousy and of suffocation. In my first memories she was in love with Otto, who is my senior by two years. When I was six she loved me passionately, and again when I was ten, and again in my later years at school; and perhaps later too, and most fiercely of all, when she felt me slipping from her grasp. It was when it was at last clear to her that I had escaped, that I had run away and would not come back, that she turned her emotions on to her last love, her granddaughter Flora, Otto and Isabel's only child. She would often say that no one but she could control the little girl. It was true; Lydia had seen to it that it was true.

She was a small woman. She had been so proud when we were at art school, of her two hugely talented sons. I can recall her walking between us and looking up at each in turn with a proud possessive leer, while we stared ahead and affected not to notice. She was, in some way, a great spirit; all that power, with some turn of the screw, might have organized some notable empire. There was nothing of the artist in her. Yet with this she was a timid woman, convinced of the hostility of the world and incapable of crossing a hotel lounge without believing that everyone there was staring at her and talking maliciously about her.

Isabel had put up but little fight. She lost Otto almost at once and withdrew herself into a sarcastic remoteness. Almost the last serious talk I had had with my brother, many years ago now, had been when I implored him, on his marriage, to get away from Lydia. I can recall the paralysed look with which he said that it was impossible. Shortly after that I departed myself. It was perhaps the spectacle of Lydia's ruthlessness to Isabel which finally sickened me and made me feel for my mother at last the positive hatred which was a necessity for my escape. Yet Lydia never destroyed Isabel. Isabel was strong too in her own way, another ruined person, but strong.

It was scarcely credible that all that power had simply ceased to be, that the machine worked no longer. My father had passed from us almost unnoticed, we believed in his death long before it came. Yet my father had not been a nonentity. When he was the young and famous John Narraway, Narraway the socialist, the free-thinker, the artist, the craftsman, the saint, the exponent of the simple life, the redeemer of toil, he must have impressed my mother, he must indeed have been an impressive person. A talented and perhaps a fine person. Yet my early memories are not of my father, but of my mother, one day saying to us: your father is not a good man, he is merely a timid man with unworldly taste.

We felt for him a faint contempt and later pity. He never beat us. It was Lydia who did that. He passed on to us only, in some measure, his talents. He had been a sculptor, a painter, an engraver, a stone mason. He left us behind, two lesser men, Otto the stone mason and I, Edmund, the engraver.

I looked at what lay before me with a horror which was not love or pity or sadness, but was more like fear. Of course I had never really escaped from Lydia. Lydia had got inside me, into the depths of my being, there was no abyss and no darkness where she was not. She was my self-contempt. To say that I hated her for it was too flimsy a saying: only those will understand who have suffered this sort of possession by another. And now the weird thought that I had survived her did not increase my being, but I felt in her presence mutilated and mortal, as if her strength, exercised from *there*, could even now destroy me. I looked with fascination upon the live, still burnished hair and upon the white already shrunken face. Leaving the room, I switched the light off and it seemed very strange to leave her there in the dark.

I moved softly across the landing to my own door. The house creaked about me as if in recognition of the inarticulate greeting of some primitive dog-like house-ghost. I had no thought of waking Otto now. The closed doors breathed a stupefaction of slumber; and I wanted desperately to sleep myself, as if to appease with that semblance of death the angry defeated spirit. I reached my own door and opened it wide, and then stopped in my tracks. The moon shone clearly on to my bed and revealed the form of a young girl with long glistening hair.

For a moment it seemed like a hallucination, something hollow and incompletely perceived, some conjuration of a tired or frightened mind. Then the form stirred slightly and turned, the bright hair falling on to an almost bare shoulder. I started back and closed the door in a shock of guilty terror. This was a magic of exclusion which was too strong for me. A moment later, like an evil spirit put to flight, I was stumbling away down the stairs.

A woman's voice above me softly spoke my name. I paused now and looked up. A face was looking at me over the banisters, a face which I dimly, partly, recognized. Then I realized that it was only my old nurse, the Italian girl. We had had in the house, ever since we were small children, a series of Italian nursery-maids; whether one had led to another or whether this was a foible of my mother's I never remember discovering. But one result had been that my brother and myself, with no natural gift for languages, spoke fluent Italian. The post had become, in a manner, traditional, so that I had always had, as it were, two mothers, my own mother and the Italian girl. Looking up now at the remembered face, I felt a sort of temporal giddiness and could not for a moment make out which one this was while a series of Giulias and Gemmas and Vittorias and Carlottas moved and merged dreamlike in my mind. 'Maggie.'

Her name was Maria Magistretti, but we had always called her Maggie. I came back up the stairs. 'Maggie, thank you. Yes, I see. Of course, Flora is in my room. You've put me in Father's old room? Yes, that's fine.'

As I whispered, she pushed open the door of my father's room and I followed her into the bleak lighted interior.

I had never known her to wear anything but black. She stood there now, a small dark figure gesturing towards the narrow bed, her long bun of black hair trailing down her back like a waxed pigtail. With her pale, framed face, in the solemnity of the hour, she seemed like an attendant nun: one expected to hear the clink of a rosary and a murmured *Ave*. She looked to me ageless, weary: the last of the Italian girls, left as it were stranded by the growing up of her two charges. She must have been when she came, but little older than the boys she was to look after; but some trick of fate had left her behind ever since in that northern house. Otto claimed he remembered being wheeled by Maggie in his

pram, but this was certainly a false memory: some previous Carlotta, some Vittoria, merged here with her image; they were indeed all, in our minds, so merged and generalized that it seemed as if there had always ever been only one Italian girl.

‘A hot-water bottle in the bed? How kind of you, Maggie. No, not a meal, I’ve eaten, thank you. Just bed. It’s at eleven tomorrow, isn’t it? Thank you, good night.’ With this came to me some of the comforting breath of childhood; warm beds, prompt meals, clean linen: these things the Italian girl had provided.

I stood alone in the faded pretty room. The patchwork bedcover was turned back for me. I looked about. A lot of my father’s pictures hung in this room, placed there by Lydia who had, after his death, collected them from elsewhere in the house to make of this place a sort of museum, a mausoleum. It was as if she had, in the end, enclosed him in a narrow space. I looked at the pale water-colours which had once seemed the equal of Cotman and the mannered engravings which had once seemed the equal of Bewick; and there emanated from them all a special and limited sense of the past. They looked at me, for the first time, dated, old-fashioned, insipid. I felt his absence then with a quick pathos, his presence as a sad reproachful ghost: and it was suddenly as if after all it was he who had just died.

2. Otto's Laughter

Soft, sweet, mechanical, senseless music was being stereophonically produced. We were waiting for the coffin to be carried in. There was to be no service; only as I gathered, a few minutes of quietness in the presence of the dead. Lydia had been a firmly convinced atheist. This was one respect perhaps in which my father had influenced her.

I had scarcely seen the family during the morning. Maggie had brought up my breakfast, and I had exchanged clumsy greetings with Otto and Isabel as we were getting into the cars.

I looked now at my niece, who was sitting a little in front of me on the other side, and savoured a certain astonishment in which last night's experience had some part. I had not seen Flora for eight years since she had not been at home on my last visit. I remembered her as a forward exasperating little fairy, yet always to me infinitely gentle, with a spontaneous affectionate grace whose sheer directness seemed a miracle. She made nothing of the complicated barriers with which I had surrounded myself, and she loved me then, naturally and carelessly, just because I was her uncle, and accepted me utterly. She was perhaps the only person in the world who did. As a child she had wonderfully possessed that open simple quality which makes adults oddly ashamed before children with a shame which is also pleasure. Otto said I 'idealized' Flora; but it was true that I might, for her, have come home often, if it had not been for Lydia.

But now she was, not quite grown up, but certainly a little girl no longer. She must be, I reflected, sixteen, perhaps seventeen. After all, I was over forty myself. And now she was beautiful. As a child she had had a broad radiant appealing expression and the sweetness of a little animal. Now there was before me a handsome impressive girl, with long reddish hair, neatly pinned up, and a pale dreamlike face in which the innocent radiance which I remembered shone like a surface mist above the firm features of a grown-up. Her face had that pure transparent look which we suddenly notice in the faces of young girls when they are no longer children. She wore a big, longish, striped skirt and a black tightfitting jacket and a large, black velvet, broad-brimmed hat tilted far back on her head. She did not resemble her mother, but had something of the gipsy grace of the young Lydia.

Isabel, beside her, looked morose and preoccupied. She too had changed, her face had aged in the imperceptible way, becoming yellower or greyer, as if a fine gauze of frowning and anxiety had been pressed upon it. But her mop of intricate brown hair was glossy and unfaded. She was smartly, quietly dressed, and could have been taken for a clever business woman, a woman of affairs, while her face might have been that of a retired actress. She had a face which was in some sense old-fashioned, round rather wistful, big-eyed, small-mouthed face such as might have peeped and simpered at the turn of the century in some overfurnished drawing-room in France. This appearance blended in a piquant way with her rather precise Scottish voice: Isabel came from the farther north, from north of the border. She caught my look now and half smiled. She had a good smile, that direct beam of one human being at another. I liked Isabel, though indeed I hardly knew her, and had often wondered why she had stayed on in that gloomy house where she must have been so very far from happy. There was Flora, of course. And there are, I suppose, always for unhappy women many good reasons for bearing the devil they know rather than seeking the other one.

Otto I could not see, he was somewhere behind me sitting with Levkin. That completed our party except for Maggie, of course. Lydia had had, in latter years, few friends. I had scarcely spoken to Otto in the car, and I resolved now to have a quick business talk with him before lunch. There was no

reason indeed why I should not get away promptly in the afternoon. Nothing detained me. I had not the past enjoyed observing the wreck of my brother's marriage and did not imagine that I would enjoy it now. And though I was bound to Otto by steely bonds more awful than the bonds of love, we had, of our rare meetings, but little to say to each other. I wanted now chiefly to discover whether Lydia, who had been my father's sole heir, had left me anything in her will. It was unlikely, since after the scandal of my departure our relations had been cold, strained and scanty. I gathered from Isabel that my name was never mentioned. Still, it was just possible that she had left me something, and I certainly needed it.

I lived a very simple solitary life, but on the other hand I also earned very little money. The art of the wood-engraver may be deep but it is narrow. I passed my days contentedly with the twenty-six letters of the roman alphabet, whose sober authority my father had taught me to love, combining the sturdy forms with wild fantasies of decoration to produce everything from book-plates and trademarks to bank-notes and soap-coupons. My father had frowned upon any decoration of the letter itself, whose classic familiarity he compared to that of the human form, and as a letterer I too counted as a puritan. I did occasional book illustrations, and for my own pleasure, with the names of Bewick and Calverley prayerfully upon my lips, transferred to the precious small surface of the wooden block many scenes, figures, objects that I saw or imagined. But I had never become a fashionable or well-known engraver and in that sense established. I was not ambitious. No type face bore my name. Perhaps I simply lacked talent. I had little curiosity about an exact estimate of my merits, and none at all about my prestige, except in so far as it affected money-making. I would have been happy enough to count myself a craftsman and to jog along in the background of some printing house, only a taste for freedom kept me at my own bench. I had no craving for luxuries and had never had, but I did not honour poverty for its own sake, and disliked its indignities and inconveniences. I lived a solitary life. It had not always been so. But my relations with women always followed a certain disastrous and finally familiar pattern. I did not need a psychoanalyst to tell me why: nor did it occur to me to seek the aid of one of those modern necromancers. I preferred to suffer the thing that I was.

There was a sound of movement, a shuffling, a heavy tread. As we all rose to our feet I half turned to see the little coffin entering, and it seemed suddenly sad that the hirelings who carried it so easily were equal in number to the real mourners. I shivered and closed my eyes as they passed me, and looked again to see the coffin reposing on a sort of stage in front of a blue velvet curtain. The music ceased, but continued in my head, making the silence idiotic. I looked at the coffin and sought for feelings, but could only feel that I was cold, very cold. It was as if she were for the last time waiting that so demanding spirit turned upon the threshold, and we were there in front of her, an embarrassed pitiful, half-witted crew, hang-dog as we had always been. At least a Christian burial would with its ancient images and emotions have covered up this moment of blankness and lent to that querulous frailty the dignity and sadness of a general mortality. To this we all come. I wished, not for the first time, that I had been brought up as a Christian. Christianity was not inside me, for all that I sometimes aped it, and I knew the loss to be terrible. This was yet another thing for which I could not forgive my parents. I checked the old familiar resentment with the old familiar check. I stared at the blue velvet curtain. The silence went on and on.

Then suddenly, just behind me, there was a weird sound. I saw Isabel turning sharply and I turned too. The coffin-bearers stood stiffly in a row at the back. In front of them was the huge figure of my brother, and as I turned I saw him swaying, bending forward and putting his hand to his mouth. I thought for a moment that he was ill or overcome by tears: but then I saw that he was laughing. Monstrous giggles shivered his great figure from head to foot and turned, as he tried to stifle them

into wet spluttering gurgles. 'Oh God!' said Otto audibly. He choked. Then abandoning all attempt at concealment he went off into a fit of gargantuan mirth. Tears of laughter wetted his red cheeks. He laughed. He roared. The chapel echoed with it. Our communion with Lydia was at an end.

The line of coffin-bearers was in scandalized disorder. Isabel had stepped into the aisle and was saying something to me. I turned towards Otto. But already David Levkin had seized him by the arm and was marching him, still gasping and rumbling, towards the door. As I left my place to follow them out I saw, behind Isabel, Flora standing perfectly still, almost at attention, gazing straight in front of her as if nothing had happened.

Outside Otto was now sitting on the stone steps in the sunshine repeating 'Oh God, Oh my God' and wiping his mouth with a filthy handkerchief. He seemed quite unable to stop laughing. He would stop for a moment, stare in front of him with a humorous delighted expression, and then as if unable to endure the exquisitely comic nature of his thoughts, explode again into a roar. 'Oh my God!' His eyes were running with water and spittle foamed down his chin. Levkin was sitting on the step above him with his knee against Otto's shoulder. He was patting him with a patient almost abstracted air. As I approached my brother I detected a strong smell of alcohol.

Drunkenness disgusts me. I recalled now that Isabel had said in a letter some time ago that she had thought that her husband was taking to drink: and I recalled how I had thought then that Otto, at best an uncontrolled and sometimes a violent man, would make a horrible drunkard. I looked down at him with repulsion.

'My lord, my lord, be quiet, be still.' Levkin was speaking to Otto, sing-song, caressing and soothing him. I looked at the boy with surprise and with an equal dislike.

'Let's get him to the car,' I said, I detest scenes and drama. Fortunately there was no one about. The two cars stood but ten yards off and beyond them the green trees of the Garden of Remembrance were resinous and sleepy in the sun. The women had not emerged from the chapel and our other attendants were not to be seen. 'Get up,' I said to Otto.

Levkin took one arm and I took the other and Otto rose between us like a giant log released from the sea bed. His face was now radiantly serene and he belched and hiccuped meditatively as we tacked and veered our way to the car. Levkin opened the door and Otto fell in. He smelt like an old bar-parlour of stale drink and tobacco. I did not care to go on seeing my brother in this condition and it seemed kinder to him too to curtail the experience. 'Take him away.'

Levkin hesitated and then got into the car and began to turn it. The three women were now on the chapel steps. As I came back towards them I saw Isabel's face bent upon me with a look of apology and appeal. Something in her eyes also said: This often happens, things are like this, do not make too much of it. Flora brushed past, tearing off her hat. 'I'm going to walk home,' she said brusquely to no one in particular. As she receded I saw her undo the pins in her red hair and let it fall down upon her shoulders.

'Come with us, Edmund,' said Isabel entreatingly.

I felt at that moment that I simply wanted to shake them off like insects from my sleeve. Otto's laughter, Otto's reek of alcohol, the messy, muddled, personal smell of it all seemed suddenly to represent everything I detested. There was no dignity, no simplicity in these lives. In a few hours, thank God, I could leave them forever. 'No thanks. I'll stay here now. It's not far to walk back. Don't wait.'

I watched the second car depart and then went slowly back into the cool chapel. It was not dark inside, plain windows and pale oak, but my eyes were dazed by the change of light and could not focus. Then I saw that the place was empty. Lydia was gone. The coffin must have receded through the

curtains or sunk slowly into the floor, after the usual weird insipid rite of the cremation chapel. Lydia was in the furnace now.

I sat down and tried to compose my mind. I tried to think of her, to remember her goodness and her fineness, to remember how she had loved me and suffered for me. This was no moment for thinking of her frailty or for measuring her devastations. My petty judgements were put to silence in the presence of her mystery. I would study charity now, as I ought to have done before, as I ought to have done from the start. I tried to feel some remorse, a little sober regret for my own failure as a son, as a man. I must not flinch from a measure of that vast failure. *Nondum considerasti quantum pondus sit peccatum.*

These were the thoughts which I attempted to think, looking at the blue curtain beyond which my once-dear mother had passed. But I could not think them. All that came into my mind was the image of Flora. How exceedingly pretty she had become. I wondered how old she was.

3. Isabel Feeds the Fire

‘You didn’t bring your car?’ said Isabel.

‘No. I hate driving northward.’

‘Have a drink? Some whisky?’

Isabel’s gramophone, turned down to an almost inaudible murmur, was playing Sibelius.

‘No, thanks. I don’t drink much.’ In fact I did not drink at all, only I always thought it sounded priggish and aggressive to say so.

‘Unlike your dear brother!’

‘How long has it been going on, the drinking?’

‘Quite long, but especially since Lydia got so ill. Lydia was the only person who could control Otto. Thank you, Maggie, that will do. Just put the sandwiches on the table.’

Maggie put down the tray and departed. With her neat black feet she seemed like a little donkey.

It was lunch-time. Otto had not reappeared and Flora had sent news of a headache, so Isabel had suggested a sandwich lunch in her own room. She wanted to talk to me, she said, privately.

Isabel occupied the bay-window bedroom in the front with the view over the lawn toward the camellias. Our house, bought by my father on his marriage, was a big ugly Victorian rectory, its red brick darkened by the sour wind that blew from the nearby collieries, whose slag heaps were invisible behind the trees. In his young socialist days my father, who came from hereabouts, had chosen this little northern town in the hope of establishing fruitful relations with the working people. But the silent suspicious miners had made nothing of that gentle personality; and by the time Otto and I were conscious of our surroundings he was already a defeated recluse. We grew up as children in exile.

The garden was immense, and had been part of the grounds of a much larger house which had been destroyed by fire. A little mountainy stream of clear brown water spilt in over the far boundary in a long cascade, obedient to the will of some long-dead landscape gardener. The stream meandered for nearly a quarter of a mile between high slopes of camellias and dense thickets of bamboos before it briefly touched the lawn and turned away to flow under iron bridges into the town. The camellia bushes, indeed most of them were by now trees, unkept and running wild, had grown into an almost impenetrable tangle of implicated vegetation. The course of the stream was marked by the greener line of bamboo, while high up above a birch grove led away into the open country. For us children it had formed a vast region of romance. I sighed. I could not remember being happy in childhood, but now it was as if the woods remembered it for me.

‘No thanks, Isabel, I don’t smoke. I’m out of date about Flora. What’s she doing now? I was surprised to see her so grown up.’

‘She’s at the technical college, doing textile design. She has a small flair for it. I expect she’ll get married young. She’s longing to go south.’

I sighed again. Through these various channels my father’s big talent was draining away.

‘Thanks, Isabel, just one sandwich. You haven’t anything soft, ginger beer? All right, tomato juice. What have you done to your hand?’

Isabel had a long pale scar across the fingers of her right hand.

‘Nothing. I burnt it here on the grate.’

‘You must be careful with that fire. It’s like a blast furnace. Surely you don’t need it in summer?’

‘It’s company. Like a dog. I enjoy feeding it.’

Lydia had always had a morbid fear of fire and kept at least six fire extinguishers in the house. Partly to annoy her, Isabel had always kept a very large open fire in her room which she piled high with wood and coal. It was roaring away now, a dazzling edifice of red and gold, although the sun was shining brightly outside. Isabel took some drooping flowers from a vase and threw them on to the blaze. There was a sizzling sound and the room filled with a sweet pungent smell.

Isabel's room had always been something of a provocation. It was her hobby, doubtless her consolation. Whereas the rest of the house was still appointed in the narrowly fanciful style favoured by my father, a sort of Spartan *art nouveau*, Isabel had built herself a luscious and eclectic boudoir. The room was crammed with furniture and the furniture encrusted with objects, and my heavy tread on entering had set a myriad trinkets tinkling like little bells. It was an Edwardian room with dreams of the eighteenth century. I backed away from the fire and leaned on the end of the mantelpiece, carefully shifting some ivory water-buffaloes out of reach of my elbow.

'Do sit down, Edmund. You'll break something if you go on loping around. You're much too big for this room anyway. Thank heavens Otto doesn't come here any more.' She added after a moment, 'And you were so right to get away from Lydia.'

Her voice with emotion became more Scottish. She was sitting now in a velvet sewing-chair which was treading upon the toes of a Georgian games-table and some ambiguous pieces of Chinoiserie. She must have changed some time after our return into what I had taken to be another dress but which I now saw to be a flowered summer dressing-gown. She had thrust her feet into fluffy backless bedroom-slippers. Since my last visit she had had her long hair cut off, though the elaborate curly coiffure had much the same curly appearance as before. Under the luxuriant hair her face was small with little poised mouth and short pretty nose. She was thickly powdered, her eyebrows drawn in an exaggerated curve, and crude greenish smudges above her big round brown eyes. Below, her unpowdered neck, revealed by the open gown, looked gaunt and tired. I felt sorry for her.

'I'll stand if you don't mind. I always prefer standing. How are things generally, Isabel? How about Otto, apart from the drink?'

'All right, I suppose. He gets his work done. I never see him now. He sleeps in the workshop.'

'I see he's got a new apprentice. I think you mentioned it in a letter. What happened to the last one?'

'Oh, he left early one morning with all the cash he could lay hands on and a lot of Otto's clothes. Of course, Otto did nothing about it. Thank God Lydia was practically unconscious by then.'

'What's the new one like? The same old style? Otto can certainly pick them! He seems foreign.'

'Foreign parents, I imagine. Russian Jew. He lives in the summer-house. I hardly see him either.'

The summer-house was a round stone building, originally an eighteenth-century decoration, which later vandals had turned, with red brick additions, into a gardener's cottage. Yet it still looked pretty enough among the first trees of the camellia forest. Otto's workshop, an unashamed monstrosity of brick and slate, was happily out of sight behind the house.

'Where did he come from?'

'Out of the blue. He arrived the day Lydia had her last stroke. He has a sister or something with him. He hasn't done anything outrageous so far.' She laughed her little laugh. Isabel had a tiny musical laugh which came out of her little mouth like a peardrop. She got up from her chair and minced, threading the furniture, to the windows. 'You make me restless. I do wish you'd sit down.'

'Sorry, Isabel. I'm afraid of breaking a chair like I did last time. Isabel, do turn that music off. It would you? I can't stand music in the background.'

She leaned to switch off the gramophone. 'I need music so much. I don't know what I'd do without

it. Sometimes I wrap it round me like a wild cloak. Oh Edmund, I've been so lonely –'

~~I was a little nervous of the note of appeal in her voice. I did not want any display of Isabel's emotions. I had no wish to hear her confessions and complaints. In any case I knew it all but too well. I said briskly, 'Come, come, there's always –'~~ I was about to say 'Flora', but felt suddenly that that might cause pain. I said '– the Italian girl.'

'Maggie and I are like the people in Dostoevsky who starved together in the hut for too long. We can do nothing for each other. Anyway, Lydia took over Maggie as she took over Flora. She took over everything.'

'Yes, I can imagine she would have swallowed down poor little Maggie quite easily.'

'There's a lot of Maggie left.'

'There's a lot of you left. I'm surprised you don't get out more, do things in the town.'

'Like *she* does. Maggie's quite a do-gooder. She knows all the Italian community. But I don't quite see myself as a baby-sitter.'

'Surely it would help you to try to think about people other than yourself, other people's troubles –'

'You think I lead an idiotic self-centred life?'

I hesitated. There was an eagerness in her question. I did not really want to have this sort of conversation with my sister-in-law. Anything from me which savoured of rebuke would release some greater warmth into the atmosphere between us, and I shrank instinctively from this. I was, after all, only a passer-by. Yet I had to answer truthfully. 'Frankly, yes.'

My frankness gave her immediate pleasure and she almost blushed with gratification. 'You're quite right. My life is a *divertissement*.' She moved from the window to the mantelpiece and began to drop dry shaggy bits of wood onto the fire. I backed away, edging my feet along the crowded floor.

'And you –' said Isabel. 'Yes, you lead a simple good life. You help people. Oh, I know about it. I wonder if you think it's easy to be like that?'

'I'm selfish too,' I said. 'It just suits me that way. I have unworldly tastes.' I added, 'And of course I had such an example before me in my father.' I was beginning to hate the conversation.

'If only your father hadn't met Lydia! He ought to have been a monk. But in a way you're living his life for him.'

'No one could live his life for him. He lived his own life. He was a much much finer person than I could ever be.' Besides, I added to myself, I met Lydia too and at a rather earlier age. I looked surreptitiously at my watch and wondered if my brother was sober yet.

'Yes, but you're a free man,' said Isabel. 'We are all prisoners here. We are like people in an engraving. God, how I hate engravings! Sorry, Edmund, but there's something about those black cramped things – it's a Gothic art, a northern art. And why do engravers always choose such gloomy subjects? Hanged men, wailing women. You can't be gay in an engraving. No colour. God, how I hate the north!' She tapped her wedding ring with exasperation on the mantelpiece.

I knew I was not a free man, but I was certainly not going to discuss this with Isabel. 'There were plenty of Italian engravers. It wasn't all invented by Dürer. Mantegna, for instance –'

'Otto's Gothic, you know,' said Isabel. 'He is the north. He's primitive, gross. Otto's the sort of man who'll pee into a washbasin even if there's a lavatory beside him.'

I detest coarse talk in women and anyway would have thought it most improper to bandy words about my brother with his wife. I said in a cheerful leave-taking tone, 'Ah well, Isabel, I think you are exaggerating. Even if you were imprisoned you are much more free now. And you can be free at any time if you choose to be. And now if you don't mind –'

'Don't be a fool, Edmund,' said Isabel. She was pouring more whisky into her glass and I realized

with distaste that she was slightly intoxicated. 'You know as well as I do that one can be imprisoned in one's mind. Here we've all been destroying ourselves and each other to spite Lydia. We've become monkey men and spider women. Otto and I are specialized destroyers of each other. Lydia's departure makes no difference to that.'

The vehemence of her tone both touched and alarmed me. This was everything that I wanted to get away from. I felt compassion and yet knew that to be really moved by Isabel's plight would do neither her nor me any good. 'Try and brace up, Isabel. Let cheerfulness break in occasionally! You can lead a happy, useful, independent life –'

'Do you remember,' said Isabel, 'how Saint Teresa describes a vision of a place reserved for her in hell? It's like a dark cupboard. Well, I live in that dark cupboard all the time. I am separated by my whole being from the good life you speak of. The only thing that consoles me now is sleep. Every night is an imitation of death. Without that I would have killed myself long ago.'

She was tapping her wedding ring again, fiercely, her moist lips apart, her eyes wrinkled against the glow of the bright fire. She seemed dishevelled now, the flowery dressing-gown pulled wide at the neck where she kept darting a nervous hand to rub her breast and shoulders.

In acute distress I turned to the window. Then, out in the garden, slowly crossing the lawn in the bright sunshine, I saw Flora. She had changed into a white summer dress and carried a big sun hat which she swung idly in one hand from a blue ribbon. Her hair was still undone. It was indeed not an engraver's task. It was a subject for Manet.

I exclaimed. 'Why, there's Flora. How very pretty she is.'

I could hear Isabel move behind me and in a moment her sleeve was touching mine. We both watched the child as she strolled, head thrown back, as if she were aware of nothing but the brilliant trees and the bright light blue summer air.

'Alice in Wonderland! She must be a joy to you, Isabel.'

'Yes and no.' She added half under her breath, 'I wish I had other children.'

Flora disappeared among the trees. I sighed.

'Still all alone, Edmund?'

'Yes.' I moved away from her. My exasperated distress had gone, and in feeling sorry for myself I felt more sorry for her.

'How long are you planning to stay with us?'

'Well,' I said, looking at my watch again, 'if you'll excuse me, and if I can get hold of Otto now I'll catch the five o'clock train.'

'What?'

Already half-way to the door, I turned to her. Her plump hands were crossed at her throat in an attitude of horror and supplication. 'No, no, no –' she said. Then with an air rather of authority than entreaty she stretched out an arm in my direction. She seemed, in her golden fiery shrine, like a little prophetess. 'You can't go, Edmund.'

'Well, really I –'

'You must stay. Something will hold you here. You must stay on now and help us. Otto needs you. We all need you. Who else could I have talked to like this? I was so much looking forward to your coming. You are the only person who can heal us.'

'I am no healer,' I said. I could not add: 'I cannot heal you. Perhaps no one can.'

'Yes, you are. You are many things. You are a good man. You are a sort of doctor. You are the assessor, the judge, the inspector, the liberator. You will clear us all up. You will set us in order. You will set us free.'

I was thoroughly alarmed by this speech. My intense desire was to return to my own simple unencumbered place. I did not want to dally in the mess of Isabel's world, let alone to be assigned a role in it. I said firmly, 'I'm sorry, Isabel. I don't exactly have to go, but I intend to go. I couldn't do anything for you and Otto. Now please forgive me and excuse me.'

The tense prophetic little figure drooped, and she shambled back to the fire, knocking over a small table. One of the fluffy slippers had come off. She poured out some more whisky and said without looking at me, 'Perhaps you're right, Edmund. You'd better get back to your good life. I shouldn't have bothered you like this. It's just that I'm caged, bored. I want emotion and pistol shots.'

Emotion and pistol shots: Lydia had wanted these things too. They were just what I feared and hated. I fled from the room.

4. Otto and Innocence

'I dreamt last night,' said Otto, 'that there was a huge tiger in the house. It kept prowling from room to room and I kept trying to get to the telephone to ring for help. Then when I did get to the phone I found I couldn't dial properly because the dial was all made of marzipan. And then this tiger –'

'Do you mind,' I said. 'I do want to catch the train. And there are still various things to be settled.'

We were in the workshop and Otto was eating his lunch. The workshop, with large pieces of worked and unworked stone rising and receding about the central space, had a megalithic solemnity, like a meeting-place of Druids. The stone seemed to give back a peculiar marmoreal quality of sound, melancholy and a little hollow, and to exude coldness. Otto now mainly produced gravestones and memorials. Sober plain surfaces of slate or marble recorded here and there in confident impeccability Blado or Baskerville the names of the deceased who could have no fears for their identity with their arrival in another world announced in lettering by Otto. A bright clear light from above showed the irregular whitewashed walls, now gauzy with innumerable cobwebs. A beautifully executed memorial tablet of dark green Cornish slate lay upon the work bench, where I had already noted with approval the neat clean array of tools. Otto might be a mess in every other way, but he was still a meticulous craftsman. Our father had given us, in this respect, a training which could not be undone.

Otto was seated on top of his folded overcoat upon a long low marble tomb with his plate balanced on his knee. His lunch consisted of water biscuits, butter and cheese in great quantity, and, in a cardboard box beside him, a mound of herbs which he had plucked in handfuls from the overgrown herb garden. I remembered these tastes of his. Feeding Otto was like feeding an elephant or a gorilla. His great size required an immense bulk of green stuff per day. At this moment, with a pocket-knife clasped in red bulging fingers, he was plastering on to a biscuit a piece of butter the size of a ping-pong ball; upon this buttery sphere a cone of cheese of equivalent mass was then balanced, and to the cone were made to adhere bushy sprigs of mint and marjoram which Otto seized from the pile of green fodder beside him, skilfully eschewing the pieces of grass, groundsel, ground elder and other foreign greenery which the hastily gathered herbage was sure to contain. His gaping mouth remained open revealing a green biscuity mess within, while he conveyed the greasy structure to it. Most of it got inside.

'Odd, isn't it,' he mumbled, spewing out biscuit crumbs as he chewed, 'that we are both practical vegetarians. I'm a vegetable man and you're a fruit man. I expect it's something to do with Lydia. Most things about us are!'

I was in fact a vegetarian, though by preference and on instinct rather than on any clear principle. I seated myself now upon the work bench, checking my usual tendency to pace about as I did not want to stir up the multi-coloured stone dust upon the floor. I have a very sensitive nose. 'Otto –'

'Gosh, I believe I've just swallowed a furry caterpillar! Poor little blighter. Will he poison me or do you think? I wonder what it's like to be eaten? Well we should know. Oh, my God!'

'Otto –'

'All right, all right. Things to be decided. Such as Lydia's tombstone, problem of. Christ.'

'I leave that to you,' I said. 'Put on anything you like. I don't mind. And she won't mind now.' We had had a discussion a little earlier about whether there should be any special inscription, and whether it should contain the words 'wife' and 'mother'. They were words Lydia had detested. 'Why not just her name, anyway.'

‘Lydia. It sounds like a little dog.’

‘I mean her full name, you ass. Anyway, you decide.’

‘Funny, isn’t it,’ said Otto, now cramming a leafy handful in, grass and all, ‘that I’m always so constipated in spite of all the green stuff. Green seems the natural colour of food, doesn’t it? Has it ever struck you that we don’t eat anything *blue*?’

‘Otto –’

‘Have some whisky, Ed, or are you still on the waggon?’

‘I’m not on the waggon. I just don’t like the stuff. Haven’t you had enough for today?’

Otto shook his head sadly, and when he could speak, ‘You just don’t understand about addiction. One always wants more. The more one has the more one wants and the more frantically one wants. Ah, if only I could give up the drink now. And just live blankly. Then one would really feel the heat one was in. It would enter the body.’ He paused, his mouth, full of green mash, wide open, and gaze immobile at the cobwebby wall.

I have said that Otto was taller than me. He was also wider and bulkier, his once bull-like frame turning to masses of fat. He still retained, however, an exceptional physical strength, and he was, when he wished to be, tireless. His face was enormous and had now become red and flabby. He had an absurdly short straight nose, a high wrinkled sweaty brow, tracts of soft pendulous cheek, and a wide shapeless gash of a mouth which usually hung open. Like me, he needed to shave twice a day, and unlike me he failed to do so. His hair, more plentiful than my own and still a dark mousy brown, fell longish, wig-like, very slightly curly round the dome of his head, so that he had sometimes the air of a middle-aged operatic bass. When he drew breath one might expect an organ-like boom; and indeed his voice was as loud though not so musical. It was hard to believe we had resembled each other when young; possibly we still did in so far as a thin man can resemble a stout one. I had long stopped looking into mirrors, even when shaving. Neither of us had much of our father, another tall man but frail and elegant and pale as ivory, though I had been told many years ago that I was his image.

‘It’s just taken us in different ways, you and me,’ Otto was going on. I noticed that striped pyjama bottoms were protruding from the ends of his trousers. This must have been his funeral garb. ‘You remember the thing Father used always to be quoting, about the two birds on the tree, how one eats the fruit and the other watches and does not eat? Some Hindu thing. Well, you’re the one that watches and I’m the one that eats. I eat and eat and drink and drink. I try to swallow the world. No wonder Isabel thinks I’m a sort of gluttonous buffoon. Was Isabel complaining to you?’

‘No,’ I said, ‘of course not.’ I was troubled by the quotation about the birds. I recalled my father uttering it, but I could not recall what it meant.

‘Well, I expect she was, you know. God, if sarcasm and cool irony were grounds for divorce I could have escaped Isabel long ago! However, she has worse things to complain of. She finds me disgusting. I am disgusting!’

I wanted to keep off this. ‘By the way, I found a lot of fine boxwood blocks in Father’s room. I wonder if I could have them if you don’t want them?’

‘Oh, take them, take them. You may find they’re a bit cracked, they’ve been there for ages. Isabel stopped me from engraving years ago. She said engravers made everything tiny, like looking through the wrong end of binoculars. Tinification, she called it. But that’s just what *she* does. How right you were not to marry!’ Everything led back to Isabel.

‘That has disadvantages too!’ I passed my hand over my lips. Otto is a wet-lipped man. I am a dry-lipped man.

‘Only very carnal ones. The spiritual disadvantages of marriage are crippling. I could have been

good man if I hadn't married. Sometimes I think women really are the source of all evil. They are such dreamers. Sin is a sort of unconsciousness, a not-knowing. Women are like that, like the bottle. Remember that dreaming Eve at Autun, that dreaming, swimming, dazed Eve of Gislebertus? Ah, if I could have ever carved anything like that – but I'm good for nothing but provincial tombstones.' He was detached, with a big dirty hand, a flowery sprig of thyme, and stuck it onto the cheese.

'You've done some very fine things,' I said, 'and you will again.'

'No, no, Ed. I'm done for. God if you only knew the mess my life is in! And it's not Isabel's fault, it's my fault, all my fault. *Mea maxima culpa*. Nothing redeems that central failure. And I can't even feel any proper regret about it. I'm caught in a machine. Evil is a sort of machinery. And part of it is that one can't even suffer properly, one enjoys one's suffering. Even the notion of punishment becomes corrupt. There are no penances because all *that* suffering is consolation. What one wants is not suffering but truth: and that would be a kind of suffering one can't even imagine now. That was what I meant earlier about giving up drink. If I could look with absolute blankness and truthfulness at what I am, even if I went on doing the same things, I'd be an infinitely better man. But I can't'.

Otto was clearly still drunk. But a distant echo of my father in what he said touched my heart. My father had been a philosopher *manqué*. Otto too had his labyrinth, his metaphysical torture chamber. Indeed, I had my own. I understood Otto perfectly.

I said, 'Work is one simplicity which can't be taken from us.'

'You sounded just like Father then.'

An old old affection for Otto stirred within me. In a sort of fright I looked at my watch. I wanted to leave promptly and I did not want to be sorry to leave. I said 'Look Otto, forgive me for rushing you. I've got that train to catch. Did Lydia leave a will?'

Otto stared at me, his mouth gaping, his eyes round and blood-shot. Then he said softly, 'Poor Lydia is just dead and you are looking at your watch and speaking of wills.' At such moments Otto could be frightening. I checked a movement of recoil. Then suddenly the tears welled out of his eyes and he bowed his big head into his hands. A red flush spread down his neck.

I was moved, more by a sort of pity for him than by anything else, but I remained cool. After all, I was the one that watched. I sat on a block of Portland stone. 'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I will mourn in my own way. I am not a public mourner.'

Otto raised a wet crimson face. 'I know, I know. You're a close one. You'll think it all out. But I'll just miss her.' The tears came again.

I could hardly bear this. 'Please, please, Otto. And don't worry about the will and all that. I shouldn't have spoken of it. I'll write. I think I'll go and pack now.' In a strange and terrible way I missed her too. But I felt an iron intention to postpone my grief until I should have got back to my own house where I could indeed 'think it all out.' Here it would be, somehow, too dangerous. I did not want to catch some last infection from the shade of Lydia.

'It's all right,' said Otto. He was wiping his face with one of the rags he used to clean his chisel. 'We may as well talk about it now. I haven't found the will yet. At least, Isabel hasn't found it, and she started looking as soon as Lydia had the first stroke. There may not be one.'

'That wouldn't be Lydia, not to make a will. It'll turn up. It's probably somewhere in her bedroom.'

'Well, maybe. Anyhow, she's probably just divided the property between us. There should be no problems. I'll give you half the value of the house.'

'I should think it's more likely,' I said, 'that she's left it all to you and cut me out.'

'I don't know,' said Otto. 'She and I rowed an awful lot these last years. You were the far-off hills. She might quite well have left it all to you and cut *me* out. That would be like her sense of humour.'

He gave his orchestral giggle, stuffing the last handful of mint and dandelions into his mouth.

‘If she has,’ I said, ‘of course I’ll divide it equally with you.’

‘Well, I’ll do the same by you if she’s left it all to me.’

It occurred to me that this arrangement was a bit unfair to Otto, since it was overwhelmingly more likely that if there was one heir it would be him. And after all he had put up with Lydia all these years. However, I decided to argue about that when the time came.

‘Thanks, Otto. I suppose she’ll have made some provision for Maggie?’

‘I suppose so. If not, we will.’

‘Is Maggie going to stay here?’

‘Of course,’ said Otto with some surprise. ‘Where should she go to? This is her home. She hasn’t been to Italy for years.’

There was a soft footfall and a figure emerged from behind a tombstone. It was Levkin, carrying a tray. I had not heard the outer door open, and it occurred to me that he might have been hiding among the stones for some time and listening to our talk. I did not trust any of Otto’s young men.

The boy went to Otto, who gave up his plate and the greasy remains of his meal with the docility of a little boy obeying his nurse. Levkin packed the tray neatly. He looked at me with a slightly coy air, stretching his long neck like an animal, his big lips impudently pursed. He tossed his longish brown hair forward to veil his eyes as he leaned over, deftly removing the fragments of biscuit and cheese which had formed a milky way down the front of Otto’s jacket. Then he removed a lump of butter from Otto’s cheek with his finger, balanced the tray lightly on one hand and stood springily to my attention. ‘And when I get back, my Lord Otto, to work, yes?’

‘Yes, David,’ said Otto. He hauled himself obediently to his feet with a grunt and a hiccup while the boy, with another humorous look at me, disappeared among the stones.

I was irritated. ‘Why do you let him address you in that idiotic way?’

Otto meditatively picked up a wooden mallet and balanced it in his hand. ‘He’s a good boy. And I think he’s fond of me.’ Otto said that about all his apprentices, usually in the face of blatant evidence to the contrary on both counts.

I shrugged my shoulders. It was time to leave Otto and his problems behind. ‘Well, I’ll be off –’

Otto shambled after me. We climbed over a little suburb of marble blocks and opened the door. It had been cool and grey in the workshop with the clear northern light from above. The door opened upon the damp sunny jungle of an English summer. Past one corner of the house, where the Virgin creeper hung like light-green cut-out paper upon the blackish-red brick, was visible a triangle of lavender seeming now almost golden in the sun. In the midst of this haze of gold Flora stood, as if she were waiting. She had put on her sun hat and the blue ribbon was tied in a big bow under her chin. As the workshop door opened she turned and walked slowly away into the green shadow in the direction of the wood. We watched the nymph for a moment in silence.

‘Innocence, innocence,’ said Otto. ‘To be good is just never to lose it. How does evil begin in a life? How *can* it begin? Yet we were there once –’

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