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# *Now We Shall Be Entirely Free*

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# ONE

# 1

It came through lanes crazy with rain, its sides slabbed with mud, its wheels throwing arcs of mud behind it. There were two horses rigged in tandem and on the left-hand horse the postilion, a man of fifty, peered from under the brim of his hat at the outline of high hedges, arching trees. Somewhere there was a moon but you would do well to say where. The lantern on the cab had guttered out a mile back. The last light he had seen was a candle at a farmhouse window, some farmer up late at his accounts or prayers.

He called to his horses, 'Steady, steady . . .' The mud was liquid clay. More than once the animals had lost their footing in it. If he were to be thrown here! Thrown and bones cracked! Then he and the poor wretch in the cab would be discovered in the morning by milkmaid or tinker, dead as if they'd met the devil on the road.

Or was his passenger already dead? At the Swans he'd been carried out in the arms of servants, eyes shut and shadowed, head lolling, the landlord looking on like a man well pleased to be rid of what troubled him.

He reined in the horses, brought them to a halt. Here the road turned and descended – he could sense it more than see it – and he sat, pushed at by the rain, trying to think of what was best to do. He could get on to the cab and work the brake but the wheels had nothing to grip and he did not want to be up top if the thing started to glide. No, he would take his chances in the mud. He climbed down, stood in his stiff postilion's boots, took the collar of the horse he had been riding and began to walk.

Did he know this hill? He would know it in daylight but now, creeping forward, muttering to the horse, the cab swaying on its axle, he could not rid himself of the feeling he was walking down into the sea and would soon feel the surf break against his boots. Nonsense of course. There was no sea for a hundred miles, but somehow even a Somerset postilion carried with him a sea in his imagination.

For a span of seconds the moon came free of clouds and he saw the hill's character, saw moonlight on the yardarm bough of a big tree he thought he recognised. Another twenty yards and the road turned sharply right and down again. He turned with it, going a little quicker now. The rain was easing. He shook the drops from his hat, went on descending (long enough to begin to doubt this could be the hill he had believed it was), then, stretching out with his hand, he grazed a stone pillar that marked the edge of an open gateway. He led the horses through on to the drive – or not a drive but a courtyard, small stones underfoot, and beyond it the blackness and slate-shine of a large, square house. He left the horses and went up the three low steps to the front door. He felt around for a knocker or bell-pull, found none and beat against the door with the sodden leather of his gloved palm. Almost immediately, a dog began to bark. Another dog, down in

the village, answered it. He waited. A voice, a woman's, called the dog to silence. When the dog was hushed she said, 'Who is it? What do you want here?'

He told her, and told her his business. He was still not certain he had come to the right place, that this was the address he carried tucked inside his glove.

'Wait,' she said, her voice made a little strange by the door between them. When she returned she had a light that he saw as a bloom of yellow through the narrow window at the side of the door. He stood back to show himself. The light shifted, bolts were drawn and the door, swollen from the rain perhaps – raining off and on for days – opened with a scraping sound. The woman stood there holding up her lamp. Not young, not old. She had a blanket around her shoulders and was holding the edges with her free hand against her chest.

'Where is he?' she asked, looking either side of the postilion.

'He's in the cab.'

'Why does he not come?'

'He will need to be lifted. He was lifted in.'

She took this in for a moment, then said, 'There is only me here.'

'I can manage him,' he said. 'I believe I can.'

He turned from her and walked to the cab. He tapped for politeness' sake on the sliding window, then opened the door, got on to the step and leaned inside. It did not smell good in there, nor was it obvious at first that the man was still breathing.

'I'll be gentle as I can,' he said. He pulled the man forward, just enough to slide an arm around his back. His other arm went under the man's knees. With a grunt he lifted him, stepped down backwards on to the courtyard stones and carried him quickly into the house.

The woman shut the door. 'Sweet heaven,' she said. 'Can you bring him up the stairs?'

'If you don't mind my boots,' he said.

The woman went first, the lamplight washing over paintings of horses, men, land. Behind the postilion came a dog, a hunting animal of some type, with a long snout and slender legs. He didn't hear it, it came so quietly.

At the top of the stairs he paused to find his breath, then followed the woman down a panelled corridor to a panelled door and past the door into a bedchamber, the chill of a room that had passed all winter unvisited and fireless.

'On there,' she said, nodding to the bed. Then, more to herself, added, 'If I had known. If I had been told. If I had been told *something* . . .'

She stood beside the postilion. By the light of the lamp they both looked down, silently, at the man on the bed. The woman moved the lamp down the length of his body. 'Those aren't his clothes,' she said.

'No?'

A brown civilian coat that had once belonged to a bigger man. A waistcoat that looked to have been cut from a blanket. Grey trousers patched with all sorts, with squares of leather and brown fustian and a dark material – red? – that might be oilcloth. Both his feet were wound with strips of cloth.

'Where are his boots?' she asked.

'He is as I had him from the Swans. No boots and no hat.'

'No bags?'

'One. A small one. Down in the cab.'

She looked at the postilion, took proper notice of him for the first time. He wasn't from the village or the next village or the next, though she might have seen him somewhere, going

about his work. A thin face touched by weather and the strong drink all men in his trade needed and relished. But there was a keenness there, a kindness too, that put her in mind of the preacher she had seen riding past the house the end of last year's apple picking, one of the new sort who spoke in the open air to miners and field labourers and servants. Even in Radstock.

'The landlord,' said the postilion, 'told me he had come up from the coast the day before. From Portsmouth.'

'Portsmouth?'

'That's what he said. And that there were soldiers back from Spain, some without eyes or legs, just lying in the streets.'

'Sweet mercy,' she said. 'But not the officers, surely?'

'He didn't say.'

'Well, those are not his clothes,' she said. 'I know all his clothes.'

'You keep house here, I suppose.'

'I do,' she said. 'An empty house.'

She took the blanket off her shoulders and folded it over the man. She had on a gown of faded blue stuff and under that the white of her shift. The postilion had to be paid and she went down to the scullery where she had a locked box behind the brewing tubs. She took the coins out to him. He thanked her and went out to the cab to fetch the man's bag, a knapsack.

'Nothing more?' she asked.

'Nothing,' he said.

They stood at the door. The night now was breezy but dry, and where the clouds had broken there was a washed sky busy with stars. He wished her luck. She nodded and closed the door, put the bolts over. He went to his horses, rubbed their foreheads and led them to the gate and on to the road.

'Odd,' he said, speaking into the ear of the nearest horse. 'An odd night. Carrying some dying soldier back to an empty house.'



The tall-case clock in the hall said just past two in the morning and showed, on the tip of a strip of bent metal, the face of a dreaming moon. She looked up the stairs (the postilion's mud still wet on the carpet), then went through to the kitchen. The fire there was easy enough to excite. She swung the kettle over it, then carried a scuttle of glowing coals up to the room where the man lay in utter darkness. She tipped the coals into the grate, went down again for kindling and fresh coal and two candles. When she came back she laid the kindling on the live coals, lit the candles from the flames and put small pieces of fresh coal on the fire. The room would take hours to become properly warm but the fire's glow encouraged her and she hurried down to the kitchen again. The water in the kettle was hot and she half filled an earthenware mug with it, added a good measure of brandy, put a horn spoon in her apron pocket. The dog was with her, had followed her on each journey, up and down.

She sat on the edge of the bed. She needed to catch up with herself, to breathe, to understand what the night had brought her and might bring her yet. She tugged the pillow down towards the man's shoulders so that his head would be raised a little, filled the horn spoon with brandy and water, tasted it herself to know the heat of it, and carefully tipped a little between his lips. Most of it spilled down his chin but some went in, a few drops. Almost immediately he opened his eyes. He stared at her in a way that

made her grateful when he closed them again. 'It's Nell,' she said. She had no idea if he had known her or not, if he had been truly awake. 'You are in your own bed,' she said. 'You are home now.'

She fed him more of the mixture until it seemed to her he scowled and she put the spoon back in her pocket. She spent a few minutes working with the fire, then went back to the kitchen to fill a basin with warm water. She would have to wash him. He stank. Sickroom smells, yet it seemed more than that, as if he had brought with him a gust from the workhouse. He would have lice on him, that was certain. She would need a good razor because a sharp blade was the surest way to be rid of lice. She wondered if he might have his own razor in the knapsack but it had seemed to contain so little. She would look for one of his father's. There would be one in a drawer somewhere, in the old room. Can an unused razor lose its edge? She did not think so.

She unwrapped his feet. Much of the skin from the soles seemed to have gone. She had to peel away the cloth with infinite care to keep herself from removing what was left. She washed them, patted them dry, then fetched her sewing scissors and cut up the legs of his trousers. She smoothed and sopped, cleaned the very white skin of his thighs, cleaned between his legs, dabbed the slightly darker skin of his cock (thought how it had, poor piece, a stunned look to it, like something – a glove – flung down and forgotten).

The shirt, she decided, was his, the only thing of all. She imagined she recognised the stitching – her own – but it was stained beyond any scrubbing and she cut it off too, dropping strips of material by her feet, a pile of rags she would burn on the kitchen fire until they were ashes and then nothing.

She washed his chest. He had lost a stone in weight or more than that, but it was still a soldier's chest and when she flattened

her palm over his heart she could feel the heat of it and for the first time since he was carried into the house she did not fear for his life.

His face she washed last of all. The lugs of his ears, the tender skin around the closed eyes, his brow, his lips. The whiskers and moustaches he wore when he left (Lord, the trimming, the rubbing-in of ointments!) had, at some point, been removed, but he had a week's growth of beard on him, the hair on his chin looking younger than the hair on his head, no threads of grey in it. She leaned back from him hoping to see the boy's face in the man's, the face she had seen when she first came into service with the family, but she could not, and knew that whatever had happened to him between the June day last summer when he left and this February night, it had taken with it the last of his youth.

She fetched a second blanket to lay over him. The warmth of the fire was creeping closer to the bed but had not yet reached it. The dog was sprawled on the rug, belly to the flames. She put on more coals, snuffed one of the candles. She could see out the rest of the night in the armchair by the fire, but the moment she sat she was restless again and went back to the bed. She held her hand by his mouth, felt the come and go of his breath. Was he easier, quieter? It seemed to her his breath came more slowly and she could not decide if this was good or not. As soon as Tom came up with the milk she would send him for the doctor. She could not have the responsibility just on herself. And doctors were not entirely useless, not all of them, always. They had their tricks.

She fussed, adjusted his blankets, his pillows, then told herself to cease, to have done. How could he sleep unless she let him be? She stepped away and crossed to the old linen press opposite the end of the bed. She had set down the knapsack there and now, for

the first time, she thought to examine it. Like the clothes he had arrived in, the pack was not his own. Officers did not have packs like this. This was to be worn on a private soldier's back. She had seen such packs often enough when the recruiting parties came through, though this one had the look of something raked out of a fire. Scorched, filthy. Black with tar or grease, the world's filth. And *this* was what he had come back with? This and nothing besides?

She had in her head a picture – vivid, detailed – of all his kit spread over the bed, over half the floor. Such things! And the expense! The boots alone were more than twenty pounds. She had found the receipt under the bed once he'd gone – George Hoby, Bootmaker of Piccadilly. Six shirts she had sewn herself. Six black neckties, twelve pairs of worsted half-stockings, two sets of overalls, four white waistcoats. A blue pelisse – blue as you might dream of blue – with a fur-lined collar he told her was from the pelt of a wolf. And then the rest – the pocket handkerchiefs, pillowcases, spare cuffs, spare collars, spare buttons. Not that all of it was new. He had been with the regiment three years, bought his commission the autumn after his father died, but he had not been on campaign before and had been free with money he perhaps did not have. The spyglass! The spyglass was new. He was pleased with it and had taken it from its leather case and said come over here, Nell, come to the window, and he had held it to her eye and after some fiddling with the lens she had seen, large as life, a farmer (she knew him) swaying down Water Lane on his mare, babbling to himself and scratching his hindquarters and not the least idea he was watched. It had made her laugh but made her uneasy too. Was that how God watched us? And if so, what must He think of us, seeing everything?

She moved the pack on to the floor and sat in its place on the press. She undid the straps, pulled them through the buckles, laid back the flap. She paused, then reached inside. The first thing she pulled out was a tin mug, dented and smoke-blackened as though used as a little saucepan. She set it on the floor next to the pack. Next out was two inches of tallow candle, then a curry comb, a clasp knife with a broken blade, and a lump of something the size of a walnut and hard as a walnut which, examined more closely, she decided was bread, very old bread. The dog had drifted over to her. She held the lump to his nose. He sniffed it, touched it with the tip of his tongue, looked up at her. 'Yes,' she said. 'And we'll burn this too.'

Last of all was the object that gave the pack what weight it had. A parcel wrapped in the same dull red oilskin that had been used to patch his trousers. She set it on her lap and carefully unwound the oilskin until it hung in red pleats down to her slippers. She guessed what it was before she saw it. Smooth wood, steel, a fold of scratched brass at the base of the handle. This alone, it seemed, had returned much as it had gone, the wood gleaming like the wood of the tables downstairs she circled beeswax into (did so still, despite no one ever sitting at them). Was it the oil in the cloth? Was that why he had chosen it? An oily swaddling that would feed what it held?

On the mechanism, below the hammer, was the stamp of a crown, and below the crown a G and another letter she was less sure of. There was no flint in the jaws of the hammer. She turned it, this way and that. She raised it. It weighed in her hand like a skillet. She had never fired a gun in her life and had only touched them to tidy them away, those mornings they came back from duck shooting mad for their breakfasts and propped the fowling pieces in the hall like walking sticks. But this was not a hunting gun. Its character was entirely different.

She saw then – a little thrill of horror – that she was pointing the pistol at the bed, at the man in the bed, and she quickly lowered it and laid it across her knees again, shook her head. What would it be to shoot this at someone? To put a ball the size of a quail's egg through another man's chest or head? Was that what the beautiful clothes were for? The boots, the fur collars? And she found herself hoping that he had not done it. That he had ridden and drilled and paraded with his men but had never shattered some poor stranger with this thing.

She wrapped it again in the cloth, settled it in the bottom of the pack, put back the mug and the comb and the candle, then stood, opened the lid of the press and settled the pack inside. One darkness swallowing another.

The doctor came in the afternoon. In places the mud on the road was a foot deep. The horse's black haunches were starred with it, and there were splashes right up to the waist of the doctor's horse-coat. At least the rain had held off; he would not have to shift about for half a day in damp clothes. This last winter he had noted the stiffening of his joints, pain at times in both knees, in the deep places of his hips. His wife rubbed him with embrocation, the same stuff they used on the horses, until the pair of them stank like stable hands. But a doctor who would not ride had better have a fancy practice in Bath or the Hotwells. Out here he would starve.

He came to the ridge above the village and looked down into the vale where the fields were bright with standing water. From

here you could see for miles: farmland, woods, a glimpse of the river, brown between vivid green banks. And now that he could spy the roof of the church (grey and mossy green, like a stepping stone you might use to cross this waterlogged land) he turned his thoughts to his patient, to young Lacroix, back from the war.

He had treated his father for years – for rheumatics, lockjaw, gout. Mostly for melancholy. The boy and his sisters he had seen or heard without taking much notice of them, though he remembered looking in at the younger girl when she had scarlatina. As for the mother, he had not met her, did not think she had got much beyond her twenty-fifth year. His business had been with Lacroix (*old* Lacroix he should perhaps call him now), and once medical matters were out the way they had liked to sit together talking farming or philosophy but mostly speaking of their collections, for they were both among that portion of mankind who gather and hoard the things that delight them. Moths and beetles for the doctor; village music and village songs for Lacroix. Sometimes he would bring his patient a beetle to look at, something jewelled, the size of a fingernail, carried in an old snuff box. In return, Lacroix would open one of his books, tall like ledgers, where he wrote down what the old men and women of the parish sang for him. His own singing voice was only middling but the doctor encouraged him, if only because a man cannot die of much while he is singing, and even if he sheds tears it is better to have them out and riding on music than he should sit staring dryly at the floor.

And now he would see the son and perhaps hear something about the war, news the papers didn't have and wouldn't have for weeks. The whole country feeding on rumour! Half the people wild for a fight, half wanting peace at almost any price. Militias made up of clerks and apprentices and commanded by whoever was willing to purchase the uniforms. The notion that the heroes

of Shepton Mallet might stop the army that crushed the Austrians and Russians at Austerlitz had long since ceased to be entirely funny. There were reports of hunger in the cities, the kind that had not been known in a generation. And from the north country came stories of men who dressed as women and burned down the very places where they were employed . . .

He tapped the horse with the heels of his boots. 'Go on, Ben,' he said. 'Let us go down and have our guinea.'

Until he was halfway up the stairs he could not remember the housekeeper's name, then it came to him and he said, 'It must have given you quite a shock, Nelly, woken out of your sleep like that. He has spoken to you at all?'

'Nothing,' she said. 'He has barely opened his eyes. If he was sitting up and talking I should not have sent for you.'

The room she led him to was not one he had seen before. Plain, comfortable, square like the house itself, a door at the far side to what was presumably a dressing room. One large window looking south. The doctor stood with the housekeeper at the side of the bed.

'He is John, is he not?'

'Yes,' she said.

'John? John? It is Dr Forbes. I have come on a visit to see you . . . Hmm. *Nihil dicit*. Well, he is dormant. He is deeply asleep. A little flushed. Some fever. A low fever. I shall listen to his heart, Nelly.'

That morning, with Tom's help, the housekeeper had got him into a nightshirt and under the covers. The doctor now drew down the covers and undid the ties at the neck of the shirt. From his bag he took a short listening trumpet. It was made of tin and he had had it for many years.

He listened for nearly half a minute then stood straight again, wincing and touching his back. 'I thought at first I heard something. Some obstruction. But no, I believe it is strong enough. What is his age?'

'He turned thirty-one the week before he went.'

'And that was?'

'Last June.'

'And he has been in Spain or Portugal all this while?'

'He went first to his sister's in Bristol.'

'I thought she married a farmer in Devonshire. Or was it Dorset?'

'I mean his younger sister. Mrs Lucy Swann. Her husband is something with the ships.'

'He is at sea?'

'No. But he has business with them. The ships and the captains.'

'It's a pretty name, Lucy Swann.' The doctor had moved to the bottom of the bed. He found himself a chair and sat down to examine the man's feet. 'She has children?'

'She has the twins. They are five now though I have not seen them in more than a year.'

'And John here was with our cavalry?'

'He was. He is, I suppose.' She told the doctor the regiment. She could, had she wished, have told him many interesting things about the regiment. The name of the colonel. The name of the colonel's horse.

'It would appear,' said the doctor, touching Lacroix's feet with a little wooden stick he had suddenly in his hand, 'that our cavalry were walking too. You do not get such wounds on the back of a horse. Do you have brimstone in the house? I will send you some. Make a solution with warm water and wash his feet with it three times a day. Has he opened his bowels?'

She shook her head.

'I will also send you canella bark. Have him sit up as soon as he is able. I do not like a patient to lie prone longer than is necessary.' He began to feel around Lacroix's neck and throat.

'The one who brought him here,' said the housekeeper, 'was told there were soldiers sleeping out on the street at Portsmouth. Sleeping rough in the street. Some without eyes or legs.'

'Yes?'

She shrugged. 'It's what he said.'

'Well, we must wait for John to tell us. When he is up to it. There will be news, Nelly, though I fear it will not be the sort we wish for. None of this' – he nodded to the bed – 'has the look of victory.'

He was done. He closed his bag. The housekeeper went with him into the corridor. Just before they reached the top of the stairs the doctor stopped at a painting, much newer than the others, a figure in a close blue jacket, a fur hat under one arm, the hand of his other arm holding a scroll. Brown whiskers, brown moustache. The pose (there was a pillar in the background, and foliage of the kind they must teach young artists to paint in the academies) was languorous, not really martial, almost hesitant, as if the scroll contained unwelcome news. Inevitable but unwelcome.

'They all have them done before they go,' said the housekeeper. 'Some man comes into the barracks and does five in a week. I suppose he only changes the faces.'

They walked down the stairs together. Flat afternoon light in the hall.

'I seem to remember,' began the doctor, into whose mind had come, quite unbidden, the image of old Lacroix's face the last time he had seen it, his last call, the bones of his jaw fragile like

the parts of a bird, grey wisps of unshaved beard, eyes shut, the lids large and dark, 'that John was a music scholar at one time. Before the army. Isn't that so, Nelly? Or have I imagined it?'

Each day she bathed his feet with the solution of brimstone. She also smeared the soles with honey, which she knew to be good for wounds.

She fed him broths from the pursed china lips of a sickroom cup. When he was better able to manage she gave him bowls of creamy milk from the half-pail Tom collected each day from the field girls. He spoke only in whispers. One time he asked her the day of the week – he had perhaps heard the cranky tolling of the church bell. Another time he said, 'I do not want people to know I am here,' and not wishing to vex him she said she would keep it a secret though she supposed most in the village already knew.

He liked the dog being with him. More than once she came into the room to find the dog standing by the bed, the man's hand settled on the nap of its skull, the dog perfectly still, the man himself apparently sleeping.

She did not send for the doctor again. She did not think she needed him. She considered asking Tom to shave off the man's beard (he knew, after all, how to shear a sheep, a man should be simple) but in the end she did it herself, brown curls floating in the scum of the basin, until he was as smooth and plain-faced as in the days before he bought his commission.

She emptied the chamber pot. She cut his nails.

A week went by. The weather was cold and clear. Snowdrops stood in clumps beside the pillars of the gate. He was sitting up to eat now and eating solid food – eggs, bread, slices of cold pork. Finally – nine days after arriving at the house – he climbed out of bed, sat there a while, pale and breathless, then said, 'I'll need some clothes, Nell.'

She fetched things from his dressing room. Salt-and-pepper trousers, a moleskin waistcoat, a quilted housecoat that had belonged to his father and that she had managed to keep the moths away from with little linen bags of lavender in the pockets. He dressed in front of her and tottered as he put on his trousers so that she had to steady him. She pushed the armchair closer to the fire, and later brought up a folding table, an old card table, which she spread with a cloth and served his meals on. She chattered to him, asked him harmless questions – about his health, about what he wished to eat, how he had slept, if the room was cold at night. Sometimes these questions went unanswered and she began to notice this happened most commonly when she spoke without his looking at her. She stood behind him one afternoon, behind the armchair, and spoke his name, softly at first, then louder. At the fourth attempt he turned to her, looked up. It might improve, she thought, in time. It might recover with his strength.

As for the news the doctor had anticipated, it did not come from John Lacroix but from the brush seller, a pedlar who criss-crossed the county like some industrious insect and who had called at the house for years. He told the housekeeper (as he laid out his brushes like pieces of best porcelain along the kitchen table) that the army had been chased out of Spain, that there had been a battle at a place whose name he could not recall for the moment and that the British general had been killed by a cannonball that took off his

shoulder. What was left of the army, which was little enough, the sweepings, had escaped in ships, though at least one of these had foundered in a storm, perhaps others.

The following Sunday the parson read them pieces out of his newspaper. It was a dark morning, the church dark, and he held the paper so close to the candles in the sconce beside the pulpit it seemed certain it must catch fire, as once before – the news of Admiral Nelson's death – it had, flying out of his hands, then swooping above the congregation, a small fiery angel that settled at last beside the font and was stamped on.

The army, he read, had retreated over the mountains of northern Spain, the enemy in close pursuit. There was snow, ice, very little food. The Spanish, defeated in battle and themselves in great need, were unable to offer any assistance. At the coast, by the port of Corunna, the army had fought a desperate battle in which the gallant commander, Sir John Moore, was wounded and carried from the field but could not be saved. That so many had escaped onto the waiting transports was both a testament to the valour and ingenuity of British arms and an example of providence at its most benign ('By providence,' said the parson, looking up at them, 'they mean to say the will of the Almighty'). There was a list of regiments – the housekeeper leaned forward in her pew, nodding when she heard the one she was listening for. There was no list of the dead, only the general himself. They prayed for the repose of his soul, for the king and his ministers. They prayed that God would not test them beyond what they could endure.

About all this, Lacroix remained silent. He sat by the fire. He read books he collected from his father's study, read them or glanced into them. A pile of them grew by the side of the armchair. She did not know what they were but was pleased his feet were healed enough for him to get about the house.

He asked her one morning to eat with him. He said he did not want to eat alone. He smiled at her – the first smile she could remember seeing since his return – and at two o'clock she brought up food for both of them and they ate across the card table from each other. She found it awkward at first. She had not eaten with him since he was a boy when he and his sisters were sometimes sent to have their suppers in the kitchen, but it became easier and she started to enjoy it. During the meals he would say things, remarks broken free from some chain of private thought. He asked her one time if she had ever eaten a fig, which she had not. She knew that the duke (who owned the village) had a fig tree in a heated room in his house but she had not eaten one, nor even seen one other than in a picture.

'We picked them from the saddle,' he said. 'We leaned into the trees and picked them as we passed. Oranges too.'

The next time they ate together he asked if she would find a newspaper for him. She had wondered when he might make such a request, when he would want to look out further than the room, the house (no spyglass now) and she knew where she would go. Not to the parson, who would make a great show of being disturbed, but to a farmer called Nicholls who had taught himself to read as a young man and now had a modest library of his own. His farm was a mile off and she walked through a wind scented with snow. When she arrived at the farm she found one of the Nicholls' boys standing with a pail in the midst of a crowd of pigs. He pointed with his chin to the house where she found the farmer drinking tea and taking his ease at a table that once, perhaps, had been a door.

'I am,' said the farmer, holding up a volume about the size and thickness of an eating apple, 'reading the words of a man who walks all over the country.'

'He must know things then,' said the housekeeper.

'It could be,' said the farmer, 'that a man standing still knows just as much and will have his boots less worn. The world will pass through him.'

She asked if he had a paper and he called to his wife to ask if she had seen the *Examiner*, then found it himself, underneath a sleeping cat. When he gave it to the housekeeper it was still warm.

'For John Lacroix, I suppose.'

'It is,' she said.

'Has he had enough of fighting?' asked the farmer.

'I can't say,' said the housekeeper. 'He has not said one way or the other.'

'There's a great many young men in a great hurry to die,' said the farmer. His middle son had taken the bounty and was serving in America.

'There's a great many as are doing their duty,' said the housekeeper. She respected the farmer but she was not afraid of him.

'Strange duty killing men whose names you do not know.'

'Would it be better,' asked the housekeeper – it was, in fact, a question – 'to know their names?'

'Knights used to know each other's names. *I* used to know the name of every man at market. Now I know half at best.'

'You live in your books,' she said.

He nodded and took up the book again, as if she had reminded him. 'It may be,' he said, as she turned to leave, 'he'll go back to music. John Lacroix. I think that it suited him. Did it not? Music?'

When she knocked at the bedroom door there was no answer. She thought he might not have heard her and she opened the door, slowly. He was lying on top of the bed, fully clothed. She

was alarmed for a moment; there was something in his pose, his face turned to the side, one arm flung out across the bed, but going closer she heard the slow tiding of his breath and was easy again. She wanted to put a blanket over him but thought even a light touch might rouse him. She left the newspaper on the table, put coal on the fire (lifting, for quiet's sake, the nuggets from the scuttle), wiped her fingers on her apron and crept out of the room.

She saw him next when she brought up his supper. It was a pie she had made from a pair of pheasants that had been hanging all week from a peg in the cool of the scullery. He was standing by the window. The newspaper was lying open on the rug beside the armchair.

'I'll go out tomorrow,' he said.

'You feel strong enough?' she asked, then seeing he had not heard her, said, 'Your feet are healed then?'

He shrugged. He wanted to know who she had fetched the paper from and when she told him he asked what the farmer had said. He knew Farmer Nicholls and knew he would have said something.

'He asked,' said the housekeeper, 'if you had finished with fighting.'

'With fighting?' He looked for a moment as if he might laugh. 'I have lost my sword, Nell. My uniform. My boots.'

'Yes,' she said, nodding as though it all made sense to her.

'My horse too. Poor Ruffian. You remember him.' He turned to look out of the window. She did not think he could see anything out there. Perhaps a light in the village or the glow of a charcoal burner's fire in the woods. Most likely he saw only the shadow of his own face in the glass. 'At Corunna we did not embark more than twenty. The war was very hard on horses, Nell.'

She waited. Now, she thought, he might be ready to speak of it all. Horses, men, ships. The mountains they had crossed. The killing of the general. All of it. She waited but he said nothing else, only went on looking out of the window, letting the silence grow between them until she was ashamed of her curiosity and wished only that he would turn back, sit with her and eat.

He went out walking very early. It was barely light. From the kitchen she heard his boots on the stairs and a single joyous bark from the dog. By the time she had put on a cap and slippers and reached the hall he was already out on the drive. Through the narrow window beside the door she saw the dog dancing around him as he tightened his scarf and settled the brim of his hat. He had a stick with him, one of the ten or twelve that leaned against the panels in a corner of the hall, blackthorns and ash. She tapped on the glass – she would give him some breakfast to take with him – but though the dog heard her the man did not and walked out of her sight towards the gate at the side of the house that would lead him through the garden and then to the fields.

He had been gone more than two hours when Tom arrived, snow on his shoulders. He had spent the night with the hens waiting for a fox that did not come. She heated cider for him and gave him the last of the pheasant pie. She told him about the man, his setting off without a bite in his pockets, his first time out of the house. And now snow!

'But what can befall him?' said Tom. She made a face and he said it again. 'What can befall him, Nell? He knows his way.'

He drank his cider, ate the pie. It was good to see him take such pleasure in the things she gave. He was her friend, unmarried, more or less her own age. There was a time – a season – a

few years back, when they might have made more of each other but the moment had passed. Or perhaps it had not, not quite. She liked to think a sensible woman became more valuable with the passage of time. And she felt strong.

'What is he going to do with himself now he's here?' asked Tom.

'He must make his life again,' she said. It was a phrase that had come to her the previous night or the night before. Those moments when words seep out of silence. 'There's the house. The land . . .'

'What's left of it,' said Tom. He had made his views plain to her before on the matter of selling land to buy a commission and pay mess bills.

'He might find a wife,' she said.

'A wife?'

'Why not? He is not old.'

'There's Widow Simpson,' said Tom.

'She's near sixty!'

'There's Widow Coombes.'

'It does not have to be a widow, Tom.'

He nodded. On a forefinger he collected the crumbs from the pie. The snow was heavier but fell unhurried, brushing the kitchen window, settling on the tops of the stone pillars, on the boughs of the ash trees across the lane.

'Has he said any more about the battle?'

'What battle?' she asked.

'Where the general was killed.'

'I do not even know he was in the battle.'

'No?'

'It's more than I know.'

'Must have done something.'

'Says you,' she said. She looked at him, one-eyed, as a blackbird looks at a worm. They grinned at each other.

'What *does* he say then?'

She shrugged. 'He asked if I had eaten a fig.'

'And have you?'

'I have not,' she said.

'Have you even seen one, Nell?'

'What? A fig?'

'Yes.'

'Why should I want to see a fig?' She was laughing now, light-headed.

'Well, I have seen one,' said Tom. 'But I didn't eat it.'

'Who did then?'

'I think it was Briffit.'

'Briffit!' For a moment she let herself imagine it, Briffit the pig-killer eating a fig! Ugly-face Briffit! Her eyes were tight shut. Tears of laughter spilled down her cheeks. He could kiss me now, she thought and be done with it. Then she sobered and opened her eyes. She looked to the window.

'You would go and look for him, Tom, if he was not back in an hour?'

'I will go if you wish me to.'

'He has the dog with him.'

'That's good.'

'He said the war was very hard on horses.'

'On horses? Yes. I believe it.'

He came back before anyone needed to search for him. He came in trailing the cold, his face very white. He was shaking slightly. When she said she would bring him up some hot milk and brandy he nodded, went up the stairs, paused halfway, then went on, as

if with the last of his strength. She made his drink so quickly she scalded her hand. In the room he was sitting in the armchair with his eyes shut. The dog looked pleased with itself. There was mud in its fur. It smelled of the river.

She woke him and made him take a mouthful of the drink. Then she got his gaiters off and his boots, stoked the fire and left him to sleep. She went outside and pressed her scalded hand in the snow. The fall was very light now. A few flakes settled on her shoulders, the linen of her cap. She thought of the widows Tom had mentioned, and in particular the Widow Coombes who had an interest in a quarry, and only one child, a girl of ten or thereabouts who hardly spoke a word. If they married – and there was nothing unpleasant about Widow Coombes, nothing at all – the house could come to life again. She would cook for a family, and the widow's money could buy back the fields. There would be visitors, lights in the windows. They would go to church on a Sunday, sit in the old box pew. The front of the box still had the Lacroix arms on it, though so faint now the griffin might almost be anything – a fox, a hare, a hare on its hind legs. But a man could paint it back in a day – a dab of blue, a dab of gold. It only needed the giving of an order. All any of it needed was a little attention, a stirring-up.

But would the widow like him? And did he have any interest in a wife? She did not believe he had had much to do with women in the past. She could only remember one or two whose names had been mentioned to her. An Amelia somebody in Blandford when he rode with the hunt there. A Miss Catherine in Bath he went to the concerts with. Though surely there had been others she knew nothing about. He had, after all, been a soldier, and all the songs could not be wrong.

She straightened herself, examined her hand, the pink half-moon of the burn. Then she stood a while in the odd grey light

of the snow, looking at the soft confusion of footprints by the door of the house.

It snowed off and on for a week, froze for a few days then began to thaw. Where the snow melted there were vivid green shoots below. The ruts in the road softened to mud again.

Lacroix left his room more frequently and would startle her, sometimes appearing in parts of the house where she was not expecting him, passages that never saw more than a glimmer of daylight, his mother's former dressing room (bitter cold in there), the steps up to the attic. From the attic, if you chose, you could get on to the roof, sit between chimney pots and see for miles.

He walked out most days with the dog, always – so far as she knew – keeping to the cross-country paths where he might meet a herdsman or a woodsman or a pedlar but no one else, no one of any standing.

Sometimes, outside his door with a tray in her hands, she heard him speak to himself. His deafness made him speak louder and what she heard frightened her. It was as if he had a secret visitor, some old intimate whose company was no longer welcome, who troubled him and seemed, with silences, to get the better of him.

Once when she came in she thought he had been weeping. He kept his face away from her and she said nothing. It was not her place to comfort him, not directly.

In body, however, he was much recovered. The body has its own rules. His old clothes began to fit him again; his hair had grown to the tops of his shoulders; most of the shadow had gone from around his eyes. When she saw him set out on his walks his stride was what she remembered it being in the days before, or near enough.

A letter came. To *Captain John Lacroix Esq.* She carried it up. Later she thought she saw part of it – a charred corner with a

sweep of ink – at the edge of the fire. He did not mention it. She did not ask. Something, she thought, needs to happen. We cannot go on like this. If she herself could write she might send a note to one of his sisters, to Lucy, who had the more tender conscience when it came to family matters. But she could not write, could not read above ten or fifteen words. And what would she say? Your brother has returned from the war but in truth has not returned at all. He is home but he is lost. It would be like a letter from a madwoman.

The second week of April. It took, it seemed, a single morning to see off what was left of the winter, of pure winter. Perhaps it took no more than an hour. The housekeeper opened windows in rooms that had spent six months in stunned inward concentration, rooms where in January there were frost flowers on the inside of the glass. With the windows up on their sashes the world rolled in – cool air tipped with warmth, the noise of the rooks. A fly sunned itself at the edge of a mirror. A humble bee settled, exhausted, on a window sill.

She started heating water on the kitchen range for a wash day. She would soak things today, scrub and rinse tonight and hang in the morning. She went upstairs to collect his sheets. He was kneeling on the floor, on the rug. All around him were the old books of music that had belonged to his father. He looked up at her and for a moment his face was bright as a boy's.

'You've got them out then,' she said. The air in the room was stale. She noticed it after airing the other rooms. She went to the window and braced the heels of her palms against the bar, pushed until it shifted.

'I had a dream of them,' he said. 'Last night. And this morning I went to find them.'

'It was a spring dream,' she said. She was a countrywoman and knew perfectly well the importance of dreams.

'And look at this,' he said, holding up to her a pressed flower – a ragged purple head, a stem that had darkened from green to grey. He held it very gently. It looked as if, blown upon, it would scatter to dust.

'It's devil's-bit,' she said. 'The herbals use it.'

'I had forgotten he put flowers in the books. I have found campion, cuckoo flower, ox-eyes. But this one escapes me.'

'Devil's-bit,' she repeated, more loudly.

He nodded. 'Yes,' he said, 'but it has another name too, I think.'

She stripped the bed and took the linen down. An hour later she came back with a tray of lunch for them both and found him still on his knees with the books. He left them open on the floor and sat at the table with her. Lunch was a broth with the last of the chimney bacon. She served him. He cleared his plate and immediately spooned on more, pushed squabs of bread into the juice. The books have changed him, she thought. The music in the books, the memory of his father. She said it was good to see him eat so well.

'And drink,' he said, filling both their cups with cider. She had made the cider herself the previous autumn, the old press in the outhouse, wasps crawling over the pommy.

'It's all soldiers think about,' he said. 'Eating and drinking. Beef and beer.'

'And what did you eat,' she asked, 'when you were away?'

'Everything with garlic and oil. In Lisbon they live on fried fish. The city stinks of it.'

'They have bacon?' she asked.

'Bacon? Yes.' He paused.

She waited. She had not thought there could be anything difficult in asking about bacon.

'I saw one time,' he said, 'soldiers attack a herd of swine they found in the woods. They were so in a rage from hunger they cut pieces from them while they still lived then cooked the meat on kettle lids, though I think most barely singed it before they started to eat.'

'Mercy,' she said. 'And were they sick after?'

'I don't know. They were infantry. We were riding through. I stopped to watch them. It was amusing at first.'

'Well,' she said, 'I hope the French were just as hungry.'

'Who?'

'The French. That they were hungry also.'

'The French we thought were better served. The men believed it at least. They were always hopeful of finding something in a Frenchman's pack.'

'And how would they have Frenchmen's packs?' she asked, but understood the answer before the question was out of her mouth.

All afternoon there was a picture in her head of men in red coats running at swine and hacking at them. She had watched Briffit cut out a pig many times, knew the noise of it, knew how the blood ran. But the men in the woods . . . the sheer *wildness* of it! And it surprised her a little that she could imagine it at all, as though she, a woman of forty-three, neat in her dress, knew more about such things – wildness, savagery – than she could have guessed. As if, perhaps, everyone did.

She was worried that the new mood had been spoiled, but that night, drowsing on the chair in the kitchen, she woke to hear music in the house. It was so faint she was not sure at first what side of sleep it came from. She put on her slippers and went out

into the hall. The dog followed her and stood with her at the bottom of the stairs. Anything? Nothing. So, she had merely dreamed it. But after half a minute it started again, a little reel played stop-start, phrase by phrase, like a poem once had by heart but not, for long years, brought to mind.

He would, of course, have known where to find the fiddle. It was where he himself had left it, under the writing table in the study. His father's fiddle. *His* fiddle when he was mad for music and had a master in Wells, those days when the young men called at the house with instruments under their arms and disappeared for hours, not eating much, drinking a great deal, always playing. They even played on the roof when the mood was on them and it was a miracle none broke his neck in a fall. (A year after they came down for the last time, Tom, fixing slates, found a wine bottle full of rain.)

The fiddle would have needed tuning, and she was not sure, listening from the bottom of the stairs, if he had made all the strings as they should be, if his hearing, his damaged ears, had made it hard for him to do. She supposed it must have, but she had listened to enough village players in her time who did not trouble themselves with anything beyond the loudness of their playing and keeping the dancers' feet in time. A little sharp, a little flat, it was all music.

Then silence, a hush filled by the tick of the clock, her own breath, the dog's. Then it was back, and more confident now, freer. His fingers were warmed, he was remembering the old tricks. The tune was as familiar to her as her own face, and in the hall, where moonlight hung like a luminous dust, she moved one slippered foot, toe down, then heel down, toe then heel.

Through the week that followed he would play for an hour or two in the day, and at night, when she had settled herself in the

kitchen, he would often play for another hour. She became used to hearing him as she went about her business. Tom came into the house, smiling, and said he had heard it as he crossed the back field and it had come on him like a memory, if she knew what he meant. She said she did.

'Are we as we were, then?' he asked. He had new gaiters on, red ones, in honour of the new season.

'It would seem we are,' she said, though she did not believe it. She had been too much in the man's company to believe in any simple restoration of easier times. She would not drop her guard and knew Lacroix had not dropped his, music or no. They were waiting for something, for the moon to crash through the tiles of the roof, for old Lacroix to shoulder his way out of his grave, for the French to show up on the ridge with their plumes and what-nots. Her sleeping thinned out to scraps. She listened to owls, to spring rain that seemed to fall *inside* the house. She began to imagine her blood was not quite right, that she was spoiling for something (she who had been ill, properly ill, twice in her adult life). It was, then, not so much a surprising thing as a necessary one when a gig pulled by a pair of grey horses swung into the yard and she answered the door to a stranger, a man who, while not in uniform, she immediately recognised as a soldier.

He smiled at her, wished her a good morning. 'Captain Wood,' he said, 'to see Captain Lacroix.'

He was about the same age as Lacroix or a little younger, spoke with a big-house voice, had the side whiskers and moustache the regiment favoured and perhaps demanded. Another man stood by the heads of the horses. This, she assumed, was his servant.

'We have brought his trunk,' said the captain. 'From Spain. Now the dust has settled things have been finding their way back to us. Though I dare say he'll be surprised to see it.'

'He's out,' she said.

'Oh?'

'He took the dog out. I can't say when he'll be back.'

'But he will not walk all day, I hope?'

'No,' she said. 'No. He'll be back before dinner.'

She led him through to the drawing room. The morning sun had been coming in the window for the last two hours and the air was warm, the room scented with the soft smell of itself – wood, old fabrics, the coal-breath of the fireplace.

'We were in the Peninsula together,' he said. 'Shared billets in Lisbon. An onion loft, believe it or not.'

She nodded, her hands clasped in front of her apron.

'I wasn't with him on the road to Corunna, worse luck. Broke my arm in Salamanca and found myself back in Lisbon again. I suppose he has told you all this. Old campaigners are fond of their stories.'

'He has not been well,' she said. 'He was very bad when he came.'

'Yes?' he said. 'Well, it is not to be wondered at. I wrote to him here but heard nothing back. Perhaps he was not well enough to write.'

'I expect not,' she said.

'But he is walking now. That must be a good sign.'

'It is,' she said.

'Yet I sense you would not declare him perfectly recovered. Not yet.'

'He cannot hear quite well,' said the housekeeper. 'When he comes in you will need to speak clearly and let him see your face.'

'I wonder what that could have been,' said the captain. 'The cause of it. He has been attended by an able doctor? We have a

very good fellow at the depot. Luff. Looks after the colonel's wife. She's often indisposed.'

'He can hear well enough,' she said, 'if you speak up a little.'

Lacroix was back in less than an hour. The housekeeper met him at the door. He had already seen the carriage. She gave him his visitor's name, twice. He frowned. He was angry. Or not angry quite. He was irritable, ill at ease. She wondered if he was frightened.

She went with him to the door of the drawing room and stood aside as he went through. She expected to be told to bring something in, some refreshments, but he said nothing and shut the door behind him. She looked a while at the door then stepped closer to it. It was easy enough to hear them – the visitor speaking as she had advised him to. And it was her business, she thought, to know something of theirs. Certainly there was no one to catch her at it.

For men who had shared an onion loft, who had been in the war together, there was nothing in their voices to suggest any warmth between them, any ease of manners. Captain Wood made enquiries about Lacroix's health. Lacroix offered his assurances, though when Wood suggested there was still some way to go before he was perfectly his old self again he did not disagree. Wood mentioned a name – Clarke? – who was quite wasted away and in appearance like a man of sixty. Another, Lieutenant Vane, had lost the use of a leg and would perhaps lose the leg itself. Lacroix said he was sorry. They were quiet a moment. Wood spoke of the trunk.

'Is that why you've come?'

'You must have been eager for it?'

'Eager? I had given it up. All of it.'

'Well, now it has come back to you. You would be astonished

at what has come back to us. Even men. A pair from Broadhurst's lot sauntered in a fortnight ago. Both presumed dead or at least made prisoner. I suspect they had been drinking somewhere on the coast and simply ran out of funds. The colonel, by the way, was wondering when *you* might return?'

'Am I expected?'

'Let us say they are anxious to have all serving officers' – or did he say 'surviving'? – 'take up their duties as soon as possible. We're damn short-handed, Lacroix. They've been sending me all over the country to find people.'

'Have you found many?'

'Not enough to keep the old man happy. They also wish to hear all they can about the campaign. You know. Reliable accounts.'

'Why?'

'I imagine as we are a young regiment they are anxious to have a little history. Something to brag about.'

'And is there talk of going back?'

'It's all the talk there is. Back to Lisbon. We might have our old loft again. No doubt the rats will remember us.' He laughed, though Lacroix did not join him.

The housekeeper left to fetch glasses and a bottle of port. When she took the wine in, Captain Wood, she thought, looked relieved to see her. Lacroix poured for them both, spilling a little on the salver as he did so.

She took a mug of cider out to the soldier. He thanked her. 'Will he have to go?' she asked.

'If he can still sit a horse. They're in a funk. I had hopes of going home myself soon but home will have to do without me a while yet. Worse luck.'

She asked him where his home was.

'Four Ashes,' he said. 'In Buckinghamshire.'

It was as though he had spoken the name of his love.

When they came out of the drawing room they were high-coloured from the wine. Wood ordered the soldier to carry in the trunk. Perhaps he had imagined Lacroix had a man to take the other end but Lacroix took it himself. The trunk was a tin box ribbed with wood, and large enough for someone to curl up inside. It was battered, rusted, though seemingly intact. It was held shut by a pair of broad leather straps.

With Lacroix going first, they took it up to his room and set it on the floor by the side of the bed. Then they came down to the hall again where the officers shook hands, exchanged remarks about the road and the route.

'So we will look for you shortly,' said Wood.

'Yes,' said Lacroix.

'Something in May?'

'In what?'

'In May. A date to keep the old man happy.'

'I cannot say exactly when,' said the man. 'There are still matters . . . outstanding.'

'How about the 10th? He will expect me to tell him something.'

'Yes. Very well.'

'The 10th then. Excellent. Should give you time to find a new horse.'

They took their leave of each other. The gig – the soldier at the reins, Captain Wood starting a cigar – turned in the courtyard, turned slowly at the gate, and was gone.

The housekeeper and Lacroix stood on the steps to the house. She looked at him, the side of his face. She meant to ask him

whether he would eat now – he had not had any dinner – but asked instead if Captain Wood was a friend.

'Eh?'

'A friend.'

'Wood?'

'Yes.'

'Not of mine,' he said, and went back into the house.

That night he stayed up in the room on his own. Two candles burning – one on the mantelpiece, one by the bed. It was a clear night, the temperature dropping sharply. The fire, lit late, did little to take the chill from the air.

He was drinking brandy, pouring double mouthfuls into a glass that had somehow survived from his grandfather's time, the glass tinged green and bubbled with the air of the old century. He had gone on drinking since the bottle of port with Wood (who, in Salamanca, fell backwards off his horse after a mess dinner) but instead of the brandy dispersing him, giving him some lightness, it had concentrated him, mind and body, like an iron peg hammered into dry earth. Now and then he spoke to the air, sentences beginning 'I . . .' But they did not progress beyond a word or two.

The trunk was where they had set it down, next to the bed. He had not touched it. There was nothing in it he thought he wished to see again. He tried to remember when he had lost contact with it. Lugo? Bembibre? It had been with the baggage train but the baggage train was God knows where. Ahead of them, behind

them. It had become a common sight to see wagons pushed on to the side of the road and set alight. Nothing could be allowed to hold up the retreat, to let its pace slacken. Yet out of this – out of the chaos of it – his trunk had returned!

He looked at it, looked away, glanced back. Then, as though the effort of ignoring it was greater than any shock it might produce, he emptied his glass, placed it carefully on the mantelpiece, took the candle that was burning there, went to the trunk and began to tug at the straps. The steel catch was bent outwards – you could see where someone had slid a bar behind it, some manner of jemmy – and he assumed that anything of any value would have been taken, but when he swung up the lid the trunk looked full, quite as full as he remembered it.

On top was his blue pelisse. The spare one, the good one. He thought for a moment one of the sleeves was damaged, watermarked – then he moved and saw it was only his own shadow and that the cloth, the fur collar, the silver braiding, were almost as new. He could wear it in front of the colonel tomorrow. A light brushing perhaps, nothing more.

He started to dig. Under the pelisse was a boat cloak (that, God knows, he could have used) and beneath the cloak a pair of grey overalls, a flannel waistcoat, two of Nell's shirts. He found a mirror (broken), a pair of bronze spurs, a bar of Windsor soap still in its wrapping. He found the painted fans he had bought in Lisbon for his sisters, views of the Tagus. Then his fingers caught on a solid edge, a smooth right-angle of wood, and he took hold of it and dragged it out as if through the weeds of a pond. This, he had forgotten and he sat on the bed with it, a wooden box the size of a backgammon set, the lid and base bound with blue Russian leather. It was the writing case he had bought at the auction of a dead officer's effects (when they still had the luxury

of such occasions). Two brass hooks kept the box closed. He slid them back and lifted the lid. A silver ink bottle, two patent pens, two quills, a dozen sheets of common notepaper. Also, folded flat, a pair of green solar glasses put there at the end of the summer for safe keeping, though one of the lenses had shaken loose and would need to be fitted again.

On the inside of the lid, in gothic lettering, was the dead officer's name. *Osbert George Lovall.*

Lovall!

He had died of frenzy fever before they even left Portugal. Sick one day, worse the next, dead the third. Twenty-two or -three, pale features. His father had made a fortune in brewing. The writing case might have been a farewell gift. He could not remember what he had paid for it at the auction; more, he thought, than it was worth. Lieutenant Ward bought Lovall's saddle for a very low price and it had to be explained to him later that finding bargains was not the intention of such auctions.

He put the case on the bed and went back to the trunk. Dress gloves, a barrel sash, a forage cap, a copy of Sime's *Military Guide for Young Officers*, the margins of many pages busy with his own handwriting. At the very bottom of the trunk, the fragrant dust of a cigar. As far as he could tell the only items missing were an embroidered sword belt, his DuBois and Wheeler watch (which had, anyway, ceased to work), and the spyglass with its leather case. So, a discerning thief or a careless one. Certainly a thief in a hurry.

For a few minutes he stood over the open trunk. A drop of wax spilled from his candle and splashed on to the sleeve of the pelisse. At one time, not very long ago, he would have cursed himself for such carelessness; now he simply watched it cool and whiten. Then he swung down the lid, blew out the candle

and went to the window, leaned his forehead against the cold glass, shut his eyes.

That night he dreamed again of the Polish lancers in the snow, the dozen or so on the slope beneath the crown of the hill where they had fallen charging a Spanish artillery position. Dead horses too, their corpses mounted by crows that would not scare. Mountains soft as lace in the white light of the dusk. The crows lifting like cinders, hovering, then settling again . . .

He had had this dream five or six times since his return. It had no variation, no narrative beyond the barest, was nothing but a picture of nothing, of absence, nullity. But something else must have come to him in his sleep that night, something more useful, for when he woke, an hour or so after dawn, it seemed to him he knew exactly what he was about to do, and by the time Nell came up with his breakfast, he had, using the paper and ink in Lovall's case, almost finished a letter to his sister Lucy. It was his third attempt, the first saying things he had no right to burden her with, the next brief to the point of oddness. Finally, having burned the others, he wrote:

*Dearest Lucy,*

*You must forgive me for not having written to you sooner and so, I fear, been the cause of unnecessary anxiety. I returned from Spain in February. You will have read by now something of what happened there. I was fit for nothing when I got home and do not know how I would have managed without Nell to nurse me. I am over the worst of it now but have decided, for the sake of my health, to make a small journey – a convalescent's tour – and have settled upon the Scottish islands, believing their remoteness, the grandeur of their scenery, will work a good change in me and make me ready for the world again. I*

*have had thoughts on music too, and mean to try to collect some of the old songs of the islands and so make a little coda or addendum to Father's books. That, at least, is my scheme. I hope you will not think it a bad or an idle one. I hoped you might ask William if he has any ship on his books bound for northern ports. Glasgow? Aberdeen? (I cannot find a good map in the house but William will know what is best.) I will need very little in the way of comforts and am anxious to start as soon as is practicable.*

*Are the twins well? And you?*

*Ever affectionately,*

*John*

He read it through then read it through again. The difficulty of knowing if you are behaving correctly. The difficulty of knowing how what you say and do will appear to the others, if perhaps you have lost some common, invisible thread of sense.

He folded, sealed and addressed the letter, handed it to Nell who passed it to Tom who took it to the toll house where it would be forwarded to the Cross Keys and loaded on to the Bristol mail. The reply came in three days. Nell carried it up with his lunch. She had recognised the hand and said how nice it was to have a letter from Lucy. She said she hoped it might mean a visit would soon follow.

He broke the seal and moved to the window. There were some lines about her relief in hearing from him at last, a gentle admonishment at his leaving them all so long without knowledge of him. Some news of their sister Sarah (pregnant with her fifth), some matter about the twins (childhood illnesses). Then, near the bottom of the page, the information he was looking for. A ship (*William is making me copy this most precisely for he does not entirely believe a woman can be relied upon to be accurate in a matter*

*of business* . . .) was leaving Bristol on the 29th, bound for Glasgow. Was the 29th too soon? She was called the *Jenny*, and William undertook to speak to her master about a cabin. It was, however, likely to be a very small cabin as the *Jenny* was in no way a large or luxurious vessel!

The 29th. He looked at Nell. 'What day is it?' he asked.

'The day?'

'The date.'

She thought a moment. 'The 24th,' she said. 'Or it may be the 25th.'

He nodded. 'Nell,' he said, 'I shall be away a while. You will have the place to yourself again.'

'You are going back to the regiment? To the war?'

'I am going to see Lucy. Then I may . . . travel a while.'

'Travel?'

'You are disappointed in me, Nell.'

'I had hoped you would stay longer.'

'I will come back.'

'Are you in trouble?' she asked.

'What's that?'

'In trouble.'

He smiled at her, and for a moment rested a hand on her shoulder.

He would take only what he could carry himself. In that, at least, he would be a good soldier. He looked for a suitable bag, something stout, not too large, and found, in his father's dressing room, a leather holdall about the size of a hollowed dog-fox. Then, in the cupboard behind the steps to the attic, he pulled out another bag, slightly smaller, that had his mother's initials on it, and inside, in the empty leathery whiff of it, a copy of *Pilgrim's Progress*.

He took the bags to his room, opened them wide – two old mouths, gaping – then sat on the bed trying to picture the islands and what he might need there. He was a man of the south country. He had never been further north than Gloucester. The islands, he assumed, were places where 'north' achieved a sort of purity, a meaning it could never quite have in Somerset. But he knew *something* of them, of what they might be, had read in papers and quarterlies the reports of travellers, men made poetical by mountains and cataracts and such. Tours in the north had become quite the thing. Albion's own savage back room, its last true wilderness. And, more usefully, he had spent a week in column with the 71st on the way to Salamanca. He had heard their language, heard some of their songs. He had liked the look of them. They had seemed to him like men who might be trusted.

First into the larger bag went his boat cloak, then two plain shirts from the trunk, a pair of blue slops, some buckskin breeches. He packed two waistcoats and two white neckerchiefs. He packed Lovall's writing case in the smaller bag together with some nankeen trousers, his razor and strop, the Windsor soap, some small-clothes.

The fiddle had its own case, and the case a leather strap he could wear across his shoulder.

What else?

One of his father's books of music? But they were too large and too fragile. He would not be able to forgive himself if one was lost or destroyed.

He looked around the room, thought of things, rejected them. Then his gaze settled on the linen press by the window. Nell had told him what she put in there, what had remained there, untouched, for all the weeks he had been back. He raised the lid, reached down and lifted the pack, recoiling a little at the smell of

it. There was only one thing he needed from it and he tugged the straps through the buckles, drew out the oilskin package and sat with it on top of the press, unwinding the oilskin until the pistol was in plain view. He moved his fingers about it in a kind of ghosting of the actions necessary for making it ready. Then he wrapped it in the cloth again and packed it in the smaller of the bags, next to Lovall's writing case. The day now was well advanced, the room swimming with late-afternoon light, and warm – warm for the first time without a fire. He sat on the bed. After a minute he lay back and stretched himself out. He did not dare to question what he was doing. Start to question it and he might find himself gazing through a tear in the skin of the world. There was no other plan. He shut his eyes, opened them. He stared up at the blue shadow of the ceiling, longing for his own boyhood until the longing shamed him.