ONE

 atch your step. Keep your wits about you; you will need them. This city I am bringing you to is vast and intricate, and you have not been here before. You may imagine, from other stories you've read, that you know it well, but those stories flattered you, welcoming you as a friend, treating you as if you belonged. The truth is that you are an alien from another time and place altogether.

When I first caught your eye and you decided to come with me, you were probably thinking you would simply arrive and make yourself at home. Now that you're actually here, the air is bitterly cold, and you find yourself being led along in complete darkness, stumbling on uneven ground, recognising nothing. Looking left and right, blinking against an icy wind, you realise you have entered an unknown street of unlit houses full of unknown people.

And yet you did not choose me blindly. Certain expectations were aroused. Let's not be coy: you were hoping I would satisfy all the desires you're too shy to name, or at least show you a good time. Now you hesitate, still holding on to me, but tempted to let me go. When you first picked me up, you didn't fully appreciate the size of me, nor did you expect I would grip you so tightly, so fast. Sleet stings your cheeks, sharp little spits of it so cold they feel hot, like fiery cinders in the wind. Your ears begin to hurt. But you've allowed yourself to be led astray, and it's too late to turn back now.

It's an ashen hour of night, blackish-grey and almost readable like undisturbed pages of burnt manuscript. You blunder forward into the haze of your own spent breath, still following me. The cobblestones beneath

your feet are wet and mucky, the air is frigid and smells of sour spirits and slowly dissolving dung. You hear muffled drunken voices from somewhere nearby, but what little you can understand doesn't sound like the carefully chosen opening speeches of a grand romantic drama; instead, you find yourself hoping to God that the voices come no closer.

The main characters in this story, with whom you want to become intimate, are nowhere near here. They aren't expecting you; you mean nothing to them. If you think they're going to get out of their warm beds and travel miles to meet you, you are mistaken.

You may wonder, then: why did I bring you here? Why this delay in meeting the people you thought you were going to meet? The answer is simple: their servants wouldn't have let you in the door.

What you lack is the right connections, and that is what I've brought you here to make: connections. A person who is worth nothing must introduce you to a person worth next-to-nothing, and that person to another, and so on and so forth until finally you can step across the threshold, almost one of the family.

That is why I've brought you here to Church Lane, St Giles: I've found just the right person for you.

I must warn you, though, that I'm introducing you at the very bottom: the lowest of the low. The opulence of Bedford Square and the British Museum may be only a few hundred yards away, but New Oxford Street runs between there and here like a river too wide to swim, and you are on the wrong side. The Prince of Wales has never, I assure you, shaken the hand of any of the residents of this street, or even nodded in passing at anyone here, nor even, under cover of night, sampled the prostitutes. For although Church Lane has more whores living in it than almost any other street in London, they are not of the calibre suitable for gentlemen. To connoisseurs, a woman is more than a carcass after all, and you can't expect them to forgive the fact that the beds here are dirty, the décor is mean, the hearths are cold and there are no cabs waiting outside.

In short, this is another world altogether, where prosperity is an exotic dream as distant as the stars. Church Lane is the sort of street where even the cats are thin and hollow-eyed for want of meat, the sort of street where men who profess to be labourers never seem to labour and so-called washerwomen rarely wash. Do-gooders can do no good here, and are sent on their way with despair in their hearts and shit on their shoes. A model lodging-

house for the deserving poor, opened with great philanthropic fanfare twenty years ago, has already fallen into the hands of disreputables, and has aged terribly. The other, more antiquated houses, despite being two or even three storeys high, exude a subterranean atmosphere, as if they have been excavated from a great pit, the decomposing archaeology of a lost civilisation. Centuries-old buildings support themselves on crutches of iron piping, their wounds and infirmities poulticed with stucco, slung with clothes-lines, patched up with rotting wood. The roofs are a crazy jumble, the upper windows cracked and black as the brickwork, and the sky above seems more solid than air, a vaulted ceiling like the glass roof of a factory or a railway station: once upon a time bright and transparent, now overcast with filth.

However, since you've arrived at ten to three in the middle of a freezing November night, you're not inclined to admire the view. Your immediate concern is how to get out of the cold and the dark, so that you can become what you'd thought you could be just by laying your hand on me: an insider.

Apart from the pale gas-light of the street-lamps at the far corners, you can't see any light in Church Lane, but that's because your eyes are accustomed to stronger signs of human wakefulness than the feeble glow of two candles behind a smutty windowpane. You come from a world where darkness is swept aside at the snap of a switch, but that is not the only balance of power that life allows. Much shakier bargains are possible.

Come up with me to the room where that feeble light is shining. Let me pull you in through the back door of this house, let me lead you through a claustrophobic corridor that smells of slowly percolating carpet and soiled linen. Let me rescue you from the cold. I know the way.

Watch your step on these stairs; some of them are rotten. I know which ones; trust me. You have come this far, why not go just a little farther? Patience is a virtue, and will be amply rewarded.

Of course – didn't I mention this? – I'm about to leave you. Yes, sadly so. But I'll leave you in good hands, excellent hands. Here, in this tiny upstairs room where the feeble light is shining, you are about to make your first connection.

She's a sweet soul; you'll like her. And if you don't, it hardly matters: as soon as she's set you on the right path, you can abandon her without fuss. In the five years since she's been making her own way in the world, she has never got within shouting distance of the sorts of ladies and

gentlemen among whom you'll be moving later; she works, lives and will certainly die in Church Lane, tethered securely to this rookery.

Like many common women, prostitutes especially, her name is Caroline, and you find her squatting over a large ceramic bowl filled with a tepid mixture of water, alum and sulphate of zinc. Using a plunger improvised from a wooden spoon and old bandage, she attempts to poison, suck out or otherwise destroy what was put inside her only minutes before by a man you've just missed meeting. As Caroline repeatedly saturates the plunger, the water becomes dirtier – a sure sign, she believes, that the man's seed is swirling around in it rather than in her.

Drying herself with the hem of her shift, she notes that her two candles are dimming; one of them is already a guttering stub. Will she light new ones?

Well, that depends on what time of night it is, and Caroline has no clock. Few people in Church Lane do. Few know what year it is, or even that eighteen and a half centuries are supposed to have passed since a Jewish troublemaker was hauled away to the gallows for disturbing the peace. This is a street where people go to sleep not at a specific hour but when the gin takes effect, or when exhaustion will permit no further violence. This is a street where people wake when the opium in their babies' sugar-water ceases to keep the little wretches under. This is a street where the weaker souls crawl into bed as soon as the sun sets and lie awake listening to the rats. This is a street reached only faintly, too faintly, by the bells of church and the trumpets of state.

Caroline's clock is the foul sky and its phosphorescent contents. The words 'three a.m.' may be meaningless to her, but she understands perfectly the moon's relationship with the houses across the street. Standing at her window, she tries for a moment to peer through the frozen grime on the panes, then twists the latch and pushes the window open. A loud snapping noise makes her fear momentarily that she may have broken the glass, but it's only the ice breaking. Little shards of it patter onto the street below.

The same wind that hardened the ice attacks Caroline's half-naked body too, eager to turn the sheen of perspiration on her pimpled breast into a sparkle of frost. She gathers the frayed collars of her loose shift into her fist and holds them tight against her throat, feeling one nipple harden against her forearm.

Outside it is almost completely dark, as the nearest street-lamp is half a dozen houses away. The cobbled paving of Church Lane is no longer white with snow, the sleet has left great gobs and trails of slush, like monstrous spills of semen, glowing yellowish in the gas-light. All else is black.

The outside world seems deserted to you, holding your breath as you stand behind her. But Caroline knows there are probably other girls like her awake, as well as various scavengers and sentinels and thieves, and a nearby pharmacist staying open in case anyone wants laudanum. There are still drunkards on the streets, dozed off in mid-song or dying of the cold, and yes, it's even possible there's still a lecherous man strolling around looking for a cheap girl.

Caroline considers getting dressed, putting on her shawl and going out to try her luck in the nearest streets. She's low on funds, having slept most of the day away and then passed up a willing prospect because she didn't like the look of him; he had a poxy air about him, she thought. She regrets letting him go now. She ought to have learned before today that it's no use waiting for the perfect man to come along.

Still, if she goes out again now, that would mean lighting another two candles, her last. The harsh weather must be considered, too: all that thrashing about in bed raises your temperature and then you go out in the cold and lose it all; a medical student once told her, as he was pulling on his trousers, that that was the way to catch pneumonia. Caroline has a healthy respect for pneumonia, although she confuses it with cholera and thinks gargling plenty of gin and bromide would give her a good chance of survival.

Of Jack the Ripper she need have no fear; it's almost fourteen years too early, and she'll have died from more or less natural causes by the time he comes along. He won't bother with St Giles, anyway. As I told you, I'm introducing you at the bottom.

A particularly nasty gust of wind makes Caroline shut the window, sealing herself once more into the box-like room she neither owns nor, properly speaking, rents. Not wanting to be a lazy slut, she tries her best to imagine walking around out there with an enigmatic look on her face; tries to conjure up a picture of an eligible customer stepping out of the darkness to call her beautiful. It doesn't seem likely.

Caroline rubs her face with handfuls of her hair, hair so thick and dark

that even the crudest men have been known to stroke it in admiration. It has a silky texture, and is warm and pleasant against her cheeks and eyelids. But when she takes her hands away she finds that one of the candles has drowned in its puddle of fat, while the other still struggles to keep its flaming head above it. The day is over, she must admit, and the day's earnings are in.

In the corner of the otherwise empty room sags the bed, a wrinkled and half-unravelled thing like a bandaged limb that has been unwisely used for a rough, dirty chore. The time has come, at last, to use this bed for sleeping. Gingerly, Caroline inserts herself between the sheets and blankets, taking care not to tear the slimy undersheet with the heels of her boots. She'll take her boots off later, when she's warmer and can face the thought of unhooking those long rows of buttons.

The remaining candle-flame drowns before she has a chance to lean over and blow it out, and Caroline rests her head back against a pillow fragrant with alcohol and foreheads.

You can come out of hiding now. Make yourself comfortable, for the room is utterly dark, and will remain that way until sunrise. You could even risk, if you wish, lying down beside Caroline, because once she's asleep she's dead to the world, and wouldn't notice you – as long as you refrained from touching.

Yes, it's all right. She's sleeping now. Lift the blankets and ease your body in. If you are a woman, it doesn't matter: women very commonly sleep together in this day and age. If you are a man, it matters even less: there have been hundreds here before you.

A while yet before dawn, with Caroline still sleeping beside you and the room barely warmer than freezing outside the blankets, you had better get out of bed.

It's not that I don't appreciate you have a long and demanding journey ahead of you, but Caroline is about to be jolted violently awake, and it's best you aren't lying right next to her at that moment.

Take this opportunity to engrave this room on your memory: its dismal size, its moisture-buckled wooden floor and candle-blackened ceiling, its smell of wax and semen and old sweat. You will need to fix it clearly in your mind, or you'll forget it once you've graduated to other, better rooms which smell of pot-pourri, roast lamb and cigar smoke; large, high-ceilinged

rooms as ornate as the patterns of their wallpaper. Listen to the faint, fidgety scufflings behind the skirting-boards, the soft, half-amused whimper of Caroline's dreams . . .

A monstrous shriek, of some huge thing of metal and wood coming to grief against stone, rouses Caroline from her sleep. She leaps out of bed in terror, throwing her sheets into the air like a flurry of wings. The shrieking grinds on for several more seconds, then gives way to the less fearsome din of a whinnying animal and human curses.

Caroline is at her window now, like almost every other resident of Church Lane. She's squinting into the gloom, excited and confused, trying to find evidence of disaster. There's none at her own doorstep, but farther along the street, almost at the lamp-lit corner, lies the wreck of a hansom cab still shuddering and splintering as the cabman cuts loose his terrified horse.

Her view hampered by dark and distance, Caroline would like to lean further out of the window, but gusts of icy wind drive her back into the room. She begins a fumbling search for her clothes, under the scattered bed-sheets, under the bed; wherever the last customer may have kicked them. (She really needs spectacles. She will never own any. They turn up in street markets from time to time, and she tries them on but, even allowing for the scratches, they're never right for her eyes.)

By the time she's back at her window, rugged up and fully roused, events have moved on remarkably quickly. A number of policemen are loitering around the wreck with lanterns. A large sack or maybe a human body is being bundled into a wagon. The cabbie is resisting invitations to climb aboard, and instead circles his upended vehicle, tugging at bits of it as if to test how much more it can possibly fall apart. His horse, placid now, stands sniffing the behinds of the two mares yoked to the police-wagon.

Within minutes, as the pale sun begins to rise over St Giles, whatever can be done has been done. The living and the dead have trundled away, leaving the wrecked cab in their wake. Splintered wheel-spokes and window-frame glass shards hang still as sculpture.

Peeping over Caroline's shoulder, you may think there's nothing more to see, but she remains hypnotised, elbows on the window-sill, shoulders still. She isn't looking at the wreck anymore; her attention has shifted to the house-fronts across the street.

There are faces at all the windows there. The silent faces of children, individually framed, or in small groups, like shop-soiled sweetmeats in a closed-down emporium. They stare down at the wreck, waiting. Then, all at once, as if by communal agreement on the number of seconds that must pass after the cabman's disappearance around the corner, the little white faces disappear.

At street level, a door swings open and two urchins run out, quick as rats. One is dressed only in his father's boots, a pair of ragged knickerbockers and a large shawl, the other runs barefoot, in a night-shirt and overcoat. Their hands and feet are brown and tough as dog's paws; their infant physiognomies ugly with misuse.

What they're after is the cab's skin and bone, and they're not shy in getting it: they attack the maimed vehicle with boyish enthusiasm. Their small hands wrench spokes from the splintered wheel and use them as chisels and jemmies. Metal edgings and ledges snap loose and are wrenched off in turn; lamps and knobs are beaten, tugged and twisted.

More children emerge from other filthy doorways, ready for their share. Those with sleeves roll them up, those without fall to work without delay. Despite their strong hands and wrinkled beetle-brows, none of them is older than eight or nine, for although every able-bodied inhabitant of Church Lane is wide awake now, it's only these younger children who can be spared to strip the cab. Everyone else is either drunk, or busy preparing for a long day's work and the long walk to where it may be had.

Soon the cab is aswarm with Undeserving Poor, all labouring to remove something of value. Practically everything is of value, the cab being an object designed for a caste many grades above theirs. Its body is made of such rare materials as iron, brass, good dry wood, leather, glass, felt, wire and rope. Even the stuffing in the seats can be sewn into a pillow much superior to a rolled-up potato sack. Without speaking, and each according to what he has in the way of tools and footwear, the children hammer and gouge, yank and kick, as the sound echoes drily in the harsh air and the framework of the hansom judders on the cobblestones.

They know their time is likely to be short, but it proves to be even shorter than expected. Scarcely more than fifteen minutes after the first urchins' assault on the wreck, a massive two-horse brewer's dray turns the corner and rumbles up the lane. It carries nothing except the cabman and three well-muscled companions.

Most of the children immediately run home with their splintery armfuls; the most brazen persist for another couple of seconds, until angry shouts of 'Clear off!' and 'Thief!' send them scurrying. By the time the dray draws up to the wreck, Church Lane is empty again, its house-fronts innocent and shadowy, its windows full of faces.

The four men alight and walk slowly around the cab, clockwise and counter-clockwise, flexing their massive hands, squaring their meaty shoulders. Then, at the cabman's signal, they lay hands on the four corners of the wreck and, with one groaning heave, load it onto the dray. It settles more or less upright, two of its wheels having been plundered.

No time is wasted scooping up the smaller fragments. The horse snorts jets of steam as it's whipped into motion, and the three helpers jump on, steadying themselves against the mangled cab. The cabman pauses only to shake his fist at the scavengers behind the windows and yell, 'This 'ere was my *life*!' and then he, too, is carted away.

His melodramatic gesture impresses nobody. To the people of Church Lane, he is a lucky man, a survivor who ought to be grateful. For, as the dray rattles off, it exposes a pattern of dark blood nestled between the cobbles, like a winding crimson weed.

From where you stand you can actually see the shiver of distaste travelling down between Caroline's shoulder-blades: she's not brave about blood, never has been. For a moment it seems likely she'll turn away from the window, but then she shudders exaggeratedly, to shake off the goose-flesh, and leans forward again.

The dray has gone, and here and there along the house-fronts doors are swinging open and figures are emerging. This time it's not children but adults – that is, those hardened souls who've passed the age of ten. The ones who have a moment to spare – the bill-poster, the scrubber, and the fellow who sells paper windmills – dawdle to examine the blood-spill; the others hurry past, wrapping shawls or scarves around their scrawny necks, swallowing hard on the last crust of breakfast. For those who work in the factories and slop-shops, lateness means instant dismissal, and for those who seek a day's 'casual' labouring, there's nothing casual about the prospect of fifty men getting turned away when the fittest have been chosen.

Caroline shudders again, this time from the chill of a distant memory. For she was one of these slaves herself once, hurrying into the grey dawn

every morning, weeping with exhaustion every night. Even nowadays, every so often when she has drunk too much and sleeps too deeply, a brute vestige of habit wakes her up in time to go to the factory. Anxious, barely conscious, she'll shove her body out of bed onto the bare floor just the way she used to. Not until she has crawled to the chair where her cotton smock ought to be hanging ready, and finds no smock there, does she remember who and what she's become, and crawl back into her warm bed.

Today, however, the accident has shocked her so wide awake that there's no point trying to get more sleep just yet. She can try again in the afternoon – indeed, she'd *better* try again then, to reduce the risk of falling asleep next to some snoring idiot tonight. A simple fuck is one thing, but let a man sleep with you just once and he thinks he can bring his dog and his pigeons.

Responsibilities, responsibilities. To get enough sleep, to remember to comb her hair, to wash after every man: these are the sorts of things she must make sure she doesn't neglect these days. Compared to the burdens she once shared with her fellow factory slaves, they aren't too bad. As for the work, well . . . it's not as dirty as the factory, nor as dangerous, nor as dull. At the cost of her immortal soul, she has earned the right to lie in on a weekday morning and get up when she damn well chooses.

Caroline stands at the window, watching Nellie Griffiths and old Mrs Mulvaney trot down the street on their way to the jam factory. Poor ugly biddies: they spend their daylight hours drudging in the scalding heat for next to nothing, then come home to drunken husbands who knock them from one wall to the other. If this is what it means to be 'upright', and Caroline is supposed to be 'fallen' . . . ! What did God make cunts for, if not to save women from donkey-work?

There is one small way, though, in which Caroline envies these women, one modest pang of nostalgia. Both Nellie and Mrs Mulvaney have children, and Caroline had a child once upon a time, and lost it, and now she'll never have another. Nor was her child an illegitimate wretch: it was born in loving wedlock, in a beautiful little village in North Yorkshire, none of which things exists in Caroline's world anymore. Maybe her blighted insides couldn't even sprout another baby, and all that flushing with alum and sulphate of zinc is as pointless as prayer.

Her child would have been eight years old now, had he lived – and indeed he might have lived, had Caroline stayed in Grassington Village.

Instead, the newly widowed Caroline chose to take her son to London, because there was no dignified work in the local town of Skipton for a woman who'd not had much schooling, and she couldn't stand living on the charity of her mother-in-law.

So, Caroline and her son boarded a train to a new life together, and instead of going to Leeds or Manchester, which she had reason to suspect were bad and dangerous places, she bought tickets to the capital of the civilised world. Pinned inside her provincial little bonnet was eight pounds, a very substantial sum of money, enough for months of food and accommodation. The thought of it ought to have comforted her, but instead she was plagued by headache all the way into London, as if the massive weight of those bank-notes was bearing down hard on her neck. She wished she could spend this fortune right away, to be rid of the fear of losing it.

Within days of arriving in the metropolis she was offered help with her dilemma. A famous dress-making firm was so impressed with her manner that it commissioned her to make waistcoats and trousers in her own home. The firm would provide her with all the necessary materials, but required the sum of five pounds as a security. When Caroline ventured the opinion that five pounds seemed a great deal to ask, the man who was engaging her agreed, and assured her that the sum was not of his choosing. No doubt the manager of the firm, his own superior, had become disillusioned by the dishonest behaviour of the folk he'd taken on in more lenient times: yards and yards of the best quality cloth stolen, hawked in street markets, only to end up in tatters on the bodies of street urchins. A chastening picture for any businessman of a generous and trusting nature, did not Caroline agree?

Caroline *did* agree, then; she was a respectable woman, her boy was no urchin, and she considered herself a citizen of that same world her employer was trying to keep safe. So, she handed him the five pounds and began her career as a manufacturess of waistcoats and trousers.

The work proved to be tolerably easy and (it seemed to her) well-paid; in some weeks she earned six shillings or more, although from this must be deducted the cost of cotton, coals for pressing, and candles. She never skimped on candles, determined not to become one of those half-blind seamstresses squinting over their work by a window at dusk; she pitied the shirt-makers eulogised in 'The Song of the Shirt' in the same way that a respectable shop-keeper might pity a ragged costermonger. Though

keenly aware of how much she'd come down in the world, she was not dissatisfied: there was enough to eat for her and her boy, their lodgings in Chitty Street were clean and neat, and Caroline, being husbandless, was free to spend her money wisely.

Then winter came and of course the child fell ill. Nursing him lost Caroline valuable time, particularly in the daylight hours, and when at last he rallied she had no choice but to engage his help.

'You must be my big brave man,' she told him, her face burning, her eyes averted towards the single candle lighting their shadowy labours. No proposal she would ever make in later years could be more shameful than this one.

And so mother and son became workmates. Propped up against Caroline's legs, the child folded and pressed the garments she had sewn. She tried to make a game of it, urging him to imagine a long line of naked, shivering gentlemen waiting for their trousers. But the work fell further and further behind and her drowsy boy fell forwards more and more often, so that in order to prevent him burning himself (or the material) with the pressing iron she had to pin the back of his shirt to her dress.

This dismal partnership didn't last very long. With dozens of waistcoats still waiting, the tugs at her skirts became so frequent it was obvious the boy was more than merely tired: he was dying.

And so Caroline went to retrieve her bond from her employer. She came away with two pounds and three shillings and a sick, impotent fury that lasted for a month.

The money lasted slightly longer than that and, with her child in marginally better health due to medical attention, Caroline found work in a sweater's den making hats, jamming squares of cloth onto steaming iron heads. All day she was handing dark, shiny, scalding hats farther along a line of women, as if passing on plates of food in an absurdly steamy kitchen. Her child (forgive this impersonality: Caroline never speaks his name anymore) spent his days locked in their squalid new lodgings with his painted ball and his Bristol toys, stewing in his sickliness and fatherless misery. He was always fractious, whimpering over small things, as if daring her to lose patience.

Then one night at the end of winter he began coughing and wheezing like a demented terrier pup. It was a night very like the one we are in now: bitter and mucky. Worried that no doctor would agree, at such an hour

and in such weather, to accompany her unpaid to where she lived, Caroline conceived a plan. Oh, she'd heard of doctors who were kind and devoted to their calling, and who would march into the slums to combat their ancient foe Disease, but in all her time in London Caroline had not met any such doctor, so she thought she'd better try deception first. She dressed in her best clothes (the bodice was made of felt stolen from the factory) and dragged her boy out into the street with her.

The plan, such as it was, was to deceive the nearest physician into believing she was new to London, and hadn't a family doctor yet, and had been all evening at the theatre, and only realised her son was ill when she returned and found the nurse frantic, and had hailed a cab immediately, and was not the sort of person to discuss money.

'Doctor won't send us away?' asked the child, scoring a bull's-eye, as always, on her worst fear.

'Walk faster,' was all she could reply.

By the time they found a house with the oval lamp lit outside, the boy was wheezing so hard that Caroline was half insane, her hands trembling with the urge to rip his little throat open and give him some air. Instead she rang the doctor's bell.

After a minute or two, a man came to the door in his night-gown, looking not at all like any doctor Caroline had met before, nor smelling like one.

'Sir,' she addressed him, doing her best to keep both the desperation and the provincial burr out of her voice. 'My son needs a doctor!'

For a moment he stared her up and down, noting her outmoded monochrome dress, the frost on her cheeks, the mud on her boots. Then he motioned her to come in, smiling and laying his broad hand on her boy's shivering shoulder as he said:

'Well now, this *is* a happy coincidence. *I* need a woman.'

Five years later, moving sleepily through her bedroom, Caroline stubs her toes on the ceramic basin and is provoked to clean up her bedroom. She transfers the stagnant contraceptive bouillon carefully into the chamber pot, watching, as she pours, the germs of another man's offspring combine with piss. She heaves the full pot onto her window-sill, and pushes the window open. There's no crack of ice this time, and the air is still. She'd like to toss the liquid into the air, but the Sanitary Inspector has been sniffing around lately, reminding everyone that this is the nineteenth

century, not the eighteenth. Threats of eviction have been made. Church Lane is infested with Irish Catholics, spiteful gossips the lot of them, and Caroline doesn't want them accusing her of soliciting cholera on top of everything else.

So, she tips the chamber-pot slowly forwards and lets the mixture trickle discreetly down the brickwork. For a while the building will look as though God relieved Himself against it, but then the problem will get solved one way or another, before the neighbours wake up – either the sun will dry it or fresh snow will rinse it.

Caroline is hungry now, a sharp belly-hunger, despite the fact that she doesn't normally wake until much, much later. She's noticed that before: if you wake up too early, you're famished, but if you wake later, you're all right again, and then later still you're famished again. Needs and desires must rise and fall during sleep, clamouring for satisfaction at the door of consciousness, then slinking away for a while. A deep thinker, that's what her husband used to call her. Too much education might have done her more harm than good.

Caroline's guts make a noise like a piglet. She laughs, and decides to give Eppie a surprise by paying an early-morning visit to The Mother's Finest. Put a smile on his ugly face and a pie in her belly.

In the cold light of day, the clothes she hastily threw on in order to see the wrecked cab don't pass muster. Rough hands have wrinkled the fabric, dirty shoes have stepped on the hems, there are even speckles of blood from the scabby shins of old Leo the dyer. Caroline strips off and starts afresh with a voluminous blue and grey striped dress and tight black bodice straight out of her wardrobe.

Getting dressed is much easier for Caroline than it is for most of the women you will meet later in this story. She has made small, cunning alterations to all her clothing. Fastenings have been shifted, in defiance of fashion, to where her hands can reach them, and each layer hides short-cuts in the layer beneath. (See? – her seamstressing skills did come in useful in the end!)

To her face and hair Caroline affords a little more attention, scrutinising the particulars in a small hand-mirror tacked upside-down to the wall. She's in fair repair for twenty-nine. A few pale scars on her forehead and chin. One black tooth that doesn't hurt a bit and is best left alone. Eyes a little bloodshot, but big and sympathetic, like those of a dog that's had

a good master. Decent lips. Eyebrows as good as anyone's. And, of course, her splendid nest of hair. With a wire brush she untangles the fringe and fluffs it out over her forehead, squaring it just above the eyes with the back of her hand. Too impatient and hungry to comb the rest, she winds it up into a pile on top of her head and pins it fast, then covers it up with an indigo hat. Her face she powders and pinks, not to conceal that she's old, ugly or corrupt in flesh, for she isn't any of these yet, but rather to brighten the pallor of her sunless existence – this for her own sake rather than for her customers.

Arranging her shawl now, smoothing down the front of her dress, she resembles a respectably well-to-do woman in a way she never could have managed when she slaved in the steam of the hat factory, suffering for her virtue. Not that an *authentic* lady could so much as fasten a garter in less than five minutes, let alone dress completely without a maid's assistance. Caroline knows very well she's a cheap imitation, but fancies herself a cheekily good one, especially considering how little effort she puts into it.

She slips out of her room, like a pretty moth emerging from a husk of dried slime. Follow discreetly after her. But you are not going anywhere very exciting yet: be patient a while longer.

On the landing and the stairs, all of last night's candles have burnt out. No new ones will be lit until the girls start bringing the men home in the afternoon, so there's not much light to see Caroline downstairs. The landing receives a lick of sunshine from her room, which she's left open to distribute the smell more evenly around the house, but the stairs, corkscrewed as they are inside a windowless stairwell, are suffocatingly gloomy. Caroline has often thought that this claustrophobic spiral is really no different from a chimney. Maybe one day the bottom-most steps will catch fire while she's on her way down and the stairwell will suck up the flames just like a chimney, the rest of the house remaining undisturbed while she and the spiral of dark stairs shoot out of the roof in a gush of smoke and cinders! Good riddance, some might say.

The first thing Caroline sees when she emerges into the light of the entrance hall is Colonel Leek seated in his wheelchair. Though he is berthed very near the foot of the stairs, he faces the front door, his back to Caroline, and she hopes that this morning he might, for once, be asleep.

'Think I'm asleep, don't you girlie?' he promptly sneers.

'No, never,' she laughs, though it's far too early in the day for her to

be a convincing liar. She squeezes past the Colonel and lets him examine her for a moment, so as not to be rude, for he never forgets an insult.

Colonel Leek is the landlady's uncle, a pot-bellied stove of a man, keeping the warmth in with overcoats, scarves and blankets, stoking up on gossip, and puffing out smoke through a stunted pipe. Concealed under all the layers, Colonel Leek still wears his military uniform complete with medals, though these have a handkerchief sewn over them to prevent them catching. In the last war he went to, the Colonel accepted a bullet in the spine in exchange for a chance to take pot-shots at mutineering Indians, and his niece has cared for him ever since, installing him as her 'toll-collector' when she opened the empty rooms of her house to prostitutes.

Colonel Leek performs his job with grim efficiency, but his true passion remains war and other outbursts of violence and disaster. When he reads his daily newspaper, happy events and proud achievements fail to capture his interest, but as soon as he comes across a calamity he cannot contain himself. It often happens that Caroline, hard at work in her room, must suddenly croon more loudly in a customer's ear to cover the noise of a hoarsely shouted recitation from downstairs, such as:

'Six thousand Tartars have invaded the Amoor Province, wrested fifteen years ago from China!'

Now the Colonel fixes his bloodshot eyes on Caroline, and whispers meaningfully: '*Some* of us don't sleep through disaster. *Some* of us knows what goes on.'

'You mean that cab this mornin'?' guesses Caroline, well accustomed to his turn of mind.

'I *saw*,' the Colonel leers, trying to raise himself up off his perennially festering rear. 'Death and damage.' He falls back on the cushions. 'But that was only the *beginning*. A small part of what's afoot. The local manifestation. But everywhere! everywhere! Disaster!'

'*Do* let us go, Colonel. I'll drop if I don't 'ave a bite to eat.'

The old man looks down at his blanketed lap as if it were a newspaper and, raising his forefinger periscopically, recites:

'Disastrous overturn of train at Bishop's Itchington. Gunpowder explosion on the Regent's Canal. Steamer gone down off the Bay of Biscay. Destruction by fire of the *Cospatrick*, half-way to New Zealand, four hundred and sixty lost, mere days ago. Think of it! These are *signs*. The whirlpool of disaster. And at the centre of it – what there, eh? What there?'

Caroline gives it a couple of seconds' thought, but she has no idea what there. Alone of the three women who use Mrs Leek's house as their lay and lodgings, she's oddly fond of the old man, but not enough to prefer his demented prophesies to a hearty breakfast.

'Goodbye, Colonel,' she calls as she swings open the door and sweeps out into the street, closing him in behind her.

Now prepare yourself. You have not much longer with Caroline before she introduces you to a person with slightly better prospects. Watch her bodice swell as she inhales deeply the air of a new day. Wait for her to plot her safe passage through Church Lane, as she notes where the dung is most densely congregated. Then watch your step as you follow her towards Arthur Street, walking briskly along the line of litter left in the wake of the cab: first the blood, then a trail of seat-stuffing and wood-splinters. Perhaps they'll lead all the way to The Mother's Finest tavern, where hot pies are served from dawn and no one is going to ask you if you knew the woman who died.

TWO

ll along the burnished footpaths of Greek Street, the shop-keepers are out already, the second wave of early risers. Of course they regard themselves as the first wave. The grim procession of slop-workers and factory drudges Caroline looked down on from her window, though it happened only a few hundred yards from here less than an hour ago, might as well have happened in another country in another age. Civilisation begins at Greek Street. Welcome to the real world.

Getting up as early as the shop-keepers do is, in their view, stoic heroism beyond the understanding of lazier mortals. Any creature scurrying about earlier than themselves must be a rodent or an insect which traps and poisons have regrettably failed to kill.

Not that they are cruel, these industrious men. Many of them are kinder souls than the people you came here to meet, those exalted leading players you're so impatient to be introduced to. It's just that the shop-keepers of Greek Street care nothing about the shadowy creatures who actually manufacture the goods they sell. The world has outgrown its quaint rural intimacies, and now it's the modern age: an order is put in for fifty cakes of Coal Tar Soap, and a few days later, a cart arrives and the order is delivered. How that soap came to exist is no question for a modern man. Everything in this world issues fully formed from the loins of a benign monster called manufacture; a never-ending stream of objects – of graded quality, of perfect uniformity – from an orifice hidden behind veils of smoke.

You may point out that the clouds of smut from the factory chimneys

of Hammersmith and Lambeth blacken all the city alike, a humbling reminder of where the cornucopia really comes from. But humility is not a trait for the modern man, and filthy air is quite good enough for breathing; its only disadvantage is the film of muck that accumulates on shop windows.

But what use is there, the shop-keepers sigh, in nostalgia for past times? The machine age has come, the world will never be clean again, but oh: what compensation!

Already they're working up a sweat, their only sweat for the day, as they labour to open their shops. They ease the tainted frost from the windows with sponges of lukewarm water and sweep the slush into the gutter with stiff brooms. Standing on their toes, stretching their arms, they strip off the shutters, panels, iron bars and stanchions that have kept their goods safe another night. All along the street, keys rattle in key-holes as each shop's ornate metal clothing is stripped away.

The men are in a hurry now, in case someone with money should come along and choose a wide-open shop over a half-open one. Passers-by are few and often queer at this hour of the morning, but all types may stray into Greek Street and there's no telling who'll spend.

An embarrassment of produce becomes available to Caroline as she walks towards The Mother's Finest; it's offered up to her in an indecent manner by the shop-keepers who, having thrown open their strongholds, now busy themselves selecting the most tempting wares to display on the footpaths outside. It's as if, having unlocked the chastity of shutters and doors, they can't see the point in maintaining any shred of modesty. Trays of books are shoved into Caroline's path, some of the volumes laid salaciously open to show off their colour plates. Stuffed manikins hold out their stitched hands, imploring Caroline to buy the clothes off their backs. Heavily curtained windows disrobe without warning.

'Morning, madam!' yelps more than one of the men as Caroline hurries by. They all know she's no lady – the mere fact that she's up at this hour makes that clear – but then they aren't exactly *gentlemen* of business either, and can't afford to scorn custom. Acutely aware how many rungs lower they are than the grand proprietors – *never* shop-keepers – of Regent Street, they'll as gladly sell their buns, boots, books or bonnets to a whore as to anyone else.

Indeed, there is an essential similarity between Caroline and the

shop-keepers of Greek Street who woo her: much of what they hope to sell is far from virgin. Here you may find books with pages made ragged by a previous owner's paper-knife; there stands furniture discarded as outmoded, still bold as brass, still serviceable, and cheap – daring anyone fallen on hard times to fall just a little farther. A nice soft landing, ladies and gents! Here are beds already slept in – by the cleanest persons on earth, sir, the very cleanest. (Or perhaps by a diseased wretch, whose corruption might yet be lurking inside the mattress. Such are the morbid fantasies of those whom bankruptcy, swindles or dissolution have brought so low that furnishing their lodgings fresh from Regent Street is no longer possible.)

In much more dubious taste still are the clothes. Not only are they all reach-me-downs (that is, made for nobody in particular) but some of them have *already been worn* – and not just once, either. The shop-keepers will, of course, deny this; they like to fancy that Petticoat Lane and the rag-and-bone shop are as far beneath them on the ladder as Regent Street is above.

But enough of these men. You're in danger of losing sight of Caroline as she walks faster, spurred on by hunger. Already you hesitate, seeing two women ahead of you, both shapely, both with black bodices, both with voluminous bows bobbing on their rumps as they trot along. What colour was Caroline's skirt? Blue and grey stripes. Catch her up. The *other* whore, whoever she is, won't introduce you to anyone worth knowing.

Caroline has almost reached her goal; she's fixed her eyes on the dangling wooden sign of The Mother's Finest, a blistered painting of a busty girl and her hideous mam. One last obstacle – a stack of newspapers skidding onto the footpath right in front of her – and she's picking up the irresistible smell of hot pies and fresh-poured beer, and pushing open the old blue door with its framed motto, *PLEASE DON'T BANG DOOR, DRUNKARDS SLEEPING.* (The publican likes a laugh, and he likes others to laugh with him. When he first put up that sign, he recited it to Caroline so often she was almost convinced he'd taught her to read. But soon enough she was confusing the please with the don't, and the drunkards with the sleeping.)

Follow Caroline inside, and you'll notice there are no sleeping drunkards here after all. The Mother's Finest is a couple of rungs above the lowest drinking-houses and, despite its waggish motto, has a policy of ejecting sots as soon as they threaten to brawl or vomit. It's a solid,

scrubbed sort of pub, all brass and poorly stained wood, with a variety of ornamental beer kegs suspended from the ceiling (despite not serving more than the one kind of beer), and a collection of coasters and bottle-tops on the wall behind the bar.

Of the forty-nine eyes in the room, only eight or ten turn to observe Caroline's entrance, for serious drinking and grumbling are the order of the day here. Those who do look at her, look just long enough to figure out who or at least *what* she is, then return to staring down into the gold froth on their bitter brown ale. By late tonight they may lust after her, but at this head-sore hour of morning the idea of paying for physical exertion lacks appeal.

It's a shabby crowd of men resting their elbows on The Mother's Finest's tables at this time of day; none of them exactly good-for-nothings, but certainly not good for much. Their coats and shirts have most of the buttons sewn on securely; the knitted scarves around their necks show signs of recent washing; and the boots on their feet are sturdy and, if not exactly shiny, no worse than dull. The majority of these men are not long out of work, and most of them are married to women who've not yet despaired of them. Caroline's presence here by no means offends or surprises them; you have a very long way to go before you set foot in the kind of establishment where only men are admitted.

''Ello, Caddie,' says the publican, raising a hairy hand glistening with beer. 'Cock wake you?'

'Never, Eppie,' says Caroline. 'The smell of your pies and ale.'

The exchange is a formality, as he's already filling a mug for her, and motioning to his wife for the pie. Of all the customers, Caroline can eat and drink on credit, because she's the only one he can trust to pay him later. What man, whose presence in a public house at this time of day trumpets his unemployed state, can claim that though he's penniless now, he'll have money tonight? Caroline, since losing her virtue, has gained respect where she needs it most.

That's not to say she's wise with money. Like most prostitutes, she spends her pay as soon as she's left alone with it. Apart from meals and rent, she buys fancy cakes, drinks, chocolates, clothes sometimes, hokey-pokey in the summer, visits to warm places in the winter – taverns, music halls, freak shows, pantomimes – anything to get her out of the cold, really. Oh yes, and she buys the ingredients for her douche, and firewood and

candles, and every Sunday a penny sparkler, a firework she has loved since she was a child, and which she lights in her room late at night like a Papist lighting a votive candle. None of these vices costs very much – not compared with a man's gambling or medicines for a child – yet Caroline never saves a shilling. A reach-me-down dress, a penny sparkler, a fancy cake, a sixpenny entertainment . . . how can such things use up so much money? There must be other expenses, but she's damned if she can remember what they are. Never mind: her income is liquid, so she's never hard up for long.

Caroline devours her pie with an unselfconscious zest she would have found difficult to tolerate in others when she was a respectable Yorkshire wife. Fork and knife are not needed for the quivering assemblage of flour, sheep ankle, ox-tail and hot gravy she cups in her palm. She chews open-mouthed, to let the cooling air in. Within minutes she's licking her own hand.

'Thanks, Eppie, that was just what I needed.' She finishes her beer, stands up and shakes pastry crumbs off her skirts. The publican's wife will sweep up after her, sour-faced. Caroline mimes a goodbye kiss and leaves.

Outside, the civilised world hasn't quite woken up yet. The shop-keepers are still laying out their wares, while thieves, bill-stickers, beggars and delivery boys look on. There are no women about except two black-shrouded flower-sellers arguing quietly over territory. The loser trundles her barrow nearer to where the dray-horses stand, her swarthy back bent almost double over her stock of dubious posies.

Caroline isn't used to being on the streets so early, and feels almost intimidated by the sheer quantity of day left to be lived through. She wonders if she should offer her body to someone, to pass the time, but she knows she probably won't bother unless the opportunity leaps into her lap. The need isn't urgent yet. She can buy candles at her leisure. Why worry about being penniless when she can earn more in twenty minutes than she used to earn in a day?

She knows it's pig-laziness and moral weakness that prevent her from saving money as she ought to. The earnings of her trade could, if she'd been frugal over the years, have filled her old bonnet to bursting with banknotes, but she's lost the knack of frugality. With no child or immortal soul left to save, the hoarding of coins in the hope of one day exchanging them

for coloured paper seems pointless. All sense of purpose, of responsibility, indeed of any imaginable future, were removed from her by the deaths of her husband and child. It was they who used to make her life a *story*; they who seemed to be giving it a beginning, a middle and an end. Nowadays, her life is more like a newspaper: aimless, up-to-date, full of meaningless events for Colonel Leek to recite when no one's paying attention. For all the use she is to Society, beyond intercepting the odd squirt of sperm that would otherwise have troubled a respectable wife, she might as well be dead. Yet she exists, and, against the odds, she is happy. In this, she has a clear advantage over the young woman you are about to meet.

'Shush?'

Caroline has paused in front of a poky, gloomy stationer's on her way back down Greek Street, because inside the shop she's caught sight of – is it really? – yes, it's Shush, or Sugar as she's known to the world at large. Even in the gloom – *especially* in the gloom – that long body is unmistakable: stick-thin, flat-chested and bony like a consumptive young man, with hands almost too big for women's gloves. Always this same first impression of Sugar: the queasy surprise of seeing what appears to be a tall, gaunt boy wreathed from neck to ankle in women's clothes; then, with the first glimpse of this odd creature's face, the realisation that this boy is female.

At the sound of her nickname, the woman turns, clutching to her dark green bodice a ream of white writing paper. There's a bosom in that bodice after all. Not enough to nourish a child perhaps, but enough to please a certain kind of man. And no one has hair quite as golden-orange as Sugar's, or skin quite as luminously pale. Her eyes alone, even if she were wrapped up like an Arabian odalisque with nothing else showing, would be enough to declare her sex. They are naked eyes, fringed with soft hair, glistening like peeled fruits. They are eyes that promise everything.

'Caddie?'

The shadowy woman raises a green glove to her brow and squints at the sunlight beaming in from the street; Caroline waves, slow to realise that her friend is blinded. Her waving arm causes shafts of light to sweep back and forth over the cluttered rows of shelving, and Sugar squints all the more. Her head sways from side to side on its long neck, straining to find who has called out to her through the thorny confusion of quills, pencils and fountain pens. Shyly – for she has no business here – Caroline steps into the shop.

'Caddie!'

The younger woman's expression, in recognising her old friend, glows with what so many men have found irresistible: an apparent ecstasy of gratitude to have lived to experience such an encounter. She rushes up to Caroline, embraces and kisses her, while behind the counter the stationer grimaces. He's embarrassed not so much by the display of affection but by the blow to his pride: serving Sugar, he had taken her for a lady and been rather obsequious to her, and now it appears, from the commonness of her companion, that he was wrong.

'Will that be all, madam?' he harrumphs, affectedly sweeping a small feather duster over a rack of ink bottles.

'Oh yes, thank you,' says Sugar in her sweet fancy vowels and scrupulous consonants. 'Only, please . . . if you'd be so kind . . . I wonder if it could be made a little easier for me to carry?' And she transfers the ream of paper – slightly rumpled from the bosom-to-bosom embrace – into his hands. Scowling, he wraps the purchase in pin-striped paper and improvises a carry-handle of twine around it. With an ingratiating coo of thanks Sugar accepts the parcel from him, admiring his handiwork, demonstrating with a sensuous stroke of her gloved fingers what a good job he has done. Then she turns her back on him and takes her friend by the arm.

Out in the sun, up close, Caroline and Sugar appraise each other while pretending not to. It's months since they last met. A woman's looks can crumble irreparably in that time, her skin eaten away by smallpox, her hair fallen out with rheumatic fever, her eyes blood-red, her lips healing crookedly from a knife wound. But neither Caroline nor Sugar is much the worse for wear. Life has been kind, or at least has been sparing with its cruelty.

Shush's lips, the older woman notes, are pale and dry and flaking, but weren't they always? In Sugar's poorer days, before the move to smarter premises, she and Caroline lived three doors apart in St Giles, and even then customers would occasionally knock on the wrong door and ask for 'the girl with the dry lips'. Caroline knows, too, that underneath Sugar's gloves there's something wrong with her hands: nothing serious, but an unsightly skin ailment which, again, men have always seemed happy to forgive. Why men should tolerate such defects in Sugar was, and still is, mysterious to Caroline; indeed there's not a single physical attribute of which she could honestly say that Sugar's is better than hers.

There must be more to her than meets the eye.

'You're lookin' awful well,' Caroline says.

'I feel wretched,' says Sugar quietly. 'God damn God and all His horrible filthy Creation.' Her face and voice are calm; she might be commenting on the weather. Her hazel eyes radiate – or appear to radiate – gentle good humour. 'Bring on Armageddon, what do you think?'

Caroline wonders if she's missing a joke, the kind which Sugar shares with educated men now that she's relocated to Silver Street. Sugar used to be good for a laugh, back in the Church Lane days. Her parlour piece – a great favourite with all the whores – still makes Caroline smile, remembering it. Not that she remembers it very well, mind; it involved not just play-acting but words, hundreds of 'em, and the words were the best part. Sugar pretending to seduce an invisible man, begging him in a voice almost hysterical with lust. 'Oh, you *must* let me stroke your balls, they are so *beautiful* – like . . . like a *dog* turd. A *dog* turd nestling under your . . .' Your what? Shush had such a good word for it. A word to make you wet yourself. But Caroline has forgotten the word, and now's not the time to ask.

The fact that Sugar should be so much more desired and sought-after a whore than herself has always puzzled her, but that's the way it is and, judging by gossip in the trade, it's more true lately than ever. Certainly there's no doubt that the relocation of Mrs Castaway's from St Giles to Silver Street – a hop, skip and jump from the widest, richest, grandest thoroughfare in London – was as much due to the demand for Sugar as to the madam's ambition.

Which raises the question: what's Sugar doing here in a dingy Greek Street stationer's, when she now lives so close to the splendid shops of the West End? Why risk dirtying the hems of that beautiful green dress on carriage-ways where no one's in a hurry to sweep up the horse-shit? Indeed, why even bother to get out of bed (a bed Caroline imagines to be royally luxurious) before midday?

But when Caroline asks, 'What are you doin' all the way down 'ere?' Sugar just smiles, her whitish lips dry as moth's wings.

'I was . . . visiting a friend,' she says. 'All of last night.'

'Oh yes,' smirks Caroline.

'No, really,' says Sugar earnestly. 'An old friend. A woman.'

'So how is she, then?' says Caroline, angling for a name.

Sugar closes her eyes for a second. Her lashes, unusually for a red-haired person, are thick and lush.

'She's . . . gone away now. I was saying goodbye.'

They make an odd pair, Caroline and Sugar, as they walk up the street together: the older woman small-boned, round-faced, swell-bosomed, so neat and shapely in comparison to her companion, a long, lithe creature wreathed in a *peau-de-soie* dress the colour of moss. Although she has no bosom to speak of, this Sugar, and bones that poke alarmingly through the fabric of her bodice, she nevertheless moves with more poise, more feminine pride than Caroline. Her head is held high, and she appears to be wholly at one with her clothing, as if it were her own fur and feathers.

Caroline wonders if it's this animal serenity that men find so attractive. That, and the expensive clothes. But she is wrong: it's all to do with Sugar's ability to make conversation with men like the one you will meet very shortly. That, and never saying 'No.'

Now Sugar asks Caroline, 'How far out from home do you mean to start today?'

'Not 'ere,' the older woman replies, frowning, and gesturing back towards St Giles. 'Crown Street, maybe.'

'Really?' says Sugar, concerned. 'You were doing all right a few months ago, weren't you, around Soho Square?' (Here you see another reason why Sugar has done so well in her profession: her ability to recall the less than fascinating minutiae of other people's lives.)

'I lost me nerve,' says Caroline with a sigh. 'It was a good day, that day I ran into you and was all excited about Soho Square; I'd landed meself two champion customers in a row, and I was finkin': this is the patch for me from now on! But it was beginner's luck, Shush. I just don't belong this far into the good parts. I should know me place.'

'Nonsense,' says Sugar. 'They can't tell the difference, half these men. Put a black dress on, take a deep breath, puff your cheeks out and they'll mistake you for the Queen.'

Caroline grins dubiously. In her experience, the great jaded world is not so easy to impress.

'They see through me, Shush. You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's arse.'

'Oh, I think you can,' says Sugar, suddenly serious. 'It all depends who's buying it.'

Caroline sighs. 'Well, if I keep to *my* part of town, I find there's more

buyin' and less refusin'. Every time I try me luck any further west than Crown Street, it's a struggle.' She squints up Greek Street in the direction of Soho Square, as if everything that lies beyond the Jews' School and the house of charity is too steep to climb. 'Oh, I get foreigners, right enough, and boys from the country, I get a few of those, that don't know no better than to follow on and on. You keep 'em talkin' all the way there, "Oh yes, and what brings a man like you to London, sir?" and 'fore they know it they're in Church Lane and there's no backin' out. So they 'as their pound o' flesh, pays you well for it and just puts it down to experience. But then you also get the ones that keeps on at you: "Is it far, is it far, are we there yet? – you'd better not be one of those *Old City* sluts." When they're like that, sometimes you can still steer 'em into an alley, make 'em settle for a soot-arse, but sometimes they just shakes you off 'alf-way, really wild, and says, "Why don't you solicit from your own kind?" I tell you, Shush, it really takes it out of you when they do that. You feel so low, you want to go 'ome and weep . . .'

'No, no,' protests Sugar, shaking her head. 'You mustn't look at it that way. You've brought *them* low, that's what you've done. They thought they were Prince Glorious, and you've made them see they don't cut the figure they thought they did. If their rank was obvious for all to see, why would a woman like you approach them in the first place? I tell you, it's *they* who go home and weep – pompous trembling little worms. Ha!'

The women laugh together, but Caroline only for a moment.

'Well, 'owever they see it,' she says, 'it can get me snivelling. And in public too.'

Sugar takes Caroline's hand, grey and green gloves locking together, and says, 'Come with me to Trafalgar Square, Caddie. We'll buy some cakes, feed the pigeons – and watch the undertakers' ball!'

They laugh again. The 'undertakers' ball' is a private joke between them, jokes being the main thing to have survived the three years since they were neighbours and daily confidantes.

Soon they're walking together through a maze of streets neither of them has any use for – streets they know only as the locales of other women's brothels and introducing-houses, streets already marked for destruction by town planners dreaming of a wide avenue named after the Earl of Shaftesbury. Crossing the invisible boundary between St Anne and St Martin-in-the-Fields, they see no evidence of saints, and no fields

unless one counts the tree-lined lawn of Leicester Square. Instead, they keep their eyes open for the same pastry-shop they visited last time they met.

'Wasn't it here?' (Shops appear and disappear so quickly in these modern times.)

'No, farther.'

London's pastry-shops (or 'patisseries', as they tend to style themselves lately) – poky little establishments that look like prettified ironmongers, displaying a variety of squat objects named after gateaux – may appal the French on their visits to England, but France is far away across a distant channel, and the patisserie in Green Street is quite exotic enough for such as Caroline. When Sugar leads her through the door, her eyes light up in simple pleasure.

'Two of those please,' says Sugar, pointing to the stickiest, sweetest, creamiest cakes on show. 'And that one too. Another two – yes, two of each.' The two women giggle, emboldened by that old girls-together chemistry. For so much of their lives, they have to be careful to avoid any word or gesture that might hinder the fickle swell of men's pride; what a relief it is to throw away inhibition!

'In the same scoop, *maydames*?' The shop-keeper, aware that they're as much ladies as he's a Frenchman, leers smarmily.

'Oh yes, thank you.'

Caroline gently cradles both of the thick paper scoops by their coned undersides and compares the four creamy lumps within, trying to decide which she'll eat first. Paid in full, the shop-keeper sees them off with a cheery '*Bon jewer*.' If two cakes each is what prostitutes buy, then bring on more prostitutes! Pastry will not stay fresh waiting for the virtuous, and already the icing is beginning to sweat. 'Come again, *maydames*!'

Onwards now to the next amusement. As they approach Trafalgar Square – what excellent timing – the fun has just begun. The unseen colossus of Charing Cross Station has discharged its most copious load of passengers for the day, and that flood of humanity is advancing through the streets. Hundreds of clerks dressed in sombre black are spilling into view, a tumult of monochrome uniformity swimming towards the offices that will swallow them in. Their profusion and their haste make them ridiculous, and yet they all wear grave and impassive expressions, as though their minds are fixed on a higher purpose – which makes them funnier still.

'The *un*-dertakers' ball, the *un*-dertakers' ball,' sings Caroline, like a child. The wit of the joke has long gone stale, but she cherishes it for its familiarity.

Sugar is not so easy to please; to her, all familiar responses smell of entrapment. Sharing an old joke, singing an old song – these are admissions of defeat, of being satisfied with one's lot. In the sky, the Fates are watching, and when they hear such things, they murmur amongst themselves: Ah yes, *that* one is quite content as she is; changing her lot would only confuse her. Well, Sugar is determined to be different. The Fates can look down any time they please, and find her always set apart from the common herd, ready for the wand of change to christen her head.

So, these clerks swarming before her cannot be undertakers anymore; what can they be? (Of course the banal truth is that they're clerks – but that won't do: no one ever escaped into a better life without the aid of imagination.) So . . . they're an enormous party of dinner guests evacuating a palatial hotel, that's what they are! An alarm has been raised: Fire! Flood! Every man for himself! Sugar glances down at Caroline, wondering whether to communicate this new perception to her. But the older woman's grin strikes her as simple-minded, and Sugar decides against it. Let Caroline keep her precious undertakers.

The clerks are everywhere now, piling out of omnibuses, marching off in a dozen directions, clutching packed lunches in parcels tied with string. And all the while still more omnibuses rattle into view, their knife-boards covered with more clerks shivering in the wind.

'I wish it'd rain,' smirks Caroline, recalling the last occasion when she and Sugar stood under cover, squealing with delight as the omnibuses ferried the clerks through a merciless downpour. The ones on the inside were all right, but the unfortunates riding on the knife-boards were hunched miserably under a jostling canopy of umbrellas. 'Oh, what a sight!' she'd crowed. Now she clasps her gloved hands as if in prayer, wishing the skies would open so she could see that sight again. But today, the heavens stay closed.

Under benign sunshine, the streets grow busier still, a chaos of pedestrians and vehicles making little distinction between street and footpath. Riding slowly through the hordes of clerks, like farmers trying to drive hay-carts through a flock of sheep, are the Jewish commission agents in their flashy broughams. Displayed at their sides are the ladies of

mercantile nobility, lapdogs shivering in their laps. Wholesale merchants, holding their heads visibly higher than retail merchants, alight from cabs and clear a path with a sweep of their walking sticks.

It is from inside Trafalgar Square, however, that the scale of the parade can best be appreciated, as the crowds of clerks stream around and about like a great army surrounding Nelson. All Sugar and Caroline have to do is push through into the Square proper, holding their cakes and parcel aloft. With every step, despite the press of bodies, men make way for them, some falling back in ignorant deference, others in knowing disgust.

Suddenly Caroline and Sugar seem to have all the space in the world. They lean against the pedestal of one of the stone lions, eating cake with their heads thrown back and licking flecks of cream off their gloves. By the standards of respectability, they might as well be licking at gobs of ejaculate. A decent woman would eat cake only on a plate in a hotel, or at least in a department store – although there's no telling who, or what, one might risk meeting in such a universally hospitable place.

But in Trafalgar Square shocking manners are less conspicuous; it is, after all, a popular haunt for foreigners and an even more popular haunt for pigeons, and who can observe perfect propriety in amongst so much filth and feather-flutter? The class of people who worry about such things (Lady Constance Bridgelow is one of them, but you are far from ready to meet her yet) will tell you that in recent years these miserable creatures (by which she would mean the pigeons, but possibly also the foreigners) have only been encouraged by the official sanctioning of a stall selling paper cones of birdseed at a halfpenny each. Sugar and Caroline, having finished their cakes, buy themselves a seed cone at this stall, for the fun of seeing each other flocked all about with birds.

It was Caroline's idea; the stream of clerks is thinning now, swallowed up by the embassies, banks and offices; in any case, she's already bored with them. (Before she fell from virtue, Caroline could be entranced by embroidery or the slow blinking of a baby for hours at a time: these days she can barely keep her attention on an orgasm – admittedly not hers – happening in one of her own orifices.)

As for Sugar, what amuses her? She's regarding Caroline with a benign smile, like a mother who can't quite believe what simple things delight her child, but it's Caroline who's the mother here, and Sugar a girl still in her teens. If scattering seed to a flock of badly behaved old birds gives her no

pleasure, what does? Ah, to know that you'd have to get deeper inside her than anyone has reached yet.

I can tell you the answers to simpler questions. How old is Sugar? Nineteen. How long has she been a prostitute? Six years. You do the arithmetic, and the answer is a disturbing one, especially when you consider that the girls of this time commonly don't pubesce until fifteen or sixteen. Yes, but then Sugar was always precocious – and remarkable. Even when she was newly initiated into the trade, she stood out from the squalor of St Giles, an aloof and serious child amongst a hubbub of crude laughter and drunken conviviality.

'She's a strange one, that Sugar,' her fellow whores said. 'She'll go far.' And indeed she has. All the way to Silver Street, a paradise compared to Church Lane. Yet, if they imagine her swanning up and down The Stretch under a parasol, they are wrong. She's almost always indoors, shut in her room, alone. The other whores of Silver Street, working in adjacent houses, are scandalised by the small number of Sugar's rendezvoux: one a day, or even none. Who does she think she is? There are rumours she'll charge one man five shillings, another two guineas. What's her game?

On one thing everyone's agreed: the girl has peculiar habits. She stays awake all night, even when there are no more men to be had; what's she *doing* in there with the lights on, if she's not sleeping? Also, she eats strange things – someone saw her eat a raw tomato once. She applies tooth powder to her teeth after each meal, and rinses it with a watery liquid that she buys in a bottle. She doesn't wear rouge, but keeps her cheeks terrible pale; and she never takes strong drink, except when a man bullies her into it (and even then, if she can get him to turn his back for an instant, she often spits out her mouthful or empties her glass into a vase). What *does* she drink, then? Tea, cocoa, water – and, judging by the way her lips are always peeling, in precious small quantities.

Peculiar? You haven't heard the half of it, according to the other whores. Not only is Sugar *able* to read and write, she actually enjoys it. Her reputation as a lover may be spreading among men-about-town, but it can't compare with the reputation she has among her fellow prostitutes as 'the one who reads all the books'. And not tuppenny books, either – *big* books, with more pages than even the cleverest girl in Church Lane could hope to finish. 'You'll go blind, you will,' her colleagues keep telling her, or, 'Don't you never think: enough's enough, this one's me last one?' But Sugar

never has enough. Since moving to the West End, Sugar has taken to crossing Hyde Park, over the Serpentine into Knightsbridge, and paying frequent visits to the two Georgian houses in Trevor Square, which may look like high-class brothels, but are in fact a public library. She buys newspapers and journals too, even ones with hardly any pictures in them, even ones that say they're for gentlemen only.

Her main expense, though, is clothes. Even by the standards of the West End, the quality of Sugar's dresses is remarkable; in the squalor of St Giles, it was astonishing. Rather than buying a discarded old costume off a butcher's hook in Petticoat Lane, or a serviceable imitation of the current fashion from a dingy Soho shop, her policy is to save every sixpence until she can afford something that looks as though the finest lady's dressmaker might have made it especially for her. Such illusions, though they're on sale in department stores, don't come cheap. The very names of the fabrics – Levantine *folicé*, satin *velouté* and Algerine, in colours of lucine, garnet and smoked jade – are exotic enough to make other whores' eyes glaze over when Sugar describes them. 'What a lot of trouble you go to,' one of them once remarked, 'for clothes that are stripped off in five minutes, for a man to tread on!' But Sugar's men stay in her room for a great deal longer than five minutes. Some of them stay for hours, and when Sugar emerges, she looks as though she hasn't even been undressed. What does she *do* with them in there?

'Talk,' is her answer, if anyone is bold enough to ask. It's a teasing answer, delivered with a grave smile, but it's not the whole truth. Once she has chosen her man, she'll submit to anything. If it's her cunt they want, they can have it, although mouth and rectum are her preferred orifices: less mess, and more peace of mind afterwards. Her husky voice is the result of a knife-point being pressed to her throat just a little too hard when she was fifteen, by one of the few men she ever failed to satisfy.

But it isn't simple submission and depravity that Sugar provides. Submission and depravity come cheap. Any number of toothless hags will do whatever a man asks if they're given a few pennies for gin. What makes Sugar a rarity is that she'll do anything the most desperate alley-slut will do, but do it with a smile of child-like innocence. There is no rarer treasure in Sugar's profession than a virginal-looking girl who can surrender to a deluge of ordure and rise up smelling like roses, her eyes friendly as a spaniel's, her smile white as absolution. The men come back again and

again, asking for her by name, convinced that her lust for their particular vice must equal their own; Sugar's fellow prostitutes, seeing the men so taken in, can only shake their heads in grudging admiration.

Those who are inclined to dislike her, Sugar strives to charm. In this, her freakish memory is useful: she's able, it seems, to recall everything anybody has ever said to her. 'So, how did your sister fare in Australia?' she will, for example, ask an old acquaintance a year after they last met. 'Did that O'Sullivan fellow in Brisbane marry her or not?' And her eyes will be full of concern, or something so closely resembling concern that even the most sceptical tart is touched.

Sugar's acute memory is equally useful when dealing with her men. Music is reputed to soothe the savage breast, but Sugar has found a more effective way to pacify a brutish man: by remembering his opinions on trade unions or the indisputable merits of black snuff over brown. 'Of course I remember you!' she'll say to the loathsome ape who, two years before, twisted her nipples so hard she almost fainted in pain. 'You are the gentleman who believes that the Tooley Street fire was started by Tsarist Jews!' A few more such regurgitations, and he's ready to praise her to the skies.

A pity, really, that Sugar's brain was not born into a man's head, and instead squirms, constricted and crammed, in the dainty skull of a girl. What a contribution she might have made to the British Empire!

'Excu-*boo*se me, ladies!'

Caroline and Sugar turn on their heels, and discover a man with a tripod and camera pursuing his hobby not far behind them in Trafalgar Square. He's a fearsome-looking creature with dark brows, Trollopean beard and a tartan overcoat, and the women jump to the conclusion that he wants them out of the way of his tripod-mounted ogre eye.

'Oh no no *n-o-o*, ladies!' he protests when they move aside. 'I would be honoured! Honoured to preserve your image for all time!'

They look at each other and share a smile: here is another amateur photographer just like all the rest, as fervent as a spiritualist and as mad as a hatter. Here is a man sufficiently charismatic to charm the pigeons down into his chosen tableau – or if he isn't, then sufficiently generous to buy lucky passers-by a halfpenny cone of birdseed. Even better when they provide their own!

'I am truly grateful, ladies! If you could but dispose yourselves a *little* farther apart . . . !'

They giggle and fidget as the pigeons flutter all around, alighting on their bonnets, clawing at their outstretched arms, settling on their shoulders – anywhere the seed has spilled. Despite the flurry of movement so near their eyes, they do their best not to blink, hoping the decisive moment will catch them in a good light.

The photographer's head moves to and fro beneath his hood, he tenses his entire body, and then there's a shudder of release. Inside his camera, a chemical image of Sugar and Caroline is born.

'A thousand thanks, ladies,' he says at last, and they know that this means goodbye: not *au revoir*, but farewell. He has taken all he wants from them.

'Did you 'ear what 'e said?' says Caroline as they watch him carry his trophies towards Charing Cross. 'For all time. *All time*. It couldn't be true, could it?'

'I don't know,' says Sugar, pensively. 'I've been to a photographer's studio once, and I've stood next to him in the dark room while he made the pictures appear.' Indeed she remembers holding her breath in the red light, watching the images materialising in their shallow font of chemicals, like stigmata, like spirit apparitions. She considers telling Caroline all this, but knows the older woman would require each word explained. 'They come out of a bath,' she says, 'and I'll tell you what: they *stink*. Anything that stinks so much can't last forever; I'm sure.' Her frown is hidden under her thick fringe: she isn't sure, at all.

She's wondering if the photographs taken of her at that photographer's salon will last forever, and hoping they don't. At the time, while the business was being done, she felt no qualms, and posed naked beside potted plants, in stockings by a curtained bed, and up to her waist in a tub of tepid bathwater. She didn't even have to touch anyone! Lately, however, she's come to regret it – ever since one of her customers produced a thumb-worn photograph of an awkward-looking naked girl and demanded that Sugar strike exactly the same pose with exactly the same kind of hand-brush, of which he'd thoughtfully brought his own. It was then that Sugar understood the permanence of being Sugar or Lotty or Lucy or whoever you might be, trapped on a square of card to be shown at will to strangers. Whatever violations she routinely submits to in the privacy of her bedroom, they vanish the moment they're over, half-forgotten with the drying of sweat. But to be chemically fixed in

time and passed hand to hand forever: *that* is a nakedness which can never be clothed again.

You would probably think, if I showed you photographs of Sugar, that she needn't have worried. Oh, but they're charming, you'd say – innocuous, quaint, even strangely dignified! A mere century and a bit – or say, eleven dozen years later – and they're suitable for reproduction anywhere, without anyone thinking they might deprave and corrupt the impressionable. They may even be granted an artistic halo by that great leveller of past outrages, the coffee-table book. *Unidentified prostitute, circa 1875*, the book might say, and what could be more anonymous than that? But you would be missing the point of Sugar's shame.

'Imagine, though,' says Caroline. 'A picture of you still bein' there, 'undreds of years after you've died. An' if I pulled a face, that's the face I'd 'ave for ever . . . It makes me shiver, it does.'

Sugar strokes the edge of her parcel absently as she thinks up a way to steer the conversation into less tainted waters. She stares across the square at the National Gallery, and her painful memory of the hand-brush man fades.

'What about painted portraits?' she says, recalling Caroline's exaggerated admiration for an art student who once fobbed her off, in lieu of payment, with a sketch he claimed was of the Yorkshire dales. 'Don't *they* make you shiver?'

'That's different,' says Caroline. 'They're . . . you know . . . of kings and people like that.'

Sugar performs a chuckle of catty mischief from her encyclopaedic repertoire of laughs. 'Kitty Bell had her portrait done, don't you remember, by that old goat from the Royal Academy who fell for her? It was even hung at an exhibition; Kitty and I went to see it. "Flower Seller", they called it.'

'Ooo, you're right too – the slut.'

Sugar pouts. 'Jealous. Just think, Caddie, if you had a painter begging you to let him do your portrait. *You* sit still, *he* works, and then at the end of it, he gives you a painting in oils, like . . . like a reflection of how you'd see yourself in a looking-glass on the one day of your life when you were prettiest.'

Caroline licks the inside of the paper scoop, thoughtful, half-seduced by the mental picture Sugar has painted for her, half-suspecting she's being

gulled. But, teasing aside, Sugar sincerely believes Caroline would make a fine subject for a painting: the small, pretty face and compact body of the older woman are so much more classically picturesque than her own bony physique. She imagines Caddie's shoulders swelling up out of an evening gown, smooth and flawless and peachy, and compares this rose-tinted vision with her own pallid torso, whose collar-bones jut out from her freckled chest like the handles of a grid-iron. To be sure, the fashions of the Seventies are growing ever more sylph-like, but what's in fashion and what a woman believes in her heart to be womanly may not be the same thing. Any print-shop is stocked to the rafters with 'Carolines', and her face is everywhere, from soap-wrappers to the stone carvings on public buildings – isn't that proof that Caroline is close to the ideal? Sugar thinks so. Oh, she's read about the Pre-Raphaelites in journals, but that's as far as it goes; she wouldn't know Burne-Jones or Rossetti if they fell on top of her. (Nor is such a collision likely, given the statistical improbability: two painters, two hundred thousand prostitutes.)

There's a fleck of cream on Caroline's chin when her face emerges from the paper scoop. Having savoured the fantasy of being an artist's muse and scorning mere money for the greater glory of her very own painted portrait, she's decided not to swallow it.

'No fanks,' she says in a nobody's-fool voice. 'If there's one fing I've learnt, it's that if you join in games you don't understand, you finish up fleeced, wivout even knowin' 'ow you got that way.'

Sugar tosses her crumpled paper scoop to the ground and shakes her skirts free of cake-crumbs and birdseed. 'Shall we go?' she suggests and, reaching over to Caroline's face, she gently wipes the fleck of cream off her chin. The older woman recoils slightly, startled at this unexpected physical intimacy outside working hours.

It's half past eight. The undertakers' ball is over and the streets are once again sparsely peopled. First the garret-shop slaves, casual labourers and factory workers, now the clerks: the city swallows armies of toilers and is still not satisfied. All day there will be fresh deliveries from all over England, from all over the world. And tonight, the Thames will swallow what wasn't wanted.

Caroline yawns, exposing the one blackened tooth among the white ones, and Sugar yawns in response, covering her mouth demurely with her gloved hand.

'Lord, I could drop into bed now and snore me 'ead off,' declares the older woman.

'Me too,' says Sugar.

'I got woken early. A cab got smashed up, in Church Lane, as close to my window as . . .' (she points to King George) 'as that there statue.'

'Was anyone hurt?'

'I fink a woman died. The police carried a body away, wiv skirts on.'

Sugar considers tickling Caddie with a description of her faulty grammar made flesh: a procession of earnest moustachioed policemen, pretty skirts frou-frouing under their sombre overcoats. Instead she asks, 'Anyone you knew?'

Caroline blinks stupidly. The thought hadn't even occurred to her.

'Gaw, I don't *know*! Fancy it bein' . . .' She screws her face up, trying to imagine any one of her prostitute friends being on the street at that time of morning. 'I'd best go 'ome.'

'Me too,' says Sugar. 'Or Mrs Castaway's may lose its reputation.' And she smiles a smile that isn't for the likes of Caroline to understand.

Briefly they embrace and, as always when they do, Caroline is surprised by how awkward and tentative Sugar is; how the girl's body, so notorious for its pliability in the hands of men, feels gawky and stiff in the arms of a friend. The heavy parcel of paper, dangling from Sugar's fist, bumps against Caroline's thigh, hard as a block of wood.

'Come and visit me,' says Caroline, releasing Sugar from the clasp.

'I will,' promises Sugar, a blush of colour coming to her face at last.

Who to follow? Not Caroline – she'll only take you where you've come from, and what a shabby place that was. Stay with Sugar now. You won't regret it.

Sugar wastes no time watching Caroline go, but hastens out of the Square. As hurriedly as if she's being pursued by ruffians intent on garrotting her, she makes her way to the Haymarket.

'I'll get you there faster, missie!' shouts a cabman from one of the hotel stands, his raucous tone making clear he's seen through her fancy clothes.

'You can 'ave a ride on me 'orse, too!' he whoops after her as she ignores him, and other cabmen on the rank guffaw with mirth, and even their horses snort.

Sugar advances along the footpath, face impassive, back straight. The

other people on the streets do not exist for her. The men loitering around the coffee-stall step back from her advance, lest her swinging parcel clip their knees. A bill-poster moves his bucket closer to the pillar on which he's pasting his placard, lest she kick his gluey liquid all over the paving-stones. A bleary-eyed gent – a new arrival from America, by the look of his hat and trousers – appraises her from head to hurrying feet; his innocence will wear off by this evening, when a flock of harlots will flutter into the Haymarket and proposition him every dozen steps.

'Begging your pardon, ma'am,' he mutters as Sugar pushes past him.

Up Great Windmill Street Sugar goes, past Saint Peter's where the best of the child prostitutes will later congregate, past the Argyll Rooms where even now the cream of male aristocracy lies drunk and snoring, interleaved with snoozing whores damp with champagne. Unerringly she turns corners, ducks through alleyways, crosses busy streets with barely a glance, like a cat with an idea glowing in its catty brain.

She doesn't stop until she's in Golden Square, with the rooftop and smoking chimneypots of Mrs Castaway's, and the desultory traffic of Silver Street, already in view. Then, with only a few yards to go, she cannot bring herself to walk those last steps and knock at the door of her own house. Under her green silks, she's sweating, not just from her haste, but in fresh distress. She turns about, hugs her parcel to her bosom, and dawdles towards Regent Street.

On the stone steps of the Church of Our Lady of the Assumption in Warwick Street, a small child of uncertain sex lies huddled in a pale-yellow blanket that twinkles with melted frost. In the pale sunlight, the drizzle of snot on the child's lips and mouth shines like raw egg-yolk, and Sugar, disgusted, looks away. Alive or dead, this child is doomed: it's not possible to save anyone in this world, except oneself; God gets His amusement from doling out enough food, warmth and love to nourish a hundred human beings, into the midst of a jostling, slithering multitude of millions. One loaf and one fish to be shared among five thousand wretches – that's His jolliest jape.

Sugar has already crossed the street, when she's stopped by a voice – a feeble, wheezy bleat, making a sound that could be wordless nonsense, could be 'Money', could be 'Mama'. She turns, and finds the child alive and awake, gesturing from its swaddle of dirty wool. The grim façade of the chapel, new red brick with no windows down below, and spy-holes in

dark locked door, flaunts its imperviousness to anti-Catholic rioters and children seeking charity.

Sugar hesitates, rocking on the balls of her feet, feeling the sweat inside her boots prickle and simmer between her toes. She cannot bear going backwards when she's made up her mind to go forwards; she's crossed this street now, and there's no crossing back. Besides, it's hopeless; she could fuck a hundred men a day and give all the proceeds to destitute children, and still make no lasting difference.

Finally, when her heart begins to labour in her breast, she fetches a coin from her reticule and throws it across the street. Her aim is true, and the shilling lands on the pale-yellow blanket. She turns away again, still unsure of the child's sex; it doesn't matter; in a day or a week or a month from now, the child will be dragged down into oblivion, like a lump of refuse flushed into London's sewers. God damn God and all His horrible filthy creation.

Sugar walks on, her eyes fixed on the grand thoroughfare of Regent Street shimmering through her stinging eyes. She needs sleep. And, yes, if truth be told, if you really must know, she is suffering, suffering so much that she'd be relieved to die, or else kill. Either would do. As long as a decisive blow is struck for disengagement.

It's not Caroline's company that's brought this on. Caroline, as you already know, is inconsequential; she asks nothing.

No, what has tested Sugar so unbearably is this: having to be patient and kind all yesterday and last night, sitting up with a dying friend called Elizabeth in a fetid slum in Seven Dials. How long Elizabeth took to die, clutching Sugar's hand all the while! Such a clammy, cool, claw-like hand it was too, for all those hours! At the thought of it, Sugar's own hands sweat even more inside her gloves, itching and stinging against the powdered lining.

But being a fallen woman has its small advantages, and she claims one of them now. The rules governing outdoor dress are clear, for those who can understand them: men may wear gloves or not wear gloves, as they please; poor shabby women must not wear them (the thought alone is ridiculous!) or the police are likely to demand where they got them; respectable women of the lower orders, especially those with babes in arms, can be forgiven for not wearing them; but ladies must wear them at all times, until safely indoors. Sugar is dressed like a lady, therefore she must on no account bare her extremities in public.

Nevertheless, glove-tip by glove-tip, finger by finger, Sugar strips, even as she walks, the soft green leather off her hands. Unsheathed, her sweating white skin glistens in the sunshine. With a deep sigh of relief, indistinguishable from the one she uses when a man has done to her all he can do, she flexes in the cool air her intricately cracked and flaking fingers.

Follow Sugar now into the great open space, the grandiose vacancy of Regent Street – admire those towering honeycombs of palatial buildings stretching into the fog of architectural infinity, those thousands of identically shaped windows tier upon tier; the glassy expanse of roadway swept clear of snow; all of it is a statement of intent: a declaration that in the bright future to come, places like St Giles and Soho, with their narrow labyrinths and tilting hovels and clammy, crumbling nooks infested with human flotsam, will be swept away, to be replaced by a new London that's entirely like Regent Street, airy, regular and clean.

The Stretch at this hour of morning is already alive with activity – not the insane profusion it will bear in the summer Season, but enough to impress you. Cabs are trotting backwards and forwards, thickly bearded gentlemen in dark clothing dash across their path, sandwich-board men patrol the gutters and, over there, a trio of street-sweepers are standing over a drain, cramming the accumulated porridge of snow-slush, dirt and horse-dung down through the grille with jabs of their brooms. Even as they toil, an equipage bristling with provincial businessmen jingles by, leaving a steamy festoon of turd in its wake.

An omnibus is reined to a halt, and half a dozen passengers alight. One of them, a soberly dressed man of average height and build, is in an indecent hurry, and almost runs into the shit-spill: just in time he reels backwards, like a street clown performing for whinnying onlookers in Seven Dials. Mortified, he whips off his hat, and advances with a cringing gait. His hair, thus released into the atmosphere, is remarkable in how it sits, or more accurately jumps around, on his head. From the forehead down, he looks terribly serious, even anxious, as if he's late for work and may expect a reprimand, but from the forehead up he is a comic delight: a flip-flopping crest of curly golden hair, like a small furry animal fallen out of the sky onto the head of a man, and determined to keep its purchase there no matter what.

Sugar smiles, relieved to see something amusing in the world at last; then she hugs her parcel once more, and starts to idle along the Stretch.

Just a few more minutes, here on the cobbled shore of London's tomorrow, and she'll be ready to go home.

Leave Sugar to herself now; she longs to walk alone, anonymous. She's already forgotten about the man with the ridiculous hair, whom you took to be just another passer-by, a flash of local colour distracting you from your quest to find the people you came here to meet. Stop daydreaming now; cross the shiny Rubicon of Regent Street, avoiding the traffic and the mounds of muck; and seek out that clownish man.

Whatever you do, don't let him melt into the crowd, for he's really a very important man, and he'll take you further than you can possibly imagine.

THREE

illiam Rackham, destined to be the head of Rackham Perfumeries but rather a disappointment at present, considers himself to be in *desperate* need of a new hat. That's why he is hurrying so. That's why you had better stop staring at the gently bobbing bustle of Sugar's dress as she moves away from you, stop staring at her sharp shoulder-blades and wasp waist and the wisps of orange hair fluttering under her bonnet, and run after William Rackham instead.

You hesitate. Sugar is going home, to a bawdy-house with the most peculiar name of 'Mrs Castaway's'. You'd like to see the insides of such a place, wouldn't you? Why should you miss whatever is about to happen, just to pursue this stranger, this . . . man? Admittedly his bouncing mop of golden hair was comical, but he was otherwise not very fascinating – especially compared to this woman you're only just getting to know.

But William Rackham is destined to be the head of Rackham Perfumeries. Head of Rackham Perfumeries! If you want to get on, you can't afford to linger in the company of whores. You must find it in you to become extraordinarily interested in why William Rackham considers himself to be in desperate need of a new hat. I will help you as much as I can.

His old hat he carries in his hand as he walks along, for he'd rather go bareheaded in a world of hatted men than wear it a minute longer, so ashamed is he of its unfashionable tallness and its frayed brim. Of course, whether he wears it or doesn't wear it, people will be staring at him in pity, just as they stared at him in the omnibus . . . do they truly imagine he can't see them smirking? Oh God! How is it possible things have come

to this! Life has conspired . . . but no, he has no right to make so all-embracing an accusation . . . Rather say, there are *unfriendly elements* in Life conspiring against him, and he can't yet see his way clear to victory.

In the end, though, he will triumph; he *must* triumph, because his happiness is, he believes, essential to a larger scheme of things. Not that he necessarily deserves to be happier than other men, no. Rather, his fate is a sort of . . . a sort of *hinge* on which much else depends, and if he should be crushed by misfortune, something greater will collapse along with him, and surely Life wouldn't risk that.

William Rackham has come . . .

(Are you still paying attention?)

William Rackham has come into the city because he knows that in Regent Street he can put an end to his humiliation by buying a new hat. Which isn't to imply he couldn't buy just as good a hat at Whiteley's in Bayswater and save himself the journey, but he has an ulterior reason for coming here, or two ulterior reasons. Firstly, he'd rather not be seen in Whiteley's, which he's been heard to disparage, in the course of those smart dinner parties to which he always used to be invited, as hopelessly vulgar. (Where he's heading now is vulgar too, of course, but he's less likely to meet anyone he knows.) Secondly, he wishes to keep a careful eye on Clara, his wife's lady's-maid.

Why? Oh, it's all very sordid and complicated. Having recently forced himself to make a few calculations of his household's expenses, William Rackham has concluded that his servants are stealing from him – and not just the odd candle or rasher of bacon, but on an outrageous scale. No doubt they're taking advantage of his wife's illness and his own disinclination to dwell on his financial woes, but they're damned mistaken if they think he notices nothing. Damned mistaken!

And so, yesterday afternoon, as soon as his wife finished describing to Clara what she wished bought in London the next morning, William (eavesdropping outside the door) smelled avarice. Watching Clara descend the stairs, looking down on her from the shadowy landing, he fancied he could see plans for embezzlement already simmering in her stocky little body, simmering towards the boil.

'I trust Clara with my life,' Agnes objected, with typical exaggeration, when he told her privately of his misgivings.

'That may be so,' he said. 'But I don't trust her with my money.' An

uneasy moment followed then, as Agnes's face was subtly contorted by the temptation to point out that the money wasn't his but his father's, and that if he would only comply with his father's demands, they'd have a lot more of it. She behaved herself, though, and William felt moved to reward her with a compromise. Clara would be trusted with the actual purchase, but William would, by sheer 'chance', accompany her into the city.

And so it is that the master and the lady's-maid have travelled down from Notting Hill together on the omnibus, a cab being 'out of the question, of course' – not (Rackham hoped the servant would understand) because he can ill afford cabs nowadays, but because people might gossip.

A vain hope. The servant naturally chose to believe she was seeing yet more evidence of her master coming down in the world. (She'd also noticed how worn and outmoded his hat has become; in fact, she was the *only* person who'd noticed it, for he has been avoiding all his fashionable friends in shame.) Every change in the household routine, no matter how trifling, and every suggestion of economy, no matter how reasonable, Clara interprets as further proof that William Rackham is being squashed under his father's boot like a slug.

In her delight at his humiliation, it doesn't occur to her that if he isn't rescued from his predicament he might eventually be unable to keep her employed: her insights are of a different kind. She's detected, for example, a cowardly retreat on the matter of the coachman, whose coming has been foretold for years, but who has never yet materialised. Lately there appears to be an unspoken agreement that there should be no further mention of this fabled advent. But Clara doesn't forget! And what about Tilly, the downstairs housemaid? Dismissed for falling pregnant, she has never been replaced, with the result that Janey is doing far more than should be expected of a scullery maid. Rackham says it's only temporary, but the months pass and nothing is done. Good lady's-maids like Clara may be hard to find, but surely downstairs housemaids are plentiful as rats? Rackham could have one within the hour if he was willing to pay for it.

All in all it's a disgraceful situation, which Clara handles to the best of her abilities – that is, by making her displeasure felt in every way she can think of short of outright insolence.

Hence the pained expression she maintained on her face all the way into London on the omnibus, an expression which the miserable Rackham didn't even notice until the horses pulled the vehicle through Marble Arch.

Perhaps *all* members of the female sex are sickly, he thought then, guessing that the servant must be in some sort of pain.

Perhaps (he tried to reassure himself) *my poor sick Agnes is not so unusual after all.*

William has deliberately made an early start in the city, so that he'll have plenty of time to study, on his return home, the long-avoided progress papers and accounts of Rackham Perfumeries. (Or at least take them out of the envelopes his father sent them in.) Then tomorrow (perhaps) he will visit the lavender farm, if only to be seen there, so that report of it may reach the old man's ears. It would probably be as well to ask the farm workers a few pertinent questions, if he can think of any. Reading the documents will help, no doubt – if it doesn't drive him insane first.

Madhouse or poorhouse: is that what his choices have been reduced to? Is there no way forward but to . . . to sell a false image of himself to his own father, faking enthusiasm for something loathsome? How, in the name of . . . But he mustn't dwell on the deeper implications: that's the curse of higher intellect. He must meet the day's demands one by one. Buy a new hat. Keep an eye on Clara. Go home and make a start on those papers.

William Rackham does not imagine he will master the family business in a day, no: his aims are modest. If he shows a *little* interest, his father may surrender a little more money. How long can it possibly take to read a few papers? One afternoon wasted on it ought to be enough, surely? Granted, he once opined in a Cambridge undergraduate magazine that 'a single day spent doing things which fail to nourish the soul is a day stolen, mutilated, and discarded in the gutter of destiny.' But, as his recent haircut proves, the Cambridge life can't last for ever. He's made it last a good few years as it is.

So, light-headed and blinking in the sun, legs still stiff from the long omnibus journey, William hurries along the Stretch. At his side, clutched in his gloved fingertips, swings the detestable hat; a few yards ahead of him walks his detested servant; and immediately behind him follows his shadow. Feel free, now, to follow him every bit as close as that shadow, for he is determined never to look back.

There, up ahead, its grand mysterious interior glowing with a thousand lights, is the place where he'll put an end to his misery. Buying a new hat should take no more than an hour or so, and Clara's errand had better

take less, if she knows what's good for her. Straight in, get what's wanted, then straight out, that's how it'll be. Back home by midday.

William Rackham's view of the enormous glass-fronted Billington & Joy emporium, unobstructed by the crowds through which he had to usher Agnes last time he was here, is panoramic. Dozens of display windows, huge by comparison with most shops' humble panes, proclaim the store's grand scale and modernity. Behind each of the windows is a showcase, offering for public admiration (the possibility of sale is not alluded to) a profusion of manufactures. These are artfully displayed against painted *trompe-l'œils* of their settings in rooms of a fashionable house. Clara is moving past the dining-room display just now, a thick pane of glass separating her from the sumptuously laid table of silverware, china and wine-filled glasses. In the painted backdrop behind the table, a hearth glows convincingly with life-like flame and, to the side, poking through a slit in a real curtain, two porcelain hands with white cuffs and a hint of black sleeve hold aloft a papier-mâché roast.

So impressive are these displays, so diverting, that William almost careers into a headlong fall. There are hooks jutting out of the wall at ankle-level, provided for the tethering of dogs, and he very nearly trips. It's just as well Clara has already entered Billington & Joy's great white doors slightly ahead of him, at his instruction. How she would adore to see him fall!

Once inside, William tries to catch sight of her, but she's already lost in the wonderland of mirrored brightness. Glass and crystal are everywhere, mirrors hung at every interval, to multiply the galaxy of chandeliered gas-light. Even what is not glass or crystal is polished as if it were; the floor shines, the lacquered counters shimmer, even the hair of the serving staff is brilliant with Macassar oil, and the sheer profusion of merchandise is a little dazzling too.

Mind you, as well as selling many elegant and indispensable things, Billington & Joy also sells magnetic brushes for curing bilious headaches in five minutes, galvanic chain-bands for imparting life-giving impulses, and glazed mugs with the Queen's face scowling out of them in bas-relief, but even these objects seem already to have the status of eccentric museum exhibits, as though showcased for public wonderment alone. The whole effect, indeed, is so suggestive of the great Crystal Palace Exhibition on which the store is modelled, that *some* visitors, in their awe, are reluctant

to buy anything, lest they mar the display. The fact that no prices are attached only adds to their timorousness, for they fear to ask and discover themselves insufficiently affluent.

Therefore less is sold than might be sold – but at least not much gets stolen. To the urchins and thieves of Church Lane, Billington & Joy is Heaven – that is, not for the likes of them. They could no more hope to pass through its great white doors than through the eye of a needle.

As for breakages, the most fragile displays endure safely for months at a time, because even prosperous children are rarely seen here, and on a tight leash when they are. Also, more crucially, the evolution of ladies' fashions has meant that stylish female shoppers can move through a shop without knocking things over. Indeed, it would be fair to say that Billington & Joy, and other establishments of its kind, have expanded in celebration of the crinoline's demise. The modern woman has been streamlined to permit her to spend freely.

Once more before mounting the stairs to the hat department, William looks around the store for Clara. Though she was a dozen footsteps ahead of him at most, she has disappeared like a rodent. The only thing resembling a servant he can see is the dummy serving-maid behind the display curtain, but there's nothing to her except disembodied plaster arms that end abruptly at the elbows, mounted on metal stands.

Clara's errand, which she is to complete unsupervised while William Rackham chooses his new hat, is to procure for her mistress eighteen yards of ochre silk, plus matching trimmings, to be made into a dress when Mrs Rackham feels well enough to apply herself to the pattern and the machine. Clara likes this errand very much. In performing it, she experiences not only the thrill of saying, 'Well, my man, I'll need eighteen yards of it,' and handling all that money, but she also executes a neat swindle whereby an additional item is bought – ostensibly for her mistress. This is the beauty of working for the Rackhams: *he* pays but has no stomach to understand what he's paying for, *she* has needs but has no idea what they ought to cost, and the accounts disappear in a chasm between the two. And there's no housekeeper! That's the most convenient thing of all. There was a housekeeper once upon a time, a tubby Scotchwoman to whom Mrs Rackham attached herself, limpet-like, until it ended in tears: thereafter, a ban on the very subject.

'We can run the house perfectly well between us, can't we, Clara?' *Oh, yes, ma'am. We surely can!*

Clara already decided yesterday, while discussing the purchase of the dress material with Mrs Rackham ('The prices lately, ma'am – you wouldn't believe them!') to buy herself a little something. A figure, if you must know.

Clara hates her dowdy servant's uniform fervently, and she knows only too well that for Christmas this year she'll get exactly the same gift parcel she got *last* Christmas. Every year the same insult! – seven yards of double-width black merino, two yards of linen, and a striped skirt. Just what's needed to make a new uniform – well, fancy that. Damn William Rackham and his stinginess – he deserves everything that befalls him!

All year she slaves to make her mistress beautiful, breaking her fingernails on the clasps of Mrs Rackham's corsets, simpering in feigned admiration, and now, five years on, what has she to show for it? Her own body is thickening in the middle, and grievance is etching lines in her face. She possesses nothing that would make a man look at her once, let alone twice. Nothing, that is, until now. With her heart in her mouth, she hurries back towards the corsetry department, where she'll duck behind a curtain and stuff her illicit purchase, parcel and all, into her capacious drawers.

Although it was partly for fear of such wickedness that he insisted on chaperoning Clara today, there's really nothing William can do to prevent it. All he can verify, without soiling his mind with money matters, is that Clara does indeed, as agreed, emerge from the store with one big parcel in her arms. The theft she's now committing, easily detected and mercilessly punished in stricter households than the Rackhams', will go unnoticed.

For all his chagrin at his wife's frailty, William hasn't quite grasped just how ignorant Agnes has become, with every passing month of her seclusion, of what's what in the world at large. He would never guess, for example, that she could possibly entrust the costing of eighteen yards of material to a servant. Instead, he's relieved that she's no longer having dresses made for her, because that indulgence cost him a fortune in the past – a fortune wasted, given how little of her life Agnes spends out of bed.

Luckily, Agnes seems to agree. In giving up her dressmaker for a mechanical toy, she has side-stepped social disgrace as deftly as possible, by claiming genteel boredom as her excuse. The tedium of convalescence can be whiled away so much more agreeably, she says, with a diverting (never to mention money-saving) invention like the sewing-machine. Anyway, she's

a modern woman, and machines are part of the modern landscape – or so William's father keeps declaring.

She's putting on a brave face, William knows that. In her more reproachful moments, Agnes lets him know how humiliating it is to maintain a pretence of genteel boredom when anyone can see she's economising. Couldn't he make a gesture to appease his father – write a letter or something – that would make everything all right again? Then they could have a coachman at last, and she could – but No, William warns her. Rackham Senior is an unreasonable old man and, having failed to bully his first-born, he has turned his bullying on William. If Agnes feels she's suffering, can she not spare a thought for what her husband must endure!

To which Agnes responds with a forced smile, and a declaration that the silvery Singer really is an amusing novelty, and she'd best be getting back to it.

Agnes's willingness to save money on clothes pleases William well enough, but he's less pleased with having to buy his new hat from Billington & Joy and pay for it on the spot, as if it were a roasted chestnut or a shoeshine, rather than having it fitted at a prestigious hatter's and adding its cost to a yearly account. Why, the top-notch gentleman visits his hatter every few days just to have his hat ironed! How has it come to this? Penury, penury and piecemeal disgrace, for a man by rights so rich! Isn't it true that Billington & Joy stock shelves full of Rackham perfumes, soaps and cosmetics? The name Rackham is everywhere! And yet he, William Rackham, heir to the Rackham fortune, must loiter around hat stands, waiting for other men to replace hats he wishes to try on! Can't the Almighty, or the Divine Principle, or whatever is left now that Science has flushed out the stables of the universe, see there's something wrong here?

But if It does, It snubs him regardless.

At a quarter to eleven, William Rackham and Clara meet briefly outside the emporium. Clara has a large, crackling parcel clasped to her bosom, and walks more stiffly than usual. William has his new hat screwed firmly on his head, the old one now removed to that hidden store-room where the unwanted hats, umbrellas, bonnets, gloves and a thousand other orphaned things are banished. Where do they go, in the end? To Christian missions in Borneo, perhaps, or a fiery furnace. Certainly not to Church Lane, St Giles.

'It suddenly occurs to me,' says William, squinting into the servant's

eyes (for he is exactly her height), 'that I have some other business to attend to. In town, I mean. So, I think it would be best if you returned alone.'

'As you wish, sir.' Clara dips her head meekly enough, but still William thinks he detects a note of sly mockery, as if she thinks he's lying. (For once, she isn't thinking that at all: she's merely savouring how convenient it will be not to have the secret package squashed against her itchy buttocks all the way home in the omnibus.)

'You won't lose that, will you?' says William, pointing at Agnes's bounty of silk.

'No, sir,' Clara assures him.

William tugs his watch out of his fob-pocket into his palm and pretends to consult it, so that he has an excuse for looking away from the irritating little minx he pays £21 a year to be his wife's closest companion.

'Well, off you go then,' he says, and 'Yes, sir,' she replies, and off she goes, mincing as if she's straining not to fart. But William doesn't notice. In fact, much later today, when he sees Clara flitting around his house with a waist she didn't possess before, he won't notice that either.

It wasn't always thus. In the past, William Rackham was very much the sort of man to notice small, even tiny, differences in dress and personal appearance. In his University prime, he was quite a dandy, with silver-handled cane and a shoulder-length mane of golden hair. In those days it was perfectly normal for him to dawdle in front of the flower vases in his own 'set' for half an hour at a time, selecting a particular flower for a particular buttonhole; he might spend even longer matching silk neckties of one colour with waistcoats of another, and his most dearly beloved trousers were dark blue with mauve checks. On one memorable occasion, he instructed his tailor to shift a waistcoat's buttonhole to discourage one troublesome button from peeping out indiscreetly behind the overcoat. 'A quarter of an inch to the right, no more, no less,' he said, and God help the fellow if it weren't done just so.

In those days, William was proud to correct faults of dress few people had the good taste to perceive in the first place. Now his shrinking fortunes make him prey to faults which anyone, even his servants, can perceive all too clearly.

Nervously, William feels above his head, to check that everything is still in place. It is, but he has good reason to worry. Only an hour ago, in

a mirror, he saw a vision so shocking that he still can't erase it from his mind. For the first time since rashly whipping off his old hat in Regent Street, he was made aware of the anarchy that had broken out on his scalp.

Once upon a time William's hair was his proudest feature: all through his childhood it was soft and golden-bronze, cooed over by aunts and passing strangers. As a student at Cambridge, he wore it long, to his shoulders, brushed back without oil. He was slender then, and his flowing hair disguised the pear shape of his head. Besides, long hair stood for Shelley, Liszt, Garibaldi, Baudelaire, individualism – that sort of thing.

But if his intention, in getting those long locks cut shorter a few days ago, was to retreat into anonymity, it had all gone terribly wrong. Reflected in the looking-glass, he saw what his hair had done in defiance of the ruthless barbering; it had sprung loose from oily restraint, and risen up in outright rebellion against him. God in Heaven, how many onlookers witnessed him in this state, a clown with a ludicrous crown of tufts and crinkles! With a spasm of embarrassment, right there in Billington & Joy's hat department, William hid his fleecy halo under the nearest hat he could lay his fingers on. And that was the hat, despite many subsequent tentative choices, he finally bought.

Since then, he's combed the halo flat, and applied more oil, but has it learned its lesson? With his fingertips he touches it nervously, smoothing it under the hat-brim. His bushy sideboards prickle. 'I want it like Matthew Arnold,' he told his barber, but instead he got the Wild Man of Borneo. What has he done? He'd convinced himself (well, almost) that a modest new exterior would help him stride forwards into the final quarter of the century, but does his hair have other ideas?

As William walks in the general direction of the Thames, he keeps an eye out for an alley in which, hidden from judgemental eyes, he can run a comb through his hair again. He has offended against decent manners quite enough for one morning.

At last a suitable alley offers itself, an alley so narrow it doesn't merit a name. William slips inside it immediately. Standing there in the dimness between the filthy walls, only a few steps from Jermyn Street, he has to be careful not to tread in maggoty garbage as he chastises himself with his ivory-handled comb.

A voice behind him – an ugly, nasal sound – makes him jump.

'Are you kind, master?'

William spins around. A mousy-haired little whore, easily forty or even more, is toddling out of the gloom towards him, wrapped in what appears to be an old tablecloth. What the devil's she doing in this part of town, so close to the palaces and the best hotels?

Speechless with disgust, William retreats. Four hasty steps take him back into the sunshine. A prickle of sweat has broken out on the scalp he's just combed, and against all reason he imagines his hair springing up, popping his hat off like a cork.

Minutes later, not far short of Trafalgar Square, William Rackham passes a pastry shop. It occurs to him that he would enjoy a small treat.

Of course, what he *really* ought to do, if he wishes to dine, is make his way to the Albion or the London or the Wellington, where his old school chums are probably sitting even now, lighting up their first cigar of the day – that is, if they're not still sleeping in the arms of their mistresses. But William is in no mood to go to any of these places. At the same time he's afraid that if he eats a cake in Trafalgar Square, he might be spotted and shunned forever after by an important acquaintance.

Ah, to be a carefree student again! Was it really twelve years ago that he did all manner of outrageous things in the company of his laughing, fearless companions, without anyone ever doubting his status? Didn't he go to public houses, the working man's sort with no screens dividing the classes, and drink himself stupid, right there in amongst the toothless old women and tosspots? Didn't he buy oysters from street stalls and toss them into his mouth? Didn't he wink saucily at promenading matrons just to scandalise them? Didn't he sing bawdy songs, in a louder and fruitier baritone than any of his friends, while dancing bareheaded on the Waterloo Bridge?

Oh, my love is a thing of airs and graces,
Her chins are held to her neck with laces,
Her hair is red, likewise her nose,
From out her skirts an ill wind blows . . .

Why, he could still sing it now!

Everyone in the patisserie is all ears, ready. 'Yes, that one please,' he mouths, *sotto voce.* He'll risk it, yes he'll risk it (the cake, that is, not the bawdy song), if only out of nostalgia for his old abandoned self.

And so William takes his chocolate and cherry confection into the Square with him and nurses it, worrying. The lower half of his body is only just

beginning to respond to the suggestion made to him by the alley prostitute and, since she's by now out of sight, out of mind and out of the question, he ogles a trio of French girls scampering gleefully among the pigeons.

'*Moi aussi! Moi aussi!*' they're shrieking, for there's a photographer nearby, pretending to be taking pictures of things other than them. They are pretty, their dresses are pretty, they move prettily, but William can't give them the attention they merit. Instead he broods on a glowing memory of the photograph that was taken of him a week ago, just prior to getting his locks cut shorter. The last photograph, in other words, of the old (the *young*) William Rackham.

This photograph is already hidden away in a drawer at home, like pornography. But the image is sharp in his mind: in it he is still a Cambridge gallant, quite the cocky scholar, wearing the canary-yellow waistcoat which even the current generation of swells wouldn't dare to wear. The facial expression, too, is a relic of the past, in the sense that he no longer wears *that* either; it's the one that Downing College put on his face, contrary to the hopes of his father: good-humoured contempt for the workaday world.

The difficult part was explaining to the photographer the reason for the outdated clothes, namely that this picture should be regarded as a . . . (how should one put it?) a retrospective record of history, a re-capturing of the past. (He needn't have bothered: the walls of the photographer's foyer were crowded with slightly faded debutantes in resurrected triumphal gowns, tubby old men squeezed into slender military uniforms, and a variety of other resurrected dreams.)

'*Moi aussi*, *oh ma*man!'

Back in Trafalgar Square, a silky white girl of about nine is given permission to pose for the man with the camera. One sprinkle of seed and she's deluged with pigeons, just in time for the exposure. She squeals excitedly, arousing the jealousy of her companions.

'*Et moi maintenant*, *moi aussi!*'

Another girl clamouring for her turn, and William is already bored. Having finished his cake, he pulls on his gloves and continues on his way to St James's Park, gloomily asking himself *how*, if such enchanting sights bore him so soon, will he *ever* be able to stand being the head of Rackham Perfumeries?

What a curse that his father can't see this! The old man, grown rich working at the same thing daily from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. for forty years, has

lost any natural sense of the pain that monotonous drudgery might inflict on a finer soul. To Henry Calder Rackham, even the recently introduced half-day holiday on Saturdays is a shameful waste of man-hours.

Not that Henry Calder Rackham is working as hard now as in earlier years, his involvement in the company being more deskbound now. He's still fit as a horse, mind you, but, with William's marriage prospects to consider, a change was needed. A better address, a respectably sedentary routine, a few offers of assistance to members of the aristocracy experiencing a spot of pecuniary bother: without these gestures on Rackham Senior's part, his son would never have won Agnes Unwin's hand. Had the old man still been striding up and down the lavender farm in his worsted jacket and boots, there would have been no point even asking Lord Unwin if Agnes was available.

Instead, by the time of the marriage negotiations, Rackham Senior was 'keeping an eye' on his business from a very presentable house, admittedly *in* Bayswater but *very near* Kensington, and his son William was *such* a promising young man, sure to become a notable figure in . . . well, some sphere or other.

Oh, certainly it was understood that the younger Rackham would eventually take charge of Rackham Perfumeries, but his grip on the reins would no doubt be all-but-invisible, and the public would see only his other, loftier accomplishments. At the time of his courtship of Agnes, William, though long out of university, still managed to glow with the graduate's aura of infinite promise and the vivacious charm of the contentedly idle. All sham? How dare you! Even now, William keeps up to date with the latest developments in zoology, sculpture, politics, painting, archaeology, novel-writing . . . everything, really, that is discussed in the better monthly reviews. (No, he will *not* cancel any of his subscriptions – none, do you hear!)

But how can he *possibly* make his mark in any of these (William frets as he finds his favourite bench in St James's Park) when he's being virtually blackmailed into a life of tedious labour? How can he *possibly* be expected . . .

But let me rescue you from drowning in William Rackham's stream of consciousness, that stagnant pond feebly agitated by self-pity. Money is what it boils down to: how much of it, not enough of it, when will it come next, where does it go, how can it be conserved, and so on.

The bald facts are these: Rackham Senior is getting tired of running Rackham Perfumeries, damn tired. His first-born, Henry, is no use whatsoever as an heir, having devoted himself to God from a young age. A decent enough fellow and, as a frugal bachelor, not much of a bother to support – although if he really means to make his career in the Church, he's taking a powerful long time deliberating over it. But never mind: the younger boy, William, will have to do. Like Henry, he's slow to show a talent for anything, but he has expensive tastes, a stylish wife and a fair-sized household – all of which suck hard at the nipple of paternal generosity. Stern lectures having failed to have the desired effect, Rackham Senior is now attempting to hasten Rackham Junior's halting steps towards the directorship of the business by reducing William's allowance, slowly and steadily. Each month he reduces it a little more, whittling away at the style to which his son is accustomed.

Already William has been obliged to reduce the number of his servants from nine to six; trips abroad are a thing of the past; travel by cab has become, if not a luxury, then certainly no longer a matter of course. William is no longer prompt to replace worn-out or outmoded possessions; and the dream of employing a male – the true yardstick of prosperity – remains emphatically a dream.

What grieves William most is how *unnecessary* his suffering is, given the value of the family assets. If his father would only sell his company, lock, stock and barrel, the sum it raised would be so enormous that the Rackhams could live off it for generations – What was the old man working for, all these years, if not for that?

The desire to make more money when more than enough has already been made disgusts William, a socialist by inclination. Besides, were Rackham Senior to sell up and invest the proceeds, the money would be self-replenishing; it might even last forever, and come, in time, to be regarded as 'old money'. And if it's sentimental attachment to the business that prevents the old man from selling, why oh why must it be William who accepts the burden of leadership? Why can't some capable trustworthy fellow be appointed from the ranks of Rackham Perfumeries itself?

In his grief, William resorts to a political philosophy of his own invention, a scheme he hopes might one day be imposed on English society. (Rackhamism, history might call it.) It is a theory he's toyed with for a decade or more, though he's sharpened it recently; it involves the abolition

of what he terms 'unjustifiable capital', to be replaced with what he terms 'equity of fortune'. This means that as soon as a man has made a large enough fortune to support, perpetually, his household (defined as a family of up to ten persons, with no more than ten servants), he is banned from stockpiling any more. Speculative investments in Argentinian gold-mines and the like would be prohibited; instead, investment in safe and solid concerns would be overseen by Government, to ensure that the return, although unspectacular, was perennial. Any excess income flowing to the wealthiest men would be re-routed into the public coffers for distribution among society's unfortunates – the destitute and homeless.

A revolutionary proposal, he's well aware of that, and no doubt horrifying to many, for it would erode the present distinctions between the classes; there would no longer be an aristocracy in the sense nowadays understood. Which, in William's view, would be a damn good thing, as he's tired of being reminded that Downing College was hardly Corpus Christi, and that he was lucky to get in at all.

So there you have it: the thoughts (somewhat pruned of repetition) of William Rackham as he sits on his bench in St James's Park. If you are bored beyond endurance, I can offer only my promise that there will be fucking in the very near future, not to mention madness, abduction, and violent death.

In the meantime, Rackham is jogged violently from his brooding by the sound of his own name.

'Bill!'

'Great God yes: Bill!'

William looks up, head still full of sludge, so that he can only stare dumbly at the sudden apparition of his two best friends, his inseparable Cambridge cronies, Bodley and Ashwell.

'Won't be long now, Bill,' cries Bodley, 'before it's time to celebrate!'

'Celebrate what?' says William.

'Everything, Bill! The whole blessed Bacchanalia of Christmas! Miraculous offspring popping out of virgins into mangers! Steaming mounds of pudding! Gallons of port! And before you know it, another year put to bed!'

'1874 well-poked and snoring,' grins Ashwell, 'with a juicy young 1875 trembling in the doorway, waiting to be treated likewise.'

(They are very similar, he and Bodley, in their ageless 'old boys'

appearance. Immaculately dressed, excitable and listless all at once, slick-faced, and wearing hats superior to any sold by Billington & Joy. They are in fact *so* similar that William has been known, in moments of extreme drunkenness, to address them as Bashley and Oddwell. But Ashwell is distinguishable from Bodley by sparser side-whiskers, slightly less florid cheeks, and a smaller paunch.)

'Haven't seen you in *aeons*, Bill. What have you been up to? Apart from cutting all your hair off?'

Bodley and Ashwell sit heavily on the bench next to William, then perch forward, their chins and folded hands resting on the knobs of their walking sticks, grotesquely attentive. They are like architectural gargoyles carved for the same tower.

'Agnes has been bad,' Rackham replies, 'and there's that cursed business to take over.'

There, it's said. Bodley and Ashwell are trying to seduce him into frivolity: they may as well know he's not in the mood. Or at least that they must seduce him harder.

'Be careful the business doesn't take *you* over,' cautions Ashwell. 'You'd be such a bore gassing on about . . . oh, I don't know . . . crop yield.'

'No fear,' says William, fearing.

'Far better to make a trembling young beauty *yield* to the *crop*,' snarls Bodley theatrically, then looks to Rackham and Ashwell for praise.

'That's utterly feeble, Bodley,' says Ashwell.

'Maybe so,' sniffs Bodley. 'But you've paid pounds for worse.'

'At any rate, Bill,' pursues Ashwell, '– pornography aside – you mustn't let Agnes keep you out of the great stream of Life this way. The way you're worrying so much over a mere woman . . . it's dangerous. That way lies . . . uh . . . what's the word I'm looking for, Bodley?'

'Love, Ashwell. Never touch the stuff myself.'

A wan smile twitches on William's face. Stroke on, old friends, stroke on!

'Seriously, Bill, you mustn't let this problem with Agnes turn into a family curse. You know, like in those frightful old-fashioned novels, with the distracted female leaping out of cupboards. You have to realise you're not the only man in this position: there are *hordes* of mad wives about – half of London's females are positively *raving*. God damn it, Bill: you're a free man! There's no sense locking yourself up, like an old badger.'

'London out of Season is enough of a bore as it is,' chips in Ashwell. 'Best to waste it in style.'

'And how,' asks William, 'have the two of you been wasting it?'

'Oh, we've been hard at work,' enthuses Ashwell, 'on a simply superb new book – mostly *my* labour,' (here Bodley scoffs loudly) 'with Bodley polishing up the prose a bit – called *The Efficacy of Prayer*.'

'Awful lot of work involved, you know. We've been quizzing hordes of devout believers, getting them to tell us honestly if they ever got anything they prayed for.'

'By that we don't mean vague nonsense like "courage" or "comfort"; we mean actual *results*, like a new house, mother's deafness cured, assailant hit by bolt of lightning, et cetera.'

'We've been terrifically thorough, if I do say so myself. As well as hundreds of *individual* cases, we also examine the *general*, *formulaic* prayers that thousands of people have uttered every night for years. You know the sort of thing: delivery from evil, peace on Earth, the conversion of the Jews and so on. The clear conclusion is that sheer weight of numbers and perseverance don't get you anywhere either.'

'When we've chalked it all up, we're going to talk to some of the top clergy – or at least solicit correspondence from them – and get their view. We want to make it clear to everyone that this book is a disinterested, scientific study, quite open to comment or criticism from its . . . ah . . . victims.'

'We mean to hit Christ for six,' interjects Bodley, driving his cane into the wet earth.

'We've had some delightful finds,' says Ashwell. 'Superbly mad people. We talked to a clergyman in Bath (wonderful to see the place again, capital beer there) and he told us he's been praying for the local public house to burn down.'

'"Or otherwise perish".'

'Said he supposed God was deciding on the right time.'

'Completely confident of eventual success.'

'Three years he's been praying for this – nightly!'

Both men thump their canes on the ground in sarcastic ecstasy.

'Do you think,' says William, 'there's the slightest chance you'll find a publisher?' He's in better spirits now, almost seduced, yet feels compelled to mention the spoilsport realities of the world as it is. Bodley and Ashwell merely grin at each other knowingly.

'Oh yes. Sure to. There's a simply thundering call nowadays for books that destroy the fabric of our society.'

'That goes for novels, too,' says Ashwell, winking pointedly at William. 'Do keep that in mind if you still mean to produce anything in that field.'

'But honestly Bill – you really must show yourself more often. We haven't seen you at any of the old haunts for ages.'

'Got to preserve your bad name, you know.'

'Got to keep your hand in.'

'Mustn't be foiled by the march of time.'

'What do you mean?' says the startled William. His traumatic haircut has exposed strands of premature grey amongst the gold, so he's sensitive to any mention of advancing age.

'Pubescent *girls*, William. Time catches up with them. They don't stay ripe for ever, you know. Half a year makes all the difference. Indeed, you've already missed *some* girls that have passed into legend, Bill – *legend*.'

'To give just one example: Lucy Fitzroy.'

'Oh yes – Lord Almighty yes.'

The two men leap up from the bench as if on a pre-agreed signal.

'Lucy Fitzroy,' begins Ashwell, in the manner of a music-hall recital, 'was a new girl at Madame Georgina's in the Finchley Road, where there is chastisement a'plenty.' By way of illustration Ashwell brings his cane down hard on his calf several times. '*Down*, flesh! *Up*, flesh! *Down*!'

'Steady on, Ashwell.' Bodley lays a cautioning hand on his friend's arm. 'Remember, only a lord can make a limp look distinguished.'

'Well, as you may know, Bodley and I occasionally take a peek in Madame Georgina's to see what calibre of girl is wielding the whips. And late last year we came upon an absolute fizgig of a girl, introduced to us by the madam as Lucy Fitzroy, illegitimate daughter of Lord Fitzroy, with horse-riding consequently in her blood.'

'Well no doubt it's all bosh, but the *girl* seemed convinced of it! Fourteen years old, smooth and firm as a babe, with the most *glorious* pride. She had on all the riding gear, and she wore it so well – she'd come down the stairs, *sideways*, like this, one boot, then the other, as though she were *dismounting* from the steps. She'd be clutching a *very* short and quite *vicious* riding crop, and on her cheeks you could see those little spots of colour burning – genuine, I'll swear. And Madame Georgina told us that whenever a man was sent up to her, the girl would stand on the

landing and wait there just so, and when the poor fool got close enough, *ssshwish!* she'd slash him across the cheek with the crop, and then point with it towards the bed and say—'

'Good God!' exclaims Ashwell, having chanced to look in the direction of Bodley's pointing stick. 'God almighty! Who would you say *that* is?' He shades his eyes with one hand and peers intently at the far end of St James's Park. Bodley falls into position at his side, peering likewise.

'It's Henry,' he proclaims delightedly.

'Yes, yes it is – and Mrs Fox!'

'Of course.'

The two men turn to face William once more and bow gravely.

'You must excuse us, Bill.'

'Yes, we wish to go and torment Henry.'

'You have my blessing,' says William, with a smirk.

'He avoids us, you know – avoids us like the plague, ever since . . . uh . . . how shall we put it . . . ?'

'Ever since his own personal angel alighted at the end of his bed.'

'Quite. Anyway, we must do our very best to catch him before he makes a run for it.'

'Oh, he couldn't, not with Mrs Fox in tow: she'd drop dead! They haven't a chance, I tell you.'

'Cheers, Willy.'

And with that they are off, pursuing their victims at high speed. Indeed, they run at such a furious pace, despite their formal dress, that they must pump their arms for balance, quite unconcerned about the impression they must be making on anyone watching – in fact, they exaggerate their ridiculous chuff-chuffing gait for their own amusement. Behind them they leave two long, wet, dark-green trails in the grass, and a rather dazed William Rackham.

It's always been very much Bodley and Ashwell's style to swoop in and out of conversations, and if one wishes to feel comfortable in their company, one must swoop alongside them. As William watches them dashing across the park, the burden of despondency descends on his shoulders once more. He has lost, through lack of use, his own nerve and agility for this sort of banter, this brand of exhibitionism. Could he even run as fast as his friends are running? It's as if he's watching his own body fleeing across the park, a younger self, speeding away.

Could he perhaps leap up and follow? No, it's too late. There's no catching up now. They are dark, fleet figures on a bright horizon. William slumps back on the bench, and his thoughts, briefly stirred up by Bodley and Ashwell, settle into their former stagnancy.

What grieves him most is how *unnecessary* his suffering is, given the value of the family assets. If his father would only sell the company . . .

But you have heard all this before. Your best course is to leave William to himself for ten minutes or so. In that time, while his brain forms a crust of reflective algae, the rest of him will feel the influence of all he's been plied with this morning: the alley whore's proposition, the sight of the French girls in Trafalgar Square, Bodley and Ashwell's talk of brothels, their own teasing courtship of him followed by their desertion, and (just in the last hour or so) the arrival in St James's Park of a number of beautiful young ladies.

A potent brew, all that. Once sufficiently intoxicated, William will rise from his seat and follow his desires, follow them along the path that leads, ultimately, to Sugar.