

I

Breakfast at Stories

'I wonder who this is from,' said Mrs Brandon, picking a letter out of the heap that lay by her plate and holding it at arm's length upside down. 'It is quite extraordinary how I can't see without my spectacles. It makes me laugh sometimes because it is so ridiculous.'

In proof of this assertion she laughed very pleasantly. Her son and daughter, who were already eating their breakfast, exchanged pitying glances but said nothing.

'It doesn't look like a handwriting that I know,' said Mrs Brandon, putting her large horn-rimmed spectacles on and turning the letter the right way up. 'More like a handwriting that I don't know. The postmark is all smudgy so I can't see where it comes from.'

'You might steam it open and see who it's from,' said her son Francis, 'and then shut it up again and guess.'

'But if I saw who it was from I'd know,' said Mrs Brandon plaintively. 'In France and places people write their name

and address across the back of the envelope so that you know who it is.'

'And then you needn't open it at all if you don't like them,' said Francis, 'though I believe they really only do it to put spies from other places off the scent. I mean if Aunt Sissie wanted to write to you she would put someone else's name and address on the flap, and then you would open it instead of very rightly putting it straight into the waste-paper basket.'

'You don't think it's from Aunt Sissie, do you?' said Mrs Brandon. 'Whenever I get a letter I hope it isn't from her; but mostly,' she added, reverting to her original grievance, 'one knows at once by the handwriting who it's from.'

'If it's Aunt Sissie,' said her daughter Delia, 'it will be all about being offended because we haven't been to see her since Easter.'

'Well, we couldn't,' said Mrs Brandon. 'Francis hasn't had a holiday since Easter, and you were abroad and if I go alone she is only annoyed. Besides she is more your aunt than mine. She is no relation of mine at all. That she is a relation of yours you have to thank your father.'

Francis and Delia again exchanged glances. It was a habit of their mother's to make them entirely responsible for any difficulties brought into the family by the late Mr Brandon, saying the words 'your father' in a voice that implied a sinister collaboration between that gentleman and the powers of darkness for which her children were somehow to blame. As for Mr Brandon's merits, which consisted chiefly in having been an uninterested husband and father for some six or seven years and then dying and leaving his widow quite well off, no one thought of them.

‘Well, after all, Mother, Father was as much your father as ours,’ said Francis, who while holding no brief for a parent whom he could barely remember, felt that men must stick together, ‘at least *you* brought him into the family, and that makes you really responsible for Aunt Sissie. And,’ he hurriedly added, seeing in his mother’s eye what she was about to say, ‘it’s no good your saying Father wouldn’t have liked to hear me speak to you like that, darling, because that’s just what we can’t tell. Can I have some more coffee?’

Mrs Brandon, who had been collecting her forces to take rather belated offence at her son’s remarks, was so delighted to fuss over his coffee that she entirely forgot her husband’s possible views on how young men should address their mothers and saw herself very happily as a still not unattractive woman spoiling a handsome and devoted son. That Francis’s looks were inherited from his father was a fact she chose to ignore, except if his hair was more than usually untidy, when she was apt to say reproachfully, ‘Of course that is your father’s hair, Francis,’ or even more loftily and annoyingly to no one in particular, ‘His father’s hair all over again.’

Peace being restored over the coffee, Mrs Brandon ate her own breakfast and read her letters. Francis and Delia were discussing a plan for a picnic with some friends in the neighbourhood, when their mother interrupted them by remarking defiantly that she had said so.

A small confusion took place.

‘No, no,’ said Mrs Brandon, ‘nothing to do with hard-boiled eggs or cucumber sandwiches. It is your Aunt Sissie.’

By the tone of the word ‘your’ her children realised that

they were about to be in disgrace for thinking of picnics at such an hour.

'Then it *was* Aunt Sissie,' said Delia. 'What is the worst, Mother? Does she want us to go over?'

'Wait,' said Mrs Brandon. 'It isn't Aunt Sissie. At least not exactly. It is dictated. I will read it to you. And that,' said Mrs Brandon laying the letter aside, 'is why I couldn't tell who it was from. It is written by someone called Ella Morris with Miss in brackets, so as none of the maids are called Morris it must be a new companion.'

'Heaven help her,' said Francis, 'and that isn't swearing, darling, and I am sure Father would have said it too. Give me the letter or we shall never know what is in it. Delia, the blow has fallen. Ella Morris, Miss, writes at the wish of Miss Brandon to say that she, Miss Brandon, hereinafter to be known as Aunt Sissie, is at a loss to understand why all her relations have forsaken her and she is an ailing old woman and expects us all to come over on Wednesday to lunch or be cut out of her will. Mother, who gets Aunt Sissie's money if she disinherits us?'

Mrs Brandon said that was not the way to talk.

After half an hour's detailed consideration of the question the Brandon family left the breakfast table, not that the subject was in any way exhausted, but Rose the parlour-maid had begun to hover in an unnerving and tyrannical way. Francis said he must write some letters, Delia went to do the telephoning which she and her friends found a necessary part of daily life, while Mrs Brandon went into the garden to get fresh flowers, choosing with great cunning the moment when the gardener was having a mysterious second

breakfast. Certainly anyone who had met her coming furtively and hurriedly but triumphantly in by the drawing-room window, her arms full of the gardener's flowers, would entirely have agreed with her own opinion of herself and found her still not unattractive, or possibly felt that a woman with so enchanting an expression could not have been more charming even in her youth. Mrs Brandon herself, in one of her moods of devastating truthfulness, had explained her own appearance as the result of a long and happy widowhood, and as, after a little sincere grief at the loss of a husband to whom she had become quite accustomed, she had had nothing of consequence to trouble her, it is probable that she was right. Her house and garden were pretty, comfortable, and of a manageable size, her servants stayed with her, Francis had been one of those lucky, even-tempered boys that go through school with the goodwill of all, if with no special distinction, and then fallen straight into a good job. As for Delia, she combined unconcealed scorn for her mother with a genuine affection and an honest wish to improve her and bring her up to date. Mrs Brandon thought her daughter a darling, and had gladly given up any attempt at control years ago. The only fault she could find with her children was that they didn't laugh at the same jokes as she did, but finding that all their friends were equally humourless, she accepted it placidly, seeing herself as a spirit of laughter born out of its time.

But human nature cannot be content on a diet of honey and if there is nothing in one's life that requires pity, one must invent it; for to go through life unpitied would be an unthinkable loss. Mrs Brandon, quite unconsciously, had

made of her uninteresting husband a mild bogey, allowing her friends, especially those who had not known him, to imagine a slightly sinister figure that had cast a becoming shadow over his charming widow's life. Many of her acquaintances said sympathetically they really could not imagine why she had married such a man. To them Mrs Brandon would reply wistfully that she had not been very happy as a girl and no one else had asked her, thus giving the impression that she had in her innocence seized an opportunity to escape from loveless home to what proved a loveless marriage. The truth, ever so little twisted in the right direction by her ingenious mind, was that Mr Brandon had proposed to her when she was not quite twenty. Being a kind-hearted girl who hated to say no, she had at once fallen in love, because if one's heart is not otherwise engaged there seems to be nothing else to do. Her parents had made no difficulties, Mr Brandon had made a very handsome will and taken his wife to Stories, his charming early Georgian house at Pomfret Madrigal in the Barchester country. Francis was born before she was twenty-one, a deed which filled her with secret pride, though no one else would have guessed it from her usual plaintive and ambiguous statement, 'of course my first baby was born almost at once,' a statement which had made more than one of her hearers silently add the word Brute to Mr Brandon's epitaph.

Delia was born four years later, and Mrs Brandon, wrapped up in her nursery, was only beginning to feel ruffled by her husband's dullness when death with kindly care removed him through the agency of pneumonia. As it was a cold spring Mrs Brandon was able to go into black, and the

ensuing summer being a particularly hot one gave her an excuse for mourning in white, though she always wore a heavy necklace of old jet to show goodwill.

It was during that summer that Mr Brandon's Aunt Sissie, hitherto an almost mythical figure, had made her first terrifying appearance at Stories. Mrs Brandon was sitting in the ex-library, now called her sitting-room, writing to her parents, when the largest Rolls Royce she had ever seen came circling round the gravel sweep. As it drew up she saw that there were two chauffeurs on the front seat. The man who was driving remained at his post to restrain the ardour of his machine, while the second got out and rang the front door bell. The bonnet was facing Mrs Brandon and she could not see who was inside the car without making herself too visible at the window, so she had to wait till Rose, then only a young parlour-maid, but older than her mistress and already a budding tyrant, came in.

'Miss Brandon, madam,' she announced, 'and I've put her in the drawing-room.'

'Miss Brandon?' said her mistress. 'Oh, that must be Mr Brandon's aunt. What shall I do?'

'I've put her in the drawing-room, madam,' Rose repeated, speaking patiently as to a mental defective, 'and she said the chauffeurs was to have some tea, madam, so Cook is looking after them.'

'Then I suppose I must,' said Mrs Brandon, and went into the drawing-room.

It was here that for the first and only time she felt a faint doubt as to the propriety of mourning in white, for her aunt by marriage was wearing such a panoply of black silk dress,

black cashmere mantle, black ostrich feather boa and unbelievably a black bonnet trimmed with black velvet and black cherries, that Mrs Brandon wondered giddily whether spinsters could be honorary widows.

‘When once I have sat down I don’t get up again easily,’ said Miss Brandon, holding out a black-gloved, podgy hand.

‘Oh, please don’t,’ said Mrs Brandon vaguely, taking her aunt’s lifeless hand. ‘How do you do, Miss Brandon. Henry will be so sorry to miss you – I mean he was always talking about you and saying we must take the children to see you.’

‘I had practically forbidden him the house for some years,’ said Miss Brandon.

To this there appeared to be no answer except *Why?* A question Mrs Brandon had not the courage to ask.

‘But I would certainly have come to the funeral,’ Miss Brandon continued, ‘had it not been my Day in Bed. I take one day a week in bed, an excellent plan at my age. Later I shall take two days, and probably spend the last years of my life entirely in bed. My grandfather, my mother and my elder half-sister were all bed-ridden for the last ten years of their lives and all lived to be over ninety.’

Again it was difficult to find an answer. Mrs Brandon murmured something about how splendid and felt it was hardly adequate.

‘But I went into mourning for my nephew Henry at once,’ said Miss Brandon, ignoring her niece’s remark, ‘as you see. I have practically not been out of mourning for fifteen years, what with one death and another. A posthumous child?’ she added with sudden interest, looking piercingly at her niece’s white dress.

‘Oh no,’ said Mrs Brandon. ‘Mamma and Papa are still alive.’

‘Tut, tut, not you,’ said Miss Brandon. ‘What is your name?’

Mrs Brandon said apologetically that it was Lavinia.

‘A pretty name,’ said Miss Brandon. ‘When last I saw your husband Henry Brandon, he mentioned you to me as Pet. It was before his marriage and he was spending a weekend with me. I had to say to him, “Henry Brandon, a man who can call his future wife Pet and speak of the Government as you have spoken can hardly make a good husband and is certainly not a good nephew.” I suppose he made you suffer a good deal.’

Here if ever was an opportunity for Mrs Brandon to indulge in an orgy of sentiment, but her underlying sense of fairness suddenly choked any complaint she could truthfully have made.

‘No, I don’t think so,’ she said, looking straight at her husband’s aunt. ‘He was very nice to the children when he noticed them, and he liked me to be nicely dressed, and we were always very comfortable. Would you like to see the children, Miss Brandon?’

She rang the bell and asked Rose to ask Nurse to bring the children down.

‘I see you are determined not to give Henry away,’ said Miss Brandon, not disapprovingly. ‘But when is it? I see no other reason for wearing white so soon.’

Her gaze was again so meaningfully fixed upon her niece’s white dress that Mrs Brandon began to blush violently.

‘I don’t think I understand,’ she faltered, ‘but if that is

what you mean of course it isn't. I just thought white was less depressing for the children.'

'I am glad to hear it. That I could not have forgiven Henry,' said the disconcerting Miss Brandon, and then the children were brought down, approved, and taken away again.

'Now you can ring for my second chauffeur, Lavinia,' said Miss Brandon. 'He always comes with me to help me in and out of the car. I prefer to have the first chauffeur remain at the wheel, for one never knows.'

She then expounded to Mrs Brandon in the hall, unmoved by the presence of her chauffeur and the parlour-maid, her plans for the disposal of her affairs. As far as Mrs Brandon, shaken by Rose's presence, could understand, Francis and Delia were to be the heirs of their aunt's large fortune, unless she saw fit to leave it to a cousin whom she had never seen. She was then hoisted into her car, the second chauffeur got into his place, the first chauffeur put in the clutch and the equipage moved away. Mrs Brandon, much the worse for her aunt's visit, declined Rose's suggestion of an early cup of tea and went up to the nursery for comfort. Here she found Francis and Delia already having tea. Francis was sitting on a nursery chair with a fat cushion on it. He was wearing a green linen suit with a green linen feeder tied round his neck, and was covered with apricot jam from his large smiling mouth to the roots of his yellow hair. Delia, in a yellow muslin frock with a feeder of yellow towelling, and a yellow ribbon in her brown curls, was being fed with strips of bread and butter by Nurse.

'Don't move, Nurse,' said Mrs Brandon, as Nurse sketched

the gesture of one who has no intention of getting up. 'Can I have tea with you?'

'If we had known Mummie was coming, we'd have had our clean pinny on,' said Nurse severely to Delia.

'Pinny,' said Delia.

'You'd hardly believe the words she picks up, madam,' said Nurse with quite unjustifiable pride considering how many times a day the words clean pinny were said by her. 'We'll get another cup and saucer out of the cupboard, won't we, baby, a nice cup and saucer with a duck on it for Mummie. Would you like the duck, madam, or the moo-cow?'

Mrs Brandon expressed a preference for the moo-cow, on hearing which Delia, who was holding a mug of milk to her mouth with both hands, said 'Moo-cow' into it. The milk spluttered all over her face, Francis began to laugh and choked on a piece of bread and butter and jam, Nurse dashed with first aid from one to another, and Mrs Brandon found herself laughing till suddenly she was crying and couldn't stop. Her children, deeply interested, stopped choking to stare.

'I don't know what's the matter, Nurse,' said Mrs Brandon through her sobs. 'An aunt of Mr Brandon's came to call and it was very upsetting.'

'I don't wonder, madam,' said Nurse, deeply approving her mistress's show of feeling as suitable to a young widow. 'Suppose you go and lie down and I'll bring you the tea in your room. We'll give Mummie the nice moo-cow cup of tea, won't we baby? Francis, wipe your mouth on your feeder and say your grace and get down and Nurse will come and wash your hands as soon as she has taken Mummie some tea.'

Thanks to the tea and a rest Mrs Brandon quite soon recov-

ered from her mild hysterics, but the affair was not at an end. On Thursdays, which this day happened to be, the nursery-maid had her half-day out; by a great oversight the kitchen-maid who took Nurse's supper tray up when the nursery-maid was out, had been given special leave to go and see her married sister who had had triplets. On any ordinary occasion Nurse would have gone supperless sooner than condescend to go downstairs, just as the second housemaid would sooner have lost her place than deputed for the kitchen-maid, but the urgent need of communicating gossip drove both sides into some semblance of humanity. As soon as Francis and Delia were asleep Nurse went down to the kitchen and there found the second housemaid talking to Rose.

'Well, Nurse,' said the second housemaid, 'I was just going to take your tray up as Gladys is out.'

'Thanks, Grace,' said Nurse with the courtesy that a superior should always show to an inferior, 'that is very obliging of you, but I hardly feel like touching a thing. Just the bread and butter and that bloater paste and a bit of cheese and a cup of tea.'

She assumed an interesting pallor and smiled faintly.

'Rose feels just like you do, Nurse,' said Grace. 'It's all that upset this afternoon.'

'Madam did mention that she was upset,' said Nurse, exploring the ground, but careful to give nothing away.

'I couldn't hardly touch my own tea,' said Rose. 'That Miss Brandon talking of making her will with Mr Brandon only four months buried and all. No wonder madam didn't fancy her tea after that.'

Cook, who had come in as Rose was speaking, said those

chauffeurs were nice young fellers and the young one with the little moustache had worked in the works where her brother was, and there were twenty indoors and out at Miss Brandon's place, and didn't Nurse want a bit of that cold pork.

'Thanks, Cook, ever so,' said Nurse, 'but it would go against my feelings. It gave me quite a turn seeing madam so upset. Seeing Master Francis and baby having their tea seemed to bring it all home as you might say. So I said to madam, If you was to have a nice lay down, madam, you'd feel much better.'

She paused.

'No wonder she was upset,' said Rose. 'I knew she was reel upset because I said If you was to have a cup of tea, madam, now, it would do you good, because it was only half-past four and drawing-room tea isn't till five.'

'My nursery kettle was just on the boil,' said Nurse airily, 'so I took madam a cup of tea and she seemed ever so much better when she'd drunk it.'

This was an appalling piece of provocation on Nurse's part, carefully led up to and deliberately uttered. Between her and Rose there was an unspoken rivalry for the possession of their mistress. Rose had been with Mrs Brandon since her marriage and was therefore the senior, besides holding the important position of unofficial lady's maid, but Nurse had through the children an unassailable hold over the household. Rose might be able to bully her mistress about the hour for tea, or the evening dress she should wear, but it was with Nurse that Mrs Brandon spent an hour or two in the nursery or the garden every day, Nurse that she allowed to help her to get flowers for the church, or to finish the half-dozen hideous and badly

cut flannelette nightgowns that were her forced contribution to a thing called Personal Service that levied blackmail on the gentry. Rose knew in her heart that if it came to a showdown Nurse would win, for Mrs Brandon as a mother was as incapable as she was adoring, and this did not improve her feelings. Nurse, equally conscious of this vital fact, was more polite to Rose than anyone could be expected to bear. Today she had made an incursion into the enemy's territory that would not easily be forgiven. If Mrs Brandon chose to demean herself to have tea in the nursery, Rose could but pity her, while admitting that she had a perfect right to have tea with her own children. But that her mistress should refuse the cup of tea she had so kindly offered and then accept the offering from Nurse, not even in the nursery but in her own room, sacred to Rose's ministrations, that was an insult Rose would not readily forget, and for which she chose to put the entire blame on her rival. So she said, in a general way, that Indian tea wasn't no good for the headache.

Nurse said in an equally general and equally offensive way that so long as tea was made with boiling water, it didn't matter if it was Indian or China.

Cook said she found a good dose was the best thing for the headache, but it must be a good dose, to which both housemaids added a graphic description of the effect a good dose had on (a) a bed-ridden aunt, and (b) a cousin who had fits.

Rose said to Cook it was no wonder madam didn't have no appetite for her dinner, poor thing, to which Nurse was just preparing a barbed reply when to everyone's mingled disappointment and relief the kitchen-maid suddenly

appeared, and by sitting down and bursting into tears at once became the centre of interest. Cook at once provided a cup of very strong tea and while drinking it the kitchen-maid explained with sobs and gulps that two of the triplets were dead and looked that beautiful that you wouldn't credit it. Everyone applauded her display of feeling and a delightful conversation took place about similar events in everyone's own family circle. Nurse, who only recognised the children of the gentry, circles in which triplets are for some obscure social or economic reason practically unknown, came off poorly in this contest and retired quietly with her tray.

But from that day the silent struggle for the soul of the unconscious Mrs Brandon became the ruling passion in Nurse and Rose. If Nurse brushed and twisted Delia's curls with absent-minded ferocity, or Rose cleaned the silver ornaments in the drawing-room till they were severely dented and had to go to Barchester to be repaired, they were not thinking of their respective charges, but of an enemy above and below stairs. When Francis went to school and Delia had a French governess, Rose's hopes soared high. Mrs Brandon had intended to give Nurse notice, with a huge tip and glowing recommendations, but from day to day she found that she dared not do it, from month to month Nurse's position became stronger, and from year to year Nurse stayed on, partly as maid to Delia, partly as general utility, always in a state of armed neutrality towards Rose.

After this terrifying visit, nearly seventeen years ago, Miss Brandon had never visited Stories again, but from time to time had summoned her niece and her children to Brandon

Abbey. These visits seemed to Mrs Brandon to have been the inevitable occasion for some outburst from her offspring. It was here that Francis had fallen through a hot-house roof, where he had no business to be, cutting his leg to the bone and bringing down the best grape vine in his fall; here that he had laboriously baled all the water out of the small lily-pond with one of the best copper preserving pans, abstracted no one ever discovered how from the kitchen regions, leaving all the high-bred goldfish to die in the mud. Here it was that Delia, usually so good, had been found in Miss Brandon's dressing-room, that Holy of Holies, peacocking before the glass in her great-aunt's mantle and bonnet. Here it was that Francis, at a later age, had learnt to drive a car with the connivance of the second chauffeur and run over one of Miss Brandon's peacocks, while on the same ill-omened visit Delia had broken the jug and basin in the best spare bedroom where she had been sent to wash her hands, and flooded the Turkey carpet.

Miss Brandon had made very little comment on these misfortunes, but her niece noticed that after each of them she had talked a good deal about the cousin she had never seen, the possible inheritor of her money. Mrs Brandon, who did not care in the least what her aunt's plans might be, but was genuinely sorry for the indomitable old lady, yearly becoming more bed-ridden as she had predicted, was at last goaded into a mild remonstrance, pointing out to Miss Brandon that if it had not been for her nephew Henry, the children would never have existed, to which Miss Brandon had replied cryptically that it took two to make a quarrel.

Thinking of all this and of her aunt's letter, Mrs Brandon

carried her flowers into the little room known as the flower room, along one wall of which ran a long marble slab with four basins in it, relics of a former Brandon with four gardening daughters. She then fetched yesterday's flowers from the hall and living-rooms, refilled the vases, and began to arrange her flowers. This she always called 'my housekeeping', adding that it took more time than all her other duties put together, but she couldn't bear anyone else to do it, thus giving the impression of one who was a martyr to her feeling for beauty. As a matter of fact she spoke no more than the truth, for Cook arranged the menus, and Nurse looked after the linen and did all the sewing and darning, so that Mrs Brandon would have been hard put to it to find anything useful to do.

Presently Delia's voice at the telephone in the hall penetrated her consciousness, and she called her daughter's name.

'Oh, bother,' said Delia's voice to her unknown correspondent, 'Mummie's yelling for me. Hang on a moment. What is it, Mummie?' she inquired, looking into the flower room.

'It's about Aunt Sissie, darling. She said Wednesday, so don't arrange the picnic that day.'

'Oh, Mother, any day would do for Aunt Sissie. We must have Wednesday for the picnic or the Morlands can't come.'

'I can't help it,' said Mrs Brandon, massing sweet peas in a bowl. 'We haven't been for ages and she's all alone, poor old thing.'

'Don't be so mercenary, Mother,' said Delia. 'Here, Francis, come here a moment.'

Francis, who was passing through the hall, came to the flower room door and asked what the matter was.

‘It’s Mummie, going all horse-leechy,’ said Delia. ‘Wednesday’s the only possible day for the picnic and now Mummie says we must go and be dutiful to Aunt Sissie. I wish Aunt Sissie would give all her money to that cousin of hers straight away and leave us in peace. Oh, Mummie, do be sensible.’

‘I am,’ said Mrs Brandon, ‘and I don’t see why we shouldn’t be kind to poor Aunt Sissie even if she is rich. If I were very old and alone and spent most of my time in bed, I would be very glad when people visited me.’

At this both her children laughed loudly.

Nurse, on her way upstairs with an armful of sewing, stopped to interfere.

‘Oh, Nurse—’ said all three at once.

‘I want you, Miss Delia, so I can try on your tennis frock,’ said she. ‘Come up with me now.’

‘Oh, Nurse, any time will do. I’m telephoning now. Be an angel and I’ll come up presently. Mummie wants us to go over to Aunt Sissie on Wednesday, and that’s the only good day for the picnic.’

‘Nonsense, Miss Delia,’ said Nurse. ‘There’s plenty of other days in the week. Now come straight up with me and try that dress on.’

Delia followed her old Nurse mutinously upstairs, making faces, till Nurse, who appeared to have, as she had often told the children when they were small thus frightening them horribly, eyes in the back of her head, said sharply that that was enough, and so they vanished.

‘Francis, darling,’ said Mrs Brandon, who had collected another great bunch of sweet peas and was holding them thoughtfully to her face, ‘we must go to Aunt Sissie on Wednesday.’

‘Yes, I think we must,’ said Francis. ‘Anyone who didn’t know you would think you were mercenary, darling, but I know you haven’t the wits to concentrate. You’ve got a kind heart, though, and anyone who looked at you sympathising with people would think you really cared. Give me a smell of those sweet peas.’

Mrs Brandon held up the flowers and Francis sniffed them violently.

‘There are few pleasures like really burrowing one’s nose into sweet peas,’ he said, much refreshed. ‘You’re a bit like them, darling, all soft pinky-purple colours and a nice smell. Do you want your tall handsome son to help you to take the flowers to the church? It will look so well if we go together, and everyone will say what a comfort I am to you and what a wonderful mother you have been.’

Mrs Brandon laughed with great good humour and gave Francis a long basket to fill with tall flowers. Then they walked across the garden, up a lane, past the Cow and Sickle, and so into the churchyard by the side gate.

Mrs Brandon could never be thankful enough that her husband had died at Cannes and been decently buried in the English cemetery. If he had been buried in Pomfret Madrigal church she would have had to keep his grave and memory decorated with flowers. If she had undertaken this pious duty herself she would certainly have forgotten it and left the flowers, a wet mush of decay, to scandalise the vil-

lage. If she had told Turpin the gardener to look after it, not only would the village have been scandalised, but he would have chosen the stiffest asters and dahlias like rosettes, bedded out begonias, even cultivated immortelles for the purpose, and given the little plot the air of a County Council Park. The only alternative Mrs Brandon could imagine was to have what might be called an all-weather grave, sprinkled with chips from the stone-mason's yard, or battened down under a granite slab, and to do this to the unconscious Mr Brandon would have seemed to his widow a little unkind. So Mr Brandon reposed at Cannes and a sum of money was paid yearly to keep his memory as green as the climate allowed, while a neat tablet in Pomfret Madrigal church bore witness in excellent lettering to the dates of his birth and death.

Pomfret Madrigal church was of great antiquity, being the remains of the former Abbey of that name. Part of it was supposed to date from the reign of King John, but as that particular part was considered by archaeologists to be buried in the thick chancel walls, everyone was at liberty to have his own opinion. A few years previously the Vicar, Mr Miller, a newcomer and an ardent enthusiast for his new church, had discovered faint traces of colour in a very dark corner high up on the south wall. Mrs Brandon, always pleased to give pleasure, had made a handsome contribution towards a fund for church restoration, a learned professor famed for extracting mural paintings from apparently blank walls had visited the church, and the work had been put in hand.

After several months' slow, careful, and to the Vicar mad-deningly exciting work, Professor Lancelot had brought to

light two square feet of what might have been a patterned border, and a figure, apparently standing on its head, which was variously identified as Lucifer, Fulke de Pomfret who had impounded some of the Abbey pigs in revenge for alleged depredations on his lady's herb garden, and Bishop Wyckens who had made himself extremely unpopular with the Abbey about the matter of some waste land over at Starveacres. However, all these differences of opinion were drowned and forgotten in Professor Lancelot's supreme discovery that the fragment of border might almost with certainty be attributed to Nicholas de Hogpen, an extremely prolific artist practically none of whose work was known. Others supported the view that the work should stand to the credit of an unknown monk whose work in Northumberland was described in an imperfect MS which the owner, Mr Amery P. Otis of Brookline, Mass., would not allow anyone to see. The correspondence on this subject, beginning in the *Journal of the Society of Bassetshire Archaeologists*, had overflowed into the *Sunday Times* and *Observer*, causing several correspondents to write to the Editor about yellow-backed tits who had nested near mural paintings, or the fact that their great-great-grandfather had as a child sat on the knee of a very old man whose grandfather said he remembered someone who said he had heard of the Reformation. The Vicar read every word of correspondence and pasted all the cuttings into an album, as also a photograph from the *Daily Spectrum* with the caption 'Rector of Pomfret Madrigal says Mural Paintings unique', and an inset called The Rev. Milker.

Since these eventful doings the paintings had gradually receded into the walls and were now invisible except to the

eye of faith, which could often be found in the tourist season, guide book in hand, twisting itself almost upside down in its efforts to make out the inverted figure.

The July morning was now very hot. The little churchyard, on a slope facing the south, was shimmering with heat, and the flowers in the jam jars and Canadian salmon tins on the poorer graves were already wilting. In spite of her shady hat and her parasol of a most becoming shade of pink, Mrs Brandon was glad to get into the coolness of the little church. She slipped into a pew, knelt for a moment, and then emerged, apparently spiritually much refreshed.

‘What do you say, darling, when you do that?’ asked Francis. ‘I’ve often wondered.’

Mrs Brandon looked guilty.

‘I never quite know,’ she said. ‘I try to concentrate, but the only way I can concentrate is to hold my breath very hard, and that stops me thinking. And when I shut my eyes I see all sorts of spokes and fireworks. I always mean to ask to be nicer and kinder, but things like Rose wanting to change her afternoon out, or Aunt Sissie’s letter, come into my mind at once. But I did have one very good idea, which was that if Rose changes her afternoon we could have the picnic that day and kill two birds with one stone.’

‘People have been excommunicated for less than that,’ said Francis. ‘Pull yourself together, darling; here comes Mr Miller.’

Mr Miller, in the cassock and biretta that were the joy of his life and that no one grudged him, came up.

‘Good morning, good morning,’ he said, not so much in a spirit of vain repetition as in double greeting.

'I always feel I ought to ask you to bless me,' said Mrs Brandon taking his hand and looking up at him.

'My dear lady!' said Mr Miller, much embarrassed, and only just stopping himself saying, 'It is rather you who should bless me.'

'Come off it, Mamma,' said Francis kindly but firmly. 'Don't you know my mamma well enough yet, Mr Miller, to realise that she is a prey to saying what she thinks most effective?'

'I don't think you ought to talk like that in church, Francis,' said his mother severely. 'Come along, the altar is waiting for us.'

At this Francis exploded in a reverent guffaw and handed the basket of flowers to the Vicar, saying that he would fill the watering can at the tap in the churchyard and bring it in. So Mr Miller found himself alone with Mrs Brandon and an armful of flowers, and didn't know if he ought to stay with her or visit the poor, who were always kind to him but at the same time gave him the impression that they had just stopped a deeply absorbing conversation, probably about himself, and were only waiting till his back was turned to continue it. Mr Miller was about Mrs Brandon's age and having never met anyone that he felt like marrying had romantic views on celibacy. His richer parishioners liked him and he dined out a good deal, while the poorer part of his flock accepted him with good-humoured tolerance and always put off the christenings till he had come back from his yearly holiday. Funerals unfortunately could not so be postponed, though it was considered distinctly bad taste in Old Turpin, Mrs Brandon's gardener's uncle, to have died

four days before the Vicar's return, in particularly hot weather. Weddings were also postponed so that the contracting parties could have the benefit of their own priest, but since the sexton's daughter had produced a fine pair of twins owing to her insistence on waiting to celebrate the nuptials till Mr Miller came back from Switzerland, he had been very firm on the subject.

As was inevitable, he was romantically in love with Mrs Brandon, but luckily for his own peace of mind he did not recognise the symptoms which he mistook for respect and admiration, though why these respectable qualities should make one give at the knees and become damp in the hands, he did not inquire.

Now Francis came back with the watering can and the vestry waste-paper basket for the dead flowers, and Mrs Brandon arranged sheaves of gladioli to her own satisfaction. All three walked down the church together and emerged blinking into the hot noonday glare. Mrs Brandon slowly put up her parasol, looking so angelic that Francis felt obliged to ask his mother what she was thinking about.

'I was wondering,' said she, 'if one ought to bring a watering can into the church. Wouldn't it look better to bring the vases outside and fill them at the tap?'

'My mother is the most truthful woman I know,' said Francis to Mr Miller, 'except when she isn't.'

Mr Miller wanted to say that Mrs Brandon's touch would sanctify even a watering can and that Francis ought not to speak lightly of such a thing as Truth, but was overcome by nervousness and said nothing. Francis said, Well, they must be getting along, and Mr Miller was inspired by desperation

to ask them into the Vicarage to look at the new wallpaper in his study. Accordingly they walked through the little gate into the Vicarage garden and up by the yew hedge to the sixteenth-century stone Vicarage which was basking in the sun. The new wallpaper, which turned out to be that part of the wall where the damp patch used to be, freshly distempered, was duly admired.

‘One does feel,’ said Mrs Brandon, sinking elegantly into a very comfortable leather armchair, ‘that this house needs a woman.’

Francis, alarmed by his mother’s fresh outburst of truthfulness, made gestures behind Mr Miller’s back, designed to convey to his mother that the Vicar’s cassock and biretta made such a suggestion very unbecoming. Mr Miller felt that if Mrs Brandon were always sitting in that chair on a hot summer morning in the subdued light that filtered through the outside blinds, holding the broken head of a white gladiolus in her gloved hand, the parish would be much easier to manage.

‘It really needs a good housekeeper,’ said Mrs Brandon, continuing the train of her own thoughts. ‘Turpin’s Hettie is a nice girl, but she is much too kind to insects. She has never killed a spider in her life. Look!’

And she pointed the gladiolus accusingly at a corner where a fat spider was dealing with a daddy-long-legs.

‘Oh dear!’ said Mr Miller, in despair.

‘I’ll hoick her down,’ said Francis, looking round for something that would reach the ceiling. ‘Can I take one of your oars, Mr Miller?’

Without waiting for permission he took down from the

wall the oar with which Mr Miller had stroked Lazarus to victory in Eights Week, and made a pat at the spider. The spider was dislodged, but with great presence of mind clung to the end of the blade with all her arms and legs.

‘Get off,’ said Francis, waving the oar. ‘Help, Mr Miller, she is laying hold with her hands or whatever it says. It’s more in your line than mine.’

On hearing this suggestion of clerical interference the spider ran down the oar in a threatening way. Mr Miller flapped feebly at her with his biretta, which caused her, or so Francis subsequently asserted, to bare her fangs and snarl. Mrs Brandon got up and enveloped the spider in her handkerchief, which she then threw out of the window into the heliotrope.

‘Thank you, darling,’ said Francis, putting the oar back on the wall. ‘It takes a woman to fight a woman.’

‘I wonder why spiders should be female?’ said Mr Miller, so overwrought by his narrow escape that he hardly knew what he was saying.

‘I suppose it’s because they eat their husbands,’ said Mrs Brandon.

‘Mamma darling, don’t,’ said Francis, ‘not in the Vicarage,’ thus completing Mr Miller’s confusion.

‘Please rescue my handkerchief, Francis,’ said Mrs Brandon, ‘only see that the spider has really gone.’

Francis leant his long form over the window sill, picked up the handkerchief, shook it and returned it to his mother. Mr Miller, who had had a wild thought of keeping the handkerchief for himself, realised that his chance was lost.

‘It smells so deliciously of heliotrope now,’ said Mrs Brandon, holding it to her face. This delightful gesture gave

a little comfort to her host, who would be able to reflect that his flowers had furnished the scent that pleased his guest.

Just as the goodbyes were getting under way, the study door opened and a dark young man of poetic and pale appearance came in, and seeing company began to back out.

‘Wait a moment, Hilary,’ said Mr Miller. ‘Mrs Brandon, this is Mr Grant who is reading with me. He only arrived last night. And this is Francis Brandon, Hilary Grant.’

Further handshaking took place and it seemed that the visit had really come to an end, when on the doorstep Mrs Brandon suddenly stopped.

‘I was thinking,’ she said, ‘that it would be so nice, Mr Miller, if you would dine with us next Wednesday. It will only be a kind of cold meal, but if you care to come we’d love to have you. And would Mr Grant perhaps come too?’

Mr Miller accepted for himself and his pupil and the Brandons went away.

‘Really, Mamma,’ Francis expostulated, ‘I didn’t think you had it in you to be so mean!’

‘I know quite well what you are hinting,’ said his mother, with distant dignity. ‘But it isn’t my fault if Rose changes her afternoon out, and I have been meaning to ask Mr Miller for some time, and it isn’t as if being a clergyman made one not able to eat cold supper. And now I must answer Aunt Sissie’s letter. I cannot think how it is that one never has time to do anything.’

‘Because you never have anything to do, darling,’ said Francis. ‘You take yourself in, but you can’t take in your tall, handsome son. Come along or we shall be late for lunch and Rose will lower.’

Brandon Abbey

In spite of Delia's mild sulks the picnic was put off till Friday and Miss Brandon's invitation, or command, obeyed. The weather remained set fair and as the Brandon family got into the car at twelve o'clock, Francis puffed loudly and said it was worse than a third-class railway carriage that had been standing in a siding. The road to Brandon Abbey was through some of the loveliest scenery in Bassetshire. Leaving Pomfret Madrigal it went through Little Misfit, with a glimpse of the hideous pinnacles of Pomfret Towers in the distance, and then followed for several miles the winding course of the Rising, among water meadows that looked greener than ever in contrast with the sun-parched country. At the Mellings Arms there was a choice of ways. One went through Barchester, the other, marked as a second-class road, went up and over the downs, as straight as the Romans had built it, skirted Rushwater by the beech avenue and so by the Fever Hospital to Brandon Abbey.

As the Mellings Arms came in sight, Mrs Brandon leant forward and tapped on the glass. Francis, who was by the chauffeur, slid the window back and poked his face through.

'Tell Curwen, darling, that we'll go by the downs,' said Mrs Brandon.

Her clear voice carried well and Curwen's back visibly took offence. Francis exchanged a few words with him and turned back to his mother and sister.

'He says there's a bad patch near the top and he doesn't think the springs will stand up to it,' he said.

Mrs Brandon made a face of resignation.

'Don't let that stop us,' said Francis. 'I'm all for the downs myself, aren't you, Delia?'

'Rather,' said Delia. 'We might see the place where the motor char-à-banc was on fire last week.'

Francis shut the window and spoke to Curwen again. That harbinger of misfortune listened with a stony face and turned the motor's head towards the downs. To Delia's great pleasure the burnt-out corpse of the motor char-à-banc was still by the roadside, and Curwen so far unbent as to inform his mistress, via her son, that there was one of the bodies burnt so bad they couldn't identify it, after which he devoted his attention to driving with quite maddening care over the stony patches, wincing at each little jolt as if a pin had been stuck into him.

At twenty minutes past one the gloomy lodge of Brandon Abbey was reached. Miss Brandon always kept her gates shut to mark her disapproval of things in general, and as the lodge-keeper was deaf and usually working in his back garden, Curwen had to get out and go and find him, which

he did with the gloomy satisfaction of a prophet whose warnings have been disregarded. Another five minutes' driving down the gloomy avenue which wound its way downwards to the hole in which the house was situated, brought them to the front door.

'Welcome to the abode of joy,' said Francis, politely opening the door of the car for his mother and sister. 'I'll ring the front door bell, but I don't suppose anyone will come. No wonder Aunt Sissie spends her time in bed. I would if I lived here.'

Certainly Brandon Abbey was not an encouraging place.

The house, a striking example of Scotch baronial, spouting pepper-pot turrets at every angle, had been built in the sixties by Miss Brandon's father, an extremely wealthy jute merchant, on the site of a ruined religious house. The locality though favourable for stewponds and contemplation was damp and gloomy in the extreme. Mushrooms sprouted freely in the cellars, damp spread in patches on the bedroom walls, the flooring of the servants' hall was from time to time lifted by unknown fungoid growths. The trees which Mr Brandon had planted far too thickly and far too near the house had thriven unchecked, and screened the house from all but the direct rays of the midday summer sun, which then made the servants' bedrooms under a lead roof intolerably hot. On the mossy stones of the terrace the peacocks walked up and down, believing according to the fashion of their kind that everyone was admiring the tail feathers which they had moulted some time ago.

'Nightmare Abbey,' said Francis, after they had waited some time, and rang the bell again. Even as he rang it and

said the words, the door was opened by Miss Brandon's permanently disapproving butler, who said Miss Brandon was very sorry she couldn't come down to luncheon, but would like to see Mrs Brandon afterwards. He then showed the family into the drawing-room and left them to meditate till lunch was ready.

'Bother,' said Delia, after hunting in her bag, 'I've left my looking-glass at home.'

She looked round for one, but on the walls, thickly hung with the real masterpieces, the blatant fakes, and, incredibly, the china plates in red velvet frames that Mr Brandon's catholic and personal taste had bought, there was not a mirror to be seen.

'Try the overmantel or what not,' suggested Francis, pointing to the fireplace, above which towered a massive, yet fanciful superstructure of fretwork. Shelves with ball and fringe edgings, turned pillars, Moorish arches, Gothic niches were among the least of its glories, while here and there were inserted round or diamond-shaped mirrors, hand-painted with sprays of plum blossom, forget-me-not, and other natural products.

By standing on tiptoe on the heavy marble fender Delia could just see her face among some painted bulrushes, and behind it a reflection of the room. In the reflection she saw the door open and a young man come in. Excited by the unexpected apparition she hastily put away her powder puff, turned, knocked down the polished steel fire irons with a frightful crash and stood transfixed with shame. To her great surprise the young man took no notice of the noise, but stood gazing at her mother who was apparently half asleep.

Francis was the first to recognise the newcomer as Mr Miller's pupil, and though surprised to see him here, had enough presence of mind to say, 'Hullo, Grant.'

'Oh, hullo,' said Mr Grant, inquiringly.

'Francis Brandon,' said Francis, 'you remember meeting me at Mr Miller's last week.'

'Of course, I'm so sorry,' said Mr Grant, his eyes still wavering towards Mrs Brandon. 'I mean how do you do.'

'Nicely, thank you,' said Francis. 'This is my sister Delia, and Mamma will come to in a minute. Mamma, here is Mr Grant that you met at the Vicarage.'

Mrs Brandon, who had succumbed for a few seconds to the heat and ante-lunch exhaustion, opened her eyes and gave Mr Grant her hand with a smile. Francis was rather afraid that the shock of waking up might prompt her to one of her worse indiscretions, but luckily lunch was announced, and they all went into the dining-room. This impressive apartment was lined with pitch pine and adorned with pictures by deceased RAs, pictures which, as Mr Brandon had informed every visitor, had all been hung on the line. The lofty ceiling was decorated with strips of pitch pine crossing each other diagonally and at each intersection was fixed a naked electric light in a copper lotus. The dado and the panels of the door were of the finest Lincrusta Walton and the bronze clock on the mantelpiece represented a Knight Templar, with the clock face under his horse's stomach.

From the very beginning of lunch it was obvious to Francis and Delia that Mr Grant was in their language a case, and they had the great pleasure of kicking each other under the table whenever he looked at their mother. They

were used to her rapid and entirely unconscious conquests, which Francis regarded with malicious enjoyment and Delia with good-humoured contempt. Delia's heart was so far untouched except by the heroes, whether villain or detective, of thrillers and American gangster films, and as Mr Grant, apart from a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles, had nothing in common with these supermen, she mentally labelled him Not Wanted.

Conversation during lunch was of a disjointed nature. Francis and Delia were consumed with curiosity as to why Mr Miller's pupil should be lunching at Brandon Abbey. On ordinary occasions they would have had no inhibitions about asking him what he was doing in their aunt's house, but the presence of the disapproving butler, who never left the room for a moment, not to speak of the two footmen, cramped their style a little. Their mother would have been capable of any indiscretion, but, as her children well saw, she had not yet recovered from her slumber before lunch and although she had grasped the fact that she had met Mr Grant at the Vicarage, she appeared to be under the impression that he was going to be a curate, and was industriously and ignorantly talking on church subjects. Mr Grant was doing his best to second her, but was hampered by an ignorance equal to her own and a tendency to look at her rather than listen to her. Altogether it was a relief to everyone when the butler, as soon as dessert was set on the table, told Mrs Brandon that Miss Brandon would be glad if she would come up and have coffee in her room. Mrs Brandon made a face at her children, sympathetically answered by hideous faces from them, and got up from the table, dropping a pale

pink handkerchief as she rose. Mr Grant, who had stood up with her, was about to rescue it when a footman, at a sign from the butler, picked it up and gave it to his superior, who put it on a silver salver and handed it to its owner.

Mrs Brandon looked at the handkerchief, then looked in her bag, and finding that her handkerchief was not there, seemed surprised.

‘I must have dropped it,’ she said, taking it from the salver. ‘Thank you so much.’

She was then wafted away by the butler, and the three young people were left alone with Miss Brandon’s glasshouse peaches and grapes, besides the less rare products of the kitchen garden. Francis, approaching his subject cautiously, asked Mr Grant what he was reading with old Miller.

‘Classics,’ said Mr Grant.

‘Is that to go to Oxford, or something?’ asked Francis.

‘No, I’m afraid I’m through Oxford,’ said Mr Grant apologetically. ‘Mother thought I’d better read for the bar, and as I did history my classics were a bit sticky, so she sent me here to rub them up. Were you a history man?’

‘No, I’m afraid I’m only an Old School Tie,’ said Francis in his turn apologetic. ‘I wasn’t very brainy at school and when a good job turned up in Barchester I jumped at it. I rather wish I’d let Mamma send me to a University now, but anyway it’s about five years too late.’

‘I think you’re jolly lucky,’ said Mr Grant. ‘I wanted to go into a publisher’s office when I left school, but I’d got a mouldy kind of scholarship by mistake so they made me take it up, and then Mother made me go abroad, and here I am at twenty-three only just beginning.’

‘That’s exactly as old as Francis,’ said Delia. ‘When’s your birthday?’

Mr Grant said March.

‘Well, I’m February and Francis is April,’ said Delia, ‘so that’s rather funny. Do you go to the movies much? There’s not a bad cinema at Barchester.’

Mr Grant said he didn’t go very much, but he had seen *Descente de lit* in which Zizi Pavois was superb, and *Menschen ohne Knochen* which, even allowing for propaganda, was an astoundingly moving affair.

Delia said she meant films and there was going to be an awfully good one at Barchester next week called *Going for a Ride* with Garstin Hermon as the villain and she had been told it was absolutely ghastly. As she said these words her pretty brown eyes sparkled, her cheeks flushed in a most becoming way and her hair seemed to curl even more than usual. Mr Grant looked at these phenomena with an historian’s appraising eye and thought how much lovelier gentle blue eyes were than bold brown, how preferable was a soft pale skin to the rude glow of health, and how infinitely more touching were loose waves of hair, a little touched with grey, than a mop of corkscrews. Thinking these chivalrous thoughts he said, with the annoyingly tolerant manner that Oxford is apt to stamp upon her sons, that it sounded very exciting.

‘Look here, Delia, that’s your fourth peach,’ said Francis. ‘You’ll be sick. Let’s come out in the garden.’

Accordingly the three young people strolled out into the terrace and sat on the broad balustrade, looking at the foolish peacocks. At the end of the yew avenue the former

stewpond, now a formal basin, gleamed among the leaves of the water lilies. The one white peacock, white by courtesy but really looking rather grey, posed self-consciously against the yews. It was all very peaceful and for a time no one had anything to say.

‘I’m afraid my aunt’s in rather a bad mood today,’ said Mr Grant at last. ‘I do hope she isn’t giving Mrs Brandon a bad time.’

‘Your aunt?’ said Delia.

‘Aunt Sissie. She’s an aunt of yours too, isn’t she?’

‘Good Lord,’ said Francis, ‘you are our long-lost rival. I’m jolly glad to meet you. Aunt Sissie is always ramming you down our throats and I thought you were an old man with a beard. And I jolly well hope you do get this foul Abbey – I mean if you’d like it.’

Mr Grant looked so uncomfortable that even Delia felt that her brother might have been more tactful.

‘You see, Aunt Sissie is a bit of a bully,’ she said, ‘and she thinks she can frighten us by saying she’ll leave the money to you, but we really don’t care two hoots.’

Mr Grant looked more uncomfortable than ever after this explanation.

‘Sorry,’ said Francis, vaguely feeling that some reparation was necessary.

‘It’s all right,’ said Mr Grant. ‘But it’s rather a shock. I knew practically nothing about Aunt Sissie till Father died, and then she wrote to Mother and said she was a very old woman whose relatives neglected her and would I come and visit her. She didn’t say anything about leaving this place or anything. I only came over here yesterday afternoon and I

had an awful night in a four-poster stuffed with knobs, and there was a marble bath with a mahogany surround about three hundred yards down the passage, and Aunt Sissie was rather unpleasant, and thank goodness I'm going back to the Vicarage. If I hadn't promised Aunt Sissie I'd stay to tea I'd go at once. I can't stand this.'

He spoke with such vehemence that his hearers were surprised, not understanding that in his mind's eye he saw himself depriving that wonderful Mrs Brandon of her birthright and turning her out into the snow while he lived among peacocks and butlers.

'All right,' said Francis. 'If I get it I'll give it to you and if you get it you give it to me. If I had it I'd sell it for a lunatic asylum. Anyhow it's almost one now.'

'If it were mine I'd burn the damned thing down,' said Mr Grant, toying with the idea of handing over the insurance money to Mrs Brandon anonymously.

Warming to the theme the two heirs, ably supported by Delia, began to alter the house according to their individual tastes, turning the pond into a swimming pool, the enormous servants' hall into a squash court, and the drawing-room into a dance room with bar. By the time they had decided to make their aunt's room into a Chamber of Horrors, charging half a crown for admission, they were all laughing so much that even when Delia suddenly uttered one of her celebrated screams, it was hardly heard above the noise the men were making. Her shriek was merely a prelude to the announcement that if Aunt Sissie was everybody's aunt they must be Hilary's cousins, adding that she hoped he didn't mind her calling him Hilary, but she

always did. On inquiry it turned out that Mr Grant's father and the Brandons' father were connected with Miss Brandon's family on quite different sides and no relationship existed, but it was agreed that a state of cousinship should be established.

When Mrs Brandon left the dining-room she found Miss Brandon's maid waiting for her in the hall.

'Good afternoon, Sparks,' said Mrs Brandon. 'How is Miss Brandon today?'

'Thank you, madam, a little on the edge,' said Sparks. 'Young Mr Grant's visit seemed to upset her a good deal, being as he reminded her of her brother, Captain Brandon, the one that was killed by a pig in India, madam.'

At any other moment Mrs Brandon might have wondered why Mr Miller's pupil should remind her Aunt Sissie of Captain Frederick Brandon who was killed while pig-sticking in Jubilee year, but her whole attention was concentrated on getting upstairs. The great staircase at Brandon Abbey, square, made of solid oak, had been taken from an Elizabethan house that was being demolished. Mr Brandon, after taking one look at its rich natural colour, had decided that it did not look worth the considerable sum he had given for it, so he dismissed his architect who had advised the purchase and had the whole staircase painted and grained to resemble the oak of which it was made. Having done this he admired the result so much that, with a taste far in advance of his time, he left it bare, instead of covering it as the hall and corridors were covered with a layer of felt, a rich Kidderminster carpet, and a drugget

above all. He then gave orders that it was to be waxed and polished twice a week, which had been faithfully carried out ever since, even after Mr Brandon had slipped and broken his ankle and a second footman (who should have been using the back stairs and was at once dismissed) had crashed down the final flight carrying six empty brass water cans.

Knowing the dangers, Mrs Brandon clung to the banisters and went slowly upstairs. Safely arrived on the landing she followed Sparks along the gloomy corridor to the door that led to Miss Brandon's sitting-room. This door was guarded by two life-size and highly varnished black wooden statues of gorillas, wearing hats and holding out trays for visiting cards, which images had been the terror of Francis and Delia's childhood. Delia, always the bolder of the two, had only suspected that they would claw her as she went into her aunt's room, but Francis knew, with the deadly certainty of childhood, that they came over the downs to Stories every Friday night, when Nurse was out, and got under his bed. Perhaps the happiest day of his life was when he was taken to Brandon Abbey in his first prep school holidays, and fresh from a world of men suddenly realised that the gorillas were nothing but very hideous wooden figures, which knowledge he imparted to Delia in a lofty and off-hand way, as one who had always known the truth but had not troubled to mention it.

Sparks left Mrs Brandon in the sitting-room while she went to prepare her mistress. Mrs Brandon walked about the room, idly looking at the many faded photographs of old Mr and Mrs Brandon at all stages, of Captain Brandon with military moustache and whiskers, of Miss Brandon from a

plump, pretty child with ringlets to a well-corseted young woman in a bustle, after which epoch she had apparently never been photographed again. She wondered idly, not for the first time, what Amelia Brandon's life had been, what secrets her heart might have held, before she became the immense, terrifying old lady whom she had always known. These unprofitable reflections were interrupted by the door into Miss Brandon's room being opened and Mrs Brandon, turning to face Sparks, saw a stranger. It was a woman no longer young, with greying hair and a rather worn face, neatly dressed in dark blue silk.

'Mrs Brandon?' said the stranger. 'I am Ella Morris, Miss Brandon's companion.'

Mrs Brandon found Miss Morris's voice very pleasant.

'Oh, how do you do,' said she, shaking hands. 'Thank you so much for writing for Aunt Sissie and I do hope you aren't having a dreadful time.'

'Nothing to what I have had with my other old ladies,' said Miss Morris composedly. 'I was so sorry not to be down when you came, but Miss Brandon wanted me to read some old letters to her. I hope everything was all right at lunch.'

'Perfect,' said Mrs Brandon. 'And forgive my asking, but knowing Aunt Sissie as I do, have you had any lunch?'

'Oh, no,' said Miss Morris as composedly as ever. 'Miss Brandon likes me to read to her while she is lunching. She has a remarkably good appetite. I shall have mine now. Will you come in?'

'How many days a week is she in bed now?' Mrs Brandon asked softly, as they approached the door.

'Six and a half, since Whitsun when I came,' said Miss

Morris. 'She gets up on Tuesday for the afternoon, and that is why she is always a little fatigued on Wednesday.'

With these ominous words she opened the door, saying, 'Miss Brandon, here is Mrs Brandon.' She then went away and Sparks, who had been keeping guard at the bedside, got up and followed her.

In the huge room, hung with dark tapestries, filled with heavy mahogany furniture, there was very little light. The blinds were drawn against the westering sun and Mrs Brandon, dazzled by the gloom, could only advance slowly towards the four-poster with its embroidered canopy, below which her husband's aunt lay propped upon pillows.

Miss Brandon in a state of nature bore a striking resemblance, with her almost bald head and her massive jowl, to the more decadent of the Roman Emperors. To conceal her baldness she had taken of late years to a rather cheap wig, whose canvas parting was of absorbing interest to the young Brandons as they grew tall enough to look down on it, but when in bed she preferred to discard the wig, and wore white bonnets, exquisitely hand-sewn by Sparks, frilled, plaited and goffered, in which she looked like an elderly Caligula disguised as Elizabeth Fry. Round her shoulders she had a white cashmere shawl, fine enough to draw through a wedding ring, and about her throat swathes of rich, yellowing lace, pinned with hideous and valuable diamond brooches. Diamonds, rubies, sapphires, emeralds sparkled in the creases of her swollen fingers, and in the watch pocket above her head was the cheap steel-framed watch that her father had bought as a young man with his first earnings.

'Stand still and shut your eyes for a moment,' commanded

Miss Brandon's voice from the bed, 'and then you'll be able to see. I can't have the blinds up. My eyes are bad.'

Mrs Brandon obediently halted, shut her eyes, and presently opened them again. The gloom was now less dense to her sight and without difficulty she reached the chair placed by the bedside.

'How are you, Aunt Sissie,' she said, taking her aunt's unresponsive hand, and then sat down.

Miss Brandon said that her legs were more swollen than ever and it was only a question of Time. Her niece, she added, could look at them if she liked.

'Oh, thank you *very* much, Aunt Sissie, but I don't think I could *bear* it,' said Mrs Brandon truthfully.

'You don't have much to bear, Lavinia,' said her aunt grimly, 'and I think you might take a little interest in my sufferings. Even my father's legs weren't as bad as mine. But all you young people are selfish. Hilary wouldn't look at them. What do you think of him?'

'Of whom?' Mrs Brandon asked, a little bewildered.

'Hilary Grant. My nephew. First cousin once removed to be exact, as his father was a son of my youngest aunt. Same relation your children are.'

'Do you mean Mr Grant?' faltered Mrs Brandon. 'I thought he was going to be a clergyman.'

Miss Brandon almost reared in bed.

'I have always been sorry for you, Lavinia, as Henry's wife,' she announced, 'but I am beginning to be sorry for Henry. Have you *no* intelligence?'

'Not much,' said her niece meekly.

'None of you have,' said the invalid. 'Four people having

lunch together and can't find out who they are. Why didn't Miss Morris tell you?

'I didn't see her, Aunt Sissie. She was reading to you, she said, when we got here.'

'Oh, that's what she said, is it,' said Miss Brandon. 'Well, as a matter of fact she is perfectly correct. She was reading some of Fred's letters from India to me. I would like you to read me some, Lavinia. Take a chair nearer the window and pull up the blind a little. Here they are.'

She handed her niece a large sachet, worked in cross-stitch with a regimental crest, containing a bundle of yellowing letters. Mrs Brandon went towards the window and could not resist saying as she went, 'Is it the cousin you sometimes talk about?'

'His son. I didn't like the father and the mother is a fool, but luckily she lives in Italy a good deal. I like young Hilary.'

She said this with such meaning that Mrs Brandon was almost goaded into saying that she wished her aunt would leave everything to Mr Grant at once, and then they needn't ever come to Brandon Abbey again. But when she looked at her aunt's helpless bulk, and thought of her legs, and the years of pain and loneliness she had had and might have to come, she felt so sorry that she said nothing, pulled up the blind a little, sat down and opened the sachet. A marker of perforated cardboard sewn with blue silk onto a faded blue ribbon and stitched with the initials F. B., showed the place where Miss Morris had left off.

'Shall I read straight on?' she asked.

Receiving no reply, she began to read. But Captain Brandon's writing had never been his strong point, the ink

was pale with age, the letters were heavily crossed. And as they consisted almost entirely of references to fellows in the regiment, or the places where they had been quartered or in camp, she found herself floundering hopelessly.

‘You’d better stop, Lavinia,’ said her aunt’s voice after a time, though not unkindly. ‘Miss Morris can do it far better than you can. I think of Fred as if it were only yesterday. He was twelve years older than I was. Sissie was his pet name for me; he didn’t like Amelia. When he was a lieutenant he used to let me ride on his knee and pull his moustaches. He was a very fine figure of a man. My father made an eldest son of him, and sent him into the Army and gave him every advantage. And all the end of it was that Fred was killed. And now I am all that is left. Hilary reminded me of Fred. I should like to think of someone like Fred living here when I am gone.’

Mrs Brandon understood that her aunt was talking to herself and without malice. Neither did she feel any resentment herself at the old lady’s outspoken preference for her new nephew. For many years she had felt that the prospect of an inheritance might be bad for Francis. Luckily he had hitherto treated the whole subject as a joke and worked just as hard as if he had no expectations from his aunt and no allowance from his mother. But if by any chance Miss Brandon did bequeath him the Abbey and even a part of her fortune, Mrs Brandon saw no end to the trouble that such a white elephant would bring. What the amount of Miss Brandon’s estate might be she had no idea, but she thought the death duties would effectually keep the inheritor from improving or even keeping up the place. Never in

fact had the mother of a possible legatee been less grateful. It was almost without knowing that she was speaking that she said, 'I hope that he will then, Aunt Sissie.'

'What?' said Miss Brandon sharply.

Mrs Brandon found what she had just said too difficult to repeat and was silent.

'Read me some of *The Times*,' said Miss Brandon. 'The cricket news. My father was very fond of cricket and I used to know all the names of the county players. It is a poor game now. Go on.'

Mrs Brandon read the descriptions of the chief matches for some time, looking occasionally at the bed to see if her aunt was listening. Gradually she let her voice tail away into a murmur, then gently got up and was tip-toeing towards the door to call Sparks, when a sharp voice from the bed said, 'Lavinia!'

'I'm so sorry,' said Mrs Brandon, returning to the bedside, 'I thought you were asleep.'

'You've never thought in your life,' said Miss Brandon. 'Come here.'

Mrs Brandon approached the bed.

'You are a silly woman, Lavinia,' said her aunt, 'but there's a lot of good in you. I heard what you said quite well. It was no business of yours, but I daresay you are right. I'm going to give you something. It is the diamond Fred brought back from India the last time he came on leave. I always wore it till my hands began to swell, and I wouldn't have it altered because it was set just as Fred gave it to me. If you don't get anything else, you'll get that.'

She took a little case from beside her bed and handed it

to her niece, who opened it and saw a diamond ring in an open setting of very thin gold, a store of a thousand lights and twinklings.

‘Put it on,’ said Miss Brandon. ‘That’s right. It looks better on you than it ever looked on me. You have a lady’s hands. Mine are like my father’s, workman’s hands. Go away now and send Sparks to me.’

She shut her eyes so determinedly that Mrs Brandon did not dare to thank her, so she kissed the swollen, bejewelled hand very gently and went out of the room. In the sitting-room she found Miss Morris writing letters and told her that Miss Brandon wanted Sparks. Miss Morris rang the bell.

‘I hope very much to see you before you go,’ she said. ‘Miss Brandon has her tea about half-past four and I have ordered tea for you at five if that suits you and then I can come down. Five to seven is my off time. I hope you found Miss Brandon pretty well. She has been looking forward to your visit very much indeed.’

‘I never knew anyone who could show their pleasure at seeing one less than Aunt Sissie,’ said Mrs Brandon, ‘but she was very kind and gave me this ring.’

She held out her left hand on which the diamond was sparkling. Mrs Brandon had exquisite hands and though she was by no means puffed up she might sometimes be found gazing at them with a frank and pensive admiration that amused her best friends. She wore no rings except her wedding ring, having secretly sold her ugly diamond half-hoop engagement ring many years ago. Captain Brandon’s Indian diamond now shone in its place.

‘It looks perfect on your hand,’ said Miss Morris in a

matter-of-fact voice that yet somehow conveyed to Mrs Brandon that her hands were admired and the gift approved. 'I think your son and daughter are in the garden with Mr Grant. Or would you rather rest?'

Again Miss Morris's pleasant voice conveyed an unmistakable meaning, and Mrs Brandon went downstairs feeling rather like a child that has been told it may get down from table. In the hall she picked up her parasol and gloves and went out into the shimmering afternoon. To young Mr Grant, sitting on the edge of the lily-pond, while Francis and Delia tried to tickle for goldfish, it seemed that never had a goddess been more apparent in her approach. Being in private a poet he tried to think of a suitable description, rejected the words swimming, floating, gliding, light-footed, winged, and several others, and finally as she came near delivered his soul in the words, 'Oh, Mrs Brandon,' standing up and straightening his tie as he did so.

'Hullo, Mamma,' said Francis. 'Don't come any nearer or you will frighten my goldfish. Hilary, take Mamma away or she will want to look, and if there's one thing goldfish can't bear it's people looking. There are millions of seats about.'

He waved his hand comprehensively at a stretch of green turf and dark walls of yew and bent himself again to his tickling. Mrs Brandon smiled indulgently and turning to Mr Grant said, 'I think we must be cousins by marriage.'

This statement, which when previously made by Delia had caused Mr Grant no emotion at all, suddenly assumed a totally different aspect. To be Mrs Brandon's cousin was like suddenly becoming a member of the Royal Family, or being asked to tea by the Captain of the Eleven; or like

going to Heaven. In a state of unspeakable nervous exaltation he began to explain the relationship, but one half of his mind, and that, if the expression may be permitted, by far the larger half, was trying to visualise the Tables of Affinity in the beginning of the Prayer Book and to remember whether a man might marry his father's aunt's nephew's on another side's wife, or rather widow. So he stammered and repeated himself and wished he had shaved more carefully that morning. When he had stammered himself into silence, Mrs Brandon said she thought there was a seat under the tulip tree, so they walked there; and there were two deck chairs, just as if it had been meant.

'Now,' said Mrs Brandon, settling herself comfortably, 'tell me about yourself.'

This kind suggestion naturally threw Mr Grant into a state of even more acute palsy and paralysis, but to please the goddess he explained, in a not very intelligible way, that his father had died some time ago and his mother was rather Italian.

'Have you Italian blood then?' asked Mrs Brandon, interested.

Not like that, Mr Grant explained, but he meant his mother lived mostly in Italy and had got rather Italian, at least, he added in a burst of confidence, the kind of Italian that English people do get.

'I know,' said Mrs Brandon. 'She talks about Marcheses and would like you to kiss people's hands.'

So confounded was Mr Grant by this proof of semi-miraculous understanding, and at the same time so overcome by the idea that he might perhaps be allowed to kiss Mrs

Brandon's hand, that he forgot all the hard words he had been about to utter concerning his mother, and wished she had forced him from earliest youth to kiss the hand of every delightful woman he met. Mrs Brandon said she thought the custom of kissing hands was so charming, which inspired Mr Grant's heart with fresh ardour, but that she thought Englishmen could never do it well, at which his heart sank and he thought more unkindly than ever of his mother.

Mrs Brandon pulled off her gloves and looked thoughtfully at her hands.

'Aunt Sissie gave me this ring today,' she said. 'Isn't it beautiful?'

She held out her hand. Mr Grant put his own hand very respectfully beneath it and raised it a little. He looked intently at the diamond and the elegant fingers and imagined himself gently pressing his lips upon them. He then, entirely against his own will, found himself withdrawing his own hand and saying the ring was lovely. This would have been a good moment to add that the hand it adorned was lovelier still, but his voice refused its office and flames consumed his marrow. By the time he came to, Mrs Brandon was telling him about the wall paintings in the church.

'I liked them awfully,' said Mr Grant, 'and all the monuments and things.'

'I suppose you saw my husband's memorial stone,' said Mrs Brandon, assuming quite unconsciously a most intriguing air of melancholy.

'No, I'm awfully sorry I didn't,' said Mr Grant. 'Is it a good one – I mean sculpture or anything?'

'Oh, no; quite simple,' said Mrs Brandon, in a voice that

made Mr Grant feel how moving simplicity was, compared with sculpture. 'Just the dates of his birth and death. He died at Cannes, you know, so he couldn't be buried here.'

Mr Grant said again he was awfully sorry.

'That is very sweet of you,' said Mrs Brandon, turning grave blue eyes upon him. 'I don't think much about it. I wasn't very happy. There are things one is glad to forget.'

If Mr Grant's guardian angel had been there he would have been perfectly within his rights to take Mrs Brandon by the shoulders and shake her. Mr Grant, deeply moved by this touching confidence, saw his exquisite new friend in the power of a sadist, a drunkard, a dope fiend, nay Worse, though why it should be worse he didn't quite know, and in his agitation got up and began to walk about.

'Yes, I suppose it is nearly tea-time,' said Mrs Brandon. 'Let's find the children. And you won't mind if I call you Hilary, will you? If we are cousins it seems ridiculous to say Mr Grant.'

'I'd love it,' said Mr Grant.

'And you must call me Lavinia,' said Mrs Brandon, putting her parasol up again as they walked back across the lawn to the pond.

'There is one name I would like to call you,' said Mr Grant, in a low, croaking voice.

Mrs Brandon stopped and looked interested.

'I would like to call you my friend,' said Mr Grant.

'Of course,' said Mrs Brandon, laughing gently, 'that goes without saying. But if you feel I am too old for Christian names, never mind.'

Mr Grant felt that this misunderstanding was so awful

that it would be no good trying to explain it. They collected Francis and Delia, who had by now tired of the goldfish, and all four went back to the house for tea. Here Miss Morris was waiting for them at the head of the dining-room table, which was loaded with scones, sandwiches, cakes of all sorts and sizes, sweets and fruit. Mr Grant had not yet arrived at the stage when love makes one resent the sight of food, and all three young people made a very hearty meal. When Miss Morris had finished pouring out the tea she asked Mrs Brandon if it would be inconvenient for her to take Mr Grant back in her car.

‘I had ordered Miss Brandon’s car to take Mr Grant back,’ she said, ‘but as he is almost next door to you I thought you, wouldn’t mind.’

‘Of course not,’ said Mrs Brandon. ‘And now I come to think of it, you are having supper with us tonight, aren’t you, Hilary, so it all fits in.’

Mr Grant on hearing those lips speak his name lost his senses and said, Oh, of course, he had quite forgotten, and again felt that it was no good trying to explain. Ever since the invitation had been issued on the previous Saturday he had been living for that evening, but in the unexpected joy of seeing Mrs Brandon again at the Abbey, and the whirlpool of emotion into which he had been thrown by finding her even more exquisite than he thought, only the present had existed for him, and so drowned was he in the moment that he had truly and completely forgotten about the evening.

‘Well, it’s no good forgetting now,’ said Francis, ‘if you’re coming back with us. No need to bother about changing

tonight. When Rose is out we relax a little. And anyway there's not much sense in telling old Miller to change because you can hardly tell the difference. He ought to be allowed to dress like a monk or something for dinner; he'd get an awful kick out of it.'

While the younger members were loudly discussing suitable evening dress for Mr Miller, Mrs Brandon turned to Miss Morris and pressed cake upon her. Miss Morris refused it.

'You are too tired to eat,' said Mrs Brandon accusingly. 'You have had nothing for tea, and I'm sure you didn't have enough lunch. Was it a poached egg?'

'Oh no. Just what you had. Cold salmon, grilled cutlets. I order the meals for Miss Brandon and I make a point of tasting everything. One must keep the servants up to the mark.'

'Yes, tasting,' said Mrs Brandon severely. 'Three grains of rice and a mouthful of cutlet.'

Miss Morris said nothing. Her mouth tightened, but her eyes looked at Mrs Brandon for a moment as if appealing for help.

'I know exactly what you feel like,' said Mrs Brandon untruthfully, 'but it's no good going on like that. You need a holiday.'

'I have only been with Miss Brandon since Whitsun, Mrs Brandon.'

'And have you once been outside the grounds? or had a day to yourself? or gone to bed before one o'clock?'

'I really could get out if I wanted to,' said Miss Morris, 'but there's nowhere particular to go, and the motor bus

doesn't come any nearer than Pomfret Abbas. And I don't mind going to bed late at all. I used to read to my father a great deal at night.'

'Now what I want you to do,' said Mrs Brandon, 'is to come for a picnic with us on Friday. Francis has a little car and he can come and fetch you and take you back. We are going to the Wishing Well over beyond Southbridge and you will like it very much.'

'How good of you,' said Miss Morris. 'But I can't.'

Her mouth set into a hard line again, but Mrs Brandon saw it tremble, and took a secret resolution.

'Miss Brandon sent her love,' said Miss Morris, deliberately changing the subject and speaking for the whole table to hear, 'and she is very sorry that she doesn't feel up to seeing Mr Brandon, or Miss Brandon—'

'Bountiful Jehovah!' said Francis, piously grateful.

'—or Mr Grant, but she would like you to come up before you go, Mrs Brandon.'

Mrs Brandon said she would come at once then, as they must be getting home, and went upstairs with Miss Morris, saying no more about the picnic.

Miss Brandon was propped up on her pillows, finishing what looked like the remains of a tea that would have fed several people.

'Well,' said she to her niece, 'so you are going. I can't see those young people. They tire me. I suppose they have been getting into mischief as usual.'

'No, Aunt Sissie. Just sitting in the garden.'

'Idling as usual,' said Miss Brandon. 'My father never idled, nor did I.'

Mrs Brandon, suppressing an impulse to say And look at you both now, thanked her aunt for a pleasant visit, at which her aged relative grunted.

‘I wanted Miss Morris to come for a picnic with us on Friday,’ she said.

‘Well, she can’t,’ said the invalid, who seemed to be imbibing fresh strength as she dipped plum cake into her tea and mumbled it.

‘But she said she wouldn’t,’ Mrs Brandon continued, with great cunning.

‘She wouldn’t!’ said Miss Brandon. ‘I don’t know why girls are so ungrateful now. I never could stand a proud stomach. I suppose you wanted her to help with the sandwiches, Lavinia. Something for nothing.’

Having thus satisfactorily attributed the lowest of motives to her niece and her companion, Miss Brandon drank the rest of her tea and rang the handbell violently. Sparks appeared and was ordered to fetch Miss Morris, while Miss Brandon ate lumps of sugar in a state of mental abstraction which her niece thought it better not to disturb.

‘I want you to go with Mrs Brandon on Friday and help with the sandwiches,’ said the invalid, as soon as Miss Morris appeared. ‘The car will take you, and tell Simmonds to put up some of her potted salmon and crab apple jelly and make some cakes. And you’d better take some of the marsala. You can read to me all Friday evening to make up. Goodbye, Lavinia.’

‘Goodbye, Aunt Sissie, and thank you very much for the ring. It is the loveliest diamond I’ve ever seen,’ said Mrs Brandon.

‘Fred liked pretty women to have jewellery,’ said Miss Brandon with a surprising chuckle. ‘It was the diamond bracelet he gave to Mrs Colonel Arbuthnot that made him have to exchange – that was at Poona in seventy-six. I was only a young woman then, but Fred told me everything. Come again, soon, but I don’t want to see all those young people. Come alone, and I’ll show you my legs.’

Taking this as permission to retire, and seeing no means of reaching her aunt across the tea-things, Mrs Brandon repeated her farewell and went out, followed by Miss Morris.

‘Is it all right for Miss Brandon to eat so much?’ she inquired as they went downstairs. ‘I thought she was on a diet.’

‘So she is, but she doesn’t take any notice of it. She told Dr Ford last time he came that she was going to die in her own way and he needn’t come again if he didn’t like it, so he just comes and talks to her occasionally. She likes it. Mrs Brandon, I can’t thank you enough, but do you really want me?’

At this slavish question, which no one should ever ask, Mrs Brandon almost felt she didn’t. But she looked at Miss Morris’s thin shoulders and her worn face and decided that she did.

‘I do want you,’ she said, ‘but I’m not sure if I really want Aunt Sissie’s car. Anyway, Francis shall drive you back.’

Then they all got into the car. Curwen asked with long-suffering if he should go by the downs, and on receiving the order to go by Barchester managed to express by the set of his shoulders his opinion of employers, their children, and their guest. Francis chose to ride inside, so he and Delia

continued their plans for remaking Brandon Abbey, while Mrs Brandon thought of nothing in particular and Mr Grant felt that he now knew what true religion was like. As they approached Pomfret Madrigal, Mrs Brandon told Curwen to drive first to the Vicarage. Francis protested that there was no need to change, and Hilary might as well come straight to Stories and have a singles with him before dinner. But Mr Grant, increasingly conscious of his unsuccessful shave that morning, said he would really like to go to the Vicarage first if nobody minded, and, as an afterthought, that he might as well change. Mrs Brandon smiled approval, Mr Grant was decanted at the Vicarage, the car rolled away and darkness fell on the world.