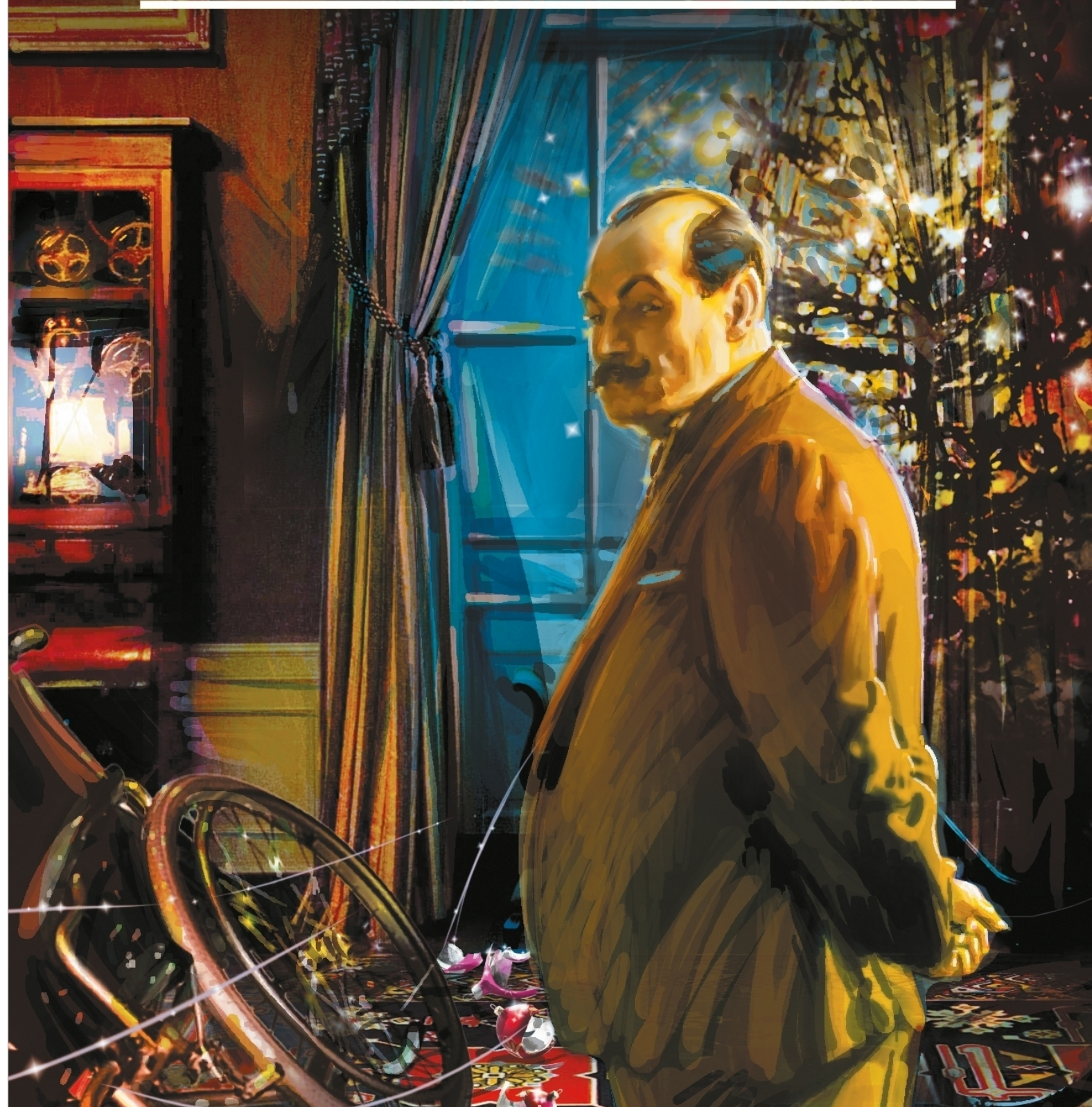


AGATHA CHRISTIE

HERCULE POIROT'S CHRISTMAS



Чтение в оригинале (Каро)

Агата Кристи

**Hercule Poirot's Christmas /
Рождество Эркюля Пуаро. Книга
для чтения на английском языке**

«КАРО»

2014

УДК 372.8
ББК 81.2 Англ-93

Кристи А.

Hercule Poirot's Christmas / Рождество Эркюля Пуаро. Книга
для чтения на английском языке / А. Кристи — «КАРО»,
2014 — (Чтение в оригинале (Каро))

ISBN 978-5-9925-0927-4

События романа «Рождество Эркюля Пуаро» разворачиваются накануне и после Рождества. В центре повествования – убийство хозяина дома, престарелого миллионера Симеона Ли, который впервые за двадцать лет решил собрать на Рождество всех своих детей. Убийство происходит непосредственно в вечер перед Рождеством после большого семейного скандала. Основное расследование ведет талантливый инспектор Сагден при поддержке полковника Джонсона, начальника местной полиции. Поскольку в вечер убийства в доме Джонсона гостил его друг Эркюль Пуаро, полковник приглашает знаменитого детектива помочь в раскрытии убийства в качестве неофициального консультанта. Неадаптированный текст романа снабжен комментариями и словарем. Книга предназначена для студентов языковых вузов и всех любителей детективного жанра.

УДК 372.8
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ISBN 978-5-9925-0927-4

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**Agatha Christie / Агата Кристи
Hercule Poirot's Christmas /
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Об авторе

Агата Кристи (урожденная Миллер) родилась 15 сентября 1890 года в городе Торки, графство Девон. Ее родители были состоятельными переселенцами из Соединенных Штатов. Получила хорошее домашнее образование, в том числе музыкальное, и только страх перед выступлениями на публике помешал ей стать профессиональным музыкантом.

В первый раз Агата Кристи вышла замуж в 1914 году за полковника Арчибальда Кристи, в которого была влюблена уже несколько лет – с тех пор, как он был лейтенантом. У них родилась дочь Розалинда. В 1926 году умерла мать Агаты, а муж потребовал развода. Пытаясь сохранить брак ради дочери, Агата едва не сошла с ума: однажды она исчезла на целых девять дней, ее искали, обнаружили пустую машину с багажом, в то время как сама Агата, без памяти, оказалась в некоем пансионате. Ей потребовалось серьезное лечение, чтобы восстановить память. По другой версии, исчезновение было задумано ею специально, чтобы отомстить полковнику Кристи, которого полиция неизбежно заподозрила бы в убийстве бывшей жены.

В 1930 году, путешествуя по Ираку, на раскопках в Уре она познакомилась со своим будущим супругом – археологом Максом Маллоуэном. С тех пор она периодически проводила несколько месяцев в году на Ближнем Востоке в экспедициях вместе с мужем. «Мой муж археолог, – сказала как-то писательница, – а археологи – это детективы прошлого».

В 1971 году за достижения в области литературы Агата Кристи была удостоена ордена Британской Империи, обладательницы которого также приобретают дворянский титул «дама» (англ. *dame*), употребляющийся перед именем.

Писательница умерла 12 января 1976 года у себя дома в городе Уоллингфорд, графство Оксфордшир, и была похоронена в деревне Чолси.

«Королева детектива» принадлежит к числу писателей, для творчества которых острая наблюдательность и цепкая память играют роль более важную, чем для других. Она блестяще владеет умением заинтриговать читателя, не отпуская его внимания до самой развязки, которая почти всегда бывает неожиданной, но тем не менее психологически убедительной. В лучших произведениях она старается следовать традициям детективной школы Эдгара По и Гилберта Кийта Честертона, однако сама писательница не раз говорила о своей зависимости от «шерлок-холмсовского построения сюжета». Читателя она заставляет «думать, а не бегать, словно ищейка», и возможность поразмышлять над разгадкой преступления привлекает не меньше, чем неизменно занимательный сюжет.

* * *

События романа «Рождество Эркюля Пуаро» разворачиваются накануне и после Рождества, с 22 по 27 декабря, в загородном доме Горстон-холл в вымышленном городе Лонгдейле на границе Англии и Шотландии. В центре повествования – убийство хозяина дома, престарелого миллионера Симеона Ли, который впервые за двадцать лет решил собрать на Рождество всех своих детей. Убийство происходит непосредственно в вечер перед Рождеством после большого семейного скандала. Основное расследование ведет талантливый инспектор Сагден при поддержке полковника Джонсона, начальника местной полиции. Поскольку в вечер убийства в доме Джонсона гостил его друг Эркюль Пуаро, полковник приглашает знаменитого детектива помочь в раскрытии убийства в качестве неофициального консультанта.

* * *

My dear James

You have always been one of the most faithful and kindly of my readers, and I was therefore seriously perturbed when I received from you a word of criticism.

You complained that my murders were getting too refined – anaemic, in fact. You yearned for a ‘good violent murder with lots of blood’. A murder where there was no doubt about its being murder!

So this is your special story – written for you. I hope it may please.

Your affectionate sister-in-law

Agatha

Part 1

December 22nd

I

Stephen pulled up the collar of his coat as he walked briskly along the platform. Overhead a dim fog clouded the station. Large engines hissed superbly, throwing off clouds of steam into the cold raw air. Everything was dirty and smoke-grimed.

Stephen thought with revulsion: 'What a foul country – what a foul city!'

His first excited reaction to London, its shops, its restaurants, its well-dressed, attractive women, had faded. He saw it now as a glittering rhinestone set in a dingy setting.

Supposing he were back in South Africa now... He felt a quick pang of homesickness. Sunshine – blue skies – gardens of flowers – cool blue flowers – hedges of plumbago – blue convolvulus clinging to every little shanty.

And here – dirt, grime, and endless, incessant crowds – moving, hurrying – jostling. Busy ants running industriously about their ant-hill.

For a moment he thought, 'I wish I hadn't come...'¹

Then he remembered his purpose and his lips set back in a grim line. No, by hell, he'd go on with it! He'd planned this for years. He'd always meant to do – what he was going to do. Yes, he'd go on with it!

That momentary reluctance, that sudden questioning of himself: 'Why? Is it worth it?'² Why dwell on the past? Why not wipe out the whole thing?' – all that was only weakness. He was not a boy – to be turned this way and that by the whim of the moment. He was a man of forty, assured, purposeful. He would go on with it. He would do what he had come to England to do.

He got on the train and passed along the corridor looking for a place. He had waved aside a porter and was carrying his own raw-hide suitcase. He looked into carriage after carriage. The train was full. It was only three days before Christmas. Stephen Farr looked distastefully at the crowded carriages.

People! Incessant, innumerable people! And all so – so – what was the word – so drab-looking! So alike, so horribly alike! Those that hadn't got faces like sheep had faces like rabbits, he thought. Some of them chattered and fussed. Some, heavily middle-aged men, grunted. More like pigs, those. Even the girls, slender, egg-faced, scarlet-lipped, were of a depressing uniformity.

He thought with a sudden longing of open veldt, sun-baked and lonely...

And then, suddenly, he caught his breath, looking into a carriage. This girl was different. Black hair, rich creamy pallor – eyes with the depth and darkness of night in them. The sad proud eyes of the South... It was all wrong that this girl should be sitting in this train among these dull, drab-looking people – all wrong that she should be going into the dreary midlands of England. She should have been on a balcony, a rose between her lips, a piece of black lace draping her proud head, and there should have been dust and heat and the smell of blood – the smell of the bull-ring³ – in the air... She should be somewhere splendid, not squeezed into the corner of a third-class carriage.

¹ **I wish I hadn't come...** – (разг.) Лучше бы я не возвращался

² **Is it worth it?** – (разг.) А стоит ли?

³ **the smell of the bull-ring** – (зд.) запах корриды

He was an observant man. He did not fail to note the shabbiness of her little black coat and skirt, the cheap quality of her fabric gloves, the flimsy shoes and the defiant note of a flame-red handbag. Nevertheless splendour was the quality he associated with her. She was splendid, fine, exotic...

What the hell was she doing in this country of fogs and chills and hurrying industrious ants?

He thought, 'I've got to know who she is and what she's doing here... I've got to know...'

II

Pilar sat squeezed up against the window and thought how very odd the English smelt... It was what had struck her so far most forcibly about England – the difference of smell. There was no garlic and no dust and very little perfume. In this carriage now there was a smell of cold stuffiness – the sulphur smell of the trains – the smell of soap and another very unpleasant smell – it came, she thought, from the fur collar of the stout woman sitting beside her. Pilar sniffed delicately, imbibing the odour of mothballs reluctantly. It was a funny scent to choose to put on yourself, she thought.

A whistle blew, a stentorian voice cried out something and the train jerked slowly out of the station. They had started. She was on her way...

Her heart beat a little faster. Would it be all right? Would she be able to accomplish what she had set out to do? Surely – surely – she had thought it all out so carefully... She was prepared for every eventuality⁴. Oh, yes, she would succeed – she must succeed...

The curve of Pilar's red mouth curved upwards. It was suddenly cruel, that mouth. Cruel and greedy – like the mouth of a child or a kitten – a mouth that knew only its own desires and that was as yet unaware of pity.

She looked round her with the frank curiosity of a child. All these people, seven of them – how funny they were, the English! They all seemed so rich, so prosperous – their clothes – their boots – Oh! undoubtedly England was a very rich country as she had always heard. But they were not at all gay⁵ – no, decidedly not gay.

That was a handsome man standing in the corridor... Pilar thought he was very handsome. She liked his deeply bronzed face and his high-bridged nose and his square shoulders. More quickly than any English girl, Pilar had seen that the man admired her. She had not looked at him once directly, but she knew perfectly how often he had looked at her and exactly how he had looked.

She registered the facts without much interest or emotion. She came from a country where men looked at women as a matter of course⁶ and did not disguise the fact unduly. She wondered if he was an Englishman and decided that he was not.

'He is too alive, too real, to be English,' Pilar decided. 'And yet he is fair. He may be perhaps Americano.' He was, she thought, rather like the actors she had seen in Wild West films⁷.

An attendant pushed his way along the corridor.

'First lunch, please. First lunch. Take your seats for first lunch.'

The seven occupants of Pilar's carriage all held tickets for the first lunch. They rose in a body⁸ and the carriage was suddenly deserted and peaceful.

Pilar quickly pulled up the window which had been let down a couple of inches at the top by a militant-looking, grey-haired lady in the opposite corner. Then she sprawled comfortably back on her seat and peered out of the window at the northern suburbs of London. She did not turn her head at the sound of the door sliding back. It was the man from the corridor, and Pilar knew, of course, that he had entered the carriage on purpose to talk to her.

She continued to look pensively out of the window.

Stephen Farr said: 'Would you like the window down at all?'

Pilar replied demurely: 'On the contrary. I have just shut it.' She spoke English perfectly, but with a slight accent.

⁴ **was prepared for every eventuality** – (уст.) была готова к любой неожиданности

⁵ **they were not at all gay** – (разг.) они были вовсе не веселыми

⁶ **as a matter of course** – (разг.) как и следовало ожидать

⁷ **Wild West films** – (уст.) вестерны

⁸ **in a body** – (разг.) одновременно; все вместе

During the pause that ensued, Stephen thought: 'A delicious voice. It has the sun in it... It is warm like a summer night...'

Pilar thought: 'I like his voice. It is big and strong. He is attractive – yes, he is attractive.'

Stephen said: 'The train is very full.'

'Oh, yes, indeed. The people go away from London, I suppose, because it is so black there.'

Pilar had not been brought up to believe that it was a crime to talk to strange men in trains. She could take care of herself as well as any girl, but she had no rigid taboos⁹.

If Stephen had been brought up in England he might have felt ill at ease¹⁰ at entering into conversation with a young girl. But Stephen was a friendly soul who found it perfectly natural to talk to anyone if he felt like it.

He smiled without any self-consciousness and said: 'London's rather a terrible place, isn't it?'

'Oh, yes. I do not like it at all.'

'No more do I.'

Pilar said: 'You are not English, no?'

'I'm British, but I come from South Africa.'

'Oh, I see, that explains it.'

'Have you just come from abroad?'

Pilar nodded. 'I come from Spain.'

Stephen was interested. 'From Spain, do you? You're Spanish, then?'

'I am half-Spanish. My mother was English. That is why I talk English so well.'

'What about this war business?' asked Stephen. 'It is very terrible, yes – very sad. There has been damage done, quite a lot – yes.'

'Which side are you on?'

Pilar's politics seemed to be rather vague. In the village where she came from, she explained, nobody had paid very much attention to the war. 'It has not been near us, you understand. The Mayor, he is, of course, an officer of the Government, so he is for the Government, and the priest is for General Franco¹¹ – but most of the people are busy with the vines and the land, they have not time to go into these questions.'

'So there wasn't any fighting round you?'

Pilar said that there had not been. 'But then I drove in a car,' she explained, 'all across the country and there was much destruction. And I saw a bomb drop and it blew up a car – yes, and another destroyed a house. It was very exciting!'

Stephen Farr smiled a faintly twisted smile. 'So that's how it seemed to you?'

'It was a nuisance¹², too,' explained Pilar. 'Because I wanted to get on, and the driver of my car, he was killed.'

Stephen said, watching her: 'That didn't upset you?'

Pilar's great dark eyes opened very wide. 'Everyone must die! That is so, is it not? If it comes quickly from the sky – bouff – like that, it is as well as any other way. One is alive for a time – yes, and then one is dead. That is what happens in this world.'

Stephen Farr laughed. 'I don't think you are a pacifist.'

'You do not think I am what?' Pilar seemed puzzled by a word which had not previously entered her vocabulary.

'Do you forgive your enemies, señorita?'

Pilar shook her head. 'I have no enemies. But if I had –'

⁹ **she had no rigid taboos** – (разг.) у нее не было строгих запретов на что бы то ни было

¹⁰ **might have felt ill at ease** – (разг.) мог почувствовать себя неловко

¹¹ **General Franco** – генерал Франко Баамонде (1892–1975), глава испанского государства, вождь Испанской фаланги, в 1936 г. возглавил военно-фашистский мятеж против Испанской республики

¹² **It was a nuisance** – (разг.) Это было досадно

‘Well?’

He was watching her, fascinated anew by the sweet, cruel upward-curving mouth.

Pilar said gravely: ‘If I had an enemy – if anyone hated me and I hated them – then I would cut my enemy’s throat like this...’

She made a graphic gesture.

It was so swift and so crude that Stephen Farr was momentarily taken aback. He said: ‘You are a bloodthirsty young woman!’

Pilar asked in a matter-of-fact tone: ‘What would you do to your enemy?’

He started – stared at her, then laughed aloud. ‘I wonder¹³ – ’ he said. ‘I wonder!’

Pilar said disapprovingly: ‘But surely – you know.’

He checked his laughter, drew in his breath and said in a low voice: ‘Yes. I know...’

Then with a rapid change of manner, he asked: ‘What made you come to England?’

Pilar replied with a certain demureness. ‘I am going to stay with my relations – with my English relations.’

‘I see.’

He leaned back in his seat, studying her – wondering what these English relations of whom she spoke were like – wondering what they would make of this Spanish stranger... trying to picture her in the midst of some sober British family¹⁴ at Christmas time.

Pilar asked: ‘Is it nice, South Africa, yes?’

He began to talk to her about South Africa. She listened with the pleased attention of a child hearing a story. He enjoyed her naïve but shrewd questions and amused himself by making a kind of exaggerated fairy story of it all.

The return of the proper occupants of the carriage put an end to this diversion. He rose, smiled into her eyes, and made his way out again into the corridor.

As he stood back for a minute in the doorway, to allow an elderly lady to come in, his eyes fell on the label of Pilar’s obviously foreign straw case. He read the name with interest – Miss Pilar Estravados – then as his eye caught the address it widened to incredulity and some other feeling – Gorston Hall, Longdale, Addlesfield.

He half-turned, staring at the girl with a new expression – puzzled, resentful, suspicious... He went out into the corridor and stood there smoking a cigarette and frowning to himself...

¹³ **I wonder** – (разг.) Вот и мне интересно; мне и самому хотелось бы знать

¹⁴ **in the midst of some sober British family** – (разг.) среди рассудительного и спокойного британского семейства

III

In the big blue and gold drawing-room at Gorston Hall Alfred Lee and Lydia, his wife, sat discussing their plans for Christmas. Alfred was a squarely built man of middle age with a gentle face and mild brown eyes. His voice when he spoke was quiet and precise with a very clear enunciation. His head was sunk into his shoulders and he gave a curious impression of inertia. Lydia, his wife, was an energetic, lean greyhound of a woman. She was amazingly thin, but all her movements had a swift, startled grace about them.

There was no beauty in her careless, haggard face, but it had distinction. Her voice was charming.

Alfred said: 'Father insists! There's nothing else to it.'

Lydia controlled a sudden impatient movement. She said: 'Must you always give in to him¹⁵?'

'He's a very old man, my dear –'

'Oh, I know – I know!'

'He expects to have his own way¹⁶.'

Lydia said dryly: 'Naturally, since he has always had it! But some time or other¹⁷, Alfred, you will have to make a stand.'

'What do you mean, Lydia?'

He stared at her, so palpably upset and startled, that for a moment she bit her lip and seemed doubtful whether to go on.

Alfred Lee repeated: 'What do you mean, Lydia?'

She shrugged her thin, graceful shoulders. She said, trying to choose her words cautiously: 'Your father is – inclined to be – tyrannical –'

'He's old.'

'And will grow older. And consequently more tyrannical. Where will it end? Already he dictates our lives to us completely. We can't make a plan of our own! If we do, it is always liable to be upset¹⁸.'

Alfred said: 'Father expects to come first. He is very good to us, remember.'

'Oh! good to us!'

'Very good to us.' Alfred spoke with a trace of sternness.

Lydia said calmly: 'You mean financially?'

'Yes. His own wants are very simple. But he never grudges us money¹⁹. You can spend what you like on dress and on this house, and the bills are paid without a murmur. He gave us a new car only last week.'

'As far as money goes²⁰, your father is very generous, I admit,' said Lydia. 'But in return he expects us to behave like slaves.'

'Slaves?'

'That's the word I used. You are his slave, Alfred. If we have planned to go away and Father suddenly wishes us not to go, you cancel your arrangements and remain without a murmur! If the whim takes him to send us away, we go... We have no lives of our own – no independence.'

Her husband said distressfully: 'I wish you wouldn't talk like this, Lydia. It is very ungrateful. My father has done everything for us...'

¹⁵ **give in to him** – (разг.) уступать ему; подчиняться

¹⁶ **to have his own way** – (разг.) всегда добиваться своего; стоять на своем

¹⁷ **some time or other** – (разг.) хотя бы изредка

¹⁸ **it is always liable to be upset** – (разг.) всегда есть вероятность, что планы будут нарушены

¹⁹ **never grudges us money** – (разг.) не ограничивает нас в тратах

²⁰ **As far as money goes** – (разг.) В том, что касается денег

She bit off a retort that was on her lips. She shrugged those thin, graceful shoulders once more.

Alfred said: 'You know, Lydia, the old man is very fond of you –'

His wife said clearly and distinctly: 'I am not at all fond of him.'

'Lydia, it distresses me to hear you say things like that. It is so unkind –'

'Perhaps. But sometimes a compulsion comes over one to speak the truth.'

'If Father guessed –'

'Your father knows perfectly well that I do not like him! It amuses him, I think.'

'Really, Lydia, I am sure you are wrong there. He has often told me how charming your manner to him is.'

'Naturally I've always been polite. I always shall be. I'm just letting you know what my real feelings are. I dislike your father, Alfred. I think he is a malicious and tyrannical old man. He bullies you and presumes on your affection for him. You ought to have stood up to him²¹ years ago.'

Alfred said sharply: 'That will do²², Lydia. Please don't say any more.'

She sighed. 'I'm sorry. Perhaps I was wrong... Let's talk of our Christmas arrangements. Do you think your brother David will really come?'

'Why not?'

She shook her head doubtfully. 'David is – queer. He's not been inside the house for years, remember. He was so devoted to your mother – he's got some feeling about this place.'

'David always got on Father's nerves,' said Alfred, 'with his music and his dreamy ways. Father was, perhaps, a bit hard on him sometimes. But I think David and Hilda will come all right. Christmas time, you know.'

'Peace and goodwill,' said Lydia. Her delicate mouth curved ironically. 'I wonder! George and Magdalene are coming. They said they would probably arrive tomorrow. I'm afraid Magdalene will be frightfully bored.'

Alfred said with some slight annoyance: 'Why my brother George ever married a girl twenty years younger than himself I can't think! George was always a fool!'

'He's very successful in his career,' said Lydia. 'His constituents like him. I believe Magdalene works quite hard politically for him²³.'

Alfred said slowly: 'I don't think I like her very much. She is very good-looking – but I sometimes think she is like one of those beautiful pears one gets – they have a rosy flush and a rather waxy appearance –' He shook his head.

'And they're bad inside?' said Lydia. 'How funny you should say that, Alfred!'

'Why funny?'

She answered: 'Because – usually – you are such a gentle soul. You hardly ever say an unkind thing about anyone. I get annoyed with you sometimes because you're not sufficiently – oh, what shall I say? – sufficiently suspicious – not worldly enough!'

Her husband smiled. 'The world, I always think, is as you yourself make it.'

Lydia said sharply: 'No! Evil is not only in one's mind. Evil exists! You seem to have no consciousness of the evil in the world. I have. I can feel it. I've always felt it – here in this house –' She bit her lip and turned away.

Alfred said, 'Lydia –'

But she raised a quick admonitory hand²⁴, her eyes looking past him at something over his shoulder. Alfred turned.

A dark man with a smooth face was standing there deferentially.

²¹ **ought to have stood up to him** – (разг.) должен был восстать против его тирании

²² **That will do** – (разг.) Хватит; достаточно

²³ **works quite hard politically for him** – (разг.) помогает ему делать политическую карьеру

²⁴ **she raised a quick admonitory hand** – (разг.) жестом она остановила его

Lydia said sharply: 'What is it, Horbury?'

Horbury's voice was low, a mere deferential murmur. 'It's Mr Lee, madam. He asked me to tell you that there would be two more guests arriving for Christmas, and would you have rooms prepared for them.'

Lydia said, 'Two more guests?'

Horbury said smoothly, 'Yes, madam, another gentleman and a young lady.'

Alfred said wonderingly: 'A young lady?'

'That's what Mr Lee said, sir.'

Lydia said quickly: 'I will go up and see him —' Horbury made one little step, it was a mere ghost of a movement²⁵ but it stopped Lydia's rapid progress automatically.

'Excuse me, madam, but Mr Lee is having his afternoon sleep. He asked specifically that he should not be disturbed.'

'I see,' said Alfred. 'Of course we won't disturb him.' 'Thank you, sir.' Horbury withdrew.

Lydia said vehemently: 'How I dislike that man! He creeps about the house like a cat! One never hears him going or coming.'

'I don't like him very much either. But he knows his job²⁶. It's not so easy to get a good male nurse attendant. And Father likes him, that's the main thing.'

'Yes, that's the main thing, as you say. Alfred, what is this about a young lady? What young lady?'

Her husband shook his head. 'I can't imagine. I can't even think of anyone it might be likely to be.'

They stared at each other. Then Lydia said, with a sudden twist of her expressive mouth:

'Do you know what I think, Alfred?'

'What?'

'I think your father has been bored lately. I think he is planning a little Christmas diversion for himself.'

'By introducing two strangers into a family gathering?'

'Oh! I don't know what the details are – but I do fancy that your father is preparing to – amuse himself.'

'I hope he will get some pleasure out of it,' said Alfred gravely. 'Poor old chap, tied by the leg²⁷, an invalid – after the adventurous life he has led.'

Lydia said slowly: 'After the – adventurous life he has led.'

The pause she made before the adjective gave it some special though obscure significance. Alfred seemed to feel it. He flushed and looked unhappy.

She cried out suddenly: 'How he ever had a son like you, I can't imagine! You two are poles apart²⁸. And he fascinates you – you simply worship him!'

Alfred said with a trace of vexation: 'Aren't you going a little far, Lydia? It's natural, I should say, for a son to love his father. It would be very unnatural not to do so.'

Lydia said: 'In that case, most of the members of this family are – unnatural! Oh, don't let's argue! I apologize. I've hurt your feelings, I know. Believe me, Alfred, I really didn't mean to do that. I admire you enormously for your – your – fidelity. Loyalty is such a rare virtue in these days. Let us say, shall we, that I am jealous? Women are supposed to be jealous of their mothers-in-law – why not, then, of their fathers-in-law?'

²⁵ **it was a mere ghost of a movement** – (разг.) он почти не сдвинулся с места

²⁶ **knows his job** – (разг.) знает свое дело

²⁷ **tied by the leg** – (разг.) связан по рукам и ногам; прикован к креслу

²⁸ **are poles apart** – (разг.) диаметрально противоположны по характеру

He put a gentle arm round her. 'Your tongue runs away with you²⁹, Lydia. There's no reason for you to be jealous.'

She gave him a quick remorseful kiss, a delicate caress on the tip of his ear.

'I know. All the same, Alfred, I don't believe I should have been in the least jealous of your mother. I wish I'd known her.'

'She was a poor creature³⁰,' he said.

His wife looked at him interestedly.

'So that's how she struck you... as a poor creature... That's interesting.'

He said dreamily: 'I remember her as nearly always ill... Often in tears...' He shook his head. 'She had no spirit.'

Still staring at him, she murmured very softly: 'How odd...'

But as he turned a questioning glance on her, she shook her head quickly and changed the subject.

'Since we are not allowed to know who our mysterious guests are I shall go out and finish my garden.'

'It's very cold, my dear, a biting wind.'

'I'll wrap up warmly.'

She left the room. Alfred Lee, left alone, stood for some minutes motionless, frowning a little to himself, then he walked over to the big window at the end of the room. Outside was a terrace running the whole length of the house. Here, after a minute or two, he saw Lydia emerge, carrying a flat basket. She was wearing a big blanket coat. She set down the basket and began to work at a square stone sink slightly raised above ground level.

Her husband watched for some time. At last he went out of the room, fetched himself a coat and muffler, and emerged on to the terrace by a side door. As he walked along he passed various other stone sinks arranged as miniature gardens, all the products of Lydia's agile fingers.

One represented a desert scene with smooth yellow sand, a little clump of green palm trees in coloured tin, and a procession of camels with one or two little Arab figures. Some primitive mud houses had been constructed of plasticine. There was an Italian garden with terraces and formal beds with flowers in coloured sealing-wax. There was an Arctic one, too, with clumps of green glass for icebergs, and a little cluster of penguins. Next came a Japanese garden with a couple of beautiful little stunted trees, looking-glass arranged for water, and bridges modelled out of plasticine.

He came at last to stand beside her where she was at work. She had laid down blue paper and covered it over with glass. Round this were lumps of rock piled up. At the moment she was pouring out coarse pebbles from a little bag and forming them into a beach. Between the rocks were some small cactuses.

Lydia was murmuring to herself: 'Yes, that's exactly right – exactly what I want.'

Alfred said: 'What's this latest work of art?'

She started, for she had not heard him come up. 'This? Oh, it's the Dead Sea, Alfred. Do you like it?'

He said, 'It's rather arid³¹, isn't it? Oughtn't there to be more vegetation?'

She shook her head. 'It's my idea of the Dead Sea. It is dead, you see –'

'It's not so attractive as some of the others.'

'It's not meant to be specially attractive.'

Footsteps sounded on the terrace. An elderly butler, white-haired and slightly bowed, was coming towards them.

²⁹ **Your tongue runs away with you** – (разг.) Ты сначала говоришь, потом думаешь

³⁰ **was a poor creature** – (разг.) была очень несчастной

³¹ **It's rather arid** – (зд.) Какое-то оно скучное (безжизненное)

‘Mrs George Lee on the telephone, madam. She says will it be convenient if she and Mr George arrive by the five-twenty tomorrow?’

‘Yes, tell her that will be quite all right.’

‘Thank you, madam.’

The butler hurried away. Lydia looked after him with a softened expression on her face.

‘Dear old Tressilian. What a standby he is!’³² I can’t imagine what we should do without him.’

Alfred agreed. ‘He’s one of the old school. He’s been with us nearly forty years. He’s devoted to us all.’

Lydia nodded. ‘Yes. He’s like the faithful old retainers of fiction. I believe he’d lie himself blue in the face’³³ if it was necessary to protect one of the family!’

Alfred said: ‘I believe he would... Yes, I believe he would.’

Lydia smoothed over the last bit of her shingle. ‘There,’ she said. ‘That’s ready.’

‘Ready?’ Alfred looked puzzled.

She laughed. ‘For Christmas, silly! For this sentimental family Christmas we’re going to have.’

³² **What a standby he is!** – (разг.) Он такой надежный!

³³ **he’d lie himself blue in the face** – (разг.) будет врать до изнеможения (до посинения)

IV

David was reading the letter. Once he screwed it up into a ball and thrust it away from him. Then, reaching for it, he smoothed it out and read it again.

Quietly, without saying anything, his wife, Hilda, watched him. She noted the jerking muscle (or was it a nerve?) in his temple, the slight tremor of the long delicate hands, the nervous spasmodic movements of his whole body. When he pushed aside the lock of fair hair that always tended to stray down over his forehead and looked across at her with appealing blue eyes she was ready.

‘Hilda, what shall we do about it³⁴?’

Hilda hesitated a minute before speaking. She had heard the appeal in his voice. She knew how dependent he was upon her – had always been ever since their marriage – knew that she could probably influence his decision finally and decisively. But for just that reason she was chary of pronouncing anything too final.

She said, and her voice had the calm, soothing quality that can be heard in the voice of an experienced nannie in a nursery: ‘It depends on how you feel about it, David.’

A broad woman, Hilda, not beautiful, but with a certain magnetic quality. Something about her like a Dutch picture. Something warming and endearing in the sound of her voice. Something strong about her – the vital hidden strength that appeals to weakness. An over-stout dumpy middle-aged woman – not clever – not brilliant – but with something about her that you couldn’t pass over. Force! Hilda Lee had force!

David got up and began pacing up and down. His hair was practically untouched by grey. He was strangely boyish-looking. His face had the mild quality of a Burne-Jones³⁵ knight. It was, somehow, not very real...

He said, and his voice was wistful: ‘You know how I feel about it, Hilda. You must.’

‘I’m not sure.’

‘But I’ve told you – I’ve told you again and again! How I hate it all – the house and the country round and everything! It brings back nothing but misery. I hated every moment that I spent there! When I think of it – of all that she suffered – my mother...’

His wife nodded sympathetically.

‘She was so sweet, Hilda, and so patient. Lying there, often in pain, but bearing it – enduring everything. And when I think of my father’ – his face darkened – ‘bringing all that misery into her life – humiliating her – boasting of his love affairs – constantly unfaithful to her and never troubling to conceal it³⁶.’

Hilda Lee said: ‘She should not have put up with it³⁷. She should have left him.’

He said with a touch of reproof: ‘She was too good to do that. She thought it was her duty to remain. Besides, it was her home – where else should she go?’

‘She could have made a life of her own.’

David said fretfully: ‘Not in those days! You don’t understand. Women didn’t behave like that. They put up with things. They endured patiently. She had us to consider³⁸. Even if she divorced my father, what would have happened? He would probably have married again. There might have

³⁴ **what shall we do about it** – (разг.) как нам поступить

³⁵ **Burne-Jones** – Эдуард Берн-Джонс (1833–1898), английский живописец и иллюстратор, близкий по духу к прерафаэлитам. Широко известен своими витражами.

³⁶ **never troubling to conceal it** – (разг.) даже не пытался это скрывать

³⁷ **should not have put up with it** – (разг.) не должна была с этим мириться

³⁸ **had us to consider** – (разг.) ей приходилось заботиться о нас, детях

been a second family. Our interests might have gone to the wall³⁹. She had to think of all those considerations.'

Hilda did not answer.

David went on: 'No, she did right. She was a saint! She endured to the end – uncomplainingly.'

Hilda said, 'Not quite uncomplainingly or you would not know so much, David!'

He said softly, his face lighting up: 'Yes – she told me things – She knew how I loved her. When she died –'

He stopped. He ran his hands through his hair. 'Hilda, it was awful – horrible! The desolation! She was quite young still, she needn't have died. He killed her – my father! He was responsible for her dying.

He broke her heart. I decided then that I'd not go on living under his roof. I broke away – got away from it all.'

Hilda nodded. 'You were very wise,' she said. 'It was the right thing to do.'

David said: 'Father wanted me to go into the works⁴⁰. That would have meant living at home. I couldn't have stood that. I can't think how Alfred stands it – how he has stood it all these years.'

'Did he never rebel against it?' asked Hilda with some interest. 'I thought you told me something about his having given up some other career.'

David nodded. 'Alfred was going into the army. Father arranged it all. Alfred, the eldest, was to go into some cavalry regiment, Harry was to go into the works, so was I. George was to enter politics.'

'And it didn't work out like that?'

David shook his head. 'Harry broke all that up! He was always frightfully wild⁴¹. Got into debt – and all sorts of other troubles. Finally he went off one day with several hundred pounds that didn't belong to him, leaving a note behind him saying an office stool didn't suit him and he was going to see the world.'

'And you never heard any more of him?'

'Oh, yes, we did!' David laughed. 'We heard quite often! He was always cabling for money from all over the world. He usually got it too!'

'And Alfred?'

'Father made him chuck up the army⁴² and come back and go into the works.'

'Did he mind?'

'Very much to begin with. He hated it. But Father could always twist Alfred round his little finger. He's absolutely under Father's thumb still, I believe.'

'And you – escaped!' said Hilda.

'Yes. I went to London and studied painting. Father told me plainly that if I went off on a fool's errand⁴³ like that I'd get a small allowance from him during his lifetime and nothing when he died. I said I didn't care. He called me a young fool, and that was that⁴⁴! I've never seen him since.'

Hilda said gently: 'And you haven't regretted it?'

'No, indeed. I realize I shan't ever get anywhere with my art. I shall never be a great artist – but we're happy enough in this cottage – we've got everything we want – all the essentials. And if I die, well, my life's insured for you.'

He paused and then said: 'And now – this!'

He struck the letter with his open hand.

³⁹ **might have gone to the wall** – (разг.) могли вылететь в трубу

⁴⁰ **to go into the works** – (зд.) продолжить его дело

⁴¹ **was always frightfully wild** – (разг.) всегда был неуправляемым; поступал по-своему

⁴² **made him chuck up the army** – (разг.) заставил его бросить службу в армии

⁴³ **if I went off on a fool's errand** – (разг.) если буду заниматься глупостями

⁴⁴ **that was that** – (разг.) на этом дело и кончилось

'I am sorry your father ever wrote that letter, if it upsets you so much,' said Hilda.

David went on as though he had not heard her. 'Asking me to bring my wife for Christmas, expressing a hope that we may be all together for Christmas; a united family! What can it mean?'

Hilda said: 'Need it mean anything more than it says?'

He looked at her questioningly.

'I mean,' she said, smiling, 'that your father is growing old. He's beginning to feel sentimental about family ties. That does happen⁴⁵, you know.'

'I suppose it does,' said David slowly.

'He's an old man and he's lonely.'

He gave her a quick look. 'You want me to go, don't you, Hilda?'

She said slowly: 'It seems a pity – not to answer an appeal. I'm old-fashioned, I dare say, but why not have peace and goodwill at Christmas time?'

'After all I've told you?'

'I know, dear, I know. But all that's in the past. It's all done and finished with.'

'Not for me.'

'No, because you won't let it die. You keep the past alive in your own mind.'

'I can't forget.'

'You won't forget – that's what you mean, David.'

His mouth set in a firm line. 'We're like that, we Lees. We remember things for years – brood about them, keep memory green⁴⁶.'

Hilda said with a touch of impatience: 'Is that anything to be proud of?⁴⁷ I do not think so!'

He looked thoughtfully at her, a touch of reserve in his manner.

He said: 'You don't attach much value to loyalty, then – loyalty to a memory?'

Hilda said: 'I believe the present matters – not the past! The past must go. If we seek to keep the past alive, we end, I think, by distorting it. We see it in exaggerated terms – a false perspective.'

'I can remember every word and every incident of those days perfectly,' said David passionately.

'Yes, but you shouldn't, my dear! It isn't natural to do so! You're applying the judgment of a boy to those days instead of looking back on them with the more temperate outlook of a man.'

'What difference would that make?' demanded David.

Hilda hesitated. She was aware of un wisdom in going on, and yet there were things she badly wanted to say.

'I think,' she said, 'that you're seeing your father as a bogey! Probably, if you were to see him now, you would realize that he was only a very ordinary man; a man, perhaps, whose passions ran away with him, a man whose life was far from blameless, but nevertheless merely a man – not a kind of inhuman monster!'

'You don't understand! His treatment of my mother –'

Hilda said gravely: 'There is a certain kind of meekness – of submission – brings out the worst in a man – whereas that same man, faced by spirit and determination, might be a different creature!'

'So you say it was her fault –'

Hilda interrupted him. 'No, of course I don't! I've no doubt your father treated your mother very badly indeed, but marriage is an extraordinary thing – and I doubt if any outsider – even a child of the marriage – has the right to judge. Besides, all this resentment on your part now cannot help your mother. It is all gone – it is behind you! What is left now is an old man, in feeble health, asking his son to come home for Christmas.'

'And you want me to go?'

⁴⁵ **That does happen** – (разг.) Такое иногда случается

⁴⁶ **keep memory green** – (разг.) ничего не забываем

⁴⁷ **Is that anything to be proud of?** – (разг.) Нашел чем гордиться!

Hilda hesitated, then she suddenly made up her mind. 'Yes,' she said. 'I do. I want you to go and lay the bogy once and for all⁴⁸.'

⁴⁸ **once and for all** – (разг.) раз и навсегда

V

George Lee, M.P.⁴⁹ for Westeringham, was a somewhat corpulent gentleman of forty-one. His eyes were pale blue and slightly prominent with a suspicious expression, he had a heavy jowl, and a slow pedantic utterance.

He said now in a weighty manner: 'I have told you, Magdalene, that I think it my duty to go.'

His wife shrugged her shoulders impatiently.

She was a slender creature, a platinum blonde with plucked eyebrows and a smooth egg-like face. It could, on occasions, look quite blank and devoid of any expression whatever. She was looking like that now.

'Darling,' she said, 'it will be perfectly grim, I am sure of it.'

'Moreover,' said George Lee, and his face lit up as an attractive idea occurred to him, 'it will enable us to save considerably⁵⁰. Christmas is always an expensive time. We can put the servants on board wages⁵¹.'

'Oh, well!' said Magdalene. 'After all, Christmas is pretty grim anywhere!'

'I suppose,' said George, pursuing his own line of thought, 'they will expect to have a Christmas dinner? A nice piece of beef, perhaps, instead of a turkey.'

'Who? The servants? Oh, George, don't fuss so. You're always worrying about money.'

'Somebody has to worry,' said George.

'Yes, but it's absurd to pinch and scrape⁵² in all these little ways. Why don't you make your father give you some more money?'

'He already gives me a very handsome allowance⁵³.'

'It's awful to be completely dependent on your father, as you are! He ought to settle some money on you outright.'

'That's not his way of doing things.'

Magdalene looked at him. Her hazel eyes were suddenly sharp and keen. The expressionless egg-like face showed sudden meaning.

'He's frightfully rich, isn't he, George? A kind of millionaire, isn't he?'

'A millionaire twice over, I believe.'

Magdalene gave an envious sigh. 'How did he make it all? South Africa, wasn't it?'

'Yes, he made a big fortune there in his early days. Mainly diamonds.'

'Thrilling!' said Magdalene.

'Then he came to England and started in business and his fortune has actually doubled or trebled itself⁵⁴, I believe.'

'What will happen when he dies?' asked Magdalene.

'Father's never said much on the subject. Of course one can't exactly ask. I should imagine that the bulk of his money will go to Alfred and myself. Alfred, of course, will get the larger share.'

'You've got other brothers, haven't you?'

⁴⁹ **M.P.** – сокр. от **Member of Parliament**, член парламента

⁵⁰ **it will enable us to save considerably** – (разг.) мы сможем хорошо сэкономить

⁵¹ **put the servants on board wages** – (разг.) платить слугам только за проживание и стол

⁵² **to pinch and scrape** – (разг.) ограничивать себя и экономить на всем

⁵³ **gives me a very handsome allowance** – (разг.) платит мне приличное содержание

⁵⁴ **doubled or trebled itself** – (разг.) удвоилось или даже утроилось

‘Yes, there’s my brother David. I don’t fancy he will get much. He went off to do art or some tomfoolery of that kind. I believe Father warned him that he would cut him out of his will⁵⁵ and David said he didn’t care.’

‘How silly!’ said Magdalene with scorn.

‘There was my sister Jennifer too. She went off with a foreigner – a Spanish artist – one of David’s friends. But she died just over a year ago. She left a daughter, I believe. Father might leave a little money to her, but nothing much. And of course there’s Harry –’

He stopped, slightly embarrassed.

‘Harry?’ said Magdalene, surprised. ‘Who is Harry?’

‘Ah – er – my brother.’

‘I never knew you had another brother.’

‘My dear, he wasn’t a great – er – credit – to us⁵⁶. We don’t mention him. His behaviour was disgraceful. We haven’t heard anything of him for some years now. He’s probably dead.’

Magdalene laughed suddenly.

‘What is it? What are you laughing at?’

Magdalene said: ‘I was only thinking how funny it was that you – you, George, should have a disreputable brother! You’re so very respectable.’

‘I should hope so,’ said George coldly.

Her eyes narrowed. ‘Your father isn’t – very respectable, George.’

‘Really, Magdalene!’

‘Sometimes the things he says make me feel quite uncomfortable.’

George said: ‘Really, Magdalene, you surprise me. Does – er – does Lydia feel the same?’

‘He doesn’t say the same kind of things to Lydia,’ said Magdalene. She added angrily, ‘No, he never says them to her. I can’t think why not.’

George glanced at her quickly and then glanced away.

‘Oh, well,’ he said vaguely. ‘One must make allowances.⁵⁷ At Father’s age – and with his health being so bad –’

He paused. His wife asked: ‘Is he really – pretty ill?’

‘Oh, I wouldn’t say that. He’s remarkably tough. All the same, since he wants to have his family round him at Christmas, I think we are quite right to go. It may be his last Christmas.’

She said sharply: ‘You say that, George, but really, I suppose, he may live for years?’

Slightly taken aback, her husband stammered:

‘Yes – yes, of course he may.’

Magdalene turned away. ‘Oh, well,’ she said, ‘I suppose we’re doing the right thing by going.’

‘I have no doubt about it.’

‘But I hate it! Alfred’s so dull, and Lydia snubs me.’

‘Nonsense.’

‘She does. And I hate that beastly manservant.’

‘Old Tressilian?’

‘No, Horbury. Sneaking round like a cat and smirking.’

‘Really, Magdalene, I can’t see that Horbury can affect you in any way!’

‘He just gets on my nerves, that’s all. But don’t let’s bother. We’ve got to go, I can see that. Won’t do to offend⁵⁸ the old man.’

‘No – no, that’s just the point. About the servants’ Christmas dinner –’

⁵⁵ **would cut him out of his will** – (разг.) вычеркнет его из завещания

⁵⁶ **wasn’t a great – er – credit – to us** – (разг.) не делал чести нашей семье

⁵⁷ **One must make allowances.** – (разг.) Надо быть снисходительнее.

⁵⁸ **Won’t do to offend** – (разг.) Нехорошо обижать

‘Not now, George, some other time. I’ll just ring up Lydia and tell her that we’ll come by the five-twenty tomorrow.’

Magdalene left the room precipitately. After telephoning she went up to her own room and sat down in front of the desk. She let down the flap and rummaged in its various pigeon-holes. Cascades of bills came tumbling out. Magdalene sorted through them, trying to arrange them in some kind of order. Finally, with an impatient sigh, she bundled them up and thrust them back whence they had come. She passed a hand over her smooth platinum head.

‘What on earth am I to do?’ she murmured.

VI

On the first floor of Gorston Hall a long passage led to a big room overlooking the front drive. It was a room furnished in the more flamboyant of old-fashioned styles. It had heavy brocaded wallpaper, rich leather armchairs, large vases embossed with dragons, sculptures in bronze... Everything in it was magnificent, costly and solid.

In a big grandfather armchair⁵⁹, the biggest and most imposing of all the chairs, sat the thin, shrivelled figure of an old man. His long clawlike hands rested on the arms of the chair. A gold-mounted stick was by his side. He wore an old shabby blue dressing-gown. On his feet were carpet slippers. His hair was white and the skin of his face was yellow.

A shabby, insignificant figure, one might have thought. But the nose, aquiline and proud, and the eyes, dark and intensely alive, might cause an observer to alter his opinion. Here was fire and life and vigour.

Old Simeon Lee cackled to himself, a sudden, high cackle of amusement.

He said: 'You gave my message to Mrs Alfred, hey?'

Horbury was standing beside his chair. He replied in his soft deferential voice: 'Yes, sir.'

'Exactly in the words I told you? Exactly, mind?'

'Yes, sir. I didn't make a mistake, sir.'

'No – you don't make mistakes. You'd better not make mistakes either – or you'll regret it! And what did she say, Horbury? What did Mr Alfred say?'

Quietly, unemotionally, Horbury repeated what had passed. The old man cackled again and rubbed his hands together.

'Splendid... First rate... They'll have been thinking and wondering – all the afternoon! Splendid! I'll have 'em up now. Go and get them.'

'Yes, sir.'

Horbury walked noiselessly across the room and went out.

'And, Horbury – ' The old man looked round, then cursed to himself. 'Fellow moves like a cat. Never know where he is.'

He sat quite still in his chair, his fingers caressing his chin till there was a tap on the door, and Alfred and Lydia came in.

'Ah, there you are, there you are. Sit here, Lydia, my dear, by me. What a nice colour you've got.⁶⁰

'I've been out in the cold. It makes one's cheeks burn afterwards.'

Alfred said: 'How are you, Father, did you have a good rest this afternoon?'

'First rate – first rate. Dreamt about the old days! That was before I settled down and became a pillar of society⁶¹.'

He cackled with sudden laughter.

His daughter-in-law sat silently smiling with polite attention.

Alfred said: 'What's this, Father, about two extra being expected for Christmas?'

'Ah, that! Yes, I must tell you about that. It's going to be a grand Christmas for me this year – a grand Christmas. Let me see, George is coming and Magdalene – '

Lydia said: 'Yes, they are arriving tomorrow by the five-twenty.'

Old Simeon said: 'Poor stick, George! Nothing but a gasbag! Still, he is my son.'

Alfred said: 'His constituents like him.'

⁵⁹ **In a big grandfather armchair** – (разг.) В большом старинном кресле с подлокотниками

⁶⁰ **What a nice colour you've got.** – (разг.) Сегодня у вас чудный цвет лица.

⁶¹ **became a pillar of society** – (ирон.) стал столпом общества

Simeon cackled again. 'They probably think he's honest. Honest! There never was a Lee who was honest yet.'

'Oh, come now⁶², Father.'

'I except you, my boy. I except you.'

'And David?' asked Lydia.

'David now. I'm curious to see the boy after all these years. He was a namby-pamby youngster. Wonder what his wife is like? At any rate he hasn't married a girl twenty years younger than himself, like that fool George!'

'Hilda wrote a very nice letter,' said Lydia. 'I've just had a wire from her confirming it and saying they are definitely arriving tomorrow.'

Her father-in-law looked at her, a keen, penetrating glance. He laughed. 'I never get any change out of Lydia,' he said. 'I'll say this for you, Lydia, you're a well-bred woman. Breeding tells.⁶³ I know that well enough. A funny thing, though, heredity. There's only one of you that's taken after me – only one out of all the litter.'

His eyes danced. 'Now guess who's coming for Christmas. I'll give you three guesses and I'll bet you a fiver⁶⁴ you won't get the answer.'

He looked from one face to the other.

Alfred said frowning: 'Horbury said you expected a young lady.'

'That intrigued you – yes, I dare say it did. Pilar will be arriving any minute now. I gave orders for the car to go and meet her.'

Alfred said sharply: 'Pilar?'

Simeon said: 'Pilar Estravados. Jennifer's girl. My granddaughter. I wonder what she'll be like.'

Alfred cried out: 'Good heavens, Father, you never told me...'

The old man was grinning. 'No, I thought I'd keep it a secret! Got Charlton to write out and fix things.'

Alfred repeated, his tone hurt and reproachful: 'You never told me...'

His father said, still grinning wickedly: 'It would have spoilt the surprise! Wonder what it will be like to have young blood under this roof again? I never saw Estravados. Wonder which the girl takes after⁶⁵ – her mother or her father?'

'Do you really think it's wise, Father,' began Alfred. 'Taking everything into consideration –'

The old man interrupted him. 'Safety – safety – you play for safety too much⁶⁶, Alfred! Always have! That hasn't been my way! Do what you want and be damned to it! That's what I say! The girl's my granddaughter – the only grandchild in the family! I don't care what her father was or what he did! She's my flesh and blood! And she's coming to live here in my house.'

Lydia said sharply: 'She's coming to live here?'

He darted a quick look at her. 'Do you object?'

She shook her head. She said smiling: 'I couldn't very well object to your asking someone to your own house, could I? No, I was wondering about – her.'

'About her – what d'you mean?'

'Whether she would be happy here.'

Old Simeon flung up his head. 'She's not got a penny in the world. She ought to be thankful!'

Lydia shrugged her shoulders.

⁶² **Oh, come now** – (разг.) Да бросьте

⁶³ **Breeding tells.** – (разг.) Чувствуется порода.

⁶⁴ **I'll bet you a fiver** – (разг.) ставлю пятерку (пять фунтов)

⁶⁵ **which the girl takes after** – (разг.) на кого же похожа девушка

⁶⁶ **you play for safety too much** – (разг.) ах как ты любишь осторожничать

Simeon turned to Alfred: 'You see? It's going to be a grand Christmas! All my children round me. All my children! There, Alfred, there's your clue. Now guess who the other visitor is.'

Alfred stared at him.

'All my children! Guess, boy! Harry, of course! Your brother Harry!'

Alfred had gone very pale. He stammered: 'Harry – not Harry –'

'Harry himself!'

'But we thought he was dead!'

'Not he!'

'You – you are having him back here? After everything?'

'The prodigal son⁶⁷, eh? You're right. The fatted calf! We must kill the fatted calf, Alfred. We must give him a grand welcome.'

Alfred said: 'He treated you – all of us – disgracefully. He –'

'No need to recite his crimes! It's a long list. But Christmas, you'll remember, is the season of forgiveness! We'll welcome the prodigal home.'

Alfred rose. He murmured: 'This has been – rather a shock. I never dreamt that Harry would ever come inside these walls again.'

Simeon leaned forward. 'You never liked Harry, did you?' he said softly.

'After the way he behaved to you –'

Simeon cackled. He said: 'Ah, but bygones must be bygones⁶⁸. That's the spirit for Christmas, isn't it, Lydia?'

Lydia, too, had gone pale. She said dryly: 'I see that you have thought a good deal about Christmas this year.'

'I want my family round me. Peace and goodwill. I'm an old man. Are you going, my dear?'

Alfred had hurried out. Lydia paused a moment before following him.

Simeon nodded his head after the retreating figure. 'It's upset him. He and Harry never got on⁶⁹. Harry used to jeer at Alfred. Called him old Slow and Sure.'

Lydia's lips parted. She was about to speak, then, as she saw the old man's eager expression, she checked herself. Her self-control, she saw, disappointed him. The perception of that fact enabled her to say: 'The hare and the tortoise.⁷⁰ Ah, well, the tortoise wins the race.'

'Not always,' said Simeon. 'Not always, my dear Lydia.'

She said, still smiling: 'Excuse me, I must go after Alfred. Sudden excitements always upset him.'

Simeon cackled. 'Yes, Alfred doesn't like changes. He always was a regular sobersides.'

Lydia said: 'Alfred is very devoted to you.'

'That seems odd to you, doesn't it?'

'Sometimes,' said Lydia, 'it does.'

She left the room. Simeon looked after her.

He chuckled softly and rubbed his palms together. 'Lots of fun,' he said. 'Lots of fun still. I'm going to enjoy this Christmas.'

With an effort he pulled himself upright, and with the help of his stick, shuffled across the room.

He went to a big safe that stood at the corner of the room. He twirled the handle of the combination. The door came open and, with shaking fingers, he felt inside.

He lifted out a small wash-leather bag, and opening it, let a stream of uncut diamonds pass through his fingers.

⁶⁷ **The prodigal son** – (библ.) Блудный сын

⁶⁸ **bygones must be bygones** – искаж. посл. **Let bygones be bygones**, Кто старое помянет, тому глаз вон

⁶⁹ **never got on** – (разг.) никогда не ладили

⁷⁰ **The hare and the tortoise**. – см. «Сказки дядюшки Римуса» (сборник рассказов негритянского юга Америки)

‘Well, my beauties, well... Still the same – still my old friends. Those were good days – good days... They shan’t carve you and cut you about, my friends. You shan’t hang round the necks of women or sit on their fingers or hang on their ears. You’re mine! My old friends! We know a thing or two, you and I. I’m old, they say, and ill, but I’m not done for⁷¹! Lots of life in the old dog yet. And there’s still some fun to be got out of life. Still some fun – ’

⁷¹ **I’m not done for** – (разг.) я еще живой

Part 2

December 23rd

I

Tressilian went to answer the doorbell. It had been an unusually aggressive peal, and now, before he could make his slow way across the hall, it pealed out again.

Tressilian flushed. An ill-mannered, impatient way of ringing the bell at a gentleman's house! If it was a fresh lot of those carol singers he'd give them a piece of his mind⁷².

Through the frosted glass of the upper half of the door he saw a silhouette – a big man in a slouch hat. He opened the door. As he had thought – a cheap, flashy stranger – nasty pattern of suit he was wearing – loud! Some impudent begging fellow!

'Blessed if it isn't Tressilian,' said the stranger. 'How are you, Tressilian?'

Tressilian stared – took a deep breath – stared again. That bold arrogant jaw, the high-bridged nose, the rollicking eye. Yes, they had all been there three years ago. More subdued then...

He said with a gasp: 'Mr Harry!'

Harry Lee laughed. 'Looks as though I'd given you quite a shock. Why? I'm expected, aren't I?'

'Yes, indeed, sir. Certainly, sir.'

'Then why the surprise act⁷³?' Harry stepped back a foot or two and looked up at the house – a good solid mass of red brick, unimaginative but solid.

'Just the same ugly old mansion,' he remarked. 'Still standing, though, that's the main thing. How's my father, Tressilian?'

'He's somewhat of an invalid, sir. Keeps his room⁷⁴, and can't get about much. But he's wonderfully well, considering.'

'The old sinner!'

Harry Lee came inside, let Tressilian remove his scarf and take the somewhat theatrical hat.

'How's my dear brother Alfred, Tressilian?'

'He's very well, sir.'

Harry grinned. 'Looking forward to seeing me? Eh?'

'I expect so, sir.'

'I don't! Quite the contrary. I bet it's given him a nasty jolt, my turning up! Alfred and I never did get on. Ever read your Bible, Tressilian?'

'Why, yes, sir, sometimes, sir.'

'Remember the tale of the prodigal's return? The good brother didn't like it, remember? Didn't like it at all! Good old stay-at-home Alfred doesn't like it either, I bet.'

Tressilian remained silent looking down his nose⁷⁵. His stiffened back expressed protest. Harry clapped him on the shoulder. 'Lead on, old son,' he said. 'The fatted calf awaits me! Lead me right to it.'

Tressilian murmured: 'If you will come this way into the drawing-room, sir. I am not quite sure where everyone is... They were unable to send to meet you, sir, not knowing the time of your arrival.'

⁷² **he'd give them a piece of his mind** – (разг.) уж он выскажет им все, что думает о них

⁷³ **why the surprise act** – (разг.) зачем же изображать удивление

⁷⁴ **Keeps his room** – (разг.) Придерживается домашнего режима (не выходит)

⁷⁵ **looking down his nose** – (разг.) выражая явное неодобрение

Harry nodded. He followed Tressilian along the hall, turning his head to look about him as he went.

‘All the old exhibits in their place, I see,’ he remarked. ‘I don’t believe anything has changed since I went away twenty years ago.’

He followed Tressilian into the drawing-room.

The old man murmured: ‘I will see if I can find Mr or Mrs Alfred,’ and hurried out.

Harry Lee had marched into the room and had then stopped, staring at the figure who was seated on one of the window-sills. His eyes roamed incredulously over the black hair and the creamy exotic pallor.

‘Good Lord!’ he said. ‘Are you my father’s seventh and most beautiful wife?’

Pilar slipped down and came towards him. ‘I am Pilar Estravados,’ she announced. ‘And you must be my Uncle Harry, my mother’s brother.’

Harry said, staring: ‘So that’s who you are! Jenny’s daughter.’

Pilar said: ‘Why did you ask me if I was your father’s seventh wife? Has he really had six wives?’

Harry laughed. ‘No, I believe he’s only had one official one. Well – Pil – what’s your name?’

‘Pilar, yes.’

‘Well, Pilar, it really gives me quite a turn to see something like you blooming in this mausoleum.’

‘This – maus – please?’⁷⁶

‘This museum of stuffed dummies! I always thought this house was lousy! Now I see it again I think it’s lousier than ever!’

Pilar said in a shocked voice: ‘Oh, no, it is very handsome here! The furniture is good and the carpets – thick carpets everywhere – and there are lots of ornaments. Everything is very good quality and very, very rich!’

‘You’re right there,’ said Harry, grinning. He looked at her with amusement. ‘You know, I can’t help getting a kick out of seeing you in the midst —’

He broke off as Lydia came rapidly into the room. She came straight to him.

‘How d’you do, Harry? I’m Lydia – Alfred’s wife.’ ‘How de do, Lydia.’ He shook hands, examining her intelligent mobile face in a swift glance and approving mentally of the way she walked – very few women moved well.

Lydia in her turn took quick stock of him⁷⁷.

She thought: ‘He looks a frightful tough – attractive though. I wouldn’t trust him an inch...’⁷⁸

She said smiling: ‘How does it look after all these years? Quite different, or very much the same?’

‘Pretty much the same.’ He looked round him. ‘This room’s been done over.’

‘Oh, many times.’

He said: ‘I meant by you. You’ve made it – different.’

‘Yes, I expect so...’

He grinned at her, a sudden impish grin that reminded her with a start of the old man upstairs.

‘It’s got more class about it now! I remember hearing that old Alfred had married a girl whose people came over with the Conqueror’⁷⁹.

Lydia smiled. She said: ‘I believe they did. But they’ve rather run to seed’⁸⁰ since those days.’

Harry said: ‘How’s old Alfred? Just the same blessed old stick-in-the-mud as ever?’

⁷⁶ **This – maus – please?** – (разг.) Простите, в чем?

⁷⁷ **took quick stock of him** – (разг.) критически осмотрела его с ног до головы

⁷⁸ **I wouldn’t trust him an inch...** – (разг.) Я бы не доверяла ему ни на грош

⁷⁹ **the Conqueror** – Вильгельм Завоеватель (1027– 1087), король Англии с 1066 г. до своей смерти (победил короля Гарольда в битве при Гастингсе)

⁸⁰ **they’ve rather run to seed** – (зд.) все пришло в упадок

'I've no idea whether you will find him changed or not.'

'How are the others? Scattered all over England?'

'No – they're all here for Christmas, you know.'

Harry's eyes opened. 'Regular Christmas family reunion? What's the matter with the old man? He used not to give a damn for sentiment⁸¹. Don't remember his caring much for his family, either. He must have changed!'

'Perhaps.' Lydia's voice was dry.

Pilar was staring, her big eyes wide and interested.

Harry said: 'How's old George? Still the same skinflint? How he used to howl if he had to part with a halfpenny of his pocket-money!'

Lydia said: 'George is in Parliament. He's member for Westeringham.'

'What? Pop-eye in Parliament? Lord, that's good.'

Harry threw back his head and laughed. It was rich stentorian laughter – it sounded uncontrolled and brutal in the confined space of the room. Pilar drew in her breath with a gasp. Lydia flinched a little.

Then, at a movement behind him, Harry broke off his laugh and turned sharply. He had not heard anyone coming in, but Alfred was standing there quietly. He was looking at Harry with an odd expression on his face.

Harry stood a minute, then a slow smile crept to his lips. He advanced a step. 'Why⁸²,' he said, 'it's Alfred!'

Alfred nodded. 'Hallo, Harry,' he said.

They stood staring at each other. Lydia caught her breath. She thought: 'How absurd! Like two dogs – looking at each other...'

Pilar's gaze widened even further. She thought to herself: 'How silly they look standing there... Why do they not embrace? No, of course the English do not do that. But they might say something. Why do they just look?'

Harry said at last: 'Well, well. Feels funny to be here again!'

'I expect so – yes. A good many years since you – got out.'

Harry threw up his head. He drew his finger along the line of his jaw. It was a gesture that was habitual with him. It expressed belligerence.

'Yes,' he said. 'I'm glad I have come' – he paused to bring out the word with greater significance – 'home...'

⁸¹ **used not to give a damn for sentiment** – (разг.) да он в жизни не был сентиментальным

⁸² **Why** – (разг.) Ну неужели

II

'I've been, I suppose, a very wicked man,' said Simeon Lee.

He was leaning back in his chair. His chin was raised and with one finger he was stroking his jaw reflectively. In front of him a big fire glowed and danced. Beside it sat Pilar, a little screen of *papier-mâché*⁸³ held in her hand. With it she shielded her face from the blaze. Occasionally she fanned herself with it, using her wrist in a supple gesture. Simeon looked at her with satisfaction.

He went on talking, perhaps more to himself than to the girl, and stimulated by the fact of her presence.

'Yes,' he said. 'I've been a wicked man. What do you say to that, Pilar?'

Pilar shrugged her shoulders. She said: 'All men are wicked. The nuns say so. That is why one has to pray for them.'

'Ah, but I've been more wicked than most.' Simeon laughed. 'I don't regret it, you know. No, I don't regret anything. I've enjoyed myself... every minute! They say you repent when you get old. That's bunkum. I don't repent. And as I tell you, I've done most things... all the good old sins! I've cheated and stolen and lied... lord, yes! And women – always women! Someone told me the other day of an Arab chief who had a bodyguard of forty of his sons – all roughly the same age! Aha! Forty! I don't know about forty, but I bet I could produce a very fair bodyguard if I went about looking for the brats⁸⁴! Hey, Pilar, what do you think of that? Shocked?'

Pilar stared. 'No, why should I be shocked? Men always desire women. My father, too. That is why wives are so often unhappy and why they go to church and pray.'

Old Simeon was frowning. 'I made Adelaide unhappy,' he said. He spoke almost under his breath, to himself. 'Lord, what a woman! Pink and white and pretty as they make 'em⁸⁵ when I married her! And afterwards? Always wailing and weeping. It rouses the devil in a man when his wife is always crying... She'd no guts, that's what was the matter with Adelaide. If she'd stood up to me! But she never did – not once. I believed when I married her that I was going to be able to settle down, raise a family – cut loose from the old life⁸⁶...'

His voice died away. He stared – stared into the glowing heart of the fire.

'Raise a family... God, what a family!' He gave a sudden shrill pipe of angry laughter. 'Look at 'em – look at 'em! Not a child among them – to carry on! What's the matter with them? Haven't they got any of my blood in their veins? Not a son among 'em, legitimate or illegitimate. Alfred, for instance – heavens above, how bored I get with Alfred! Looking at me with his dog's eyes. Ready to do anything I ask. Lord, what a fool! His wife, now – Lydia – I like Lydia. She's got spirit. She doesn't like me, though. No, she doesn't like me. But she has to put up with me for that nincompoop Alfred's sake.' He looked over at the girl by the fire. 'Pilar – remember – nothing is so boring as devotion.'

She smiled at him. He went on, warmed by the presence of her youth and strong femininity. 'George? What's George? A stick! A stuffed codfish! a pompous windbag with no brains and no guts – and mean about money as well! David? David always was a fool – a fool and a dreamer. His mother's boy⁸⁷, that was always David. Only sensible thing he ever did was to marry that solid comfortable-looking woman.' He brought down his hand with a bang on the edge of his chair. 'Harry's the best of 'em! Poor old Harry, the wrong 'un! But at any rate he's alive!'

⁸³ *papier-mâché* – (фр.) папье-маше

⁸⁴ *looking for the brats* – (разг.) разыскивая своих бастардов

⁸⁵ *pretty as they make 'em* – (разг.) хорошенькая как картинка

⁸⁶ *cut loose from the old life* – (разг.) отказаться от старых привычек

⁸⁷ *His mother's boy* – (разг.) Мамынькин сынок

Pilar agreed. 'Yes, he is nice. He laughs – laughs out loud – and throws his head back. Oh, yes, I like him very much.'

The old man looked at her.

'You do, do you, Pilar? Harry always had a way with the girls. Takes after me there.'⁸⁸ He began to laugh, a slow wheezy chuckle. 'I've had a good life – a very good life. Plenty of everything.'

Pilar said: 'In Spain we have a proverb. It is like this: Take what you like and pay for it, says God.'

Simeon beat an appreciative hand on the arm of his chair. 'That's good. That's the stuff. Take what you like... I've done that – all my life – taken what I wanted...'

Pilar said, her voice high and clear, and suddenly arresting: 'And you have paid for it?'

Simeon stopped laughing to himself. He sat up and stared at her. He said, 'What's that you say?'

'I said, have you paid for it, Grandfather?'

Simeon Lee said slowly: 'I – don't know...'

Then, beating his fist on the arm of the chair, he cried out with sudden anger: 'What makes you say that, girl? What makes you say that?'

Pilar said: 'I – wondered.'

Her hand, holding the screen, was arrested. Her eyes were dark and mysterious. She sat, her head thrown back, conscious of herself, of her womanhood.

Simeon said: 'You devil's brat...'

She said softly: 'But you like me, Grandfather. You like me to sit here with you.'

Simeon said: 'Yes, I like it. It's a long time since I've seen anything so young and beautiful... It does me good, warms my old bones... And you're my own flesh and blood... Good for Jennifer, she turned out to be the best of the bunch after all!'

Pilar sat there smiling.

'Mind you, you don't fool me,' said Simeon. 'I know why you sit here so patiently and listen to me droning on. It's money – it's all money... Or do you pretend you love your old grandfather?'

Pilar said: 'No, I do not love you. But I like you. I like you very much. You must believe that, for it is true. I think you have been wicked, but I like that too. You are more real than the other people in this house. And you have interesting things to say. You have travelled and you have led a life of adventure. If I were a man I would be like that, too.'

Simeon nodded. 'Yes, I believe you would... We've gipsy blood in us, so it's always been said. It hasn't shown much in my children – except Harry – but I think it's come out in you'⁸⁹. I can be patient, mind you, when it's necessary. I waited once fifteen years to get even'⁹⁰ with a man who'd done me an injury. That's another characteristic of the Lees – they don't forget! They'll avenge a wrong if they have to wait years to do it. A man swindled me. I waited fifteen years till I saw my chance – and then I struck. I ruined him. Cleaned him right out!⁹¹

He laughed softly.

Pilar said: 'That was in South Africa?'

'Yes. A grand country.'

'You have been back there, yes?'

'I went back last five years after I married. That was the last time.'

'But before that? You were there for many years?'

'Yes.'

'Tell me about it.'

⁸⁸ **Takes after me there.** – (разг.) Тут он похож на меня.

⁸⁹ **it's come out in you** – (зд.) в тебе это проявляется

⁹⁰ **to get even** – (разг.) чтобы поквитаться

⁹¹ **Cleaned him right out!** – (разг.) Обчистил его до нитки!

He began to talk. Pilar, shielding her face, listened.
His voice slowed, wearied. He said: 'Wait, I'll show you something.'
He pulled himself carefully to his feet. Then, with his stick, he limped slowly across the room.
He opened the big safe. Turning, he beckoned her to him.
'There, look at these. Feel them, let them run through your fingers.'
He looked into her wondering face and laughed.
'Do you know what they are? Diamonds, child, diamonds.'
Pilar's eyes opened. She said as she bent over: 'But they are little pebbles, that is all.'
Simeon laughed. 'They are uncut diamonds⁹². That is how they are found – like this.'
Pilar asked incredulously: 'And if they were cut they would be real diamonds?'
'Certainly.'
'They would flash and sparkle?'
'Flash and sparkle.'
Pilar said childishly: 'O-o-o, I cannot believe it!'
He was amused. 'It's quite true.'
'They are valuable?'
'Fairly valuable. Difficult to say before they are cut⁹³. Anyway, this little lot is worth several thousands of pounds.'
Pilar said with a space between each word: 'Several – thousands – of – pounds?'
'Say nine or ten thousands – they're biggish stones, you see.'
Pilar asked, her eyes opening: 'But why do you not sell them, then?'
'Because I like to have them here.'
'But all that money?'
'I don't need the money.'
'Oh – I see,' Pilar looked impressed. She said: 'But why do you not have them cut and made beautiful?'
'Because I prefer them like this.' His face was set in a grim line. He turned away and began speaking to himself. 'They take me back – the touch of them, the feel of them through my fingers... It all comes back to me, the sunshine, and the smell of the veldt, the oxen – old Eb – all the boys – the evenings...'
There was a soft tap on the door.
Simeon said: 'Put 'em back in the safe and bang it to⁹⁴.' Then he called: 'Come in.'
Horbury came in, soft and deferential. He said: 'Tea is ready downstairs.'

⁹² **uncut diamonds** – (разг.) необработанные алмазы

⁹³ **before they are cut** – (разг.) до огранки

⁹⁴ **and bang it to** – (зд.) и захлопни дверцу

III

Hilda said: 'So there you are, David. I've been looking for you everywhere. Don't let's stay in this room, it's so frightfully cold.'

David did not answer for a minute. He was standing looking at a chair, a low chair with faded satin upholstery. He said abruptly: 'That's her chair... the chair she always sat in... just the same – it's just the same. Only faded, of course.'

A little frown creased Hilda's forehead. She said: 'I see. Do let's come out of here, David. It's frightfully cold.'

David took no notice. Looking round, he said: 'She sat in here mostly. I remember sitting on that stool there while she read to me. *Jack the Giant Killer* – that was it – *Jack the Giant Killer*. I must have been six years old then.'

Hilda put a firm hand through his arm. 'Come back to the drawing-room, dear. There's no heating in this room.'

He turned obediently, but she felt a little shiver go through him.

'Just the same,' he murmured. 'Just the same. As though time had stood still.'

Hilda looked worried. She said in a cheerful determined voice: 'I wonder where the others are? It must be nearly tea-time.'

David disengaged his arm and opened another door. 'There used to be a piano in here... Oh, yes, here it is! I wonder if it's in tune⁹⁵.'

He sat down and opened the lid, running his hands lightly over the keys.

'Yes, it's evidently kept tuned.'

He began to play. His touch was good, the melody flowed out from under his fingers.

Hilda asked: 'What is that? I seem to know it, and I can't quite remember.'

He said: 'I haven't played it for years. She used to play it. One of Mendelssohn⁹⁶'s *Songs Without Words*.'

The sweet, over-sweet, melody filled the room. Hilda said: 'Play some Mozart⁹⁷, do.'

David shook his head. He began another Mendelssohn.

Then suddenly he brought his hands down upon the keys⁹⁸ in a harsh discord. He got up. He was trembling all over. Hilda went to him.

She said: 'David – David.'

He said: 'It's nothing – it's nothing...'

⁹⁵ **it's in tune** – (разг.) настроено ли оно

⁹⁶ **Mendelssohn** – Феликс Мендельсон (1809–1847), немецкий композитор

⁹⁷ **Mozart** – Вольфганг Амадей Моцарт (1756–1791), австрийский композитор

⁹⁸ **brought his hands down upon the keys** – (разг.) уронил руки на клавиши

IV

The bell pealed aggressively. Tressilian rose from his seat in the pantry and went slowly out and along to the door.

The bell pealed again. Tressilian frowned. Through the frosted glass of the door he saw the silhouette of a man wearing a slouch hat.

Tressilian passed a hand over his forehead.

Something worried him. It was as though everything was happening twice.

Surely this had happened before. Surely – He drew back the latch and opened the door.

Then the spell broke. The man standing there said: 'Is this where Mr Simeon Lee lives?'

'Yes, sir.'

'I'd like to see him, please.'

A faint echo of memory awoke in Tressilian. It was an intonation of voice that he remembered from the old days when Mr Lee was first in England.

Tressilian shook his head dubiously. 'Mr Lee is an invalid, sir. He doesn't see many people now. If you –'

The stranger interrupted. He drew out an envelope and handed it to the butler. 'Please give this to Mr Lee.'

'Yes, sir.'

V

Simeon Lee took the envelope. He drew out the single sheet of paper it held. He looked surprised. His eyebrows rose, but he smiled.

‘By all that’s wonderful!’ he said. Then to the butler: ‘Show Mr Farr up here, Tressilian.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Simeon said: ‘I was just thinking of old Ebenezer Farr. He was my partner out there in Kimberley. Now here’s his son come along!’

Tressilian reappeared. He announced: ‘Mr Farr.’

Stephen Farr came in with a trace of nervousness. He disguised it by putting on a little extraswagger. He said – and just for the moment his South African accent was more marked than usual: ‘Mr Lee?’

‘I’m glad to see you. So you’re Eb’s boy?’

Stephen Farr grinned rather sheepishly. He said: ‘My first visit to the old country. Father always told me to look you up if I did come.’

‘Quite right.’ The old man looked round. ‘This is my granddaughter, Pilar Estravados.’

‘How do you do?’ said Pilar demurely.

Stephen Farr thought with a touch of admiration: ‘Cool little devil.’⁹⁹ She was surprised to see me, but it only showed for a flash.’

He said, rather heavily: ‘I’m very pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Estravados.’

‘Thank you,’ said Pilar.

Simeon Lee said: ‘Sit down and tell me all about yourself. Are you in England for long?’

‘Oh, I shan’t hurry myself now I’ve really got here!’ He laughed, throwing his head back.

Simeon Lee said: ‘Quite right. You must stay here with us for a while.’

‘Oh, look here, sir. I can’t butt in like that¹⁰⁰. It’s only two days to Christmas.’

‘You must spend Christmas with us – unless you’ve got other plans?’

‘Well, no, I haven’t, but I don’t like –’

Simeon said: ‘That’s settled.’ He turned his head. ‘Pilar?’

‘Yes, Grandfather.’

‘Go and tell Lydia we shall have another guest. Ask her to come up here.’

Pilar left the room. Stephen’s eyes followed her. Simeon noted the fact with amusement. He said: ‘You’ve come straight here from South Africa?’

‘Pretty well.’

They began to talk of that country. Lydia entered a few minutes later.

Simeon said: ‘This is Stephen Farr, son of my old friend and partner, Ebenezer Farr. He’s going to be with us for Christmas if you can find room for him.’

Lydia smiled. ‘Of course.’ Her eyes took in the stranger’s appearance. His bronzed face and blue eyes and the easy backward tilt of his head.

‘My daughter-in-law,’ said Simeon.

Stephen said: ‘I feel rather embarrassed – butting in on a family party like this.’

‘You’re one of the family, my boy,’ said Simeon. ‘Think of yourself as that.’

‘You’re too kind, sir.’

Pilar re-entered the room. She sat down quietly by the fire and picked up the hand screen. She used it as a fan, slowly tilting her wrist to and fro. Her eyes were demure and downcast.

⁹⁹ **Cool little devil.** – (разг.) Хладнокровная чертовка (бестия).

¹⁰⁰ **can’t butt in like that** – (разг.) не хочу так грубо вторгаться (мешать вашим планам)

Part 3

December 24th

I

'Do you really want me to stay on here, Father?' asked Harry. He tilted his head back. 'I'm stirring up rather a hornet's nest¹⁰¹, you know.'

'What do you mean?' asked Simeon sharply.

'Brother Alfred,' said Harry. 'Good brother Alfred! He, if I may say so, resents my presence here.'

'The devil he does!' snapped Simeon. 'I'm master in this house.'

'All the same, sir, I expect you're pretty dependent on Alfred. I don't want to upset –'

'You'll do as I tell you,' snapped his father.

Harry yawned. 'Don't know that I shall be able to stick a stay-at-home life. Pretty stifling to a fellow who's knocked about the world¹⁰².'

His father said: 'You'd better marry and settle down.'

Harry said: 'Who shall I marry? Pity one can't marry one's niece. Young Pilar is devilish attractive.'

'You've noticed that?'

'Talking of settling down, fat George has done well for himself as far as looks go¹⁰³. Who was she?'

Simeon shrugged his shoulders. 'How should I know? George picked her up at a mannequin parade, I believe. She says her father was a retired naval officer.'

Harry said: 'Probably a second mate of a coasting steamer. George will have a bit of trouble with her if he's not careful.'

'George,' said Simeon Lee, 'is a fool.'

Harry said: 'What did she marry him for – his money?'

Simeon shrugged his shoulders.

Harry said: 'Well, you think that you can square Alfred all right?'

'We'll soon settle that,' said Simeon grimly. He touched a bell that stood on a table near him. Horbury appeared promptly. Simeon said:

'Ask Mr Alfred to come here.'

Horbury went out and Harry drawled: 'That fellow listens at doors!'

Simeon shrugged his shoulders. 'Probably.'

Alfred hurried in. His face twitched when he saw his brother. Ignoring Harry, he said pointedly: 'You wanted me, Father?'

'Yes, sit down. I was just thinking we must reorganize things a bit now that we have two more people living in the house.'

'Two?'

'Pilar will make her home here, naturally. And Harry is home for good¹⁰⁴.'

Alfred said: 'Harry is coming to live here?'

¹⁰¹ **I'm stirring up rather a hornet's nest** – (разг.) Я разворошу это осиное гнездо

¹⁰² **who's knocked about the world** – (разг.) который привык шататься по свету

¹⁰³ **has done well for himself as far as looks go** – (разг.) подобрал себе неплохую пару, если уж говорить о внешности

¹⁰⁴ **is home for good** – (разг.) вернулся домой навсегда

‘Why not, old boy?’ said Harry.

Alfred turned sharply to him. ‘I should think that you yourself would see that¹⁰⁵!’

‘Well, sorry – but I don’t.’

‘After everything that has happened? The disgraceful way you behaved. The scandal – ’

Harry waved an easy hand. ‘All that’s in the past, old boy.’

‘You behaved abominably to Father, after all he’s done for you.’

‘Look here, Alfred, it strikes me that’s Father’s business, not yours. If he’s willing to forgive and forget – ’

‘I’m willing,’ said Simeon. ‘Harry’s my son, after all, you know, Alfred.’

‘Yes, but – I resent it – for Father’s sake.’

Simeon said: ‘Harry’s coming here! I wish it.’ He laid a hand gently on the latter’s shoulder. ‘I’m very fond of Harry.’

Alfred got up and left the room. His face was white. Harry rose too and went after him, laughing.

Simeon sat chuckling to himself. Then he started and looked round. ‘Who the devil’s that? Oh, it’s you, Horbury. Don’t creep about¹⁰⁶ that way.’

‘I beg your pardon, sir.’

‘Never mind. Listen, I’ve got some orders for you. I want everybody to come up here after lunch – everybody.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘There’s something else. When they come, you come with them. And when you get half-way along the passage raise your voice so that I can hear. Any pretext will do. Understand?’

‘Yes, sir.’

Horbury went downstairs. He said to Tressilian: ‘If you ask me, we are going to have a Merry Christmas.’

Tressilian said sharply: ‘What d’you mean?’

‘You wait and see, Mr Tressilian. It’s Christmas Eve today, and a nice Christmas spirit abroad – I don’t think!’

¹⁰⁵ **you yourself would see that** – (зд.) сам должен сообразить

¹⁰⁶ **Don’t creep about** – (зд.) Прекратите подкрадываться

II

They came into the room and paused at the doorway. Simeon was speaking into the telephone. He waved a hand to them. 'Sit down, all of you. I shan't be a minute.'¹⁰⁷ He went on speaking into the telephone.

'Is that Charlton, Hodgkins & Bruce? Is that you, Charlton? Simeon Lee speaking. Yes, isn't it?... Yes... No, I wanted you to make a new will for me... Yes, it's some time since I made the other... Circumstances have altered... Oh no, no hurry. Don't want you to spoil your Christmas. Say Boxing Day¹⁰⁸ or the day after. Come along, and I'll tell you what I want done. No, that's quite all right. I shan't be dying just yet.'

He replaced the receiver, then looked round at the eight members of his family. He cackled and said: 'You're all looking very glum. What is the matter?'

Alfred said: 'You sent for us...'

Simeon said quickly: 'Oh, sorry – nothing portentous about it. Did you think it was a family council? No, I'm just rather tired today, that's all. None of you need come up after dinner. I shall go to bed. I want to be fresh for Christmas Day.'

He grinned at them. George said earnestly: 'Of course... of course...'

Simeon said: 'Grand old institution, Christmas. Promotes solidarity of family feeling. What do you think, Magdalene, my dear?'

Magdalene Lee jumped. Her rather silly little mouth flew open and then shut itself. She said: 'Oh – oh, yes!'

Simeon said: 'Let me see, you lived with a retired naval officer' – he paused – 'your father. Don't suppose you made much of Christmas. It needs a big family for that!'

'Well – well – yes, perhaps it does.'

Simeon's eyes slid past her.

'Don't want to talk of anything unpleasant at this time of year, but you know, George, I'm afraid I'll have to cut down your allowance a bit. My establishment here is going to cost me a bit more to run in future.'

George got very red. 'But look here, Father, you can't do that!'

Simeon said softly: 'Oh, can't I¹⁰⁹!'

'My expenses are very heavy already. Very heavy. As it is, I don't know how I make both ends meet. It needs the most rigorous economy.'

'Let your wife do a bit more of it,' said Simeon. 'Women are good at that sort of thing. They often think of economies where a man would never have dreamt of them. And a clever woman can make her own clothes. My wife, I remember, was clever with her needle. About all she was clever with – a good woman, but deadly dull –'

David sprang up. His father said: 'Sit down, boy, you'll knock something over –'

David said: 'My mother –'

Simeon said: 'Your mother had the brains of a louse! And it seems to me she's transmitted those brains to her children.' He raised himself up suddenly. A red spot appeared on each cheek. His voice came high and shrill. 'You're not worth a penny piece, any of you! I'm sick of you all! You're not men! You're weaklings – a set of namby-pamby weaklings. Pilar's worth any two of you

¹⁰⁷ **I shan't be a minute.** – (разг.) Я сейчас закончу.

¹⁰⁸ **Boxing Day** – День подарков (после Рождества), по традиции хозяева делают своим слугам небольшие подарки

¹⁰⁹ **can't I** – (разг.) да неужели

put together! I'll swear to heaven I've got a better son somewhere in the world than any of you, even if you are born the right side of the blanket¹¹⁰!

'Here, Father, hold hard,' cried Harry.

He had jumped up and stood there, a frown on his usually good-humoured face. Simeon snapped: 'The same goes for you! What have you ever done? Whined to me for money from all over the world! I tell you I'm sick of the sight of you all! Get out!'

He leaned back in his chair, panting a little.

Slowly, one by one, his family went out. George was red and indignant. Magdalene looked frightened. David was pale and quivering. Harry blustered out of the room. Alfred went like a man in a dream. Lydia followed him with her head held high. Only Hilda paused in the doorway and came slowly back.

She stood over him, and he started when he opened his eyes and found her standing there. There was something menacing in the solid way she stood there quite immovably.

He said irritably: 'What is it?'

Hilda said: 'When your letter came I believed what you said – that you wanted your family round you for Christmas, I persuaded David to come.'

Simeon said: 'Well, what of it?'

Hilda said slowly: 'You did want your family round you – but not for the purpose you said! You wanted them there, didn't you, in order to set them all by the ears¹¹¹? God help you, it's your idea of fun!'

Simeon chuckled. He said: 'I always had rather a specialized sense of humour. I don't expect anyone else to appreciate the joke. I'm enjoying it!'

She said nothing. A vague feeling of apprehension came over Simeon Lee. He said sharply: 'What are you thinking about?'

Hilda Lee said slowly: 'I'm afraid...'

Simeon said: 'You're afraid – of me?'

Hilda said: 'Not of you. I'm afraid – for you!'

Like a judge who has delivered sentence¹¹², she turned away. She marched, slowly and heavily, out of the room...

Simeon sat staring at the door. Then he got to his feet and made his way over to the safe. He murmured: 'Let's have a look at my beauties.'

¹¹⁰ even if you are born the right side of the blanket – (разг.) даже если вы рождены в браке

¹¹¹ in order to set them all by the ears – (разг.) чтобы посеять рознь (рассорить всех со всеми)

¹¹² a judge who has delivered sentence – (разг.) судья, вынесший приговор

III

The doorbell rang about a quarter to eight.

Tressilian went to answer it. He returned to his pantry to find Horbury there, picking up the coffee-cups off the tray and looking at the mark on them.

'Who was it?' said Horbury.

'Superintendent of Police – Mr Sugden – mind what you're doing!¹¹³'

Horbury had dropped one of the cups with a crash.

'Look at that now,' lamented Tressilian. 'Eleven years I've had the washing up of those and never one broken, and now you come along touching things you've no business to touch, and look what happens!'

'I'm sorry, Mr Tressilian. I am indeed,' the other apologized. His face was covered with perspiration. 'I don't know how it happened. Did you say a Superintendent of Police had called?'

'Yes – Mr Sugden.'

The valet passed a tongue over pale lips.

'What – what did he want?'

'Collecting for the Police Orphanage.'

'Oh!' The valet straightened his shoulders. In a more natural voice he said: 'Did he get anything?'

'I took up the book to old Mr Lee, and he told me to fetch the superintendent up and to put the sherry on the table.'

'Nothing but begging, this time of year,' said Horbury. 'The old devil's generous, I will say that for him, in spite of his other failings.'

Tressilian said with dignity: 'Mr Lee has always been an open-handed gentleman¹¹⁴.'

Horbury nodded. 'It's the best thing about him! Well, I'll be off now.'

'Going to the pictures?'

'I expect so. Ta-ta, Mr Tressilian.' He went through the door that led to the servants' hall.

Tressilian looked up at the clock hanging on the wall. He went into the dining-room and laid the rolls in the napkins. Then, after assuring himself that everything was as it should be, he sounded the gong in the hall.

As the last note died away the police superintendent came down the stairs. Superintendent Sugden was a large handsome man. He wore a tightly buttoned blue suit and moved with a sense of his own importance.

He said affably: 'I rather think we shall have a frost tonight. Good thing: the weather's been very unseasonable lately.'

Tressilian said, shaking his head: 'The damp affects my rheumatism.'

The superintendent said that the rheumatism was a painful complaint, and Tressilian let him out by the front door.

The old butler refastened the door and came back slowly into the hall. He passed his hand over his eyes and sighed. Then he straightened his back as he saw Lydia pass into the drawing-room. George Lee was just coming down the stairs.

Tressilian hovered ready. When the last guest, Magdalene, had entered the drawing-room, he made his own appearance, murmuring: 'Dinner is served.'

In his way Tressilian was a connoisseur of ladies' dress. He always noted and criticized the gowns of the ladies as he circled round the table, decanter in hand.

¹¹³ **mind what you're doing** – (разг.) осторожнее!

¹¹⁴ **has always been an open-handed gentleman** – (разг.) всегда был щедрым хозяином

Mrs Alfred, he noted, had got on her new flowered black and white taffeta. A bold design, very striking, but she could carry it off, though many ladies couldn't. The dress Mrs George had on was a model, he was pretty sure of that. Must have cost a pretty penny.¹¹⁵ He wondered how Mr George would like paying for it! Mr George didn't like spending money – he never had. Mrs David now: a nice lady, but didn't have any idea of how to dress. For her figure, plain black velvet would have been the best. Figured velvet¹¹⁶, and crimson at that, was a bad choice. Miss Pilar, now, it didn't matter what she wore, with her figure and her hair she looked well in anything. A flimsy cheap little white gown it was, though. Still, Mr Lee would soon see to that! Taken to her wonderful¹¹⁷, he had. Always was the same way when a gentleman was elderly. A young face could do anything with him!

'Hock or claret?' murmured Tressilian in a deferential whisper in Mrs George's ear. Out of the tail of his eye¹¹⁸ he noted that Walter, the footman, was handing the vegetables before the gravy again – after all he had been told!

Tressilian went round with the *soufflé*. It struck him, now that his interest in the ladies' toilettes and his misgivings over Walter's deficiencies were a thing of the past, that everyone was very silent tonight. At least, not exactly silent: Mr Harry was talking enough for twenty – no, not Mr Harry, the South African gentleman. And the others were talking too, but only, as it were, in spasms. There was something a little – queer about them.

Mr Alfred, for instance, he looked downright ill. As though he had had a shock or something. Quite dazed he looked and just turning over the food on his plate without eating it. The mistress, she was worried about him. Tressilian could see that. Kept looking down the table towards him – not noticeably, of course, just quietly. Mr George was very red in the face – gobbling his food, he was, without tasting it. He'd get a stroke one day if he wasn't careful. Mrs George wasn't eating. Slimming, as likely as not.¹¹⁹ Miss Pilar seemed to be enjoying her food all right and talking and laughing up at the South African gentleman. Properly taken with her, he was. Didn't seem to be anything on their minds!

Mr David? Tressilian felt worried about Mr David. Just like his mother he was, to look at. And remarkably young-looking still. But nervy; there, he'd knocked over his glass.

Tressilian whisked it away, mopped up the stream deftly. It was all over. Mr David hardly seemed to notice what he had done, just sat staring in front of him with a white face.

Thinking of white faces, funny the way Horbury had looked in the pantry just now when he'd heard a police officer had come to the house... almost as though —

Tressilian's mind stopped with a jerk. Walter had dropped a pear off the dish he was handing. Footmen were no good nowadays! They might be stable-boys¹²⁰, the way they went on!

He went round with the port. Mr Harry seemed a bit distraught tonight. Kept looking at Mr Alfred. Never had been any love lost between those two¹²¹, not even as boys. Mr Harry, of course, had always been his father's favourite, and that had rankled with Mr Alfred. Mr Lee had never cared for Mr Alfred much. A pity, when Mr Alfred always seemed so devoted to his father.

There, Mrs Alfred was getting up now. She swept round the table. Very nice that design on the taffeta; that cape suited her. A very graceful lady.

He went out to the pantry, closing the dining-room door on the gentlemen with their port.

He took the coffee tray into the drawing-room. The four ladies were sitting there rather uncomfortably, he thought. They were not talking. He handed round the coffee in silence.

¹¹⁵ **Must have cost a pretty penny.** – (разг.) Должно быть, влетело в копеечку.

¹¹⁶ **Figured velvet** – (уст.) Узорчатый бархат

¹¹⁷ **Taken to her wonderful** – (разг.) Быстро к ней привык

¹¹⁸ **Out of the tail of his eye** – (разг.) Краем глаза

¹¹⁹ **Slimming, as likely as not.** – (разг.) Наверняка опять на диете.

¹²⁰ **They might be stable-boys** – (разг.) Похоже, их воспитывали на конюшне

¹²¹ **Never had been any love lost between those two** – (разг.) Всегда недолюбливали друг друга

He went out again. As he went into his pantry he heard the dining-room door open. David Lee came out and went along the hall to the drawing-room.

Tressilian went back into his pantry. He read the riot act¹²² to Walter. Walter was nearly, if not quite, impertinent! Tressilian, alone in his pantry, sat down rather wearily. He had a feeling of depression. Christmas Eve, and all this strain and tension... He didn't like it!

With an effort he roused himself. He went to the drawing-room and collected the coffee-cups. The room was empty except for Lydia, who was standing half-concealed by the window curtain at the far end of the room. She was standing there looking out into the night.

From next door the piano sounded. Mr David was playing. But why, Tressilian asked himself, did Mr David play the *Dead March*? For that's what it was. Oh, indeed things were very wrong¹²³.

He went slowly along the hall and back into his pantry. It was then he first heard the noise from overhead: a crashing of china, the overthrowing of furniture, a series of cracks and bumps.

'Good gracious!' thought Tressilian. 'Whatever is the master doing? What's happening up there?'

And then, clear and high, came a scream – a horrible high wailing scream that died away in a choke or gurgle.

Tressilian stood there a moment paralysed, then he ran out into the hall and up the broad staircase. Others were with him. That scream had been heard all over the house.

They raced up the stairs and round the bend, past a recess with statues gleaming white and eerie, and along the straight passage to Simeon Lee's door. Mr Farr was there already and Mrs David. She was leaning back against the wall and he was twisting at the door handle.

'The door's locked,' he was saying. 'The door's locked!'

Harry Lee pushed past and wrested it from him. He, too, turned and twisted at the handle. 'Father,' he shouted. 'Father, let us in.'

He held up his hand and in the silence they all listened. There was no answer. No sound from inside the room.

The front door bell rang, but no one paid any attention to it.

Stephen Farr said: 'We've got to break the door down. It's the only way.'

Harry said: 'That's going to be a tough job. These doors are good solid stuff. Come on, Alfred.'

They heaved and strained. Finally they went and got an oak bench and used it as a battering-ram. The door gave at last. Its hinges splintered and the door sank shuddering from its frame.

For a minute they stood there huddled together looking in. What they saw was a sight that no one of them ever forgot...

There had clearly been a terrific struggle. Heavy furniture was overturned. China vases lay splintered on the floor. In the middle of the hearthrug in front of the blazing fire lay Simeon Lee in a great pool of blood... Blood was splashed all round. The place was like a shambles.

There was a long shuddering sigh, and then two voices spoke in turn. Strangely enough, the words they uttered were both quotations.

David Lee said: 'The mills of God grind slowly'¹²⁴...

Lydia's voice came like a fluttering whisper: 'Who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?'¹²⁵...

¹²² **read the riot act** – (разг.) устроил нагоняй

¹²³ **indeed things were very wrong** – (зд.) что-то было очень неправильно

¹²⁴ **The mills of God grind slowly** – цитата из Секста Эмпирика (к. II – н. III в., древнегреческого философа), перешедшая в поговорку: Мельницы богов движутся медленно, но смалывают в пыль; *перен.* возмездие неизбежно

¹²⁵ **Who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?** – цит. из «Макбета» В. Шекспира (акт 5, сц. 1)

IV

Superintendent Sugden had rung the bell three times. Finally, in desperation, he pounded on the knocker.

A scared Walter at length opened the door. 'Oo-er,' he said. A look of relief came over his face. 'I was just ringing up the police.'

'What for?' said Superintendent Sugden sharply. 'What's going on here?'

Walter whispered: 'It's old Mr Lee. He's been done in¹²⁶...'

The superintendent pushed past him and ran up the stairs. He came into the room without anyone being aware of his entrance¹²⁷. As he entered he saw Pilar bend forward and pick up something from the floor. He saw David Lee standing with his hands over his eyes.

He saw the others huddled into a little group. Alfred Lee alone had stepped near his father's body. He stood now quite close, looking down. His face was blank¹²⁸.

George Lee was saying importantly:

'Nothing must be touched – remember that – nothing – till the police arrive. That is most important!'

'Excuse me,' said Sugden. He pushed his way forward, gently thrusting the ladies aside. Alfred Lee recognized him.

'Ah,' he said. 'It's you, Superintendent Sugden. You've got here very quickly.'

'Yes, Mr Lee.' Superintendent Sugden did not waste time on explanations. 'What's all this?'

¹²⁶ **He's been done in** – (разг.) Его уколошили

¹²⁷ **without anyone being aware of his entrance** – (разг.) никто не обратил на него внимания

¹²⁸ **was blank** – (разг.) ничего не выражало

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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