**The Ebony Tower**

John Fowles

Et par forez longues et leesPar leus estrange et sauvagesEt passa mainz felons passagesEt maint peril et maint destroitTant qu'il vint au santier tot droit—CHRETIEN DE TROYES, Yvain

David arrived at Coëtminais the afternoon after the one he had landed at Cherbourg and driven down to Avranches, where he had spent the intervening Tuesday night. That had allowed an enjoyable meander over the remaining distance; a distant view of the spectacular spired dream of Mont St Michel, strolls round St Malo and Dinan, then south in the splendid early September weather and through the new countryside. He took at once to the quiet landscapes, orcharded and harvested, precise and pollarded, self-concentrated, exhaling a spent fertility. Twice he stopped and noted down particularly pleasing conjunctions of tone and depth—parallel stripes of water-colour with pencilled notes of amplification in his neat hand. Though there was some indication of the formal origin in these verbal notes—that a stripe of colour was associated with a field, a sunlit wall, a distant hill—he drew nothing. He also wrote down the date, the time of day and the weather, before he drove on.

He felt a little guilty to be enjoying himself so much, to be here so unexpectedly alone, without Beth, and after he had made such a fuss; but the day, the sense of discovery, and of course the object of the whole exercise looming formidably and yet agreeably just ahead, everything conspired to give a pleasant illusion of bachelor freedom. Then the final few miles through the forest of Paimpont, one of the last large remnants of the old wooded Brittany, were deliciously right: green and shaded minor roads with occasional sunshot vistas down the narrow rides cut through the endless trees. Things about the old man's most recent and celebrated period fell into place at once. No amount of reading and intelligent deduction could supplant the direct experience. Well before he arrived, David knew he had not wasted his journey.

He turned off down an even smaller forest road, a deserted voie communale; and a mile or so along that he came on the promised sign. Manoir de Coëtminais. Chemin privé. There was a white gate, which he had to open and shut. Haifa mile on again through the forest he found his way barred, just before the trees gave way to sunlight and a grassy orchard, by yet another gate. There was a sign-board nailed to the top bar. Its words made him smile inwardly, since beneath the heading Chien méchant they were in English: Strictly no visitors except by prior arrangement. But as if to confirm that the sign was not to be taken lightly, he found the gate padlocked on the inner side. It must have been forgotten that he was arriving that afternoon. He felt momentarily discomfited; as long as the old devil hadn't forgotten his coming completely. He stood in the deep shade staring at the sunlight beyond. He couldn't have forgotten, David had sent a brief note of reminder and grateful anticipation only the previous week. Somewhere close in the trees behind him a bird gave a curious trisyllabic call, like a badly played tin flute. He glanced round, but could not see it. It wasn't English; and in some obscure way this reminded David that he was. Guard-dog or not, one couldn't... he went back to his car, switched off and locked the doors, then returned to the gate and climbed over.

He walked along the drive through the orchard, whose aged trees were clustered with codlings and red cider-apples. There was no sign of a dog, no barking. The manoir, islanded and sundrenched in its clearing among the sea of huge oaks and beeches, was not quite what he had expected, perhaps because he spoke very little French—hardly knew the country outside Paris—and had translated the word visually as well as verbally in terms of an English manor-house. In fact it had more the appearance of a once substantial farm; nothing very aristocratic about the façade of pale ochre plaster broadly latticed by reddish beams and counterpointed by dark brown shutters. To the east there was a little wing at right angles, apparently of more recent date. But the ensemble had charm; old and compact, a warm face of character, a good solid feel. He had simply anticipated something grander.

There was a gravelled courtyard opposite the southward of the house. Geraniums by the foot of the wall, two old climbing roses, a scatter of white doves on the roof; all the shutters were in use, the place asleep. But the main door, with a heraldic stone shield above, its details effaced by time, and placed excentrically towards the west end of the house, was lodged open. David walked cautiously across the gravel to it. There was no knocker, no sign of a bell; nor, mercifully, of the threatened dog. He saw a stone-flagged hail, an oak table beside an ancient wooden staircase with worn and warped medieval-looking banisters that led upwards. Beyond, on the far side of the house, another open door framed a sunlit garden. He hesitated, aware that he had arrived sooner than suggested; then tapped on the massive main door with his knuckles. A few seconds later, realizing the futility of the weak sound, he stepped over the threshold. To his right stretched a long gallery-like living-room. Ancient partitions must have been knocked down, but some of the major black uprights had been retained and stood out against the white walls with a skeletal bravura. The effect was faintly Tudor, much more English than the exterior. A very handsome piece of dense but airy space, antique carved-wood furniture, bowls of flowers, a group of armchairs and two sofas further down; old pink and red carpets; and inevitably, the art... no surprise—except that one could walk in on it like this—since David knew there was a distinguished little collection beside the old man's own work. Famous names were already announced. Ensor, Marquet, that landscape at the end must be a 'cool' Derain, and over the fireplace But he had to announce himself. He walked across the stone floor beside the staircase to the doorway on the far side of the room. A wide lawn stretched away, flowerbeds, banks of shrubs, some ornamental trees. It was protected from the north by a high wall, and David saw another line back there of lower buildings, hidden from the front of the house; barns and byres when the place was a farm. In midlawn there was a catalpa pruned into a huge green mushroom; in its shade sat, as if posed, conversing, a garden table and three wicker chairs. Beyond, in a close pool of heat, two naked girls lay side by side on the grass. The further, half hidden, was on her back, as if asleep. The nearer was on her stomach, chin propped on her hands, reading a book. She wore a wide-brimmed straw hat, its crown loosely sashed with some deep red material. Both bodies were very brown, uniformly brown, and apparently oblivious of the stranger in the shadowed doorway thirty yards away. He could not understand that they had not heard his car in the forest silence. But he really was earlier than the 'tea-time' he had proposed in his letter; or perhaps there had after all been a bell at the door, a servant who should have heard. For a brief few seconds he registered the warm tones of the two indolent female figures, the catalpa-shade green and the grass green, the intense carmine of the hat-sash, the pink wall beyond with its ancient espalier fruit-trees. Then he turned and went back to the main door, feeling more amused than embarrassed. He thought of Beth again: how she would have adored this being plunged straight into the legend... the wicked old faun and his famous afternoons.

Where he had first intruded he saw at once what he had, in his curiosity, previously missed. A bronze handbell sat on the stone floor behind one of the door-jambs. He picked it up and rang—then wished he hadn't, the sharp schoolyard jangle assaulted the silent house, its sunlit peace. And nothing happened; no footsteps upstairs, no door opening at the far end of the long room he stood in. He waited on the threshold. Perhaps half a minute passed. Then one of the girls, he didn't know which, appeared in the garden door and came towards him. She now wore a plain white cotton galabiya; a slim girl of slightly less than medium height and in her early twenties; brown and gold hair and regular features; level-eyed, rather wide eyes, and barefooted. She was unmistakably English. She stopped some twenty feet away, by the bottom of the stairs.

'David Williams?'

He made an apologetic gesture. 'You were expecting me?'

'Yes.'

She did not offer to shake hands.

'Sorry to steal in like this. Your gate out there's locked.'

She shook her head. 'Just pull on it. The padlock. I'm sorry.' She did not seem it; and at a loss. She said, 'Henry's asleep.'

'Then don't wake him, for God's sake.' He smiled. 'I'm a bit early. I thought it would be harder to find.'

She surveyed him a moment: his asking to be welcomed.

'He's such a bastard if he doesn't get his siesta.'

He grinned. 'Look, I took his letter at its word—about putting me up?-but if...'

She glanced beyond him, through the door; then back at his face, with an indifferent little tilt of query.

'Your wife?'

He explained about Sandy's chicken-pox, the last-minute crisis. 'She's flying to Paris on Friday. If my daughter's over the worst. I'll pick her up there.'

The level eyes appraised him again.

'Then I'll show you where you are?'

'If you're sure...'

'No problems.'

She made a vague gesture for him to follow her, and turned to the stairs; simple, white, bizarrely modest and handmaidenly after that first glimpse.

He said, 'Marvellous room.'

She touched the age-blackened handrail that mounted beside them. 'This is fifteenth century. They say.' But she looked neither at him nor the room; and asked nothing, as if he had driven a mere five miles to get there.

At the top of the stairs she turned to the right down a corridor.

A long rush mat ran down the centre of it. She opened the second door they came to and went a step in, holding the handle, watching him, uncannily like the patronne at the hotel where he had stayed the previous night. He almost expected to hear a price.

'The bathroom's next door.'

'Lovely. I'll just go and fetch my car.'

'As you wish.'

She closed the door. There was something preternaturally grave about her, almost Victorian, despite the galabiya. He smiled encouragingly as they went back down the corridor to the stairs.

'And you're...?'

'Henry calls me the Mouse.'

At last a tiny dryness in her face; or a challenge, he wasn't sure. 'You've known him long?'

'Since spring.'

He tried to evoke some sympathy.

'I know he's not mad about this sort of thing.'

She shrugged minutely.

'As long as you stand up to him. It's mostly bark.'

She was trying to tell him something, very plainly; perhaps just that if he had seen her in the garden, this was the real distance she kept from visitors. She was apparently some kind of equivalent of his hostess; and yet she behaved as if the house had nothing very much to do with her. They came to the bottom of the stairs, and she turned back towards the garden.

'Out here? Half an hour? I get him up at four.'

He grinned again, that nurselike tone in her voice, so dismissive of all that the outside world might think of the man she called 'Henry' and 'him'.

'Fine.'

'Make comme chez vous. Right?'

She hesitated a moment, as if she knew she was being too cool and sibylline. There was even a faint hint of diffidence, a final poor shadow of a welcoming smile. Then she looked down and turned away and padded silently back towards the garden; as she went out through the door the galabya momentarily lost its opacity against the sunlight beyond; a fleeting naked shadow. He remembered he had forgotten to ask about the dog; but presumably she would have thought of it; and tried to recall when he had been less warmly received into a strange house... as if he had taken too much, when he had taken nothing, for granted and certainly not her presence. He had understood the old man had put all that behind him.

He walked back through the orchard to the gate. At least she hadn't misled him there. The hasp came away from the body of the padlock as soon as he pulled. He drove back and parked in the shade of a chestnut opposite the front of the house, got out his overnight bag and briefcase, then an informal jeans suit on a hanger. He glanced through the doorway out into the garden at the back as he went upstairs; but the two girls seemed to have disappeared. In the corridor above he stopped to look at two paintings he had noticed when she first showed him up and failed to put a name to... but now, of course, Maximilien Luce. Lucky old man, to have bought before art became a branch of greed, of shrewd investment. David forgot his cold reception.

His room was simply furnished, a double bed in some rather clumsy rural attempt at an Empire style, a walnut wardrobe riddled with worm, a chair, an old chaise-longue with tired green upholstery; a gilt mirror, stains on the mercury. The room smelt faintly musty, seldom used; furnished out of local auctions. The one incongruity was the signed Laurencin over the bed. David tried to lift it off its hook, to see the picture in a better light. But the frame was screwed to the wall. He smiled and shook his head; if only poor old Beth were there.

David had been warned by the London publishing house—by the senior member of it who had set the project up—of the reefs, far more formidable than locked gates, that surrounded any visit to Coëtminais. The touchiness, the names one must not mention, the coarse language, the baiting: no doubt had been left that this particular 'great man' could also be the most frightful old bastard. He could also, it seemed, be quite charming—if he liked you. Na•ve as a child in some ways, had said the publisher. Then, Don't argue with him about England and the English, just accept he's a lifelong exile and can't bear to be reminded of what he might have missed. Finally: He desperately wants us to do the book. David was not to let himself be duped into thinking the subject of it didn't care a fig for home opinion.

In many ways his journey was not strictly necessary. He had already drafted the introduction, he knew pretty well what he was going to say; there were the major catalogue essays, especially that for the 1969 Tate Retrospective... the British art establishment's belated olive-branch; those for the two recent Paris shows, and the New York; Myra Levey's little monograph in the Modern Masters series, and the correspondence with Matthew Smith; a scatter of usable magazine interviews. A few biographical details remained to be cleared up, though even they could have been done by letter. There were of course any number of artistic queries one could have asked—or would have liked to; but the old man had never shown himself very helpful there, indeed rather more likely on past record to be hopelessly cryptic, maliciously misleading or just downright rude. So it was essentially the opportunity of meeting a man one had spent time on and whose work one did, with reservations, genuinely admire... the fun of it, to say one had met him. And after all, he was now indisputably major, one had to put him with the Bacons and Sutherlands. It could even be argued that he was the most interesting of that select band, though he would probably himself say that he was simply the least bloody English.

Born in 1896, a student at the Slade in the great days of the Steers-Tonks regime, a characteristically militant pacifist when cards had to be declared in 1916, in Paris (and spiritually out of England for good) by 1920, then ten years and more in the queasy-Russia itself having turned to socialist realism-noman's-land between surrealism and communism, Henry Breasley had still another decade to wait before any sort of serious recognition at home—the revelation, during his five years of 'exile from exile' in Wales during the Second World War, of the Spanish Civil War drawings. Like most artists, Breasley had been well ahead of the politicians. To the British the 1942 exhibition in London of his work from 1937-8 suddenly made sense; they too had learnt what war was about, of the bitter folly of giving the benefit of the doubt to international fascism. The more intelligent knew that there was nothing very prescient about his record of the Spanish agony; indeed in spirit it went straight back to Goya. But its power and skill, the superbly incisive draughtsmanship, were undeniable. The mark was made; so, if more in private, was the reputation of Breasley's 'difficulty' as an individual. The legend of his black bile for everything English and conventionally middle-class-especially if it had anything to do with official views on art, or its public administration—was well established by the time he returned to Paris in 1946.

Then for another decade nothing very much happened to his name in popular terms. But he had become collectible, and there was a growing band of influential admirers in both Paris and London, though like every other European painter he suffered from the rocketing ascendancy of New York as world arbiter of painting values. In England he never quite capitalized on the savage impact, the famous 'black sarcasm' of the Spanish drawings; yet he showed a growing authority, a maturity in his work. Most of the great nudes and interiors came from this period; the longburied humanist had begun to surface, though as always the public was more interested in the bohemian side of it the stories of his drinking and his women, as transmitted in the spasmodic hounding he got from the yellower and more chauvinistic side of Fleet Street. But by the late 1950s this way of life had already become a quaintly historical thing. The rumours and realities of his unregenerate life-style, like his contempt for his homeland, became amusing... and even pleasingly authentic to the vulgar mind, with its propensity for confusing serious creation with colourful biography, for allowing Van Gogh's ear to obscure any attempt to regard art as a supreme sanity instead of a chocolate-sucking melodrama. It must be confessed that Breasley himself did not noticeably refuse the role offered; if people wanted to be shocked, he generally obliged. But his closer friends knew that beneath the continuing occasional bouts of exhibitionism he had changed considerably.

In 1963 he bought the old manoir at Coëtminais and forsook his beloved Paris. A year later appeared his illustrations to Rabelais, his last fling as a pure draughtsman, in a limited edition that has already become one of the most valuable books of its kind in this century; and in the same year he painted the first of the pictures in the last-period series that was to establish his international reputation beyond any doubt. Though he had always rejected the notion of a mystical interpretation—and enough of the old left-winger remained for any religious intention to be dismissed out of court—the great, both literally and metaphorically, canvases with their dominant greens and blues that began to flow out of his new studio had roots in a Henry Breasley the outer world had not hitherto guessed at. In a sense it was as if he had discovered who he really was much later than most artists of his basic technical ability and experience. If he did not quite become a recluse, he ceased to be a professional enfant terrible. He himself had once termed the paintings 'dreams'; there was certainly a surrealist component from his 'twenties past, a fondness for anachronistic juxtapositions. Another time he had called them tapestries, and indeed the Aubusson atelier had done related work to his designs. There was a feeling—'an improbable marriage of Samuel Palmer and Chagall', as one critic had put it in reviewing the Tate Retrospective—of a fully absorbed eclecticism, something that had been evidenced all through his career, but not really come to terms with before Coetminais; a hint of Nolan, though the subject-matter was far less explicit, more mysterious and archetypal... 'Celtic' had been a word frequently used, with the recurrence of the forest motif, the enigmatic figures and confrontations.

Breasley himself had partly confirmed this, when someone had had the successful temerity to ask him for a central source and for once received a partly honest answer: Pisanello and Diaz de la Pefla. The reference to Diaz and the Barbizon School was a self-sarcasm, needless to say. But pressed on Pisanello, Breasley had cited a painting in the National Gallery in London, The Vision of St Eustace; and confessed it had haunted him all his life. If the reference at first sight seemed distinctly remote, it was soon pointed out that Pisanello and his early fourteenthcentury patrons had been besotted by the Arthurian cycle.

What had brought young David Williams (born that same year of Breasley's first English success, 1942) to Coëtminais in the September of '973 was precisely this last aspect of the old man's work. He had felt no special interest in Breasley before the Tate Retrospective, but he was forcibly struck then by certain correspondences with an art, or rather a style, the International Gothic, that had always interested the scholarly side of him. Two years later he had formulated the parallels he saw in an article. A complimentary copy had been sent to Breasley, but it was not acknowledged. A year passed, David had almost forgotten the whole thing, and certainly had not pursued any particular interest in the old man's work. The invitation from the publishers to write the biographical and critical introduction of The Art of Henry Breasley (with the added information that the offer was made with the painter's approval) had come very much out of the blue.

It was not quite a case of a young unknown visiting an old master. David Williams's parents were both architects, a stillpractising husband-and-wife team of some renown. Their son had shown natural aptitude very young, an acute colour sense, and he was born into the kind of environment where he received nothing but encouragement. In the course of time he went to art college, and settled finally for painting. He was a star student in his third year, already producing saleable work. He was not only rara avis in that; unlike the majority of his fellow-students, he was highly articulate as well. Brought up in a household where contemporary art and all its questions were followed and discussed constantly and coherently, he could both talk and write well. He had some real knowledge of art history, helped by many stays in his parents' converted farmhouse in Tuscany, as distinct from mere personal enthusiasms. He was aware of his luck in all this, and of the envy it might provoke in his socially and naturally less gifted peers. Always rather fond of being liked, he developed a manner carefully blended of honesty and tact. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about him as a student was that he was on the whole quite popular; just as he was to be popular later as a teacher and lecturer—and even not wholly detested. by his victims as an art critic. At least he never panned for panning's sake. He very rarely indeed found nothing at all to praise in an artist or an exhibition.

At his own choice he had gone for a year to the Courtauld Institute after college. Then for two years he combined the teaching of painting and general appreciation lectures. His own work came under the influence of Op Art and Bridget Riley, and benefited from her star. He became one of the passable young substitutes those who could not afford Riley herself tended to buy. Then (this was in 1967) he had had an affaire with one of his third-year students that had rapidly become the real thing. They married and bought, with parental help, a house in Blackheath. David decided to try his luck at living by his own painting alone. But the arrival of Alexandra, the first of his two small daughters, and various other things—one of which was a small crisis of doubt about his own work, now shifting away from the Riley influence—drove him to look for extra income. He did not want to return to studio teaching, but he went back to lecturing part-time. A chance meeting led to an invitation to do some reviewing; and a year later still that had become lucrative enough for him to drop the lecturing. That had been his life since.

His own work began to get enough reputation as it moved from beneath the Op Art umbrella to guarantee plenty of red stars at his exhibitions. Though he remained a fully abstract artist in the common sense of the adjective.(a colour painter, in the current jargon), he knew he was tending towards nature and away from the high artifice of his 'Riley' phase. His paintings had a technical precision, a sound architectonic quality inherited from his parents' predilections and a marked subtlety of tone. To put it crudely, they went well on walls that had to be lived with, which was one good reason (one he knew and accepted) that he sold; another was that he had always worked to a smaller scale than most non-figurative painters. This again was probably something he acquired from his mother and father; he was dubious about Transatlantic monumentality, painting direct for the vast rooms of museums of modern art. Nor was he the kind of person who was ashamed to think of his work in flats and homes, enjoyed privately, on his own chosen scale.

If he disliked pretension, he was not on the other hand devoid of ambition. He still earned more by his painting than his writing, and that meant a very great deal to him; as did what one might call the state of his status among his own generation of painters. He would have despised the notion of a race, yet he kept a sharp eye on rivals and the public mention they received. He was not unaware of this; in the public mention constituted by his own reviewing, he knew he erred on the generous side with those he feared most.

His marriage had been very successful, except for one brief bad period when Beth had rebelled against 'constant motherhood' and flown the banner of Women's Liberation; but now she had two sets of illustrations for children's books to her credit, another commissioned and a fourth in prospect. David had always admired his parents' marriage. His own had begun to assume that same easy camaraderie and co-operation. When he was approached about the Breasley introduction, he took it as one more sign that things in general were shaping up well.

He came to Coëtminais with only one small fear: that Breasley had not realized that he was a painter—to be precise, what kind of painter he was—as well as a writer on art. According to the publisher, the old man had asked no questions there. He had seen the article and thought it 'read well'; and shown himself much more concerned about the quality of the colour reproduction in the proposed book. Breasley's view that full abstraction had been the wrong road was widely known, and on the face of it he could have no time for David's own work. But perhaps he had softened on that subject—though he had had coals of fire to spare, when he was in London in 1969, for Victor Pasmore's head; more probably, since he lived so far from the London art scene, he was genuinely unaware of the partial snake he had taken to his bosom. David hoped the matter could be avoided; and if it couldn't, then he world have to play it by ear and try to show the old man that the world had moved on from such narrowmindedness. His accepting the commission was proof of it. Breasley 'worked'—and that he worked emotionally and stylistically in totally different, or distant, ways from one's own preferred line of descent (De Stiji, Ben Nicholson and the rest—including the arch-renegade Pasmore) in twentieth-century art was immaterial.

David was a young man who was above all tolerant, fairminded and inquisitive.

He took advantage of the half hour or so before 'Henry' was woken to have a look at the art downstairs. Occasionally he glanced out of windows behind the house. The lawn remained empty, the silence of the house as when he had come. Inside the long room there was only one example of Breasley's own work, but plenty else to admire. The landscape was indeed a Derain, as David had guessed. Three very fine Permeke drawings. The Ensor and the Marquet. An early Bonnard. A characteristically febrile pencil sketch, unsigned, but unmistakably Dufy. Then a splendid Jawlensky (how on earth had he got his hands on that?), an Otto Dix signed proof nicely juxtaposed with a Nevinson drawing. Two Matthew Smiths, a Picabia, a little flower painting that must be an early Matisse, though it didn't look quite right there were those, and they were outnumbered by the paintings and drawings David couldn't assign. If one accepted the absence of the more extreme movements, one had a room of early twentieth-century art many smaller museums would have cut throats to lay their hands on. Breasley had collected prewar, of course, and he had apparently always had a private income of sorts. An only child, he must have inherited quite a substantial sum when his mother died in 1925. His father, one of those Victorian gentlemen who appear to have lived comfortably on doing nothing, had died in a hotel fire in 1907. According to Myra Levey, he too had dabbled with artcollecting in a dilettante way.

Breasley had granted himself pride of place—and space over the old stone fireplace in the centre of the room. There hung the huge Moon-hunt, perhaps the best-known of the Coëtminais oeuvre, a painting David was going to discuss at some length and that he badly wanted to study at leisure again... perhaps not least to confirm to himself that he wasn't over-rating his subject. He felt faintly relieved that the picture stood up well to renewed acquaintance—he hadn't seen it in the flesh since the Tate exhibition of four years previously—and even announced itself as better than memory and reproductions had rated it. As with so much of Breasley's work there was an obvious previous iconography—in this case., Uccello's Night Hunt and its spawn down through the centuries; which was in turn a challenged comparison, a deliberate risk... just as the Spanish drawings had defied the great shadow of Goya by accepting its presence, even using and parodying it, so the memory of the Ashmolean Uccello somehow deepened and buttressed the painting before which David sat. It gave an essential tension, in fact: behind the mysteriousness and the ambiguity (no hounds, no horses, no prey... nocturnal figures among trees, but the title was needed), behind the modernity of so many of the surface elements there stood both a homage and a kind of thumbed nose to a very old tradition. One couldn't be quite sure it was a masterpiece, there was a clotted quality in some passages, a distinctly brusque use of impasto on closer examination; something faintly too static in the whole, a lack of tonal relief (but that again was perhaps just the memory of the Uccello). Yet it remained safely considerable, had presence—could stand very nicely, thank you, up against anything else in British painting since the war. Perhaps its most real mystery, as with the whole series, was that it could have been done at all by a man of Breasley's age. The Moon-hunt had been painted in 1965, in his sixty-ninth year. And that was eight years ago now.

Then suddenly, as if to solve the enigma, the living painter himself appeared from the garden door and came down towards David.

'Williams, my dear fellow.'

He advanced, hand outstretched, in pale blue trousers and a dark blue shirt, an unexpected flash of Oxford and Cambridge, a red silk square. He was white-haired, though the eyebrows were still faintly grey; the bulbous nose, the misleadingly fastidious mouth, the pouched grey-blue eyes in a hale face. He moved almost briskly, as if aware that he had been remiss in some way; smaller and trimmer than David had visualized from the photographs.

'It's a great honour to be here, sir.'

'Nonsense. Nonsense.' And David's elbow was chucked, the smile and the quiz under the eyebrows and white relic of a forelock both searching and dismissive. 'You've been looked after?'

'Yes. Splendid.'

'Don't be put off by the Mouse. She's slightly gaga.' The old man stood with his hands on his hips, an impression of someone trying to seem young, alert, David's age. 'Thinks she's Lizzie Siddal. Which makes me that ghastly little Italian fudger damn' insulting, what?' - David laughed. 'I did notice a certain Breasley raised his eyes to the ceiling.

'My dear man. You've no idea. Still. Gels that age. Well, how about some tea? Yes? We're out in the garden.'

David gestured back at the Moon-hunt as they moved towards the west end of the room. 'It's marvellous to see that again. I just pray the printers can rise to it.'

Breasley shrugged, as if he didn't care; or was proof to the too direct compliment. Then he darted another quizzing look at David.

'And you? You're quite the cat's pyjamas, I hear.'

'Hardly that.'

'Read your piece. All those fellows I've never heard of. Good stuff.'

'But wrong?'

Breasley put a hand on his arm.

'I'm not a scholar, dear boy. Ignorance of things you probably know as well as your mother's tit would astound you. Never mind. Put up with me, what?'

They went out into the garden. The girl nicknamed the Mouse, still barefooted and in her white Arab garb, came obliquely across the lawn from the far end of the house, carrying a tray of tea-things. She took no notice of the two men.

'See what I mean,' muttered Breasley. 'Needs her bloody arse tanned.'

David bit his lips. As they came to the table under the catalpa, he saw the second girl stand from a little bay of the lawn that was hidden by a bank of shrubs from the house. She must have been reading all the time, he saw the straw hat with the red sash on the grass behind her as she came towards them, book still in hand. If the Mouse was odd, this creature was preposterous. She was even smaller, very thin, a slightly pinched face under a mop of frizzed-out hair that had been reddened with henna. Her concession to modesty had been to pull on a singlet, a man's or a boy's by the look of it, dyed black. It reached just, but only just, below her loins. The eyelids had also been blackened. She had the look of a rag-doll, a neurotic golliwog, a figure from the wilder end of the King's road.

'This is Anne,' said the Mouse.

'Alias the Freak,' said Breasley.

Breasley waved to David to sit beside him. He hesitated, since there was a chair short, but the Freak sat rather gauchely on the grass beside her friend's place. A pair of red briefs became visible, or conspicuous, beneath the black singlet. The Mouse began to pour the tea.

'First visit to these parts, Williams?'

That allowed David to be polite; sincerely so, about his newfound enthusiasm for Brittany and its landscapes. The old man seemed to approve, he began to talk about the house, how he had found it, its history, why he had turned his back on Paris. He handsomely belied his rogue reputation, it was almost as if he were delighted to have another man to talk to. He sat turned away from the girls, completely ignoring them, and David had a growing sense that they resented his presence; whether it was because of the attention he distracted, the formality he introduced, or that they must have heard all the old man was telling him before, he wasn't sure. Breasley wandered off- again belying his reputation—to Welsh landscapes, his early childhood, before 1914. David knew his mother had been Welsh, of the wartime spell in Breconshire, but not that he retained memories and affections for the place; missed its hills.

The old fellow spoke in a quirky staccato manner, half assertive, half tentative; weirdly antiquated slang, a constant lacing of obscenity; not intellectually or feelingly at all, but much more like some eccentric retired (it occurred to David with secret amusement) admiral. They were so breathtakingly inappropriate, all the out-of-date British upperclass mannerisms in the mouth of a man who had spent his life comprehensively denying all those same upper classes stood for. A similar paradox was seen in the straight white hair, brushed across the forehead in a style that Breasley must have retained since his—youth—and which Hitler had long put out of fashion with younger men. It gave him a boyishness; but the ruddy, incipiently choleric face and the pale eyes suggested something much older and more dangerous. He chose transparently to come on as much more of a genial old fool than he was; and must know he deceived no one.

However, if the two girls had not been so silent—the Freak had even shifted her back to rest against the front of the other girl's chair, reached for her book and begun reading again—David would have felt comparatively at ease. The Mouse sat in white elegance and listened, but as if her mind were somewhere else—in a Millais set-piece, perhaps. If David sought her eyes, she would discompose her rather pretty features into the faintest semblance of a formal confirmation that she was still there; which gave the clear impression that she wasn't. He grew curious to know what the truth was, beyond the obvious. He had not come prepared for this, having gathered from the publisher that the old man now lived alone—that is, with only an elderly French housekeeper. During that tea the relationship seemed more daughterly than anything else. There was only one showing of the lion's claws.

David had mentioned Pisanello, knowing it was safe ground and the recently discovered frescos at Mantua. Breasley had seen them in reproduction, seemed genuinely interested to hear a first-hand account of them and genuinely ignorant—David had not taken his warning very seriously—of the techniques involved. But David had hardly launched into the complexities of arricio, intonaco, sinopie and the rest before Breasley interrupted.

'Freak dear gel, for God's sake stop reading that fucking book and listen.'

She looked up, then put the paperback down and folded her arms.

'Sorry.'

It was said to David, ignoring the old man—and with an unconcealed boredom: you're a drag, but if he insists.

'And if you use that word, for Christ's sake sound as if you mean it.'

'Didn't realize we were included.'

'Balls.'

'I was listening, anyway.'

She had a faint Cockney accent, tired and brutalized.

'Don't be so bloody insolent.'

'I was.'

'Balls.'

She pulled a grimace, glanced back up at the Mouse. 'Hen-ree.' David smiled. 'What's the book?'

'Dear boy, keep out of this. If you don't mind.' He leant forward, pointing a finger at the girl. 'Now no more. Learn something.'

'Yes, Henry.'

'My dear fellow, I'm so sorry. Do go on.'

The little incident produced an unexpected reaction from the Mouse. She gave a surreptitious nod at David behind Breasley's back: whether to tell him that this was normal or to suggest he got on with it before a full-scale row developed was not clear. But as he did go on, he had the impression that she was listening with slightly more interest. She even asked a question, she evidently knew something about Pisanello. The old man must have talked about him.

Soon afterwards Breasley stood up and invited David to come and see his 'work-room' in the buildings behind the garden. The girls did not move. As he followed Breasley out through an arched gate in the wall, David looked back and saw the thin brown figure in her black singlet pick up her book again. The old man winked at him as they strolled over the gravel towards the line of buildings to their left.

'Always the same. Have the little bitches into your bed. Lose all sense of proportion.'

'They're students?'

'The Mouse. God knows what the other thinks she is.'

But he clearly did not want to talk about them; as if they were mere moths round his candle, a pair of high-class groupies. He began explaining the conversions and changes he had made, what the buildings once were. They went through a doorway into the main studio, a barn whose upper floor had been removed. A long table littered with sketches and paper by the wide modern window looking north over the gravelled yard; a paints table, the familiar smells and paraphernalia; and dominating the space, at its far end, another of the Coëtminais series, about three-quarters completed—a twelve-by-six-foot canvas on an especially carpentered stand, with a set of movable steps in front to reach the top of the painting. It was a forest setting again, but with a central clearing, much more peopled than usual, less of the sub-aqueous feeling, under a first-class blue, almost a black, that managed to suggest both night and day, both heat and storm, a looming threat over the human component. There was this time an immediate echo (because one had learned to look for them) of the Breughel family; and even a faint selfecho, of the Moon-hunt in the main house. David smiled at the painter.

'Are any clues being offered?'

'Kermesse? Perhaps. Not sure yet.' The old man stared at his picture. 'She's playing coy. Waiting, don't you know.'

'She seems very good indeed to me. Already.'

'Why I have to have women round me. Sense of timing. Bleeding and all that. Learning when not to work. Nine parts of the game.' He looked at David. 'But you know all this. Painter yourself, what?'

David took an inward breath and skated hastily over the thin ice; explaining about Beth, her sharing his studio at home, he knew what Breasley meant. The old man opened his hands, as if in agreement; and seemed amiably not interested in pursuing the matter of David's own work. He turned and sat on a stool by the bench at the window, then reached for a still life, a pencil drawing of some wild flowers: teaselheads and thistles lying scattered on a table. They were drawn with an impressive, if rather lifeless, accuracy.

'The Mouse. Beginning of a hand, don't you think?'

'Nice line.'

Breasley nodded down towards the huge canvas. 'I let her help. The donkey-work.'

David murmured, 'On that scale...

'Clever girl, Williams. Don't let her fool you. Shouldn't make fun of her.' The old man stared down at the drawing. 'Deserves better.' Then, 'Couldn't do without her, really.'

'I'm sure she's learning a lot.'

'Know what people say. Old rake and all that. Man my age.' David smiled. 'Not any more.'

But Breasley seemed not to hear.

'Don't care a fart about that, never have. When you start using their minds.'

And he began to talk about age, turned back towards the painting with David standing beside him, staring at it; how the imagination, the ability to conceive, didn't after all, as one had supposed in one's younger days, atrophy. What declined was the physical and psychological stamina—'like one's poor old John Thomas'—to execute. One had to have help there. He seemed ashamed to have to confess it.

'Roman Charity. Know that thing? Old geezer sucking milk from some young biddy's tit. Often think of that.'

'I can't believe it's so one-way as you suggest.' David pointed at the drawing of the flowers. 'You should see the kind of art education most of the kids are getting at home now.'

'You think?'

'I'm sure. Most of them can't even draw.'

Breasley stroked his white hair; again he seemed almost touchingly boyish, lacking in confidence. And David felt himself being seduced by this shyer yet franker being behind the language and the outward manner; who apparently had decided to trust him.

'Ought to send her packing. Haven't the guts.'

'Isn't that up to her?'

'She didn't say anything? When you came?'

'She gave a very good imitation of a guardiau angel.'

'Come home to roost.'

It was said with a hint of sardonic gloom; and remained cryptic, for the old man stood up with a sudden return of energy and a brief touch, as if of apology, on David's arm.

'To hell with it. Come to grill me, what?'

David asked about the preliminary stages to the painting.

'Trial and error. Draw a lot. See.'

He led David to the far end of the bench. The work-sketches were produced with the same odd mixture of timidity and assertiveness he had shown in talking about the girl—as if he both feared criticism and would suspect its absence.

This new painting, it seemed, had sprung from a very dim recollection of early childhood; of a visit to a fair, he was no longer sure where, he had been five or six, had been longing for the treat, had taken an intense pleasure in it, could still recall this overwhelming wanting—the memory seemed dense with desire—to experience each tent and stall, see everything, taste everything. And then a thunderstorm, which must have been apparent before to all the adults, but which for some reason came to him as a shock and a surprise, a dreadful disappointment. All the outward indications of the fair theme had progressively disappeared through the working sketches, much more elaborate and varied than David had expected, and were completely exorcized from the final imago. It was rather as if a clumsy literalness, a conceptual correlative of the way the old man spoke, had to be slowly exterminated by constant recomposition and refinement away from the verbal. But the story explained the strange inwardness, the lit oblivion of the central scene of the painting. The metaphysical parallels, small planets of light in infinite nights and all the rest, had remained perhaps a fraction too obvious. It was all a shade too darkly Olympian; put in words, something of a pessimistic truism about the human condition. But the tone, the mood, the force of the statement carried conviction—and more than enough to overcome any personal prejudice David felt against overt literary content in painting.

The talk broadened out, David managed to lead the old fellow back further into his past, to his life in France in the 'twenties, his friendships with Braque and Matthew Smith. Breasley's veneration for the former was long on the record, but he apparently had to make sure that David knew it. The difference between Braque and Picasso, Matisse 'and crew' was between a great man and great boys.

'They knew it. He knew it. Everyone but the bloody world in general knows it.'

David did not argue. Picasso's name had been actually pronounced as 'pick-arsehole'. But in general the obscenities were reduced as they talked. The disingenuous mask of ignorance slipped, and the face of the old cosmopolitan that lay beneath began to show. David began to suspect he was dealing with a paper tiger; or certainly with one still living in a world before he himself was born. The occasional hint of aggression was based on such ludicrously oldfashioned notions of what shocked people, what red rags could infuriate them; to reverse the simile, it was rather like playing matador to a blind bull. Only the pompous fool could let himself be caught on such obvious horns.

They strolled back to the house just before six. Once again the two girls had disappeared. Breasley took him round the ground-floor room to look at the work there. There were anecdotes, some peremptory declarations of affection. One famous name got a black mark for being slick, 'too damn' easy'.

'Dozen-a-day man, don't you know. Bone lazy. That's what saved him. Fastidious my arse.'

And there was more frankness, when David asked what he had looked for when he bought.

'Value for money, dear boy. Insurance. Never thought my own stuff would come to much. Now how about this fellow?'

They had stopped before the little flower painting David had tentatively ascribed to Matisse. David shook his head.

'Painted rubbish ever since.'

It was hardly a clue, in present company. David smiled.

'I'm stumped.'

'Miró. Done in 1915.'

'Good God.'

'Sad.'

And he shook his head, as over the grave of someone who had died in the flower of his youth.

There were other small treasures David had failed to identify: a Sérusier, a remarkable Gauguinesque landscape by Filiger but when they got to the far corner of the room, Breasley opened a door. mom 'Got a greater artist out here, Williams. You'll see. Dinner tonight.'

The door led into a kitchen: a lantern-jawed grey-haired man sitting at a table and peeling vegetables, an elderly woman who turned from a modern cooking-range and smiled. David was introduced: Jean-Pierre and Mathilde, who ran the house and garden. There was also a large Alsatian, which the man quietened as it stood. It was called Macmillan, to rhyme with Villon; because, Breasley explained with a sniff, it was an 'old impostor'. He spoke French for the first time, a strangely different voice, completely fluent and native-sounding to David's ears; but English was probably more the foreign language now. He gathered the dinner menu was being discussed. Breasley lifted pot-lids on the stove and sniffed, like some officer doing mess rounds. Then a pike was produced and examined, some story was being told by the man, apparently he had caught it that afternoon, the dog had been with him and tried to attack it when the fish was landed. Breasley bent and wagged a finger over the dog's head, he was to save his teeth for thieves; David was glad he had chanced to arrive when the animal was off the premises. He had the impression that this evening visit to the kitchen was something of a ritual. Its domesticity and familiarity, the tranquil French couple, made a reassuring contrast with the vaguely perverse note the presence of the two girls had introduced into his visit.

Back in the long room, Breasley told David to make himself at home. He had some letters to write. They would meet there again for an aperitif at half-past seven.

'You're not too formal, I hope?'.

Freedom House, dear boy. Stark naked, if you like. He winked. 'Gels won't mind.'

David grinned. 'Right.'

The old man raised a hand and walked to the stairs. Halfway up he turned and spoke back down the room.

'World isn't all bare bubs, eh what?'

A discreet minute or two later David also went upstairs. He sat on the chaise-longue, writing notes. It was a shame one couldn't quote the old boy direct; but those first two hours had proved very useful; and there must be more to come. After a while he went and lay on the bed, hands behind his head, staring up at the ceiling. It was very warm, airless, though he had opened the shutters. Strange, he had experienced a little tinge of personal disappointment, finally, with Breasley; a little too much posing and wicked old sham for the end-product, too great a dissonance between the man and his art; and illogically there loitered, even though David had wanted to keep off the subject, a tiny hurtness that he had been asked nothing about his own work. It was absurd, of course; merely a reaction to so blatant a monomania; and not without an element of envy... this rather gorgeous old house, the studio set-up, the collection, the faintly gamy ambiguity that permeated the place after predictable old Beth and the kids at home; the remoteness of it, the foreignness, the curious flashes of honesty, a patina... fecundity, his whole day through that countryside, so many ripening apples.

But he was being unfair to Beth, who after all had been more responsible than himself in the frantic last-hour discussions on Monday morning, when Sandy's chicken-pox had moved from threatened to certain. Her mother was already there with them, ready to take over when they left, and perfectly able to cope and willing to do so, she took David's side. It was just Beth's conscience, that old streak of obstinacy in her—and a little hangover of guilt, he suspected, from her brief mutiny against the tyranny of children soon after Louise was born. Even if there weren't complications, she insisted, she wouldn't be happy not knowing; and David must go, after all it was his work. Their intended week in the Ardche, after Brittany, could still take place. They had finally agreed, when he set off for Southampton on the Monday evening, that unless there was a telegram at Coëtminais to the contrary on Thursday, she would be in Paris the next day. He had rushed out and booked the flight before he left; and brought flowers and a bottle of champagne home with the ticket. That had gained him a good mark from his mother in-law. Beth had been drier. In his first frustration he had rather too obviously put his hatred of travelling alone, especially on this journey, above responsible parenthood. But her last words had been, 'I'll forgive you in Paris.'

A door by the top of the staircase, the one Breasley had gone into, opened briefly and he heard the sound of music, a radio or a record, it seemed like Vivaldi. Then silence again. He felt like a visitor; peripheral, not really wanted. His mind drifted back to the two girls. Of course one wasn't shocked that they went to bed with the old man; whatever one did with old men. Presumably they were well paid for their services, both literally and figuratively; they must know the kind of prices his work fetched now, let alone what the collection would be worth at auction. In some nagging way their presence irritated David. They must be after something, exploiting the old man's weaknesses. They were like a screen. He sensed a secret they did not want him to know.

He wished Beth were there. She was always less afraid of offending people, more immediate; and she could have got so much more out of the girls than he ever would.

He was glad he had finally decided to dress up a little—the jeans suit, a shirt and scarf when he went downstairs. The Mouse was in a creamy high-necked blouse and a long russet skirt, laying the long wooden table at the far end of the room. There were lamps on, the first dusk outside. David saw the back of Breasley's white head in a sofa by the fireplace; and then, as he came down the room, the Freak's frizzed mop leaning against his shoulder. She was slumped back, her feet on a stool, reading aloud in French from some magazine. She wore a bare-shouldered black satin dress with a flounced bottom, a Spanish line about it. The hand of the old man's encircling arm had slipped beneath the fabric and lay on the girl's left breast. He did not move it away when he saw David, merely raised his free hand and pointed down the room towards the Mouse.

'Have a drink, dear boy.'

He too had changed; a pale summer coat, a white shirt, a purple bow tie. The girl twisted her head and slipped David a look up, charcoal eyes, intense red mouth, a thin grimace, then began slowly translating what she had read into English. David smiled, hesitated an awkward moment, then went on to where the Mouse moved round the table. She looked coolly up from her work.

'What can I get you?'

'Whatever you're having.'

'Noilly Prat?'

'Lovely.'

She went to an old carved armoire beside the door through to the kitchen; glasses, an array of bottles, a bowl of ice.

'Lemon?'

'Please.'

He took his glass, and watched her pour a similar one for herself; then some fizzy fruit-drink; and finally a whisky poured with care, dispensed, she even held the glass up and lined two fingers to check the level of the ration before topping it with an equal amount of soda. Her blouse, made of some loose-woven fabric the colour of old lace that allowed minute interstices of bare flesh, was long-sleeved and tight-wristed, high-necked, Edwardian in style; rather prim and demure except, as he soon realized, that nothing was worn underneath it. He watched her face in profile as she served the drinks; its quiet composure. Her movements were deft, at home in this domestic role. David wondered why the old man had to make fun of her; taste and intelligence seemed after all much more plausible than silliness. Nor did there seem anything Pre-Raphaelite about her now; she was simply a rather attractive bit of 'seventies bird and a good deal easier to relate to than the absurd sex-doll on the sofa, who was reading French again. Now and then the old man would correct her pronunciation and she would repeat a word. The Mouse took the drinks down to them, then came back to where David waited. He passed her her own glass, and was aware of a very straight pair of eyes; suspiciously as if she had half read his thoughts. Then she silently raised the glass to him and sipped. One hand went to hold an elbow. And at last she smiled.

'Did we behave ourselves?'

'Absolutely. Very helpful.'

'Give him time.'

He grinned. Definitely, he began to take to her. She had fine features, very regular and well-proportioned; a good mouth; and the very clear eyes, blue-grey eyes set more intense by her tanned complexion, had lost their afternoon abstraction. They were made up a little now, a faintly Slavonic oblongness about them accentuated; and they had a directness he liked. One of his theories began to crumble. It was hard to believe they were exploiting the old man in any mercenary way.

'He showed me one of your drawings. The teasels? I was impressed.'

She looked down a moment at her glass; a very deliberate hesitation; then up into his eyes again.

'And I liked your exhibition at the Redfern last autumn.'

He gave a not entirely mock start of surprise; another smile. 'I didn't realize.'

'I even went twice.'

He said, 'Where were you?'

'Leeds. For my Dip AD. Then two terms at the RCA.'

He looked duly impressed. 'Well, good God, you mustn't 'I'm learning more here.'

He looked down, it wasn't his business, but he managed to suggest that even so, postgraduate acceptance by the fiercely selective Royal College of Art was not something one jacked in lightly.

'It's all right. Henry knows he's lucky to have me.'

She said it with another smile, but it was meant neither ironically nor vainly, and David revised his opinion of the girl a step further. She had given herself a reference; and she gained an immediate stature in his eyes, a seriousness. He had obviously got things badly wrong; been in some obscure way teased on his first arrival. He saw at once the very real studio help she must be giving the old man; and made a guess—the sexual services were provided by the other girl alone.

'The new painting's remarkable. I don't know how he keeps on pulling them out.'

'Never thinking of anyone but himself. Mainly.'

'And that's what you're learning?'

'Watching.'

'He said he was very grateful to you.'

'He's a child, really. He needs toys. Like affection. So he can try and smash it to bits.'

'But yours has remained whole?'

She shrugged. 'We have to play up to him a little. Pretend we're in awe of his wicked old reputation. The harem bit.'

He smiled and looked down.

'I confess I was wondering what the reality was there.'

'Our last visitor was told—within ten minutes of arrival that we'd both been ravished three times the previous night. You mustn't look as if you doubt his word. In that area.'

He laughed. 'Right.'

'He knows nobody believes him, but that's not the point.'

'Understood.'

She sipped her vermouth.

'And just to clear up any remaining illusions, Anne and I don't deny him the little bit of sex-life that he can still manage.'

Her eyes were on his. There was a defensiveness behind the frankness, some kind of warning. They both looked down; David momentarily at the line of the bare breasts beueath the blouse, then away. She seemed devoid of coquetry, of any trace of the flagrant sexiness of her friend. Her self-possession was so strong that it denied her good looks, that repeated undertone of nakedness, any significance; and yet it secretly drew attention to them.

She went on. 'He's not verbal at all. As you must have realized. It's partly having lived abroad so long. But something much deeper. He has to see and to feel. Quite literally. The shadow of young girls in flower isn't enough.'

'I begin to realize just how lucky he is.'

'I'm only giving you the debit side.'

'I realize that as well.'

She glanced secretively to where the old man sat, then back at David. 'If he turns nasty, you mustn't get rattled. It's no good backing down, he hates that. Just stick to your guns. Keep cool.' She smiled. 'Sorry. If I'm sounding allwise. But I do know him.'

He swirled the lemon in the bottom of his glass. 'I'm actually not quite sure why I'm allowed here. If he knows my work.'

'That's why I'm warning you. He asked me, I had to tell him. In case he found out anyway.'

'Oh Christ.'

'Don't worry. He'll probably be satisfied with one or two mean digs. Which you needn't rise to.'

He gave her a rueful look. 'I suspect I'm being a bloody nuisance. For you.'

'Because we looked bored this afternoon. Not very gracious?'

She was smiling, and he smiled back.

'Since you mention it.'

'We're delighted you've come. But it wouldn't do to show that too obviously in front of Henry.'

'As I now completely understand.'

There was suddenly a grain of mischief in her eyes.

'Now you have to learn Anne. She's more difficult than me.'

But they never got on to Anne. The door from the kitchen opened and the grey head of the French housekeeper looked into the room.

'Je peux servir, mademoiselle?'

'Oui, Mathilde. Je viens vous aider.'

She went into the kitchen. The other girl was on her feet, pulling Breasley to his. She was barebacked, the dress cut absurdly low. They came hand-in-hand down the room to where David waited. One had to grant her some kind of style. She had a little self-guying mince as she walked, something monkeyish, of repressed gaiety, provokingly artificial beside her white-haired companion's quiet walk. David doubted whether he would ever 'learn' her.

Only one end of the long table was laid. Breasley stood at the head, the girl took the seat to his right. The old man gestured.

'Williams, dear boy.'

He was to sit on the Freak's right. Mathilde and the Mouse appeared: a small soup-tureen, a platter of crudités, another of variously pink rings of sausage, a butter-dish. The soup was for Breasley. He remained standing, waiting with an old-fashioned courtesy to see the Mouse into her chair. When she sat, he bent over and lightly kissed the crown of her head. The two girls exchanged a neutral look. In spite of their seemingly disparate looks and intelligences there was evidently a closeness between them, a rapport that did not need words. The Mouse ladled soup into the dish before the old man. He tucked a large napkin between two buttons halfway down his shirt-front and spread it over his lap. The Freak silently insisted that David help himself first. The housekeeper went to a corner of the room and lit an oil-lamp, then brought it back and set it down in the empty space opposite David. On her way out to the kitchen she reached for a switch and the electric lights around them died. At the far end of the room a hidden lamp in the corridor upstairs remained on, silhouetting the handsome diagonal of the medieval staircase. A last pale phosphorescence in the evening light outside, over the trees; the faces bathed in the quiet lambency from the milky diffuser; the Mouse poured red wine from a bottle without a label for David, the old man and herself. The Freak, it seemed, did not drink; and hardly ate. She sat with the elbows of her bare brown arms on the table, picking up little bits of raw vegetable and nibbling at them, staring across at the Mouse with her dark eyes. She did not look at David. There was a little silence as they all set to; as if one waited for Breasley to declare conversation open. David was hungry, anyway, and feeling much more at home now that the girl opposite had cleared the air so completely. The lamplight made the scene like a Chardin, a Georges de la Tour; very peaceful. Then the Freak choked withOut warning. David flashed her a look—not food, it had been a stifled giggle.

The Mouse murmured, 'Idiot.'

'Sorry.'

She made an absurd attempt, mouth pressed tight and down, leaning back, to control her nervousness; then abruptly clutched her white napkin to her face and twisted up away from her chair. She stood five or six feet away, her back to them. Breasley went on calmly eating his soup. The Mouse smiled across at David.

'Not you.'

'Needs her bloody bum tanned,' murmured Breasley.

Still the girl stood, long bare spine to them, fuzz of dark red shadow perched over the scarecrow neck. Then she moved further away, towards the fireplace, into the darkness.

'Mouse is a fan of yours, Williams. She tell you that?'

'Yes, we've already established a mutual admiration society.'

'Very pernickety creature, our Mouse.'

David smiled.

'Footsteps of Pythagoras, that right?'

The old man stayed intent on his soup. David glanced for help at the girl opposite.

'Henry's asking if you paint abstracts.'

Eyes on his laden spoon, the old man muttered quickly, 'Obstructs.'

'Well yes. I'm... afraid I do.'

He knew it was a mistake even before the Mouse's quick glance. The old man smiled up.

'And why are we afraid, dear boy?'

David said lightly, 'Just a figure of speech.'

'Very brainy stuff, I hear. Much admired, Mouse says.'

David murmured, '"Als ich kann."'

Breasley looked up a second time. 'Come again?'

But suddenly the Freak was behind her chair. She held three pink chrysanthemum heads, removed from a pot David had seen in the fireplace. She put one by his hand; one by the old man's and the third by the Mouse's. Then she sat down with her hands on her lap, like a self-punished child. Breasley reached out and patted her arm in avuncular fashion.

'You were saying, Williams?'

'As sound as I can make them.' He went quickly on. 'I'd rather hoped humbly in the footsteps of...' but he saw too late he was heading for another mistake.

'Of whom, dear boy?'

'Braque?'

It was a mistake. David held his breath.

'Mean that synthetic cubist nonsense?'

'It makes sense to me, sir.'

The old man did not answer for a moment. He ate more soup. 'All spawn bastards when we're young.' David smiled, and stopped his tongue. 'Saw a lot of atrocities in Spain. Unspeakable things. Happens in war. Not just them. Our side as well.' He took another mouthful of soup, then lay the spoon down and leant back and surveyed David. 'Battle's over, dear man. Doing it in cold blood, you with me? Don't go for that.'

'As I've been warned, Mr Breasley.'

The old man suddenly relaxed a little; there was even a faint glint of amusement in his eyes.

'Long as you know, my boy.'

David opened his hands: he knew. The Mouse spoke.

'Henry, do you want more soup?'

'Too much garlic.'

'It's exactly the same as last night.'

The old man grunted, then reached for the wine-bottle. The Freak raised her hands and ran her splayed fingers through her hair, as if she were afraid it might be lying flat; then turned a little to David, her arms still high.

'You like my tattoo?'

In the hollow of the shaven armpit was a dark blue daisy.

Through the rest of the meal David managed, in tacit alliance with the Mouse, to keep the conversation off art. The food itself helped; the quenelles of pike in a beurre blanc sauce that was a new gastronomic experience to him, the pré sale lamb. They talked French cooking and love of food, then about Brittany, the Breton character. This was Haute Bretagne, David learnt, as opposed to the Basse, or Bretagne Bretonnante further west, where the language was still spoken. Cot- meant wood, or forest:—minais, of the monks. The surrounding forest had once been abbatial land. Among themselves they dropped that part, one spoke simply of Coët. Most of the talk was between the Mouse and David, though she turned to Breasley from time to time for confirmation or for further details. The Freak said next to nothing. David sensed a difference of licence accorded the two girls. The Mouse was allowed to be herself; the other was there slightly on tolerance. She too, it emerged at one point, had been an art student; but graphics, not fine arts. They had first met at Leeds. But she gave the impression that she did not take her qualifications very seriously, she was out of her class in present company.

The old man, having drawn his drop of blood, seemed satisfied, prepared to revert at least part of the way back to his predinner self. But if the Mouse was successful in maintaining an innocuous conversation, she was less so in keeping the wine from him. She drank very little herself, and David gave up trying to keep pace with his host. A second bottle had been produced from the armoire. By the time the meal was finished that was empty, too, and there was a glaze in Breasley's eyes. He did not seem drunk, there was no fumbling after his glass; just that ocular symptom of possession by an old demon. His answers became increasingly brief, he hardly seemed to be listening any more. The Mouse had complained that they never saw any films, and the talk had moved to that; what David had seen recently in London. Then the old man broke in abruptly.

'Another bottle, Mouse.'

She looked at him, but he avoided her eyes.

'In our guest's honour.'

Still she hesitated. The old man stared at his empty glass, then raised a hand and brought it down on the table. It was without force or anger, only a vague impatience. But she got up and went to the armoire. They were apparently at a point where giving way was better than remonstrating. Breasley leant back in his chair, staring at David under the white quiff, almost benevolent, a kind of fixed smile. The Freak spoke to the table in front of her.

'Henry, can I get down?'

He remained staring at David. 'Why?'

'I want to read my book.'

'You're a fucking little ninny.'

'Please.'

'Bugger off then.'

He had not looked at her. The Mouse came back with the third bottle, and the Freak looked nervously up at her, as if her permission was needed as well. There was a little nod, then David felt his thigh being briefly squeezed. The Freak's hand had reached along beneath the table, apparently to give him courage. She stood up and went down the room and up the stairs. Breasley pushed the bottle towards David. It was not a politeness, but a challenge.

'Not for me, thanks. I've had enough.'

'Cognac? Calvados?'

'No thanks.'

The old man poured himself another full glass of wine.

'This pot stuff?' He nodded sideways down the room. 'That's the book she wants to read.'

The Mouse said quietly, 'She's given it up. You know that perfectly well.'

He took a mouthful of the wine.

'Thought all you young whiz-kids indulged.'

David said lightly, 'Not personally.'

'Interferes with the slide-rule stuff, does it?'

'I imagine. But I'm not a mathematician.'

'What do you call it then?'

The Mouse waited, eyes down. Evidently she could not help him now, except as a silent witness. It was not worth pretending one did not know what that 'it' meant. David met the old man's stare.

'Mr Breasley, most of us feel abstraction has become a meaningless term. Since our conception of reality has changed so much this last fifty years.'

The old man seemed to have to turn it over in his mind; then dismiss it.

'I call it betrayal. Greatest betrayal in the history of art.'

The wine had gone to his cheeks and nose, and his eyes seemed almost opaque. He was less leant than forced back against his armed chair, which he had shifted a little to face David. It also brought him a little closer to the girl beside him. David had talked too much to her during dinner, shown too much interest... he saw that now, and that the old man must have watched them talking before the meal. In some way he had to repossess her.

'Triumph of the bloody eunuch.'

In that way.

'At least better than the triumph of the bloody dictator?'

'Balls. Spunk. Any spunk. Even Hitler's spunk. Or nothing.'

Without looking at David, the Mouse said, 'Henry feels that full abstraction represents a flight from human and social responsibility.' He thought for one moment she was taking Breasley's side; then realized she had now set up as interpreter.

'But if philosophy needs logic? If applied mathematics needs the pure form? Surely there's a case for fundamentals in art, too?'

'Cock. Not fundamentals. Fundaments.' He nodded at the girl beside him. 'Pair of tits and a cunt. All that goes with them. That's reality. Not your piddling little theorems and pansy colours. I know what you people are after, Williams.'

Once again the Mouse interpreted, in an absolutely neutral voice. 'You're afraid of the human body.'

'Perhaps simply more interested in the mind than the genitals.'

'God help your bloody wife then.'

David said evenly, 'I thought we were talking about painting.'

'How many women you slept with, Williams?'

'That's not your business, Mr Breasley.'

It was disconcerting, the fixity of the stare in the pause before an answer could be framed; like fencing in slow motion.

'Castrate. That's your game. Destroy.'

'There are worse destroyers around than non-representational art.'

'Cock.'

'You'd better tell that to Hiroshima. Or to someone who's been napalmed.'

The old man snorted. There was another silence.

'Science hasn't got a soul. Can't help itself. Rat in a maze.'

He swallowed the last of his glass and gestured impatiently at the Mouse to refill it. David waited, though he was tempted to jump in and ask why he had been invited to Coëtminais in the first place. He felt rattled, in spite of being forewarned. It was the violently personal nature of the assault, the realization that any rational defence, or discussion, would simply add fuel to the flames.

'What you people... 'the old man stared at the filled glass, jumped words. 'Betrayed the fort. Sold out. Call yourself avant-garde. Experimental. My arse. High treason, that's all. Mess of scientific pottage. Sold the whole bloody shoot down the river.'

'Abstract painting is no longer avant-garde. And isn't the best propaganda for humanism based on the freedom to create as you like?'

Again the pause.

'Wishwash.'

David forced a smile. 'Then one's back with socialist realism? State control?'

'What controls you then, Wilson?'

'Williams,' said the Mouse.

'Don't give me that liberal cant. Had to live with the stench of it all my life. Le fairplay. Sheer yellowbelly.' Suddenly he pointed a finger at David. 'Too old for it, my lad. Seen too much. Too many people die for decency. Tolerance. Keeping their arses clean.'

He finished his wine in one contemptuous gulp, then reached for the bottle again. Its neck rattled against the rim of the glass and he poured too long, some spilled over. The Mouse lifted the glass and poured off a little into her own; then quietly wiped the spilt liquid from the table in front of the old man. David said nothing. He felt cool again now; but embarrassed.

'Good wines, know what they do? Piss in them. Piss in the vat.' He rather shakily got the glass to his mouth, then set it down. The pauses grew longer between each burst of speech. 'Fit ten Englishmen into a Frenchman's little finger.' Another hiatus. 'Not oil. Pigment. All shit. If it's any good. Merde. Human excrement. Excrementum. That which grows out. That's your fundamental. Not your goddam prissy little bits of abstract good taste.' He paused again, as if he sought a way forward, and had finally to go back. 'Wouldn't even wipe my arse with them.'

There was a heavy silence. Somewhere outside an owl quavered. The girl sat, her chair pushed back a little from the table, her hands folded on her lap, eyes down, apparently prepared to wait for eternity for the old man's ramblings to finish. David wondered how often she had to suffer this monstrous bohemian travesty that the alcohol had released. All those ancient battles that had to be refought; when the matter was so totally, both \_de facto\_ and \_de jure\_, decided, and long before David was born. All form was not natural; and colour had a nonrepresentational function... you could no more argue any longer about that than about Einstein's famous equation. Fission had taken place. One could dispute application, but not principle. So David thought; and some of it must have appeared on his face. He had also drunk more than usual.

'Disappointing you, Williams? Think I'm pissed? In vino bollocks?'

David shook his head. 'Just overstating your case.'

More silence.

'You really a painter, Williams? Or just a gutless bloody word-twister?'

David did not answer. There was another silence. The old man drank more wine.

'Say something.'

'Hatred and anger are not luxuries we can afford any more. At any level.'

'Then God help you.'

David smiled faintly. 'He's also a non-option.'

The Mouse reached forward and poured more wine.

'Know what turning the cheek meant when I was young? Fellow who turned his cheek?'

'No.'

'Bumboy. You a bumboy, Wilson?'

This time the Mouse did not bother to correct him; or David, to answer.

'On your knees and trousers down. Solves all, does it?'

'No. But then nor does fear.'

'Does which?'

'Being afraid of losing... what isn't in question.'

The old man stared at him.

'What the hell's he talking about?'

The Mouse said quietly, 'He means your work and your views of art aren't in any danger, Henry. There's room for everyone.'

She did not look at David, but shifted a little, forward and away from the old man; put an elbow on the table, then her hand to her chin. A finger rose momentarily to her lips. David was not to answer back any more. Outside, Macmillan suddenly began barking; wild paroxysms of suspicion. A voice, the housekeeper's husband's, shouted. Neither the old man nor the girl took any notice; to them it must have been a familiar night sound. To David it was intensely symbolic, fraught, echoing the tension inside the old man.

'That's the line now, is it?'

The girl looked across at David. There was a faint smile in her eyes.

'Henry thinks one shouldn't show toleration for things one believes are bad.'

'Same old story. Sit on the bloody English fence. Vote for Adolf.'

There was more silence, but then suddenly she spoke.

'Henry, you can't stop totalitarian ideas by totalitarian methods. That way you only help breed them.'

Perhaps some dim realization percolated through that she was now taking David's side. The old man's eyes wandered away into the shadows at the end of the table. When she had last refilled his glass, she had put the bottle back to her left, out of his reach.

He said slowly, 'Trying to tell you something.'

It wasn't clear whether he meant, I didn't mean to insult you personally; or, I've forgotten what it was.

David murmured, 'Yes, I realize.'

The old man's stare came back to him. He had difficulty in focusing.

'What's your name?'

'Williams. David Williams.'

The Mouse said, 'Finish your wine.'

But he ignored her.

'Not good with words. Never my line.'

'I understand what you're saying.'

'Don't hate, can't love. Can't love, can't paint.'

'I understand.'

'Bloody geometry. No good. Won't work. All tried it. Down the hole.' His staring at David now had a desperate concentration, almost a clinging. He seemed to lose all train.

The Mouse prompted him. 'Making is speaking.'

'Can't write without words. Lines.'

The girl stared down the room. She spoke very quietly.

'Art is a form of speech. Speech must be based on human needs, not abstract theories of grammar. Or anything but the spoken word. The real word.'

'Other thing. Ideas. Can't care.'

David nodded gravely.

The Mouse went on. 'Ideas are inherently dangerous because they deny human facts. The only answer to fascism is the human fact.'

'Machine. What's it, computer thing.'

David said, 'I do understand.'

'Tachiste. Fautrier. Wols fellow. Like frightened bloody sheep. Drip, drip.' He stopped, a silence. 'Yank, what's his name?'

David and the girl said it together, and he missed it. The Mouse repeated the name.

'Jackson Bollock.' Once again he stared off into the darkness. 'Better the bloody bomb than Jackson Bollock.'

They said nothing. David stared at the ancient surface of the table in front of him; blackened oak, scarred and rubbed, the patina of centuries' use; centuries of aged voices, ordering back some threatening, remorseless tide. As if time knew ebb.

Then the old man spoke, with a strange lucidity, as if he had only been pretending to be drunk, and now summarized with one final inconsequence.

'Ebony tower. That's what I call it.'

David glanced across at the girl, but she did not meet his look. Foreclosing had apparently become more important than interpreting. It was very clear that Breasley was not really pretending; David watched his eyes, how they searched hazily for the glass, or several glasses, in front of him. He reached, a last effort to seem positive and sober. The Mouse caught his hand and gently set the stem of the glass between the fingers. The old man had difficulty in getting it to his mouth, then tried to down the wine in one brave swallow. It dribbled down his chin, then splashed on his white shirt front. The Mouse leant forward and dabbed with her serviette.

She said gently, 'Bed now.'

'One more.'

'No.' She took the half-empty bottle and put it beside her chair on the floor. 'All gone.'

The old man's eyes found David.

'Qu'est-ce qu'il fout ici?'

The girl stood and put a hand under his elbow to urge him up. He said, 'Bed.'

'Yes, Henry.'

But still he sat, slightly bowed, a very old man in a stupor. The girl waited patiently. Her downward eyes met David's, a curious gravity, as if she were frightened she might see contempt in his for this role she had to play. He pointed at himself could he help? She nodded, but raised a finger; not yet. A moment later she bent and kissed the old man on the temple.

'Come on. Try and stand.'

And now, like an obedient but vaguely timid small boy, he pressed his hands on the table. He was unsteady as he came to his feet, and lurched forward against the tableedge. David went quickly to his other side. Suddenly he collapsed down again into the chair. This time they pulled him up. How drunk he really was did not become apparent until they started to walk him down the room towards the stairs. He was in a seeming coma, his eyes closed; only his legs, by some ancient instinct, or long practice, managed to go through the motions of shuffling forward. The Mouse pulled at the bow-tie, then unbuttoned the top of the shirt. Somehow they got him up the stairs and into the large room at the west end of the house.

David saw a double and a single bed, the Freak standing off the latter. She still wore the black dress, but now with a white jumper over it. He had a glimpse of more paintings and drawings on the walls, a table by the window that faced out west with jars of crayons and drawing pencils.

'Oh Henry. You wicked old thing.'

The Mouse spoke across the old man's bowed head to David. 'We can manage now.'

'Are you sure?'

Breasley muttered, 'Pee.'

The two girls led him round the beds and to a door beyond. They got him in and all three disappeared. David stood Undecided, at a loss; and then suddenly he registered the painting over the bed. It was a Braque, one he knew he had seen somewhere in reproduction. It must have been listed as 'private collection', he had never associated it with Breasley. He thought wrily back: the jejune folly of throwing such a name, such a relationship, at the old man in his own self-defence. The Freak came out of the bathroom and closed the door behind her. The additional irony of it struck him... that painting, a certain six figures at any auction—and the gewgawish, unreliable-looking little creature who stood facing him across the room. There was the sound of vomiting.

'Is he like this every night?'

'Just sometimes.' She had a thin smile. 'It's not you. Just other people.'

'I can't help undress him?'

She shook her head. 'Don't worry. Really. We're used to it.' He stood there in doubt. She said again, 'Really.'

He wanted to say that he admired them both for what they were doing; and found himself at an unusual loss for words.

'Well... say goodnight to... I don't actually know her real name.'

'Di. Diana. Sleep well.'

'And you.'

She pressed her lips drily together and gave a little single nod. He left.

Back in his room, in pyjamas, in bed, he lay propped on an elbow staring at a thriller he had brought. He felt he ought to stay at least potentially on hand for a while in case they did need further help; and though he felt tired, sleep was out of the question. He couldn't even read, the adrenalin had to calm down. It had been an extraordinary evening; and for the first time he was glad that Beth hadn't been there. She would have found it too much, flown off the handle probably; though the baiting had been so crude, so revealing of all the old man's weaknesses. Essentially one was dealing with a cantankerous child. And the Mouse, Diana, how staggeringly well she had handled him; quite a girl, quite a pair, there must be something better than was apparent in the other, a fidelity, a kind of courage. One took the Mouse's word now, the accuracy of her judgments; had needed her coolness; was curious to know if one had satisfied it. He recalled a certain amount of sceptical joking between Beth and himself: about the old man living up to his reputation, Beth's expecting to be groped at least twice or asking for her money back... that at least was taken care of. The stories to tell in private back home. He tried to settle to his thriller.

Perhaps twenty minutes had passed since he had left the girls to their tyrant. The house had fallen silent. But now he heard someone come out of Breasley's bedroom, then light footsteps, the creak of a floorboard outside his room. There was a hesitation, then a gentle tap of his door.

'Come in.'

The Mouse's head appeared round the door.

'I saw your light on. It's all right. He's asleep.'

'I didn't realize how far gone he was.'

'We have to let him do it sometimes. You did very well.'

'I'm jolly glad you warned me.'

'He'll be all contrite tomorrow. Meek as a lamb.' She smiled. 'Breakfast round nine? But you know. Sleep as long as you like.'

She drew back to go, but he stopped her. 'What on earth did that last thing he said mean? The ebony tower?'

'Oh.' She smiled. 'Nothing. Just one of the bats in his belfry.' She tilted her head. "What he thinks has taken the place of the ivory tower?'

'Abstraction?'

She shook her head. 'Anything he doesn't like about modern art. That he thinks is obscure because the artist is scared to be clear... you know. Somewhere you dump everything you're too old to dig? You mustn't take it personally. He can only explain what he thinks by insulting people.' She smiled again, her body still hidden by the door. 'Okay?'

He smiled back, and nodded.

And she was gone, not back to the old man's room, but further down the corridor. A door clicked quietly to. David would have liked to talk a little longer. The old teaching world, students you fancied, who fancied you a little, in some way the atmosphere of Coët reminded him of the days before Beth had entered his life; not that he had ever gone in much for having it off with students. He was a crypto-husband long before he married.

He read a little, then switched out the light and sank, in his usual way, almost immediately into sleep.

Once again the Mouse was proved right. Contrition was flagrant from the moment David appeared, punctually at nine, downstairs again. Breasley himself came in from the garden as David stood at the foot of the stairs uncertain of where breakfast took place. To one unversed in the recuperative powers of lifelong heavy drinkers, he seemed surprisingly spry, and newly dapper, in light trousers and a dark blue sports shirt.

'My dear man. So unspeakably sorry about last night. Gels tell me most appallingly rude.'

'Not at all. Honestly.'

'Absolutely pissed. Very bad form.'

David grinned. 'Forgotten.'

'Curse of my life, don't you know. Never learnt when to stop.'

'Please don't worry.'

He took the abruptly extended hand.

'Very white of you, dear boy.' The hand was retained, his eyes quizzed. 'Say I must call you David. Surnames terribly square these days. That right?'

He used 'square' as if it were some daring new piece of slang.

'Please do.'

'Splendid. Well. I'm Henry then. Yes? Now come and have some breakfast. We pig it in the kitchen in the mornings.'

On the way down the room, Breasley said, 'Gels suggest a little dejeuner sur l'herbe. Good idea, what? Picnic?' There was sunshine outside, a faint haze over the trees. 'Rather proud of my forest. Worth a dekko.'

'I'd love to.'

The two girls, it seemed, were already up and out—to Plélan, the nearest village, to shop for food... and incidentally, or so David guessed, to allow the old man time to prove his penitence. He was taken on a stroll round the domaine after breakfast. Breasley revealed a pride in his garden, a little vanity over what must have been a comparatively recently acquired knowledge of names and cultivation methods. They came on Jean-Pierre hoeing in the vegetable garden behind the east end of the house; and as he listened to the old man and the housekeeper's husband discussing an ailing young tulip-tree and what could be done for it, David had again that pleasing sense of a much more dominant key in Breasley's life than the previous night's 'recessive' exhibition of spleen. He had very evidently learnt to live in Coët and its seasons; and a little later, when they were out in the orchard beyond the vegetables, there was an old water-pear already ripe, David was to taste one, they must be eaten straight from the tree, the old man began to say as much—confess he was a fool to have spent so much of his life in a city; to have left himself so little time to enjoy this. Between bites at his pear David asked why it had taken so long to find that out. Breasley gave a little sniff of self-contempt, then poked at a windfall with the end of his walking-stick.

'The bitch Paris, dear boy. Know that bit of rhyme? Earl of Rochester, isn't it? "Where man may live in direst need, but ne'er lack land to set his seed." Neat. Says it all.'

David smiled. They strolled on.

'Should have married. Damn' sight less expensive.'

'But you'd have missed a lot?'

Another sniff of self-reproach. 'One's the same as fifty, what?'

He seemed unaware of the irony: that he still had not managed to make do with one; and as if on cue a small white Renault came down the private lane from the outer world. The Mouse was driving. She waved through the window to where they stood, but did not stop. David and Breasley turned back towards the house. The old man pointed his stick after the car.

'Envy you chaps. Weren't like that when I was young.'

'I thought the girls of the 'twenties were rather dazzling.'

The stick was raised in genially outraged contradiction.

'Absolute piffle, my dear man. No idea. Spent half your life getting their legs open. Other half wishing you hadn't. Either that. Catching the clap off some tart. Dog's life. Don't know how we stood it.'

But David was unconvinced, and knew he was meant to be. The old man regretted nothing at heart; or only the impossible, another life. Somehow something of the former sexual bantam clung physically round his old frame; he could never have been particularly good-looking, but there must have been an attack, a devil about him, a standing challenge to the monogamous. One could imagine him countlessly rebuffed, and indifferent to it; enormously selfish, both in bed and out; impossible, so one believed in him. And now even those many who must have refused to believe had been confounded: he had come through to this, reputation, wealth, the girls, freedom to be exactly as he always had been, a halo round his selfishness, a world at his every whim, every other world shut out, remote behind the arboreal sea. To someone like David, always inclined to see his own life (like his painting) in terms of logical process, its future advances dependent on intelligent present choices, it seemed not quite fair. Of course one knew that the way to the peak was never by the book, that hazard and all the rest must play its part, just as action and aleatory painting formed an at least theoretically important sector in the modern art spectrum. But some such mountaineering image drifted through his mind. One had acquired the best equipment one could afford—and one looked up. There on the summit stood a smirking old satyr in carpetslippers, delightedly damning all common sense and calculation.

By eleven they were en route. The girls walked ahead with baskets, down a long forest ride; and David walked behind with the old man, carrying a folding blue recliner on an aluminium frame—portable sofa for the senile, as Breasley disparagingly called it, but the Mouse had insisted on its being brought. He walked with a coat folded over his arm, a raffish old widebrimmed panama on his head; engagingly seigneurial, pointing at shadows with his walking-stick; lights, special perspective qualities of 'his' forest. The visit had been allowed to return to its proper purpose. The silence, the rather strange lack of birds; how did one get silence into paint? The theatre now, didn't David notice the quality of empty stage?

David was rather more noticing that all this could be used in his introduction. Anyone who has had the good fortune to walk with the master, no, with Henry Breasley in his beloved forest of Paimpont, that still potent evocation... the haze had gone, it was surprisingly warm, more like August than September, a peerless day; one couldn't actually write like that. But he was still basking—realizing his baptism of fire had been a blessing in disguise—in the old man's determined good graces. The importance, pervasive in the mood if tenuous in the actual symbolism, of Breton medieval literature in the Coëtminais series was generally accepted now, though David had not been able to trace much public clarification from Breasley himself on the real extent of the influence. He had read the subject up cursorily before coming, but now he played a little ignorant; and discovered Breasley to be rather more learned and lettered than his briskly laconic manner at first sound suggested. The old man explained in his offhand way the sudden twelfth- and thirteenth-century mania for romantic legends, the mystery of island Britain ('sort of Wild Northern, what, knights for cowboys') filtering all over Europe via its French namesake; the sudden preoccupation with love and adventure and the magical, the importance of the once endless forest—of which the actual one they were walking in, Paimpont now, but the Brocéliande of the lais of Chrétien de Troyes, was an example—as the matrix for all these goings-on; the breaking-out of the closed formal garden of other medieval art, the extraordinary yearning symbolized in these wandering horsemen and lost damsels and dragons and wizards, Tristan and Merlin and Lancelot 'All damn' nonsense,' said Breasley. 'Just here and there, don't you know, David. What one needs. Suggestive. Stimulating, that's the word.' Then he went off on Marie de France and Eliduc. 'Damn' good tale. Read it several times. What's that old Swiss bamboozler's name. Jung, yes? His sort of stuff. Archetypal and all that.'

Ahead, the two girls turned off on a diagonal and narrower ride, more shady. Breasley and David followed some forty yards behind. The old man waved his stick.

'Those two gels now. Two gels in Eliduc.'

He began to tell its story. But consciously or unconsciously his distinctly shorthand manner of narration was more reminiscent of a Noel Coward farce than a noble medieval tale of crossed love, and once or twice David had to bite his lips. Nor did the actual figures of the two girls, the Freak in a red shirt, black dungarees and wellingtons, the Mouse in a dark green jersey (all bras were not burnt, David had noted) and pale trousers, help. More and more he realized the truth of what the latter had said: the old man's problem was an almost total inadequacy with words. If he didn't always cheapen, he certainly misrepresented everything he talked about. One had to keep remembering the way he could express himself in paint; and the gap was enormous. The art predicated a sensitive and complex man; and almost everything outward in him denied it. Though he would have loathed the comparison he was not unlike a certain kind of outdated Royal Academician much more anxious to appear a stylish pillar of a dead society than to be anything that serious art was about. That was very probably one good reason for the continued exile: the old man must know his persona would never wash in the Britain of the 1970s- Only here could he still preserve it. Of course these were all things one could not put in the introduction, but David found them fascinating. Like the forest itself, the old man had his antique mysteries.

They came up to the two girls, who had stopped. It was a question of the point to leave the path and strike away through the trees to the forest pool that was the promised picnic place. There was a marker oak, a trunk with a dab of red paint. The Mouse thought they had missed it, but the old man made them go on; and rightly. In another hundred yards or so they arrived at the oak, and began to walk down a faint incline among the trees. The undergrowth became denser, they glimpsed the first water ahead; and a few minutes later they emerged on the grassy edge of the etang. It was much more a small lake than a pool, four hundred yards or more across at the point where they came to it and curving away on both sides. A dozen or so wild duck roosted in the middle. The forest stood all around its shores, not a house in sight; the water a delicate blue in the September sunlight, smooth as a mirror. The place had featured in two of the lastperiod paintings and David had a sense of familiarity, of de9‰ vu. It was very charming, miraculously unspoilt. They installed themselves in the thin shade of a solitary fir-tree. The reclining chair was set for Breasley. He seemed grateful for it now, sat down at once and put his legs up; then made them adjust the back to a more upright position.

'Come on, you two. Off with your knickers and have your bathe.'

The Freak slid a look at David, then away.

'We're shy.'

'You'll swim, won't you, David? Keep 'em company?'

David looked for guidance from the Mouse, but she was bent over one of the baskets. He felt grossly unforewarned this time. Swimming had not been mentioned.

'Well... perhaps later?'

'You see,' said the Freak.

'Not bleeding or anything, are you?'

'Oh Henry. For God's sake.'

'Married man, m'dear. Seen pussy before.'

The Mouse straightened and gave David a little glance, half apologetic, half wry.

'Costumes are considered unethical. Wearing them makes us even more impossible than usual.'

But she lightened the taunt with a smile down at the old man.

David murmured, 'Of course.'

She looked at the Freak. 'Let's go out on the spit, Anne. The bottom's harder there.' She picked up a towel and began to walk away, but the Freak seemed now the more shy. She glanced resentfully at the two men.

'And easier for all the other dirty old birdwatchers.'

The old man chuckled, and she put out her tongue at him. But then she too picked up a towel and followed her friend.

'Sit down, dear boy. Only codding you. Shy my arse.'

David sat on the needled grass. He supposed that this had been sprung on him as a little demonstration of what they had to go through, though the previous night had seemed a conclusive enough witness to that. He felt teased, faintly conspired against: now it's our turn to shock you. The spit, a narrow little grasstopped promontory, ran out some sixty yards away. As the girls walked down it, the wild duck splashed off the middle of the lake and flew in a long curve up over the trees and away. The girls stopped near the end, and the Mouse began to peel off her jersey. When it was off she turned it outside out again, then dropped it and unhooked her bra. The Freak cast a little look back across the glassy water to where David and the old man sat, then kicked out of her wellingtons and slipped off one shoulder-strap of her dungarees. The Mouse reached down her jeans and briefs together, separated them, put them beside the rest of her clothes. She walked to the water and waded straight in. The other girl let her dungarees fall, then pulled off her shirt. She was wearing nothing else. As she too walked down to the water, she turned sideways to face the two men in the distance and gave a ridiculous flaunting sidestep, a strip-dancer's routine, arms out. The old man gave another throaty little chuckle and tapped David's arm with the side of his stick. He sat enthroned, like a sultan, watching his two young slaves, the two naked figures, warm backs against the azure water, as they waded out towards the centre of the lake. Apparently the bottom shelved slowly. But then the Mouse plunged forward and began to swim away; a crawl, neatly, rather well. The Freak was more cautious, wading deeper, keeping her precious frizzed hair above the water; when she finally fell cautiously forward she did a timid breaststroke.

'Pity you're married,' said Breasley. 'They need a good fuck.'

By the time they were halfway through lunch, David felt a good deal more at his ease. It had all been rather stupid, his first embarrassment. If Beth had been there, for instance... they often swam like that on holidays themselves, even deliberately looked for deserted beaches, she would have joined the girls like a shot.

His recovery was partly due to the old man, who had started, once the two girls were swimming, talking again; or rather, at last, his ultimate proof of contrition, he asked David something about himself. The question of how and what he painted was avoided, but Breasley seemed interested to know how he had 'come into the game', his life and background; about Beth and the children. He even came out with an invitation: bring your wife and kids one day, like to meet 'em, like little gels... and David was vain enough to feel pleased. What had happened after dinner had been, rather in the medieval context they had discussed on the walk, a kind of ordeal. Very evidently he had passed the test; which left him wondering how much, besides the direct advice, he owed to the Mouse. She must have told the old man a few home truths when he woke up; and perhaps reminded him that his reputation was at least temporarily a little in David's hands.

Meanwhile the girls had come out of the water, dried themselves, and lay side by side in the sun on the spit. The ordeal had indeed been like a reef; and now David was through, after the buffeting, to the calm inner lagoon. Another echo, this time of Gauguin; brown breasts and the garden of Eden. Strange, how Coët and its way of life seemed to compose itself so naturally into such moments, into the faintly mythic and timeless. The uncontemporary. And then yet another such moment had come. The girls had stood. They must have come to some decision about modesty, or the cost of it before the old man's tongue, because they walked back as they were, carrying their clothes; without outward self-consciousness, now, but with something of that studied and improbable indifference of people in a nudist colony.

'Hey, we're hungry,' said the Freak.

The pubic was dyed the same red as her other hair. Naked, she looked even more waiflike. The girls began to unpack the baskets, kneeling in the sun, while David helped Breasley move nearer to the edge of the shade. Gauguin disappeared; and Manet took his place.

Soon, during the eating, the girls' bare bodies seemed natural. They seemed to still something in the old man as well. There were no more obscenities, but a kind of quiet pagan contentment. The lovely French bread, the little cartons of goodies the girls had brought back from Plélan... no wine, the old man drank Vichy water, the girls milk; a bottle of beer for David. The Freak sat cross-legged. Something about her, perhaps just the exotic hair and the darkness of her tan, was faintly negroid, aboriginal, androgynous. Psychologically she still repelled something in David, he couldn't quite say... but what began to seem very distinctly a kind of intelligent charity in the Mouse was shadowed in her by a fecklessness, a perversity. Though she made no cracks, one had the impression that the sexual implications of their behaviour both excited and amused her. It might be 'civilized' to the others; with her, and her not wholly concealed little air of knowingness, it was something else not a moral inhibition, of course, but a hint that she knew David was getting something for nothing; which went with his feeling that he had yet to prove himself with her. She still vaguely resented his presence. What he had to learn about her, beyond a little ability to debunk, a trendily shallow narcissism, a life-style that patently hid a life-failure, he could not imagine. She seemed so much a mere parasite on the other girl's poise and honesty; her only apparent virtue, that she was tolerated.

And perhaps she repelled him also by physical contrast. The Mouse, despite her slightness, had a much more feminine figure, long-legged, attractively firm small breasts. She sat up on one arm opposite David, her legs curled away. He watched her body when she turned to pass something, when he knew the direction of his eyes would not be caught. They talked banally enough; and once again the ghost of infidelity stalked through David's mind—not any consideration of its actuality, but if he hadn't been married, if Beth... that is to say, if Beth didn't sometimes have certain faults, an occasional brisk lack of understanding of him, an over-mundane practicality, which this attractively cool and honest young mistress of a situation would be too intelligent (for he saw in her something that he aimed at in his own painting, a detachment and at the same time a matter-of-factness) to show or at any rate to abuse. It wasn't that one didn't still find Beth desirable, that the idea of a spell together in France without the kids after Coët (hovering in it Beth's tacit re-acceptance of motherhood, a third child, the son they both wanted)... just that one was tempted. One might, if one wasn't what one was; and if it were offered—that is, it was a safe impossibility and a very remote probability away.

The lights of the Mouse's skin were bronzed where the sun caught it, duller yet softer in the shadows. The nipples, the line of the armpits. A healed scar on one of her toes. The way her wheaty hair was drying, slightly tangled, careless; and a smallness, a Quattrocento delicacy, the clothes and long skirts she wore were misleading; contrasted with an animality, the nest of hair between her legs. She sat sideways, facing the lake, and peeled an apple; passed a quarter back to the old man, then offered another to David. It was antiseptic; and disturbing.

Henry had to have his siesta. The Freak stood and let down the back of the recliner. Then she knelt beside the old man and whispered something in his ear. He reached out a hand to her waist and ran it slowly up to the arm, then drew her forward; and she leant over and touched his mouth with her own. He patted her bare bottom. Then he folded his hands across his stomach, while she arranged a purple handkerchief across his eyes. The fine mouth, the pink bulb of the nose. The girl stood and stared down at him for a moment, then grimaced back at the other two.

The Mouse smiled at David and murmured, 'Free period. We'd better go out of hearing.'

They stood. The two girls picked up their towels, and the Freak fished in one of the baskets and found her book. Then they walked back towards the spit, some thirty yards away, just out of earshot. The towels were spread, the girls both stretched out on their stomachs, feet towards the lake, chins propped on hands. David sat, then lay on an elbow, five or six feet away on the landward side. He had a brief and much more absurd recall of a painting: two little boys listening to an Elizabethan sailor. He could read the title of the Freak's book: The Magus. He guessed at astrology, she would be into all that nonsense. But now she suddenly grinned at him.

'Wish you hadn't come then?'

'Good lord no.'

'Di told me. Last night. I'm sorry. I knew, I just couldn't face it.'

He smiled. 'I'd have asked to get down myself if I'd realized.' The Freak touched two fingers to her mouth and transferred the kiss to the Mouse's shoulder.

'Poor old Di. I always leave it to her.'

Poor old Di smiled and looked down.

David said, 'How long do you think you'll last out?'

The Freak made a dry little gesture at the Mouse: for her to answer. She shook her head.

'I don't think about the future.'

'As an ex art-tutor 'I know.'

The Freak pulled another of her faces at David.

'Common sense will get you nowhere.'

The Mouse said, 'It's not that.'

'Just hard to leave?'

'Chance, I suppose. You know. It brought one here in the first place. And somehow it's got to take one away.'

'How did it bring you here?'

She glanced at the Freak: some secret irony.

'Go on. Tell him.'

'It's so stupid.' She avoided David's eyes.

He murmured, 'I'm all ears.'

She reached a hand down from her chin and picked at the grass; the shadowed breasts; shrugged.

'Last summer. August. I was here, in France, with a friend. Another art student, a sculptor. He was on a Neolithic kick and we were hitching down to Carnac.' She looked up at David. 'The megalithic avenues? By pure chance we got a lift on the N24 out of Rennes from a school-teacher at Ploermel. Just down the road. We told him we were English art students and he told us about Henry. Of course we knew his name and everything, I even knew he lived somewhere in Brittany.' She raised the bottom of one of her legs in the air. The hollowed back, the delicate brown cheeks. She shook her head. 'It was just one of those absurd things. Let's be mad and knock on his door. So we camped at Paimpont. Turned up at Henry's about eleven the next morning. Pretending we hadn't seen the sign on the gate. Expecting the boot and nearly getting it. But we gushed like crazy. How much we loved his work. Inspiration to all our generation. All that. Suddenly he fell for it, we'd got a bloody nerve... you know. All this was at the door. So we got in and he showed us round a bit. The things in the long room. Most of the time we were trying not to laugh. That way he talks, he seemed such an old phony.' She stretched her hands out on the grass, contemplated them. 'Then the studio. I saw what he was doing. Perhaps you felt it yesterday. Bump. You're in a different world.' She propped her chin again, and stared into the trees behind them. 'You've spent three years getting all the right attitudes to painting. Knowing even less what you're doing at the end than you did at the beginning. Then you meet this ridiculous old ragbag of all the wrong attitudes. And he's there. All your own clever little triumphs and progresses are suddenly cut down to scale.' She said quickly, 'I'm sorry, I don't mean that you should have felt that. But I did.'

'No, I know exactly what you mean.'

She smiled. 'Then you shouldn't. You're much, much better than that.'

'I doubt it, but never mind.'

'That's all really. Oh except at the end, Tom had gone away to fetch his camera, we'd left our rucksacks outside. Henry tells me I'm a very attractive "gel", he wishes he was younger. I laughed, said I wished I was older. And suddenly he took my hands. Kissed one. All rather corny. It happened so quickly. Tom came back, took some photos. Then Henry suddenly asked if we'd like to stay to lunch. But we felt it was just a nice gesture—one was meant to refuse. Silly. He never makes nice gestures. Without a reason. Perhaps I sensed that already, something in his eyes. And I knew Tom wanted to get on. Anyway, it sort of ruined everything. You know how it is, when you turn someone down because you don't think it matters and realize too late that it does.' She glanced sideways down at the fir-tree. 'I suppose we left the impression that we'd been doing it just for jokes. That we weren't really interested in him. Which was true in a way. He was just a famous name. It was so stupid. Just celebrityhunting.' She paused a moment. 'It was strange. Even as we walked away, I felt bad. I wanted to go back.'

She said nothing for a moment. The Freak had spread her elbows out on the ground and lay with her face couched and turned towards the Mouse.

'Two terms, nine months later, I'm not happy in London. It's all over with Tom. I feel I'm getting nowhere at the College. It's not their fault. Just the way I am.' She picked at the grass again. 'You meet someone famous, you start seeing their work in a different way. Noticing t. I kept remembering that day in August. How mean we'd been to what was basically just a poor old tongue-tied rather lonely man. Oh and... all sorts of other things. To do with my own work. One day I just sat down and wrote him a letter. About myself. Saying I wished we'd stayed to lunch. Not walked out like that. And if by any chance he needed domestic help. A paint mixer. Anything.'

'He remembered who you were?'

'I sent him one of the photos Tom took. Henry and me standing together.' She smiled to herself. 'It was the sort of letter that starts sending shivers of embarrassment down your spine the moment you've posted it. I knew he wouldn't answer.'

'But he did.'

'A telegram. "Can always use a pretty girl. When?"

The Freak said, 'Dear old him. Straight to the bloody point.'

The Mouse pulled a face at David. 'I came very innocently. Of course I knew about his past. His reputation. But I thought I could handle it. Keep a strictly grand-daughterly sort of role. Or just walk out, if it got impossible.' She looked down. 'But Henry's got one rather extraordinary quality. A kind of magic. Apart from his painting. The way he can... dissolve things in you. Make them not seem to matter. Like this, I suppose. Learning not to be ashamed of one's body. And to be ashamed of one's conventions. He put it rather well once. He said exceptions don't prove rules, they're just exceptions to rules.' She evidently felt herself at a loss for words. She smiled up. 'We can't explain it to anyone. You have to be us to understand.'

The Freak said, 'Anyway, it's more like nursing.'

There was a little silence. David said, 'And how did you come here, Anne?'

The Mouse answered. 'It began to get a bit much for me. No one to talk to. We shared a flat in Leeds. Kept in touch, I knew Anne wasn't very happy doing her ATD. So as soon as she finished that.'

'I came for one week. Ha ha.'

David grinned at the girl's couched face.

'At least more interesting than teaching?'

'And better paid.'

'He can afford it.'

The Mouse said, 'I have to give it back to him. There's no arrangement. He just throws bundles of money at us. A hundred pounds. Two. If we go into Rennes with him, we hardly dare look at clothes. He always wants to buy them.'

'He's sweet really,' said the Freak. She turned on her back. The dark-ended boy's breasts, the tuft of reddened hair; she raised a knee and scratched just above it, then let it fall.

The Mouse said, 'Working with him's very strange. He never loses patience with a painting. Even a drawing. You know, I'll hate what I've done sometimes. You rip it up? Henry'll throw things away. But always with a sort of regret. He gives work a kind of sacrosanct quality. Even when it's not going well. Everything he isn't with people.' She paused, then shook her head. 'And he hardly talks in the studio. Almost as if he's dumb, as if words would spoil everything.'

The Freak spoke to the sky. 'Well the way he uses them.' She mimicked the old man's voice. '"Are you bleeding or something?" I ask you.' And she reached a hand skyward as if to push the memory away.

'He has to compensate.'

The Freak clicked her tongue in agreement. 'Oh I know. Poor old bastard. Must be terrible, really.' She turned sideways, on an elbow, looked at the Mouse. 'It's strange, isn't it, Di? He's still quite sexy, in his funny old way.' She looked at David. 'You know, when I first... you think of blokes your own age and all that. But he must have been sensational. When he was young... and oh, Christ, you ought to hear his stories.' She pulled another clown's face at David. 'On the good old days. What was that thing the other night, Di?'

'Don't be silly. They're just fantasies.'

'I bloody well hope so.' - The Mouse said, 'It's contact. Not sex. Memories. The human thing. What he was trying to say last night.'

David detected a difference between the two girls. One wanted to play down the sexual side, the other to admit it. He had a sudden intuition that the Freak was using his presence to air a disagreement between them; and that in this context he was on her side.

'That housekeeper and her husband must have broad minds.'

The Mouse looked down at the grass. 'You mustn't tell anyone, but do you know how Jean-Pierre spent the late 'forties and 'fifties?' David shook his head. 'In prison. For murder.'

'Good grief.'

'He killed his father. Some family quarrel about land. French peasants. Mathilde housekept for Henry when he came back to Paris in 1946. He knew all about Jean-Pierre. I've got all this from Mathilde, actually. Henry can do no wrong. He stood by them.'

The Freak sniffed. 'And more. With Mathilde.'

The Mouse queried David. 'That rather heavy model he used in some of the first post-war nudes?'

'My God. I never realized.'

'Even Mathilde doesn't talk about that side of it. Just that "Monsieur Henri" gave her faith to live. To wait, she says. She's also the one person Henry never but never loses his temper with. The other day he flew off the handle at dinner with Anne about something. Marched out into the kitchen. Five minutes later I go in. There he is. Eating with Mathilde at the table, listening to her read out a letter from her sister. Just like a vicar with his favourite parishioner.' She had a small smile. 'One could be jealous.'

'Does he draw you two?'

'His hand's too shaky now. There are one or two of Anne. A lovely joke one. You know that famous Lautrec poster of Yvette Guilbert? A parody of that.'

The Freak ran fingers up through her fizz and towards the sky. 'And he did it so fast. Can't have been thirty seconds. Minute at most, wasn't it, Di? Fantastic. Honestly.'

She turned back on her stomach, chin on hands. Deep scarlet nails.

The Mouse eyed David again. 'Has he discussed your article with you?'

'Only to claim he's never heard their names. Beyond Pisanello.'

'Don't believe him. He's got an incredible memory for paintings. I've kept some of the sketches he does. He's trying to tell you about some picture and you don't quite know which one he means—and then sometimes he'll draw them. Like Anne says. Like lightning. Almost total recall.'

'That restores my morale a bit.'

'He'd never have agreed to your doing the book if you hadn't been reasonably near the truth.'

'I was beginning to wonder.'

'He's always so much more aware of what he's doing than you think. Even at his most outrageous. I took him into Rennes one day, before Anne came, to see Death in Venice. I had some dotty idea the real Henry would rather like it. The visual part of it, anyway. He was good as gold for the first twenty minutes. Then that heavenly-looking boy appears. Next time he's on the screen Henry says, Pretty gel, that—done many pictures, has she?'

David laughed; and her eyes were full of light, laughter. She was suddenly her age, not grave at all.

'Impossible, you can't imagine. He starts arguing about whether it's a girl or a boy. In a loud voice. In English, of course. Then we're on bumboys and modern decadence. The people around us start telling him to shut up. Then he's off with them in French. He didn't know there were so many queers in Rennes and... 'she put an imaginary pistol to her head. 'There was nearly a riot. I had to drag him out before the flics were called in. All the way home he told me that what he calls the kinema began and ended with Douglas Fairbanks Senior and Mary Pickford. Totally obtuse. He hasn't seen ten films in the last twenty years. But he knows all about it. Like—you last night. The more reasonable you are, the less he hears.'

'But it's an act?'

'In a curious way, it's a sense of style. There's even something honest in it. You know, he's sort of saying I'm not going to be your age. I'm old, I am what I am, I don't want to understand.'

The Freak said, 'Like the way he talks. He keeps telling me I behave like a flapper. And you laugh, you say, Henry, flappers went out with lace-up corsets and camiknickers. For Gawd's sake. But it just makes him worse, doesn't it, Di?'

'But it's not as stupid as it sounds. He knows we've got to have something to laugh at. To hate in him, really.'

'To forgive in him.'

The Mouse opened her hands.

There was a little silence. The autumnal sun beat down. A butterfly, a Red Admiral, glided past and fluttered momentarily above the camber of the Mouse's back. David knew what had happened; a sudden nostalgia for the old art-college relationship. That need for frankness, chewing the fat; testing one's tutor for general humanity, seeing how far he was prepared to come off it; not just confessing, but using confession.

The Mouse spoke to the grass. 'I hope all this isn't shocking you.'

'I'm delighted you're both so intelligent about him.'

'We sometimes wonder about that.' She added, 'Whether we aren't what he's nicknamed us.'

He smiled. 'You don't seem very timid to me.'

'Except I ran out.'

'But you said you were learning more.'

'About life. But...

'Not your work?'

'I'm trying to start from the beginning again. I don't know yet.'

'That's not mouselike.'

The Freak said, 'Anyway, who cares. I'd rather fight old Henry than forty bloody kids.'

The Mouse smiled, and the Freak pushed her shoulder.

'It's all right for you.' She looked at David. 'Honestly, I was a bloody mess. As a student. The drug thing. Not the hard stuff. You know. Sleeping around. Di knows, I got involved with so many rotten bastards. Honestly.' She pushed the other girl's leg with a foot. 'Didn't I, Di?' The Mouse nodded. The Freak looked past David to where the old man slept. 'I mean at least with him it's not being just laid and where's the next chick. Least he's grateful. I'll never forget one bloke. He'd just... YOU know, big deal. You know what he says?' David shook his head.

'"Why you so bloody skinny?"' She hit her head. 'I mean, honest to God, I think of what I used to put up with. And poor old Henry with tears in his eyes when he finally makes it.' She looked down then, as if she knew she had said too much, then suddenly grinned up at David. 'Make your fortune with News of the World.'

'I think the rights are yours.'

For a long moment she gave him a look: both questing and quizzing. She had brown eyes, the most attractive things in her small face. They also had a directness, a kind of gentleness if you looked closely at them; and David realized that he had in that forty minutes since lunch begun to learn her. He guessed at an affectionateness beneath the flip language, and an honesty—not the Mouse's kind of honesty, which was an emancipated middleclass one based on a good mind and proven talent, but something much more working-class, something that had been got the hard way, by living the 'bloody mess'. The friendship, the rapport became comprehensible; there was both an identity and a complementarity. It must have been something to do with their nakedness, the sun and water and low voices, the silent lostness of the lake behind; but he felt drawn on into a closer and closer mesh with these three unknown lives, as if he had known them much longer, or the lives he did know had somehow mysteriously faded and receded in the last twenty-four hours. Now was acutely itself; yesterday and tomorrow became the myths. There was a sense of privilege too; almost metaphysical, that he had been born into an environment and an age that permitted such swift process—and more banal, that career should-grant such opportunities. One's friends, if they could see one now. He did then think of Beth.

He had looked down from the Freak's eyes, and there had been a little silence. And then the Mouse glanced round (but not quite casually enough, as if confession had got too near the bone) at the water and then at her friend.

'I'm going to swim again.'

'Okay.'

The Mouse turned and sat up, back to David. The Freak smiled at him.

'Be our guest.'

He had foreseen this; and decided what to do. He glanced back at where the old man lay.

'If I shan't provoke anything.'

She raised her eyebrows, Groucho Marx style; a little wriggle.

'Only us.'

The Mouse reached out and smacked her bottom lightly. Then she stood and walked down towards the water. A silence, the Freak lay on, staring at the grass. Finally she spoke in a lower voice.

'Waste, isn't it?'

'She seems to know what she's doing.'

She gave a dry little smile. 'You're joking.'

He watched the Mouse wading into the water; Diana, slimbacked and small-rumped; something underfoot, she stepped sideways before going deeper.

'You think you should leave?'

'I'm only here because she is.' She looked down. 'In a funny sort of way Di's the odd one out. Old Henry and me, we kind of live from day to day. Know what I mean. We couldn't be innocent if we tried. Di's the other way round.'

The girl in the water plunged and began to swim away.

'And she doesn't realize?'

'Not really. She's stupid. The way clever girls are sometimes. Okay, she sees through old Henry. The person she can't see through is herself.' The Freak was avoiding his eyes now; there was almost a shyness about her. 'If you could try and get her to talk. Maybe this evening. We'll get Henry off to bed early. She needs someone from outside.'

'Well of course... I'll try.'

'Okay.' She was silent a moment, then she pushed abruptly up and knelt back on her heels. A grin. 'She likes you. She thinks your work's sensational. It was all an act. Yesterday afternoon.'

'She told me.'

She appraised him a moment, then stood; for a second guyed the modest Venus, one hand over her loins, the other over her breasts.

'We shan't look.'

She went to the water. David stood and got out of his clothes. He came alongside the Freak when the peaty water was round his waist. She flashed a smile at him, then swarmed forward with a little scream. A moment later he dived in himself and swam out after the distant head.

Five hours later the same head faced him across the dinner table, and he was beginning to find it difficult to think of anything else. She had appeared only briefly before dinner, she was busy in the kitchen with the Freak; and now she had changed into a black shirt and another long skirt, striped browns and a burnt orange; night and autumn; and done her hair up in a way that managed to seem both classically elegant and faintly dishevelled. There was just a tiny air that she was out to kill; and she was succeeding. The more he learnt her, the more he watched her, the more he liked her; as temperament, as system of tastes and feelings, as female object. He knew it, and concealed it... not only to her, partly also to himself; that is, he analysed what he had so rapidly begun to find attractive about her-why that precise blend of the physical and the psychological, the reserved and the open, the controlled and the (for he had also begun to believe what the Freak had said) uncertain, called so strongly to something in his own nature. Strange, how these things hit you out of the blue, were somehow inside you almost before you could see them approaching. He felt a little bewitched, possessed; and decided it must be mainly the effect of being without Beth. They lived so close, one had forgotten what the old male freedom was like; and perhaps it was most of all a matter of having to have some personal outlet for his feelings about the whole day. He had enjoyed it enormously, when he looked back. It had been so densely woven and yet simple; so crowded with new experience and at the same time primitive, atavistic, timeescaped. Above all he felt accepted, almost one of the household now.

With the girls his credentials had been established by his swimming with them; he had realized afterwards that that had been needed—to prove he was a sport, on the Freak's level; that he condoned a choice at the Mouse's more thinking one. He had caught up with her some hundred yards from the shore. They had chatted a little about the lake, the temperature, the niceness of it, as they trod water some ten feet apart. He saw the Freak go back on shore. Breasley seemed still asleep under the firtree. They had swum slowly back together, towards the thin figure drying herself. He came out of the water beside the Mouse, and the Freak had handed him her damp towel. The sunlight, the trees, the intuition of watching eyes; what faint shadows of embarrassment he still felt had very little to do with the girls... or only with the whiteness of his skin beside theirs.

He had not dressed at once, but sat propped back on his arms beside his clothes, drying off a little more in the sun. The two girls lay on their backs, their heads towards him as before, feet to the water. The deep peace of the lake, the serene isolation; or not quite, at the end of the furthest vista there was a tiny movement, an angler, a line being cast, a speck of peasant blue. He said nothing. He felt a kind of mental—an abstract?—randiness; a sinuous wave of the primeval male longing for the licitly promiscuous, the polygamous, the caress of two bodies, sheik. dom. That wickedly casual remark from the old man about what the two girls needed bred daydreams; time out of responsibility... such a shiftingness of perception, what one was, what one suppressed. Not much more than twelve hours ago he had very nearly dismissed and condemned them as beneath his notice; and now what had been lazily hypothetical during lunch had grown, even then, so much closer, more precise in its potentialities, more imaginable. It was like the days or weeks one might have spent on a painting, bringing it up, refining it, all compressed into a few hours. One knew why, of course. The hurtling pressure of time, prosaic reality—that long drive to Paris, he had to be there, or almost there, by this same hour the next day. Perhaps it constituted the old man's real stroke of genius, to take an old need to escape from the city, for a mysterious remoteness, and to see its ancient solution, the Celtic green source, was still viable; fortunate old man, to stay both percipient and profoundly amoral, to buy this last warm solitude and dry affection with his fame. David glanced back. Still he slept, as if dead. The way the two silent girls lay meant nothing prevented his long survey up and down the lines of their bodies; as perhaps they knew. Their tacitly sparing his modesty—more talk would have meant facing him—was also their secret advantage. He had a knowledge of a brutality totally alien to his nature: how men could rape. Something both tender and provocative in that defencelessness stirred him deeply.

He had stood up and put on his clothes. He would tell Beth, because sooner or later he told her everything; but not till they had made love again.

Then the slow walk home through the forest, a sudden mania in the girls—they had taken a slightly different route, to show him a picturesquely ruined farm in an overgrown clearing—for blackberries, a good old-fashioned English blackberryandapple pie. The old man claimed to despise 'the damn' things', but played an amiably grumbling part, even pulling down some of the high sprays with the crook of his walking-stick. For fifteen minutes or so they were all childishly absorbed in it. Another moment of prospective nostalgia for David—he would not be there to enjoy the eating; which was wrong, that was why they'd been in the kitchen. The Mouse had made the pastry, Anne done the fruit. Specially for him, they said, as if to atone for something emasculating in the situation, something unfair. He was touched.

For part of the way home after the blackberrying he had walked beside the Mouse, ahead of the other girl and the old man. Rather unexpectedly she had been a little shy, as if she knew that the Freak had said something—she both wanted to talk, he felt, and was on her guard against revealing too much. They had discussed the Royal College, why she had left it, but in a rather neutral, general sort of way. Apparently she had felt a kind of claustrophobia, too many elite talents cooped up in too small a space, she had become too self-conscious, too aware of what other people were doing, it had all been her fault. He glimpsed a different girl beneath the present one: rather highly strung, fiercely self-critical, over-conscientious as the one piece of work of hers that he had seen suggested. She was also anxious not to make too much of it, her artistic future; or at any rate to bore him with it. They slid away to art education in general. He was warned she was a different person on her own, much more difficult to dissolve without the catalyst of the Freak. She had even stopped and turned, and waited to let the others catch up. He was fairly sure it hadn't been merely to give Henry no cause for jealousy. In a way the conversation was a failure. But it did not make her less attractive to him.

Perhaps nothing had better summed up his mood as they returned than the matter of the telegram from Beth that might or might not be waiting back at the house. It was no good pretending. He had unreservedly hoped, not of course that Sandy was seriously ill, but that something else delayed Beth's journey to Paris. They had even foreseen that, that she might have to put it off for a day or two more. That was all he wanted, just a one day more. The wish had not been granted: there was no telegram.

As some compensation, he did have one last very useful tete-ˆ-tete with Breasley. Most of his remaining questions of a biographical kind were answered—in the old man's fashion, but David sensed that he was not being seriously misled. At times there was even a convincing honesty. David had asked about the apparent paradox of the old man's pacifism in 1916 and his serving as medical orderly with the International Brigade during the Spanish Civil War.

'White feather, dear boy. Quite literal, you know. Had a collection of the damn' things. Didn't care, all a joke. Russell, he converted me. Hearing him talk, public lecture he gave. Best brain, best heart. Unique. Never met it again.' They were up at the window table in his bedroom, with the two beds behind them. David had asked to be shown the Braque—and heard the story of the other Breasley once owned but had had to sell to pay for Coët and its conversion. The old man smiled at him. 'Years go by. Keep thinking, don't you know. Whether it wasn't all just yellow-belly. Have to find out in the end. Get it out of your system. Know what I mean?'

'I can imagine.'

The old man stared out of the window; the setting sun on the trees.

'Scared stiff. The whole time. Hated it. Had to draw. Only way I got through.' He smiled. 'Not death. You prayed for death. Still hear the pain. Relive it. Wanted to pin it. Kill it. Couldn't draw it well enough.'

'Perhaps not for yourself. You did for the rest of us.'

The old man shook his head.

'Salt on the sparrow's tail. Mug's game.'

David had led him into less traumatic areas of his life; and even risked, towards the end, giving the old man some of his own medicine. If he pretended ignorance of the parallels David had drawn in his article, how was it that the girls so admired his memory for paintings? Breasley cast him a wry look and pulled his nose.

'Little bitches gave the game away, did they?'

'I twisted their arms when you were asleep.

The old man looked down and smoothed the edge of the table.

'Never forgot a good picture in my life, David.' He looked out over the garden again. 'The names, yes. But what's a name. Bit of fiddle in a corner. That's all.' He cocked a cryptic thumb back at the Braque and winked. The image survives; is all that matters.

'So I won't have to leave myself out of the bibliography?'

'Hanged man. Not the Verona thing. Fox. I think. Can't remember now.'

He was talking about a detail in the background of the Pisanello St George and the Princess and an echo in one of the most sombre of the Coëtminais series, untitled, but Desolation would have done; a wood of hanged figures and of living ones who seemed as if they wished they were hanged.

'Fox escapes me.'

'Book of Martyrs. Woodcuts. Old copy at home. Terrified me. Aged six, seven. Far worse than the real thing. Spain.'

David risked a further step.

'Why are you so reluctant to reveal sources?'

The question visibly pleased the old man; as if David had fallen into a trap.

'My dear boy. Painted to paint. All my life. Not to give clever young buggers like you a chance to show off. Like shitting, yes? You ask why you do it. How you do it. You die of blocked arsehole. Don't care a fart in hell where my ideas come from. Never have. Let it happen. That's all. Couldn't even tell you how it starts. What half it means. Don't want to know.' He nodded back at the Braque. 'Old George had a phrase. Trop de racine. Yes? Too much root. Origin. Past. Not the flower. The now. Thing on the wall. Faut couper la racine. Cut the root off. He used to say that.'

'Painters shouldn't be intellectuals?'

The old man smiled.

'Bastards. Never knew a good one who wasn't. Old Pick-bum. Appalling fellow. Flashing his gnashers at you. Sooner trust a man-eating shark.'

'But he was reasonably articulate about what he was doing?'

The old man puffed in violent disagreement. 'Eyewash. My dear boy. Fumisterje. All the way.' He added, 'Very fast worker. Overproduced all his life. Had to cod people.'

'Guernjca?'

'Good gravestone. Lets all the scum who didn't care a damn at the time show off their fine feelings.'

There was a flash of bitterness; a tiny red light suddenly; something still raw. David knew they were back with abstraction and realism and the old man's own record of Spain. The grudge against Picasso was explained. But Breasley himself drew back from that brink.

'Si jeunesse savait... know that?'

'Of course.'

'That's all. Just paint. That's my advice. Leave the clever talk to the poor sods who can't.'

David had smiled and looked down. Some time later he had stood to go, but the old man stopped him before he could move away.

'Glad you've hit it off with the gels, David. Wanted to say. Gives 'em a break.'

'They're a nice pair of kids.'

'Seem happy, do they?'

'I've had no complaints.'

'Not much to offer now. Bit of pocket-money.' He sought confirmation on something. 'Never much good at wages. That sort of thing.'

'I'm quite sure they're not here for that.'

'Something regular. Might be better, don't you think?'

'Why don't you ask the Mouse?'

The old man was staring out of the window. 'Very sensitive gel. Money.'

'Would you like me to sound them out?'

Breasley raised a hand. 'No, no, my dear fellow. Just your advice. Man to man, don't you know.' Then he suddenly looked up at David. 'Know why I call her the Mouse?'

'I did rather wonder.'

'Not the animal.'

The old man hesitated, then reached and took a sheet of notepaper from a drawer beside him. Standing at his shoulder, David watched him address himself to the paper as if to some formal document; but all he did was to print in pencil the letter M and then, after a space, the letters U, S, E. In the space between the M and the U the wrinkled hand drew, in five or six quick strokes, an 0-shaped vulva. Then Breasley glanced drily back up at David; a wink, the tip of his tongue slipped out like a lizard's. Almost before David had grasped the double meaning the piece of paper was crumpled up.

'Mustn't tell her.'

'Of course not.'

'Dread losing her. Try to hide it.'

'I think she understands that.'

The old man nodded, then gave a little shrug, as if age and fate must win in the end; and there was no more to be said.

All of which David had meditated on, as he lay in his bath soon afterwards: how the relationship worked because of its distances, its incomprehensions, the reticences behind its façade of frankness... as a contemporary arrangement, a ménage a trois of beautiful young uninhibited people, it would very probably fail. There would be jealousies, preferences, rifts in the lute and its being so locked away, islanded, out of David's own real and daily world, Blackheath and the rush-hour traffic, parties, friends, exhibitions, the kids, Saturday shopping, parents... London, getting and spending. How desperately one could long for.., for this, suitably translated. Beth and he must definitely attempt it; perhaps Wales, or the West Country, which couldn't be all St Ives, a cloud of postures round two or three serious names..

The poor sods who can't. Yes.

What he would finally remember about the old man was his wildness, in the natural history sense. The surface wildness, in language and behaviour, was ultimately misleading—like the aggressive display of some animals, its deeper motive was really peace and space, territory, not a gratuitous show of virility. The grotesque faces the old fellow displayed were simply to allow his real self to run free. He did not really live at the manoir; but in the forest outside. All his life he must have had this craving for a place to hide; a profound shyness, a timidity; and forced himself to behave in an exactly contrary fashion. It would have driven him out of England in the beginning; but once in France he would have used his Englishness—for it was remarkable, when one thought, how much of a native persona he had retained through his long exile—to hide from whatever in French culture threatened to encroach. The fundamental Englishness of the Coëtminais series was already argued in a paragraph of the draft introduction, but David made a mental resolution to expand and strengthen it. It began to seem almost the essential clue; the wily old outlaw, hiding behind the flamboyant screen of his outrageous behaviour and his cosmopolitan influences, was perhaps as simply and inalienably native as Robin Hood.

The distance aspect of the relationship was in fact predominant during that dinner. Though he had had his whisky before, Henry drank only two glasses of wine with it, and even then cut heavily with water. He seemed tired, withdrawn, in a state of delayed hangover. Every year of his age showed, and David felt that the two girls and himself were in collusion, almost, to emphasize the abyss. The Freak was in a talkative mood, telling David about the agonies of her teacher training course in her own brand of slang and elliptic English. The old man watched her as if slightly puzzled by this sudden vivacity... and out of his depth. Half the time he was not very sure what she was getting at: micro-teaching, systems art, psychotherapy, they came from another planet. David could guess the enigma, to one who still lived the titanic battlefield of early twentieth century art, of all this reduction of passionate theory and revolutionary practice to a technique of mass education, an 'activity' you fitted in between English and maths. Les Demoiselles d'Av: non, and a billion tins of poster paint.

They had coffee, and the old man was now very nearly silent. The Mouse urged him to bed.

'Nonsense. Like to hear you young things talk.'

She said gently, 'Stop pretending. You're very tired.'

He grumbled on a bit, sought male support from David, and received none. In the end the Mouse took him upstairs. As soon as they had disappeared, the Freak moved into the old man's chair at the head of the table. She poured David more coffee.

She was less exotically dressed that evening—a black Kate GreenaWaY dress sprigged with little pink and green flowers. Its cottage simplicity somehow suited her better; or better what David had begun to like in her.

She said, 'We'll go upstairs when Di comes back. You ought to see her work.'

'I'd like to.'

'She's silly about it. Shy.'

He stirred his coffee. 'What happened to her boy-friend?'

'Tom?' She shrugged. 'Oh, the usual. He couldn't take it, really. When she got accepted by the Royal College. He was the one who was supposed to get in.'

'That happens.'

'He was one of those boys who thinks he knows it all. Public school and all that. I couldn't stand him, personally. He was always so bloody sure of himself. Only Di could never see it.'

'She took it badly?'

She nodded. 'What I was saying. She's so innocent. In some ways.' There was a little pause, then she stopped fiddling with her coffee-spoon and surveyed him in the lamplight: her frankest eyes.

'Can I tell you a great secret, David?'

He smiled. 'Of course.'

'What I was trying to say this afternoon.' She looked down the room to the stairs, then back to him, and lowered her voice. 'He wants her to marry him.'

'Oh God.'

'It's so bloody daft, I...'

'You don't mean she's She shook her head. 'But you don't know her. So many ways she's much brighter than I am, but honestly she makes some daft decisions. I mean this whole scene.' She grinned without humour. 'Two smashing girls like us. We must be out of our tiny minds.' She said, 'We don't even joke about it any more. Okay, with you this afternoon. But that's the first time in weeks.'

'She's said no?'

'She says. But she's still here, isn't she? I mean, it's like she's got a father fixation or something.' She sought his eyes again. 'She's such a smashing girl, David. Honestly, you've no idea. My mum and dad, they're Jehovah's Witnesses. Absolutely barmy. I've had such fucking awful problems at home. I mean, I haven't got a home. I couldn't have survived without Di. Even this last year. Being able to write to her.' She went on before he could speak. 'And she's so inconsistent.' She waved round the room. 'She even turns all this into a reason for not marrying him. Crazy. Screw your whole life. Just as long as you don't get anything out of it.'

'She's not going to meet anyone of her own age here.'

'What I mean.' She sprawled on an elbow, facing David across the table. They were still talking in low voices. 'She won't even look at what there is. F'rinstance last week we went into Rennes to do some shopping. A couple of French boys picked us up. In a café. Students. You know, it was all a gas. Fun. They were all right. So they chat us up. Di says we're staying on our vacances with a friend of her family's.' She grimaced. 'Then they want to drive out one day and see us.' The fingers combed up through her hair. 'Fantastic. You wouldn't believe it. Di's suddenly like a bloody security officer or something. The way she gave those boys the chop. Then straight back home and off with her clothes because old Henry's been lonely and wants a feel.' She said, 'And I mean that. You know, what... it's not the physical thing. He can hardly do it any more, it's just... you know, David, sex, honest to God, I've seen it all. Much sicker scenes than this. But it's not the same with Di. She's just had that one twit at Leeds. For serious. That's why I'm so bad for her. She thinks it's either like it is with Henry or the way I used to go on. She just doesn't know what it's about. What it can be about.'

'Have you—, But he was not to learn whether she had thought of leaving on her own. A door closed quietly upstairs. The Freak sat back in her chair, and David turned to see the subject of their conversation coming down the shadowed stairs. She waved towards them, the pool of light they sat in, then came down the room; slim and cool and composed, belying what had been said. She sat down again opposite David, with a little air of relief.

'He's been good today.'

'As you predicted.'

She raised crossed fingers. 'And what have we been talking about?'

'You.'

David added, 'Whether you'd let me see your work.'

She looked down. 'There's so little to see.'

'What there is.'

'It's mostly drawing. I've done hardly any painting.'

The Freak stood. 'I'm going to show David. You can stay here if you like.'

The two girls eyed each other a moment; a challenge and a reluctance, a ghost of some previous argument in private. But then the reluctant one smiled and stood.

David followed the girls upstairs, then down the corridor past his own room to a door at the east end of the house. It was another large room, there was a bed, but it had more the feel of a sitting-room; a student's room, if the art on the walls had not been original and distinguished, instead of home-made or in reproduction. The Freak went to a record-player in one corner, began to sort through a pile of records. The girl beside him said, 'Over here.'

There was a long work-table, inks, water-colours, a tilted drawing-board with a half-finished sketch pinned to it. The table was scrupulously neat, in contrast to the one in the old man's studio... very much the way David liked to have his own 'bench' at home. The Mouse reached up a portfolio and put it on the table, but kept it closed in front of her for a moment 'I'd gone completely non-representational by the end of Leeds. I got into the RCA on that. So these are going backwards really.' She gave him a shy little smile. 'What I began to feel I'd missed out.'

Technically the drawing was impressive, if rather lacking in individuality. The coolness that was pleasant in her personality became a kind of coldness on paper, something too painstaking and voulu. There was rather surprisingly a complete absence of the quick freedom of the old man's line, its firmness and vigour a comparison David did not have to make from memory, since the drawing that had been mentioned, his tossed-. off little parody of the Freak in the Lautrec style, turned up in the portfolio. Its haste showed; and the instinctive mastery of living line. David was complimentary, of course; asked the standard questions, what she was trying to do, where she felt she was getting near it. The Freak now stood at his other side. He had expected pop music; but it was Chopin, turned low, mere background.

They came to a batch ofdrawings with additional watercolour washes, not representational, but colour records that were something of the kind that David used himself. He liked them better, one or two tones, contrasts, the rather tentative workshop feel after the over-meticulous essays in pure draughtmanship. The Mouse went to a cupboard across the room and came back with four canvases.

'I have to keep them hidden from Henry. And I'm sorry if they look like bad David Williamses.'

She looked for a place to hang them, then took a pencil drawing off the wall and handed it to David. Gwen John. He belatedly realized who the sitter was: Henry, he must have been about David's present age. Sitting bolt upright, in a wooden chair, a little stagy, self-important in spite of the informality of his clothes: a fierce young modernist of the late 'twenties. The Mouse tilted an angle-lamp to light the place she had chosen. David put the ousted drawing down.

The canvases she showed bore no obvious similarity to his own work, beyond being delicately precise abstracts and on a smaller scale (like his own preferred working-size) than most such pictures in the manner. He very probably would not have noticed an influence if she hadn't mentioned it. But their quality, and this was a field where he was thoroughly at home—its problems, the viability of the solutions, was not something he had to pretend to see.

'Now I know why the College took you.'

'One day they work. The next they don't.'

'Normal. They work.'

The Freak said, 'Go on. Tell her they're bloody marvellous.'

'I can't do that. I'm too envious.'

'She's only asking five hundred each.'

'Anne, stop being a fool.'

David said, 'Let's see that last one beside the sketch.'

The sketch had been of a climbing rose against a wall; the painting was a trellis of pinks and greys and creams, a palette of dangers—which had been avoided. He would have been afraid of it himself, the inherent sentiment, the lack of accent. The ruling quarters of his own zodiac were more those of the colours of the clothes the Mouse wore: autumn and winter.

For twenty minutes or more they talked painting: his own work-methods, media, a renewed interest he had in lithography, how he 'grew' his ideas... all in a way he had done often enough when he taught, but had rather lost the habit of. Beth lived too near to him to need explanation, took all that for granted; and anyway, there had never been a similarity of stylistic purpose. He understood both critically and intuitively what this girl was trying to do. It did bear an analogy with his own development; in a more feminine, decorative kind of way—more concerned with textures and correspondences than form—she was abstracting from natural rather than artificial colour ranges. She said Henry had influenced her in one way, by claiming that colour could be drawn; she had learnt a lot by forcing herself to prove that it couldn't.

They sat down, David in an armchair, the two girls opposite on a sofa. He discovered more about them, their home backgrounds, their friendship; Henry and the present were tacitly barred for a while. Again the Freak talked most, she was funny about her hair-raisingly bigoted parents, her variously rebellious brothers and a younger sister, the hell of a childhood and adolescence in the backstreets of Acton. The Mouse was more reserved about her family. She was an only child, it seemed, her father owned and ran a small engineering works at Swindon. Her mother had 'artistic' tastes, kept an antique shop as a kind of hobby in Hungerford. They had a smashing house there, the Freak put in, Georgian. Ever so posh. David had an impression of some wealth; of parents too intelligent to be stock provincial; and that she did not want to talk about them.

There came a little silence; and just as David was searching for some not too obvious way of getting them back on to the present and future, the Freak was on her feet and standing over his chair.

'I'm going to bed, David. You mustn't. Di's a night bird.'

She blew him a kiss, she was gone. She had done it too suddenly, too blatantly, and he was caught off-balance. The girl he was left with would not look at him; she too knew it had been stage-managed.

He said, 'Are you tired?'

'Not unless you are.' There was an awkward moment. She murmured, 'Henry gets nightmares. One of us always sleeps in his room.'

He relaxed back in his chair.

'How on earth did he survive before you came?'

'His last lady-friend left him two years ago. She was Swedish. She betrayed him in some way. Money. I don't know, he never talks about her. Mathilde says money.'

'So he managed on his own for a bit?'

She took his point; and answered it with a faint smile.

'He didn't paint very much last year. He really does need help in the studio now.'

'And I gather he's going to go on getting it?' It was more a statement than a question, and she looked down.

'Anne's been talking.'

'A little. But if...

'No, it's...

She turned and put her bare feet up on the sofa, resting her back against one of its arms. She fiddled with a button on the black shirt. It was wild silk, faintly glossy; around each cuff, and the collar, a delicate edge of gold.

'How much did she say?'

'Just that she was worried.'

She was silent a long moment; then spoke in a lower voice.

'About Henry wanting to marry me?'

'Yes.'

'Did it shock you?'

He hesitated. 'A bit.'

She absorbed that.

'I haven't made up my mind.' She shrugged. 'I suppose it's just that when one's doing everything a wife would do 'Is the reverse true?'

'He needs me.'

'I didn't quite mean that.'

Again she was silent. He sensed that same struggle between wanting to talk and being afraid to that he had noticed after the blackberrying. But now she gave way.

'It's very difficult to explain, David. What's happened. Of course I can't love him physically. And I know perfectly well that at least half his love for me is sheer selfishness. Having his life run for him. But he really doesn't swallow his own myth any more. The gay old dog thing is strictly for strangers. Deep down he's just a rather lonely and frightened old man .11 don't think he'd paint any more if I left. It would kill him. Perhaps even literally.'

'Why are the alternatives marriage or leaving him?'

'They're not. It's just that I feel I can't walk out on him now. So what's it matter. If it makes him happier.'

Still she fiddled with the button, her head slightly bent; a faint air of a guilty child. The sophisticated little crown of hair, the bare ankles and feet. She sat with her knees cocked up.

'Anne also said you were worried about seeming to be after his money.'

'Not what people might say. What it might do to me.' She said, 'It's not as if he doesn't know what the collection's worth. The Braque's going to the Maeght when he dies. But even without that. I mean it's ludicrously out of scale. As a reward. But he does know that.'

'What might it do to you?'

She smiled wryly. 'I want to be a painter. Not a loaded widow.' She said softly, 'Get thee behind me, Coët.'

'The garret theory is out of date.'

'No struggle at all?'

'I'm not quite sure which side I'm supposed to be arguing for.'

She smiled again, without looking at him.

'I'm only twenty-three years old. It seems rather early to be sure you'll never want to live anywhere else. In any other way.'

'But you're tempted?'

She was slow to answer.

'The whole outside world. I don't even want to go into Rennes any more. All those cars. People. Things happening. My parents, I've simply got to go home soon and see them. I keep putting it off. It's absurd. As if I'm under a spell. I even dreaded your coming. I really did love your show. Yet I made up my mind I wouldn't like you. Just because you come from out there and I thought you'd upset me and... you know.'

She had left one of her own paintings on the wall behind the sofa. He knew it was not out of vanity. What last remaining doubts he had had about Anne's judgment were gone; the cool self-confidence of that first evening had been a pose, like the indifference of their first encounter. But the painting hung there as a kind of reminder of an identity between them; which grew. The silences no longer mattered.

'Your parents know what's happening?'

'Not the whole... but they're not like Anne's. I could make them understand.' She shrugged. 'It's not that. Just the thought of leaving my little forest womb. Somehow here, everything remains possible. I'm just scared of making a decision. Either way.' There was a tiny pattering sound, a moth banging against the lampshade behind the sofa. She glanced at it, then back at her lap. 'And then I wonder whether there's any connection between becoming a decent painter and... being normal.'

'You're not going to paint any better by forcing yourself to be abnormal.'

'Doing what everyone expects.'

'Surely what you ought to do is what you feel you need. And to hell with everyone.'

'I don't know how to give up. That's my trouble. I always have to stick things out to the bitter end.'

'You gave up the College.'

'It was totally against my nature. You've no idea. Trying to prove I wasn't what I am. And anyway, it was only out of the frying-pan. I'm even worse now than I was before.'

She had subsided a little, her knees still up. The one light in the room was on the floor behind her. David's eyes hardly moved now from the shadowed profile of her face. There was a deep nocturnal silence, both inside the house and out; as if they were alone in it, and in the world. He felt he had travelled much further than he expected, into the haunted and unpredicted; and yet in some strange way it seemed always immanent. It had had to come, it had had causes, too small, too manifold to have been detected in the past or to be analysed now.

'This... affaire you had ended badly?'

'Yes.'

'His fault?'

'Not really. I expected too much. He was jealous about my getting into the College.'

'Yes, Anne told me.'

There was another little silence.

He said, 'I'm not being very helpful.'

'Yes you are.'

'Platitudes.'

'No.'

And more silence, as if they were quite literally in the forest; the way hidden birds sing, spasmodically, secretly shifting position between utterances.

She said, 'Anne's got this marvellous ability to give herself. To keep hoping. One day someone nice will realize what she is. Behind all the nonsense.'

'What would happen if she left you here on your own?'

'That's something I try not to think about.'

'Why?'

Again she was slow to answer.

'I feel she's my last hold on... the real world?' She added, 'I know I'm using her. Her affection. A kind of messiness in her. The eternal student.' She smoothed a hand along the back of the sofa. 'Sometimes I wonder if I'm not bent or something.'

She had touched on what had also touched David's mind once or twice during that day. He guessed that dubbing herself the freak of the two hid a truth. The physical side of her life with Henry must be deeply against the grain of her 'innocent' self. She was in that sense much more perverse than Anne. Yet the real repression must be of a normal sexuality, a femaleness that cried out for He said gently, 'Not a hope. If I'm a judge.'

'I'm not serious. We've even discussed it. We... ' but she didn't finish.

'It seems to me that this remarkable honesty you have about yourself is a kind of danger. You know. There's something to be said for instinct.'

'I don't have much faith in my instincts.'

'Why not?'

'Being an only child. Having no comparisons to go by. You can get your own age-group so wrong. I had it with Anne in the beginning. We lived in the same house, but for months I didn't like her, I thought she was just a little tramp. Then one day I went to her room to borrow something. And she was crying her sister, some upset at home. We began to talk. She told me all about herself. And we never looked back.' She said nothing for a moment. 'The same thing happened with Tom, in reverse. I started feeling sorry for him. He was terribly insecure underneath. So one moment you're turning up your nose at a heart of gold, the next you're giving body and soul to someone who's not worth it.' She said, 'I did try. After Tom. At the College. With another first-year boy. He was nice, but... it was just bed. Feeling lonely.'

'Perhaps you expect too much.'

'Someone who can see what I am?'

'That's rather difficult. If you're hidden away'

She shook her head. 'Perhaps I don't want it to happen. I don't know any more.'

There was another silence. She stared at her skirt. He watched her present metaphorical nakedness, and thought of the previous literal one; and knew that words were swiftly becoming unnecessary; were becoming, however frank or sympathetic, not what the situation asked. The moth battered minutely again at the lampshade. There were others loosely constellated on the glass outside the window over her work-table, pale fawn specks of delicate, foolish organism yearning for the impossible. Psyches. The cruelty of glass: as transparent as air, as divisive as steel. She spoke again.

'I've got so frightened by strangers. It's ridiculous, the other day Anne and I were picked up by two law students in Rennes did she tell you?'

She looked across at him then; and he shook his head.

'I was panic-stricken that they'd find out about Coët. Want to come here. As if I was a virgin or something. A nun. It's the effort of getting to know people. All the crossed wires. Or the ones I seem to produce.'

He could have smiled then: the statement denied itself. Perhaps she sensed it.

She murmured, 'Present company excepted.'

He said softly, 'Not that rare a species.'

She nodded, once, but said nothing. She seemed almost frozen now on the sofa, hypnotized by her hands, by the need not to look at him.

'I wanted to meet you. Last November. After the show. To come and talk about my work.'

He leant forward. 'Why on earth... it would have been so easy to fix.' They had discovered that afternoon that David knew her tutor at the College.

She gave a faint smile. 'For the same reasons I wait till now to tell you?' She added, 'And my one previous experience of inviting myself unwanted into a successful painter's life.'

He had a sudden perception of the strange hazardousness of existence; of how little, a word from her, a raised 'phone, it would have taken for such a meeting to have been. Then what, he wondered; the same chemistry, in London? He didn't know; only that the now seemed more pregnant, more isolated, and somehow more inevitable. And he guessed, he began to know her so well, why the word had not been spoken: less a shyness than a kind of pride. There had been a photograph of him in the catalogue, a mention that he was married and had children. Perhaps that as well; already a flight from potential crossed wires. One way of not experiencing them was never to use the instrument.

'Do you wish you had?'

'It's too late for wishing.'

Again neither of them spoke. Then she bent forward and touched her forehead against her knees. For a few moments he had both a fear and a wanting that she was about to cry. But with a sudden change of mood, or reaction to whatever she was thinking, she put her feet down off the couch and stood. He watched her walk to the work-table. She stared down at her portfolio a second, then looked up through the window at the night.

'I'm sorry. You didn't come here for all this.'

'I wish desperately that I could help.'

She began to tie up the portfolio. 'You have. More than you know.'

'It doesn't feel like it.'

She said nothing for a moment or two.

'What do you think I should do?'

He hesitated, then smiled. 'Find someone like me? Who isn't married? If that doesn't sound too impossibly vain.'

She tied a final bow in the tags of black ribbon.

'And Henry?'

'Not even a Rembrandt has the right to ruin someone else's life.'

'I'm not sure it isn't ruined already.'

'That's self-pity. Not the real you.'

'Cowardice.'

'Also not the real you.' He watched her staring out into the night again. 'I know he dreads losing you. He told me. Before dinner. But he's lost women all his life. I think he's more inured to it than you imagine.' He added, 'And perhaps we could do something to make it easy. At least find him help in the studio.'

He felt a traitor, then; but in a good cause. She lifted the portfolio and slipped it down beside the table, then shifted a wooden chair back to its centre. But she remained with her hands on its back, turned away.

'It wouldn't be vain, David. But where do I find him?'

'You know the answer to that.'

'I rather doubt if the College would take me back.'

'I could very easily find out. When I return.'

She moved and came behind the sofa, looking down across it at him.

'Can I get in touch? If I...?'

'Henry has my address. Any time. Very seriously.'

She dropped her eyes. He knew he ought to stand, the tyingup of the portfolio had been a hint that the evening was at an end, it was late, she hadn't sat down again. Yet he was aware that she did not want him to go and that he did not want to go himself; that more than ever now, behind all the honesty and the advice, tutor and student, a truth remained unsaid. A pretence, the undeclared knowledge of a shared imagination, hung in the air; in her half-hidden figure against the light on the floor behind, in the silence, the bed in the corner, the thousand ghosts of old rooms. One was stunned, perhaps; that knowledge could come so quickly... as if it was in the place, not oneself. How impatient it was of barriers and obstacles, how it melted truth and desire of all their conventional coats; one desired truth, one truthed desire, one read minds, jumped bridges, wanted so sharply, both physically and psychologically. And the closeness of tomorrow, the end of this, was intolerable. One had to cling to it, even though one felt embarrassed, that some obscure loss of face was involved, the Dutch uncle being swiftly proved the emperor with no clothes.

He murmured, 'It's time I went.'

She smiled up at him; much more normally, as if he had been supposing things.

'I've taken to walking in the garden. Like Maud. Before I go to sleep.'

'Is that an invitation?'

'I promise not to talk about myself any more.'

The secret tension broke. She went across the room to a painted tallboy and took out a cardigan, then returned, pulling on the sleeves, freeing a strand of hair from the back; smiling, almost brisk.

'Are your shoes all right? The dew's so heavy now.'

'Not to worry.'

They went silently downstairs and to the garden door. They couldn't go out the front, Macmillan made such a racket. He waited while she slipped on some wellingtons, then they left the house. There was a rising moon above the long roof, slightly gibbous in the haze, faint stars, one bright planet. One lighted window, the lamp in the corridor outside Henry's room. They strolled over the grass and then through the courtyard past the studio. A gate on its far side led to another small orchard. There was a kind of central walk between the trees, kept mown; in the background, the black wall of the forest. The dew was heavy and pearled. But it was warm, very still, a last summer night. The ghostly apple trees, drained of colour; a cheeping of crickets. David glanced secretly at the girl beside him; the way she watched the ground as she walked, was so silent now, strict to her promise. But he had not imagined. It was here, now, the unsaid. He knew it in every nerve and premonitory fibre. His move: he drew back into speech.

'I feel as if I've been here for a month.'

'Part of the spell.'

'You think?'

'All those legends. I don't laugh at them any more.'

They spoke almost in whispers; like thieves; the ears of the invisible dog. He wanted to reach out and take her hand.

The last effort to distance. 'He will turn up. The knight errant.'

'For two days. Then leave.'

It was said. And they walked on, as if it had not been said, for at least another five seconds.

'Diana, I daren't answer that.'

'I didn't expect you to.'

He had his hands in his coat pockets, forced forward.

'If one only had two existences.'

She murmured, 'Glimpses.' Then, 'It's just Coët.'

'Where everything is not possible.' He added, 'Alas.'

'I imagined so much about you. When I knew you were coming. Everything except not wanting you to leave.'

'It's the same for me.'

'If only you hadn't come alone.'

'Yes.'

Once more he had that uncanny sense of melted time and normal process; of an impulsion that was indeed spell-like and legendary. One kept finding oneself ahead of where one was; where one should have been.

And he thought of Beth, probably in bed by now in Blackheath, in another world, asleep; of his absolute certainty that there could not be another man beside her. His real fear was of losing that certainty. Childish: if he was unfaithful, then she could be. No logic. They didn't deny themselves the sole enjoyment of any other pleasure: a good meal, buying clothes, a visit to an exhibition. They were not even against sexual liberation in other people, in their friends; if they were against anything, it was having a general opinion on such matters, judging them morally. Fidelity was a matter of taste and theirs happened simply to conform to it; like certain habits over eating or shared views on curtain fabrics. What one happened to like to live on and with. So why make an exception of this? Why deny experience, his artistic soul's sake, why ignore the burden of the old man's entire life? Take what you can. And so little: a warmth, a clinging, a brief entry into another body. One small releasing act. And the terror of it, the enormity of destroying what one had so carefully built.

They stopped before another gate at the far end of the orchard. Beyond there was a dim ride through the forest.

She said, 'It's my fault. I—'

'You?'

'Fairy-tales. About sleeping princesses.'

'They could live together. Afterwards.'

But he thought: would any decent prince have refused, just because they couldn't? When she waited, she said nothing or everything. No strings now. If you want.

He had meant it to be very brief. But once he found her mouth and felt her body, her arms come round him, it had no hope of being brief. It very soon lost all hope of being anything but erotic. He was wanted physically, as well as emotionally; and he wanted desperately in both ways himself. They leant back against the gate, her body was crushed against his. He felt the pressure of her hips, her tongue and all it offered in imitation, and did not resist. She was the one who brought it to an end, pulling her mouth abruptly away and turning her head against his neck. Their bodies stayed clung together. He kissed the top of her head. They stood there like that, in silence, for perhaps a minute. Once or twice he patted her back gently; and stared into the night and the trees; saw himself standing there, someone else, in another life. In the end she pulled gently away and turned against the gate, her back to him, with bowed head. He put an arm round her shoulders and moved her a little towards him, then kissed her hair again.

'I'm sorry.'

'I wanted you to.'

'Not just that. Everything.'

She said, 'It's all a lie, isn't it? It does exist.'

'Yes.'

There was a silence.

'All the time we were talking I was thinking, if he wants to go to bed with me I'll say yes and it'll solve everything. I'll know. It was all going to be so simple.'

'If only it could be.'

'So many if only's.' He contracted his arm, held her a little closer. 'It's so ironic. You read about Tristan and Yseult. Lying in the forest with a sword between them. Those dotty old medieval people. All that nonsense about chastity. And then...'

She pulled away and stood by the gatepost, four or five feet from him.

'Please don't cry.'

'It's all right, David. Just let me be a second.' She said, 'And please don't say anything. I understand.'

He searched for words, but found none; or none that explained him. Once again he felt hurtled forward—beyond the sex, the fancying, to where—her word—one glimpsed... and against that there rose a confrontation he had once analysed, the focus of that same Pisanello masterpiece, not the greatest but perhaps the most haunting and mysterious in all European art, that had come casually up with the old man earlier that evening: the extraordinary averted and lost eyes of the patron saint of chivalry, the implacably resentful stare of the sacrificial and tobe-saved princess of Trebizond. She had Beth's face now. He read meanings he had never seen before.

The slight figure of the girl cast as dragon turned, a small smile on her face. She held out a hand.

'Shall we pretend this never happened?'

He took the hand and they began to walk back towards the house.

He murmured, 'I could say so much.'

'I know.'

She pressed his hand: but please don't. After a step or two their fingers interlaced and squeezed; and did not relax, as if they were being pulled apart, must not be severed; and also as if hands knew what fools these mortals, or at least mortal intentions and mortal words, were. He saw her naked again, all the angles and curves of her body on the grass; he felt her mouth, the surrender in it. The trap of marriage, when the physical has turned to affection, familiar postures, familiar games, a safe mutual art and science; one had forgotten the desperate ignorance, the wild desire to know. To give. To be given to.

He had to let go of her hand to open and close the gate from the orchard into the courtyard. The catch made a little metallic sound, and Macmillan began to bark from somewhere in front of the house. He took her hand again. They silently passed the studio, he saw through the north window the long black shadow of the incomplete Kermesse canvas sleeping on its stand. The garden, the neurotically suspicious dog still barking. They came to the house, still without having said a word, and went in. She let go of his hand, bent and took off her wellingtons. A faint light reached back to them from the lamp in the corridor upstairs. She straightened and he sought her eyes in the shadows.

He said, 'It can't solve anything. But please let me take you to bed.'

She stared at him a long moment, then—looked down and shook her head.

'Why not?'

'Knight errants mustn't lose their armour.'

'With all its phony shine?'

'I didn't say that.'

'As exorcism.'

'I don't want it exorcized.'

He had only made explicit what had seemed implicit outside, on the way back; that tense interlacing of the fingers, that silence. Bodies mean more than words; now, more than all tomorrows.

He said, 'You know it's not just—'

'That's also why.'

Still he sought for loopholes; reasons.

'Because I hung back?'

She shook her head, then looked into his eyes. 'I shan't ever forget you. These two days.'

She took a sudden step and caught his arms to prevent them reaching up towards her. He felt the quick press of her mouth against his, then she was walking towards the stairs. She turned to climb them, hesitated a fraction as she saw he was following, went on up. Past the door to Henry's room, then along the corridor. She did not look round, but she must have heard him close behind. She stopped with her back to him, outside his bedroom door.

'Just let me hold you for a little.'

'It would only make it worse.'

'But if an hour ago you 'That was with someone else. And I was someone else.'

'Perhaps they were right.'

She looked down the corridor at her own door.

'Where will you be this time tomorrow, David?'

'I still want to go to bed with you.'

'Out of charity.'

'Wanting you.'

'Fuck and forget?'

He left a hurt silence. 'Why the brutality?'

'Because we're not brutes.'

'Then it wouldn't be like that.'

'But worse. We wouldn't forget.'

He moved behind her and put his hands on her shoulders.

'Look, the crossed wires are mainly words. I just want to undress you and...

For one fleeting moment he thought he had found the answer. Something in her was still undecided. The maddening closeness, the silent complicity of everything around them—a few steps, a frantic tearing-off of clothes in the darkness, a sinking, knowing, possessing, release.

Without turning she reached up and caught his right hand on her shoulder in the briefest grip. Then she was walking away. He whispered her name in a kind of incredulous despair. But she did not stop; and he felt frozen, fatally unable to move. He watched her go into her room, the door close; and he was left with all the agonized and agonizing deflation of a man who has come to a momentous decision, only to have it cursorily dismissed. He turned into his room and stood in its blackness in a rage of lost chance; made out his faint shape there in the old giltframed mirror. A ghost, a no-man. The horror was that he was still being plunged forward, still melting, still realizing; as there are rare psychic phenomena read of, imagined, yet missed when they finally happen. To one part of him—already desperate to diminish, to devalue—it was merely a perverse refusal; and to another, an acute and overwhelming sense of loss, of being cleft, struck down, endlessly deprived... and deceived. He wanted with all his being—now it was too late; was seared unendurably by something that did not exist, racked by an emotion as extinct as the dodo. Even as he stood there he knew it was a far more than sexual experience, but a fragment of one that reversed all logic, process, that struck new suns, new evolutions, new universes out of nothingness. It was metaphysical; something far beyond the girl; an anguish, a being bereft of a freedom whose true nature he had only just seen.

For the first time in his life he knew more than the fact of being: but the passion to exist.

Meanwhile, in the here and now, he felt a violent desire to punish—himself, the girl so close, Beth far away in the London night. That word she had used... he saw her sitting on the sofa, her bowed head by the gate, her almost still present face in the shadows downstairs... intolerable, intolerable, intolerable.

He went back out in the corridor and looked down towards Henry's room; then walked to the door at the other end. He did not knock. But neither did the door open. He tried the handle again, stood a few seconds. Then he did tap. There was no reply.

He was woken by his own and unlocked door opening. It was a quarter past eight. The Freak came across to his bed with a glass of orange juice and handed it to him as he sat up. For a moment he had forgotten; and then he remembered.

'Your early call. Monsewer.'

'Thanks.'

He took a mouthful of the orange-juice. She was wearing a polo-neck jumper, a knee-length skirt, which gave her an unwonted practical look. She stared down at him a moment, then without warning turned and sat on the end of his bed. She read from a sheet of message-pad paper in her hand.

'"Tell Henry I've gone shopping. Back after lunch."'

She looked up at the wall by the door, studiously avoiding David's eyes; and studiously waiting for his explanation.

'She's gone out?'

'Well it looks like it, doesn't it?' He said nothing, she waited. 'So what happened?'

He hesitated. 'We had a sort of misunderstanding.'

'Okay. So what about?'

'I'd rather she told you.'

She was apparently not to be put off by a mere curt tone of voice. She took a breath.

'You talked?' He said nothing. 'I'd just like to know why she's gone off like this.'

'Obviously. She doesn't want to see me.'

'Well, why, for Christ's sake?' She threw him a sharp little stare of accusation. 'All yesterday. I'm not blind.' She looked away. 'Di doesn't talk with strangers. Has to be something fantastic to break that block.'

'I haven't not realized that.'

'But you just talked.' She gave him another stab of a look. 'Honest to God, I think you're so mean. You know it's not the sex. Just she needs a nice bloke. Just one. To tell her she's okay, she's normal, she turns men on.'

'I think she knows that.'

'Then why's she gone out?'

'Because there's nothing more to say.'

'And you couldn't forget your bloody principles for just one night.'

He spoke to the glass in his hand. 'You've got it all rather wrong.'

She stared at him, then struck her forehead. 'Oh Christ. No. She didn't...?'

He murmured, 'Wouldn't.'

She leant forward, holding her mop of red hair.

'I give up.'

'Well you mustn't. She needs you. More than ever at the moment.'

After a second she leant back and glanced at him with a wry grin, then touched his foot under the bedclothes.

'Sorry. I ought to have guessed.'

She got off the bed and went to the window; opened the shutters, then remained there staring down at something outside. She spoke without turning.

'Old Henry?'

'Just the way we are.'

'I didn't imagine it, then?'

He was leaning on an elbow, staring down at the bedclothes. He felt embarrassed, in all senses undressed; and at the same time knew a need to be more naked still.

'I didn't think things like this could happen.'

'It's this place. You think, fantastic. When—you first come. Then you realize it's the original bad trip.'

There was a silence. She said, 'Christ, it's such a bloody mess, isn't it?' She looked up into the blue morning sky outside. 'That sadistic old shit up there. You know, you sort of seemed to fit. Really need each other.' She gave him a glance of reproach across the room. 'You should have made it, David. Just once. Just to spite the old bastard. Just for me.'

'We lack your guts, Anne. That's all, really.'

'Oh sure. My one-track mind.'

He said gently, 'Balls.'

She returned beside the foot of the bed, watching him.

'Didn't like me when you came, did you?'

'That's just a fading memory now.'

She examined the smile and his eyes for authenticity; then abruptly bit her lips and twitched up a side of her jumper. There was a flash of bare brown waist above the skirt.

'How about me instead? Time for a quickie?'

He grinned. 'You're impossible.'

She cocked a knee on to the end of the bed, crossed her arms as if to tear off her jumper, leant towards him; only the eyes teased.

'I know all sorts of tricks.'

He held out the empty glass.

'I'll try to imagine them. While I'm shaving.'

She clasped her hands over her heart and threw her eyes up. Then she moved and took the glass. She stood over him a moment.

'I think old Di's crazy.' She reached out a finger and dabbed his nose. 'You're almost dishy. For a born square.'

And there was a second Parthian shot. Her head poked back round the door.

'Oh, and I couldn't help noticing. Quite well hung, too.'

Her kindness, frankness; God bless the poor in taste. But that little touch of warmth and affection faded so fast, almost before her footsteps died away. David lay back in his bed, staring at the ceiling, trying to understand what had happened, where he had gone wrong, why she had condemned him to this. He felt drowned in disillusion, intolerably depressed and shaken. The unendurable day ahead. Her body, her face, her psyche, her calling: she was out there somewhere in the trees, waiting for him. It was impossible, but he had fallen in love; if not with her wholly, at least wholly with the idea of love. If she had stood in the door that moment, begged him not to leave, to take her away... he didn't know. Perhaps if they had gone to bed together, if he had just had her naked through the brief night, the sense of failure, of eternally missed chance, would have been less brutal.

But he knew even that was an illusion. A final separation then would have been impossible. Even if he had gone away to Paris, as he must now; perhaps from anywhere else he could have gone away for good, but here... they would have had to meet again. Somehow, somewhere.

He had escaped that. But it felt like a sentence, not a pardon.

By midday, when he had driven a third or so of the two hundred and fifty miles to Paris, he had still not recovered. All but the automaton who drove down the endless miles of route nationale remained at Coët. The old man had continued at his most affable over breakfast, David really must come again and bring his wife, must forgive him his faults, his age, his 'maundering on'... he was even wished well in his own painting; but that did not compensate for the bitter knowledge that the token acceptance of the invitation was a farce. He was banned for life now, he could never bring Beth here. They shook hands as he stood by the car. He kissed Anne on both cheeks, and managed to whisper a last message.

'Tell her... what we said?' She nodded. 'And kiss her for me.'

The ghost of a dry grimace. 'Hey, we're not that desperate.' But her brown eyes belied the flipness; and it was the last time he had felt like smiling.

The journey had begun badly: not three hundred yards after he had closed the gate on the private road to Coët, something orange-brown, a mouse, but too big for a mouse, and oddly sinuous, almost like a snake, but too small for a snake, ran across the road just in front of his car. It seemed to disappear under the wheels. David slowed and glanced back; and saw a minute blemish on the dark tarmac of the deserted forest lane. Something, a faint curiosity, a masochism, a not wanting to leave, any excuse, made him stop and walk back. It was a weasel. One of his wheels must have run straight over it. It was dead, crushed. Only the head had escaped. A tiny malevolent eye still stared up, and a trickle of blood, like a red flower, had spilt from the gaping mouth. He stared down at it for a moment, then turned and went back to the car. The key of the day had been set.

All along the road to Rennes he looked for a figure by a parked white Renault. He did not completely lose hope until he got on the autoroute that bypassed the city to the south. Then he knew the agony of never seeing her again. It seemed almost immediately like a punishment. Her disappearance that morning proved it: he had the blame. His crime had been realizing too late; at the orchard gate, when she had broken away; and he had let her, fatal indecision. Even back in the house, something in him, as she had known, had asked not to be taken at his word. He had failed both in the contemporary and the medieval sense; as someone who wanted sex, as someone who renounced it.

His mind slid away to imaginary scenarios. Beth's plane would crash. He had never married. He had, but Diana had been Beth. She married Henry, who promptly died. She appeared in London, she could not live without him, he left Beth. In all these fantasies they ended at Coët, in a total harmony of work and love and moonlit orchard.

Futile, they would have disgraced an adolescent; and they compounded his bleakness, for it was also a kind of shock, though the reality of those first few minutes after she had left him had already sunk into his unconscious, that this could happen to him, could disturb and upset him so deeply; and what it said of a past complacency. It defined so well what he lacked. His inadequacy was that he did not believe in sin. Henry knew sin was a challenge to life; not an unreason, but an act of courage and imagination. He sinned out of need and instinct; David did not, out of fear. What Anne had said: just to spite the old bastard. He was obsessed with means, not ends; with what people thought of him, not what he thought of himself. His terror of vanity, selfishness, the Id, which he had to conceal under qualities he called 'honesty' and 'fairmindedness'... that was why he secretly so enjoyed reviewing, the activity pandered to that side of him. The ultimate vanity (and folly, in an artist) was not to seem vain. That explained the high value he put in his own painting on understatement, technical decency, fitting the demands of his own critical-verbal vocabulary—the absurd way he always reviewed his own work in his imagination as he painted it. It all added up to the same thing: a fear of challenge.

And that was precisely what had happened to him: a challenge, and well beyond the moral and sexual. It had been like a trap, he saw this now as well. One sailed past that preposterously obvious reef represented by the first evening with the old man, and one's self-blindness, priggishness, so-called urbanity, love of being liked, did the rest. The real rock of truth had lain well past the blue lagoon.

The further he drove, the less inclined he felt to excuse himself. There was a kind of superficial relief at being able to face Beth more or less openly—but even that seemed a consolation prize awarded the wrong man. He had finally stayed 'faithful' by benefit of a turned key. And even that, the being technically innocent, that it should still mean something to him, betrayed his real crime: to dodge, escape, avert.

Coët had been a mirror, and the existence he was returning to sat mercilessly reflected and dissected in its surface... and how shabby it now looked, how insipid and anodyne, how safe. Riskiess, that was the essence of it: was why, for instance, he was driving much faster than usual. Between the towns the roads were comparatively empty, he was making ample time, the wretched plane didn't land till after seven. One killed all risk, one refused all challenge, and so one became an artificial man. The old man's secret, not letting anything stand between self and expression; which wasn't a question of outward artistic aims, mere styles and techniques and themes. But how you did it; how wholly, how bravely you faced up to the constant recasting of yourself.

Slowly and inexorably it came to David that his failure that previous night was merely the symbol, not the crux of the matter. He remembered the old man's crude and outlandish pun on the word Mouse; if one wanted signs as to the real nature of the rejection. Bungling the adventure of the body was trivial, part of the sexual comedy. But he had never really had, or even attempted to give himself, the far greater existential chance. He had had doubts about his work before; but not about his own fundamental nature, or at any rate that there was not in it the potential wherewithal to lay the ghost that profoundly haunts every artist: his lastingness. He had a dreadful vision of being in a dead end, born into a period of art history future ages would dismiss as a desert; as Constable and Turner and the Norwich School had degenerated into the barren academicism of the midcentury and later. Art had always gone in waves. Who knew if the late twentieth century might not be one of its most cavernous troughs? He knew the old man's answer: it was. Or it was unless you fought bloody tooth and fucking nail against some of its most cherished values and supposed victories.

Perhaps abstraction, the very word, gave the game away. You did not want how you lived to be reflected in your painting; or because it was so compromised, so settled-for-the-safe, you could only try to camouflage its hollow reality under craftsmanship and good taste. Geometry. Safety hid nothingness.

What the old man still had was an umbilical cord to the past; a step back, he stood by Pisanello's side. In spirit, anyway. While David was encapsulated in book-knowledge, art as social institution, science, subject, matter for grants and committee discussion. That was the real kernel of his wildness. David and his generation, and all those to come, could only look back, through bars, like caged animals, born in captivity, at the old green freedom. That described exactly the experience of those last two days: the laboratory monkey allowed a glimpse of his lost true self. One was misled by the excess in vogue, the officially blessed indiscipline, the surface liberties of contemporary art; which all sprang from a profound frustration, a buried but not yet quite extinguished awareness of non-freedom. It ran through the whole recent history of art education in Britain.

That notorious diploma show where the Fine Arts students had shown nothing but blank canvases—what truer comment on the stale hypocrisy of the teaching and the helpless bankruptcy of the taught? One could not live by one's art, therefore one taught a travesty of its basic principles; pretending that genius, making it, is arrived at by overnight experiment, histrionics, instead of endless years of solitary obstinacy: that the production of the odd instant success, like a white rabbit out of a hat, excuses the vicious misleading of thousands of innocents; that the maw of the teaching cess-pit, the endless compounding of the whole charade, does not underpin the entire system. When schools lie Perhaps it was happening in the other arts—in writing, music. David did not know. All he felt was a distress, a nausea at his own. Castration. The triumph of the eunuch. He saw, how well he saw behind the clumsiness of the old man's attack; that sneer at Guernica. Turning away from nature and reality had atrociously distorted the relationship between painter and audience; now one painted for intellects and theories. Not people; and Jworst of all, not for oneself. Of course it paid dividends, in economic and vogue terms, but what had really been set up by I this jettisoning of the human body and its natural physical perceptions was a vicious spiral, a vortex, a drain to nothingness, to a painter and a critic agreed on only one thing: that only they exist and have value. A good gravestone; for all the scum who didn't care a damn.

One sheltered behind notions of staying 'open' to contemporary currents; forgetting the enormously increased velocity of progress and acceptance, how quickly now the avant-garde became art pompier; the daring, platitudinous. It was-not just his own brand of abstraction that was a fault, but the whole headlong post-war chain, abstract expressionism, neo-primitivism, op art and pop art, conceptualism, photo-realism... ii faut couper la racine, all right. But such rootlessness, orbiting in frozen outer space, cannot have been meant. They were like lemmings, at the mercy of a suicidal drive, seeking Lebensraum in an arctic sea; in a bottomless night, blind to everything but their own illusion.

The ebony tower.

As if to echo his inner gloom, the sky clouded over as he approached the lie de France and the dull, stubbled plains round Chartres. Summer had died, autumn was. His life was of one year only; an end now to all green growth. Ridiculous, as he told himself at once. And yet the acute depression remained.

He came at last to the outskirts of Paris. The business of finding where he needed distracted him a little from all this soulsearching. Soon after five he booked into a likely-looking hotel near Orly. They were giving Paris a miss, the destination in the Ardche was a friend's cottage, another long day's driving. But they might stop somewhere. He dreaded the tomorrow, either way.

He had a shower and forced himself to re-read his draft introduction to The Art of Henry Breasley; while his impressions were still fresh, to see what needed changing, expansion, more emphasis. It was hopeless. Phrases and judgments that only a few days previously had pleased him... ashes, botch. The banality, the jargon, the pretence of authority. The reality of Coët rose again behind the tawdry words. He lay back on the hotel bed and closed his eyes. A little later he was on his feet and staring out of the window. For the first time in many years he had felt the sting of imminent tears. Absurd, absurd. He would die if he never saw her again. He searched for writing-paper, but there wasn't any in the room, it wasn't that kind of hotel, an endless one-nighter. He took out his note-pad: but could only sit and stare at it. Too much. Like messing on with a painting one knew was no good; that one could only walk away from, without looking back, to one's separate door in the night.

Underlying all this there stood the knowledge that he would not change; he would go on painting as before, he would forget this day, he would find reasons to interpret everything differently, as a transient losing his head, a self-indulgent folly. A scar would grow over it, then fall away, and the skin would be as if there had never been a wound. He was crippled by common sense, he had no ultimate belief in chance and its exploitation, the missed opportunity would become the finally sensible decision, the decent thing; the flame of deep fire that had singed him a dream, a moment's illusion; her reality just one more unpursued idea kept among old sketchbooks at the back of a studio cupboard.

But till then, he knew: he had refused (and even if he had never seen her again) a chance of a new existence, and the ultimate quality and enduringness of his work had rested on acceptance. He felt a delayed but bitter envy of the old man. In the end it all came down to what one was born with: one either had the temperament for excess and a ruthless egocentricity, for keeping thought and feeling in different compartments, or one didn't; and David didn't. The abominable and vindictive injustice was that art is fundamentally amoral. However hard one tried, one was hopelessly handicapped: all to the pigs, none to the deserving. Coët had remorselessly demonstrated what he was born, still was, and always would be: a decent man and—eternal also-ran.

That last was the label that seemed to have been lurking for hours when it finally came to him. He was left staring at the petered rise, which he saw almost literally above the dreary sea of roofs, wet now in a drizzle, outside the hotel: the collapsed parallel of what he was beside the soaring line of all that he might have been.

He got to Orly to find the flight was delayed for half an hour. There was fog at Heathrow. David hated airports at the best of times, the impersonality, herding, sense of anonymous passage; the insecurity. He stood by the window of the visitors' lounge, staring out into the flat distances. Dusk. Coët was in another universe; one and an eternal day's drive away. He tried to imagine what they were doing. Diana laying the table, Anne having her French lesson. The silence, the forest, the old man's voice. Macmillan barking. He suffered the most intense pang of the most terrible of all human deprivations; which is not of possession, but of knowledge. What she said; what she felt; what she thought. It pierced deeper than all questionings about art, or his art, his personal destiny. For a few terrible moments he saw himself, and all mankind, quite clear. Something in him, a last hope of redemption, of free will, burnt every boat; turned; ran for salvation. But the boats proof to all flame, the ultimate old masters, kept the tall shadow of him where he was; static and onward, returning home, a young Englishman staring at a distant row of frozen runway lights.

The flight arrival was announced and he went down to where he could watch for Beth. He had brought her holiday luggage in the car, and she came out with the first passengers. A wave. He raised his hand: a new coat, surprise for him, a little flounce and jiggle to show it off. Gay Paree. Free woman. Look, no children.

She comes with the relentless face of the present tense; with a dry delight, small miracle that he is actually here. He composes his face into an equal certainty.

She stops a few feet short of him.

'Hi.'

She bites her lips.

'I thought for one ghastly moment.'

She pauses.

'You were my husband.'

Rehearsed. He smiles.

He kisses her mouth.

They walk away together, talking about their children.

He has a sense of retarded waking, as if in a post-operational state of consciousness some hours returned but not till now fully credited; a numbed sense of something beginning to slip inexorably away. A shadow of a face, hair streaked with gold, a closing door. I wanted you to. One knows one dreamed, yet cannot remember. The drowning cry, jackbooted day.

She says, 'And you, darling?'

He surrenders to what is left: to abstraction.

'I survived.'