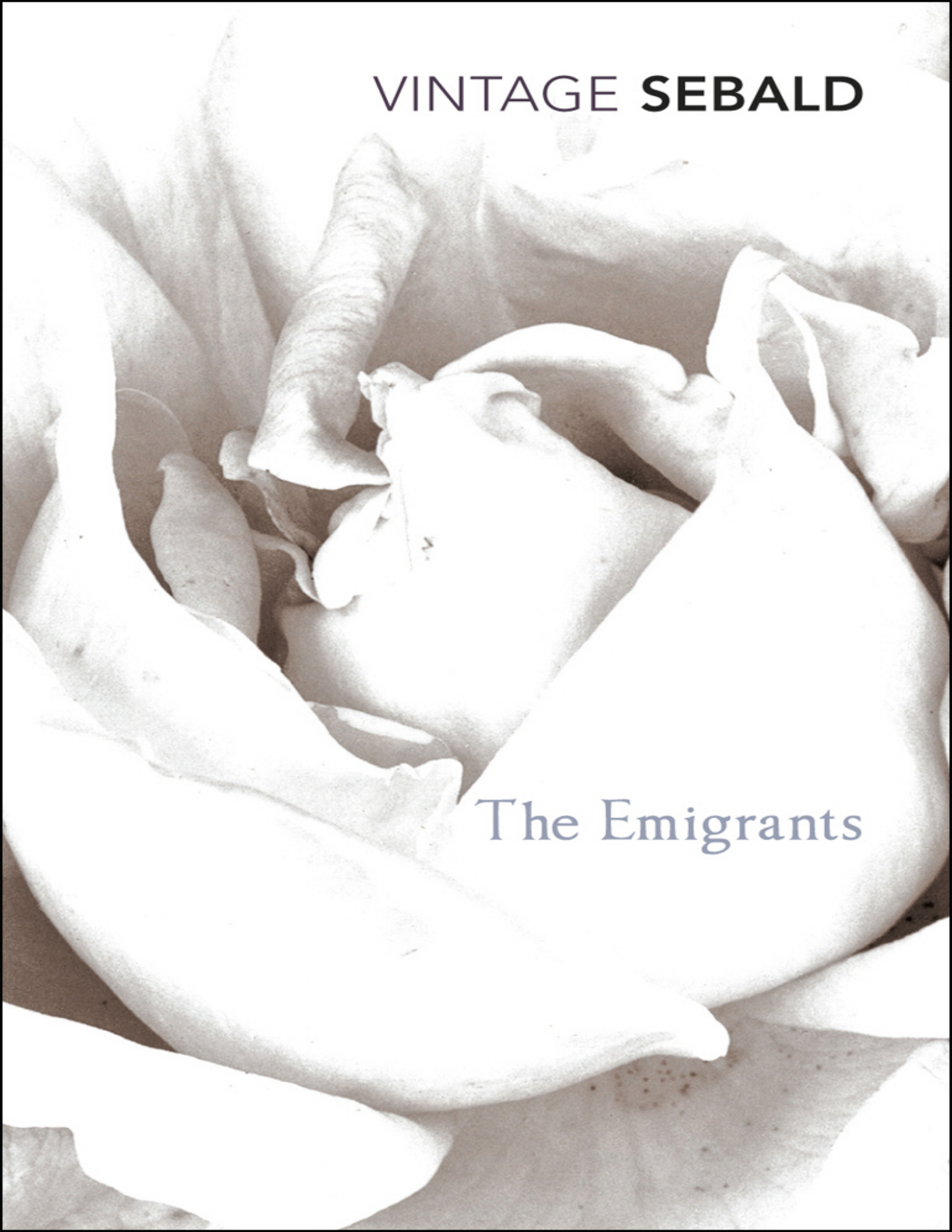
VINTAGE **SEBALD**



The Emigrants

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About the Book

At first *The Emigrants* appears simply to document the lives of four Jewish émigrés in the twentieth century. But gradually, as Sebald's precise, almost dreamlike prose begins to draw their stories, the four narrations merge into one overwhelming evocation of exile and loss.

Written with a bone-dry sense of humour and a fascination with the oddness of existence *The Emigrants* is highly original in its heady mix of fact, memory, fiction and photographs.

About the Author

W. G. SEBALD was born in Wertach im Allgäu, in the Bavarian Alps. After studying in Freiburg and Switzerland, he took up a position at the University of Manchester, settling permanently in England in 1970. He is Professor of Modern German Literature at the University of East Anglia and is the author of two other works of fiction: *The Rings of Saturn* (Harvill, 1998) and *Schwindel. Gefühle*. (1990) to be published by The Harvill Press in 1999 with the English title *Vertigo*.

MICHAEL HULSE has translated Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and Jakob Wassermann's *Caspar Hauser*, as well as the contemporary German authors Luise Rinser, Botho Strauss and Elfriede Jelinek. An award-winning poet, he is the author of *Eating Strawberries in the Necropolis* (Harvill, 1991).

ALSO BY W. G. SEBALD

The Rings of Saturn
Austerlitz
Vertigo

W. G. Sebald

THE EMIGRANTS

Translated from the German
by Michael Hulse

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DR HENRY SELWYN

And the last remnants
memory destroys

At the end of September 1970, shortly before I took up my position in Norwich, I drove out to Hingham with Clara in search of somewhere to live. For some 25 kilometres the road runs amidst fields and hedgerows, beneath spreading oak trees, past a few scattered hamlets, till at length Hingham appears, its asymmetrical gables, church tower and treetops barely rising above the flatland. The market place, broad and lined with silent façades, was deserted, but still it did not take us long to find the house the agents had described. One of the largest in the village, it stood a short distance from the church with its grassy graveyard, Scots pines and yews, up a quiet side street. The house was hidden behind a two-metre wall and a thick shrubbery of hollies and Portuguese laurel. We walked down the gentle slope of the broad driveway and across the evenly gravelled forecourt. To the right, beyond the stables and outbuildings, a stand of beeches rose high into the clear autumn sky, its rookery deserted in the early afternoon, the

nests dark patches in a canopy of foliage that was only occasionally disturbed. The front of the large, neoclassical house was overgrown with Virginia creeper. The door was painted black and on it was a brass knocker in the shape of a fish. We knocked several times, but there was no sign of life inside the house. We stepped back a little. The sash windows, each divided into twelves panes, glinted blindly, seeming to be made of dark mirror glass. The house gave the impression that no one lived there. And I recalled the château in the Charente that I had once visited from Angoulême. In front of it, two crazy brothers – one a parliamentarian, the other an architect – had built a replica of the façade of the palace of Versailles, an utterly pointless counterfeit, though one which made a powerful impression from a distance. The windows of that house had been just as gleaming and blind as those of the house we now stood before. Doubtless we should have driven on without accomplishing a thing, if we had not summoned up the nerve, exchanging one of those swift glances, to at least take a look at the garden. Warily we walked round the house. On the north side, where the brickwork was green with damp and variegated ivy partly covered the walls, a mossy path led past the servants' entrance, past a woodshed, on through deep shadows, to emerge, as if upon a stage, onto a terrace with a stone balustrade overlooking a broad, square lawn bordered by flower beds, shrubs and trees. Beyond the lawn, to the west, the grounds opened out into a park landscape studded with lone lime trees, elms and holm oaks, and beyond that lay the gentle undulations of arable land and the white mountains of cloud on the horizon. In silence we gazed at this view, which drew the eye into the distance as it fell and rose in stages, and we looked for a long time, supposing ourselves quite alone, till we noticed a motionless figure lying in the shade cast on the lawn by a lofty cedar in the southwest corner of the garden. It was an old man, his head propped

on his arm, and he seemed altogether absorbed in contemplation of the patch of earth immediately before his eyes. We crossed the lawn towards him, every step wonderfully light on the grass. Not till we were almost upon him, though, did he notice us. He stood up, not without a certain embarrassment. Though he was tall and broad-shouldered, he seemed quite stocky, even short. Perhaps this impression came from the way he had of looking, head bowed, over the top of his gold-rimmed reading glasses, a habit which had given him a stooped, almost supplicatory posture. His white hair was combed back, but a few stray wisps kept falling across his strikingly high forehead. I was counting the blades of grass, he said, by way of apology for his absentmindedness. It's a sort of pastime of mine. Rather irritating, I am afraid. He swept back one of his white strands of hair. His movements seemed at once awkward and yet perfectly poised; and there was a similar courtesy, of a style that had long since fallen into disuse, in the way he introduced himself as Dr Henry Selwyn. No doubt, he continued, we had come about the flat. As far as he could say, it had not yet been let, but we should have to wait for Mrs Selwyn's return, since she was the owner of the house and he merely a dweller in the garden, a kind of ornamental hermit. In the course of the conversation that followed these opening remarks, we strolled along the iron railings that marked off the garden from open parkland. We stopped for a moment. Three heavy greys were rounding a little clump of alders, snorting and throwing up clods of turf as they trotted. They took up an expectant position at our side, and Dr Selwyn fed them from his trouser pocket, stroking their muzzles as he did so. I have put them out to grass, he said. I bought them at an auction last year for a few pounds. Otherwise they would doubtless have gone straight to the knacker's yard. They're called Herschel, Humphrey and Hippolytus. I know nothing about their earlier life, but when I bought them

they were in a sorry state. Their coats were infested with lice, their eyes were dim, and their hooves were cracked right through from standing in a wet field. But now, said Dr Selwyn, they've made something of a recovery, and they might still have a year or so ahead of them. With that he took his leave of the horses, which were plainly very fond of him, and strolled on with us towards the remoter parts of the garden, pausing now and then and becoming more expansive and circumstantial in his talk. Through the shrubbery on the south side of the lawn, a path led to a walk lined with hazels, where grey squirrels were up to their mischief in the canopy of branches overhead. The

ground was thickly strewn with empty nutshells, and autumn crocuses took the weak light that penetrated the dry, rustling leaves. The hazel walk led to a tennis court bounded by a whitewashed brick wall. Tennis, said Dr Selwyn, used to be my great passion. But now the court has fallen into disrepair, like so much else around here. It's not only the kitchen garden, he continued, indicating the tumble-down Victorian greenhouses and overgrown espaliers, that's on its last legs after years of neglect. More and more, he said, he sensed that

Nature itself was groaning and collapsing beneath the burden we placed upon it. True, the garden, which had originally been meant to supply a large household, and had indeed, by dint of skill and diligence, provided fruit and vegetables for the table throughout the entire year, was still, despite the neglect, producing so much that he had far more than he needed for his own requirements, which admittedly were becoming increasingly modest. Leaving the once well-tended garden to its own devices did have the incidental advantage, said Dr Selwyn, that the things that still grew there, or which he had sown or planted more or less haphazardly, possessed a flavour that he himself found quite exceptionally delicate. We walked between beds of asparagus with the tufts of green at shoulder height, rows of massive artichoke plants, and on to a small group of apple trees, on which there were an abundance of red and yellow apples. Dr Selwyn placed a dozen of these fairy-tale apples, which really did taste better than any I have eaten since, on a rhubarb leaf, and gave them to Clara, remarking that the variety was aptly named Beauty of Bath.

Two days after this first meeting with Dr Selwyn we moved in to Prior’s Gate. The previous evening, Mrs Selwyn had shown us the rooms, on the first floor of the east wing,

furnished in an idiosyncratic fashion but otherwise pleasant and spacious. We had immediately been very taken with the prospect of spending a few months there, since the view from the high windows across the garden, the park and the massed cloud in the sky was more than ample recompense for the gloomy interior. One only needed to look out, and the gigantic and startlingly ugly sideboard ceased to exist, the mustard yellow paintwork in the kitchen vanished, and the turquoise refrigerator, gas-powered and possibly not without its dangers, seemed to dissolve into nowhere, as if by a miracle. Elli Selwyn was a factory owner's daughter, from Biel in Switzerland, and we soon realized that she had an excellent head for business. She gave us permission to make modest alterations in the flat, to suit our taste. Once the bathroom (which was in an annexe on cast-iron columns and accessible only via a footbridge) had been painted white, she even came up to approve our handiwork. The unfamiliar look prompted her to make the cryptic comment that the bathroom, which had always reminded her of an old-fashioned hothouse, now reminded her of a freshly painted dovecote, an observation that has stuck in my mind to this day as an annihilating verdict on the way we lead our life, though I have not been able to make any change in it. But that is beside the point. Our access to the flat was either by an iron staircase, now painted white as well, that rose from the courtyard to the bathroom footbridge, or (on the ground floor) through a double door into a wide corridor, the walls of which, just below the ceiling, were festooned with a complicated bell-pull system for the summoning of servants. From that passageway one could look into the dark kitchen, where at any hour of the day a female personage of indeterminable age would always be busy at the sink. Elaine, as she was called, wore her hair shorn high up the nape, as the inmates of asylums do. Her facial expressions and movements gave a distraught impression, her lips were always wet, and she

was invariably wearing her long grey apron that reached down to her ankles. What work Elaine was doing in the kitchen, day in, day out, remained a mystery to Clara and myself; to the best of our knowledge, no meal, with one single exception, was ever cooked there. Across the corridor, about a foot above the stone floor, there was a door in the wall. Through it, one entered a dark stairwell; and on every floor hidden passageways branched off, running behind walls in such a way that the servants, ceaselessly hurrying to and fro laden with coal scuttles, baskets of firewood, cleaning materials, bed linen and tea trays, never had to cross the paths of their betters. Often I tried to imagine what went on inside the heads of people who led their lives knowing that, behind the walls of the rooms they were in, the shadows of the servants were perpetually flitting past. I fancied they ought to have been afraid of those ghostly creatures who, for scant wages, dealt with the tedious tasks that had to be performed daily. The main access to our rooms was via this rear staircase, at the bottommost level of which, incidentally, was the invariably locked door of Elaine’s quarters. This too made us feel somewhat uneasy. Only once did I manage to snatch a glance, and saw that her small room was full of countless dolls, meticulously dressed, most of them wearing something on their heads, standing or sitting around or lying on the bed where Elaine herself slept – if, that is, she ever slept at all, and did not spend the entire night crooning softly as she played with her dolls. On Sundays and holidays we occasionally saw Elaine leaving the house in her Salvation Army uniform. She was often met by a little girl who would then walk beside her, one trusting hand in hers. It took a while for us to grow used to Elaine. What we found particularly unsettling was her intermittent habit, when she was in the kitchen, of breaking into strange, apparently unmotivated, whinnying laughter that would penetrate to the first floor. What was more, Elaine,

ourselves excepted, was the sole occupant of the immense house who was always there. Mrs Selwyn was frequently away on her travels for weeks at a time, or was about her business, seeing to the numerous flats she let in town and in nearby villages. As long as the weather permitted, Dr Selwyn liked to be out of doors, and especially in a flint-built hermitage in a remote corner of the garden, which he called his folly and which he had furnished with the essentials. But one morning just a week or so after we had moved in, I saw him standing at an open window of one of his rooms on the west side of the house. He had his spectacles on and was wearing a tartan dressing gown and a white neckerchief. He was aiming a gun with two inordinately long barrels up into the blue. When at last he fired the shot, after what seemed to me an eternity, the report fell upon the gardens with a shattering crash.

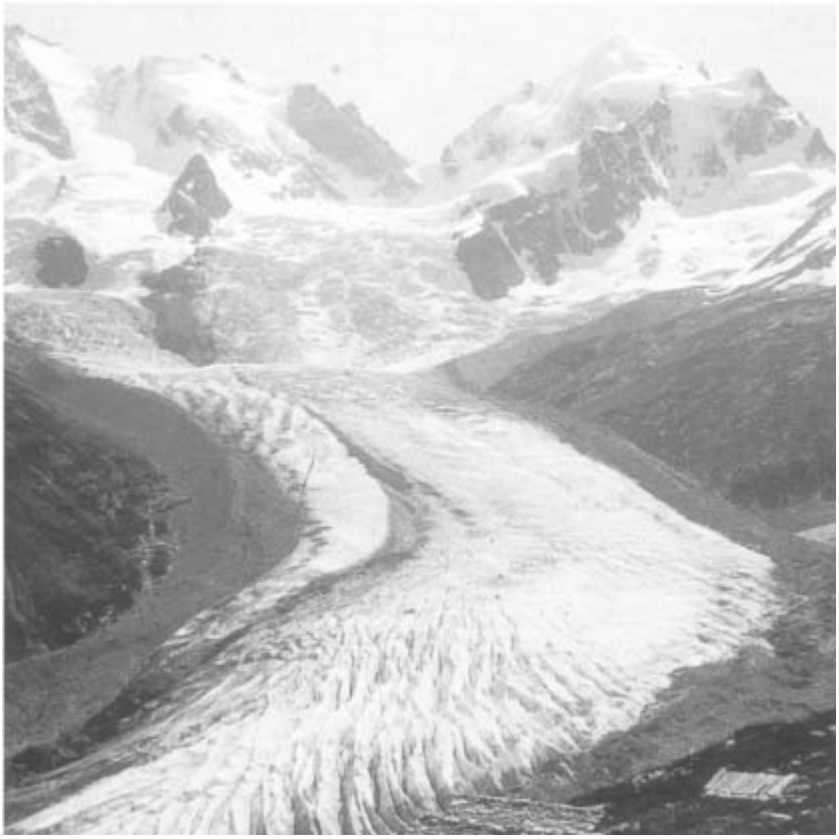
Dr Selwyn later explained that he had been finding out whether the gun, which was meant for hunting big game and which he had bought many years ago as a young man, was still in working order after decades of disuse in his dressing room. During that time, as far as he could

remember, it had been cleaned and checked over only a couple of times. He told me he had bought the gun when he went to India to take up his first position as a surgeon. At that time, having such a gun was considered obligatory for a man of his caste. He had gone hunting with it only once, though, and had even neglected to put it to inaugural use on that occasion, as he ought to have. So now he had been wondering if the piece still worked, and had established that the recoil alone was enough to kill one.

Otherwise, as I have said, Dr Selwyn was scarcely ever in the house. He lived in his hermitage, giving his entire attention, as he occasionally told me, to thoughts which on the one hand grew vaguer day by day, and, on the other, grew more precise and unambiguous. During our stay in the house he had a visitor only once. It was in the spring, I think, about the end of April, and Elli happened to be away in Switzerland. One morning Dr Selwyn came up to tell us that he had invited a friend with whom he had been close for many years to dinner and, if it was convenient, he would be delighted if we could make their twosome a *petit comité*. We went down shortly before eight. A fire was blazing against the distinct chill of evening in the vast hearth of the drawing room, which was furnished with a number of four-seater settees and cumbersome armchairs. High on the walls mirrors with blind patches were hung, multiplying the flickering of the firelight and reflecting shifting images. Dr Selwyn was wearing a tie and a tweed jacket with leather patches at the elbows. His friend Edwin Elliott, whom he introduced to us as a well-known botanist and entomologist, was a man of a much slighter build than Dr Selwyn himself, and, while the latter inclined to stoop, he carried himself erect. He too was wearing a tweed jacket. His shirt collar was too large for his scrawny, wrinkled neck, which emerged from it accordion-style, like the neck of certain birds or of a tortoise; his head was small,

seeming faintly prehistoric, some kind of throwback; his eyes, though, shone with sheer wonderful life. At first we talked about my work and our plans for the next year or so, and of the impressions we had, coming from mountainous parts, of England, and particularly of the flat expanse of the county of Norfolk. Dusk fell. Dr Selwyn stood up and, with some ceremony, preceded us into the dining room next door. On the oak table, at which thirty people could have been seated with no difficulty, stood two silver candelabra. Places were set for Dr Selwyn and Edwin at the head and foot of the table, and for Clara and me on the long side facing the windows. By now it was almost dark inside the house, and outside, too, the greenery was thickening with deep, blue shadows. The light of the west still lay on the horizon, though, with mountains of cloud whose snowy formations reminded me of the loftiest alpine massifs, as the night descended. Elaine pushed in a serving trolley equipped with hotplates, some kind of patented design dating from the Thirties. She was wearing her grey full-length apron and went about her work in a silence which she broke only once or twice to mutter something to herself. She lit the candles and shuffled out, as she had come in, without a word. We served ourselves, passing the dishes along the table to one another. The first course consisted of a few pieces of green asparagus covered with marinated leaves of young spinach. The main course was broccoli spears in butter and new potatoes boiled with mint leaves. Dr Selwyn told us that he grew his earlies in the sandy soil of one of the old glasshouses, where they reached the size of walnuts by mid April. The meal was concluded with creamed stewed rhubarb sprinkled with Demarara sugar. Thus almost everything was from the neglected garden. Before we had finished, Edwin turned our conversation to Switzerland, perhaps thinking that Dr Selwyn and I would both have something to say on the subject. And Dr Selwyn did indeed, after a certain

hesitation, start to tell us of his stay in Berne shortly before the First World War. In the summer of 1913 (he began), he had completed his medical studies in Cambridge, and had forthwith left for Berne, intending to further his training there. In the event, things had turned out differently, and he had spent most of his time in the Bernese Oberland, taking more and more to mountain climbing. He spent weeks on end in Meiringen, and Oberaar in particular, where he met an alpine guide by the name of Johannes Naegeli, then aged sixty-five, of whom, from the beginning, he was very fond. He went everywhere with Naegeli – up the Zinggenstock, the Scheuchzerhorn and the Rosenhorn, the Lauteraarhorn, the Schreckhorn and the Ewigschneehorn – and never in his life, neither before nor later, did he feel as good as he did then, in the company of that man. When war broke out and I returned to England and was called up, Dr Selwyn said, nothing felt as hard, as I realize now looking back, as saying goodbye to Johannes Naegeli. Even the separation from Elli, whom I had met at Christmas in Berne and married after the war, did not cause me remotely as much pain as the separation from Naegeli. I can still see him standing at the station at Meiringen, waving. But I may



only be imagining it, Dr Selwyn went on in a lower tone, to himself, since Elli has come to seem a stranger to me over the years, whereas Naegeli seems closer whenever he comes to my mind, despite the fact that I never saw him again after that farewell in Meiringen. Not long after mobilization, Naegeli went missing on his way from the Oberaar cabin to Oberaar itself. It was assumed that he had fallen into a crevasse in the Aare glacier. The news reached me in one of the first letters I received when I was in uniform, living in barracks, and it plunged me into a deep depression that nearly led to my being discharged. It was as if I was buried under snow and ice. But this is an old story, said Dr Selwyn after a lengthy pause. We ought really, he said, turning to Edwin, to show our guests the pictures we took on our last visit to Crete. We returned to the drawing room. The logs were glowing in the dark. Dr Selwyn tugged a bell-pull to the right of the fireplace, and

almost instantly, as if she had been waiting in the passage for the signal, Elaine pushed in a trolley with a slide projector on it. The large ormolu clock on the mantelpiece and the Meissen figurines, a shepherd and shepherdess and a colourfully clad Moor rolling his eyes, were moved aside, and the wooden-framed screen Elaine had brought in was put up in front of the mirror. The low whirr of the projector began, and the dust in the room, normally invisible, glittered and danced in the beam of light by way of a prelude to the pictures themselves. Their journey to Crete had been made in the springtime. The landscape of the island seemed veiled in bright green as it lay before us. Once or twice, Edwin was to be seen with his field glasses and a container for botanical specimens, or Dr Selwyn in knee-length shorts, with a shoulder bag and butterfly net. One of the shots resembled, even in detail, a photograph of Nabokov in the mountains above Gstaad that I had clipped from a Swiss magazine a few days before.

Strangely enough, both Edwin and Dr Selwyn made a distinctly youthful impression in the pictures they showed us, though at the time they made the trip, exactly ten years earlier, they were already in their late sixties. I sensed that, for both of them, this return of their past selves was an occasion for some emotion. But it may be that it merely seemed that way to me because neither Edwin nor Dr Selwyn was willing or able to make any remark concerning these pictures, whereas they did comment on the many others showing the springtime flora of the island, and all manner of winged and creeping creatures. Whilst their images were on screen, trembling slightly, there was almost total silence in the room. In the last of the pictures