

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Doves of Venus

Olivia Manning

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About the Author

Olivia Manning, OBE, was born in Portsmouth, Hampshire, spent much of her youth in Ireland and, as she put it, had 'the usual Anglo-Irish sense of belonging nowhere.' The daughter of a naval officer, she produced her first novel, *The Wind Changes*, in 1937. She married just before the War and went abroad with her husband, R. D. Smith, a British Council lecturer in Bucharest. Her experiences there formed the basis of the work that makes up *The Balkan Trilogy*. As the Germans approached Athens, she and her husband evacuated to Egypt and ended up in charge of the Palestine Broadcasting Station. They returned to London in 1946 and lived there until her death in 1980.

Also by Olivia Manning

Novels

The Wind Changes
Artist for the Missing
School for Love
A Different Face
The Play Room
The Rain Forest

The Balkan Trilogy

The Great Fortune
The Spoilt City
Friends and Heroes

The Levant Trilogy

The Danger Tree
The Battle Lost and Won
The Sum of Things

Short Stories

Growing Up
A Romantic Hero

The Doves of Venus

Olivia Manning



arrow books

To William Gerhardi

PART ONE

Walking home one night, taking a round-about route to add to experience, to stay awake a little longer and meet, perhaps, some curiosity of life not met before, Ellie Parsons, aged eighteen, independent, employed person, living in Chelsea, passed, near the Victoria Coach Station, a couple from her home town. She recognised the shape of them. She hurried. She thought herself safely past, when the husband called:

‘Why, Ellie Parsons!’

His tone showed that he was struck by seeing among eight million strangers someone known to him. Ellie had not the courage to ignore him. She paused and faced them, pretending surprise.

‘The Ripleys,’ she said.

The Ripleys, not on their own ground, looked unsure of themselves, but they were, as usual, armed with disapproval. Overcoming his surprise, Mr Ripley asked: ‘How are you getting on?’ He was a lay preacher at the Pratt Hill Baptist Chapel, Eastsea, and publicly held it shameful that Ellie Parsons should have left home against the wish of a widowed mother. His face became stern: ‘You’re going to Eastsea for Christmas, I hope?’

Ellie, standing two yards away from him, said: ‘Yes,’ then, suddenly defiant, added: ‘I have a job in a studio. I’m doing my own work. It’s wonderful!’ Unable to control her voice, she shouted like a schoolgirl: ‘I’ve never been so happy before in my life.’

A smile appeared unexpectedly on the young-old face of the wife. She put her hand on her husband’s arm, prompting him to say ‘Good-night,’ then, as they moved off, she whispered: ‘That girl’s in love.’

Ellie heard her, and did not care. As she turned her back on them, London was about her again and she felt her own

freedom.

It was a mild December night, pretending spring. The sky, lacquer-black and peppered with small stars, looked as though blown clean by a gale, but the breeze that came from the side streets was tender as the breath of a fan. The road before her was empty. At the triangle where it joined Ebury Street, it looked as spacious as a ballroom. Ellie broke into a run. At that moment it seemed to her, were she to leap up, she would rise from the moorings of earth and sail between the stars; and if she called out, her voice would fill the sky.

On an impulse, she jumped and called: 'Hey!' As she landed, the pavement smacked sharply through her thin soles; her cry came out like a mouse-squeak. She looked over her shoulder, but there was no one who might have heard her. She burst out laughing. It was true. She was in love.

That evening while Quintin Bellot and she had been gazing at one another across the restaurant table, his expression had changed. She had felt between them not merely that sharp-edged, sparking attraction, but tenderness. She had felt it like a supernatural glow in the air about them. She touched his hand with her finger-tips and he gathered her fingers into his hand, then he laughed and gave her hand an impatient shake and said: 'You must choose something from the menu.'

She tried to give her attention to the menu. It was a pity she was not hungry in the evenings. She took her main meal at mid-day and the occasional evening meal that Quintin bought her, seemed to her wasted. She wished she could say: 'Give me the money instead so that I can have a real meal tomorrow.'

He started explaining the items to her: '*Langue de Boeuf en Paupiettes* - that's ox-tongue done with a sort of meat stuffing and bacon; in *paupiettes*, in . . . oh, you know! . . . in slices. *Côtes de veau foyot* - veal cutlets done in white

wine with grated cheese and breadcrumbs. Very nice. Would you like that? Or some sort of chicken?’

She suddenly became annoyed that he should take her ignorance for granted. She said: ‘But all this is nonsense. These French names don’t mean anything.’

‘But of course they do.’ He laughed at her: ‘If they didn’t, how could you tell one dish from another?’

Her mother, who kept a restaurant in Eastsea, was always telling her customers that the French on menus was meaningless, invented to impress simpletons. ‘We write in English,’ she would say. ‘We’ve nothing to hide.’

Quintin said: ‘Or would you like some kebabs – they’re pieces of meat put on a skewer and cooked over a charcoal fire.’

Disconcerted, Ellie asked stupidly: ‘But how do you know?’

He pushed her hand away. Still laughing at her, he said: ‘Don’t be silly.’

Suddenly she said so loudly that people turned their heads: ‘How marvellous everything is!’

He raised an eyebrow: ‘I believe you’re the first person I’ve heard say that since 1939.’

‘Why 1939?’

‘That was when the war started.’

‘Oh, the war!’ – she had almost forgotten it ‘I was evacuated.’

‘Evacuated! I thought you girls were all conscripted.’

‘I was too young.’

‘So you were. So you were.’ Quintin let his eyelids droop with a look of melancholy, rather comical: ‘And I? Even then, I was middle-aged.’

It was for that reason, among other reasons, when later in the evening he had roused himself and said with a yawn: ‘Well, I suppose I must dress and see you home,’ that she pushed him back against the pillows and said: ‘No, stay there. You look so comfortable.’

Not moving, he protested: ‘But I must put you into a taxi.’

‘Oh no.’ Anything but that. Once before he had put her into a taxi and the fare had beggared her for a week. ‘You just stay there,’ she said.

He sighed and said weakly: ‘This is disgraceful. I’m being spoilt.’

Ahead of her, traffic lights changed in an empty world. When she reached them, she gazed down Chelsea Bridge Road to observe the infernal splendour of the Battersea Power Station. It was flood-lit. The rosy cameo of chimneys, seeming incandescent against the black sky, billowed smoke wreaths, glowing, massive, majestic as the smoke of hell. She loved them. They were a landmark of home. They remained at hand as she passed the cemetery. An icy dampness came from the earth where the old soldiers lay buried. She knew these old soldiers. On her Saturday afternoon walks she came here and read the inscriptions to the Master Builder, the surgeon and the mysterious Sixpennyman; to the cook who had died aged twenty-nine and the officers who had died of their wounds. She had sketched into a notebook the tomb that bore so lavish a collection of trophies of war, and had written beneath her sketch ‘Decoration for a bed-head’, hoping that one day at the studio she would be required to decorate a bed-head. It was familiar ground, yet now, in the darkness, she was unnerved by the glimmer of the headstones. At the thought of the dead who lay there in the cold of winter, the darkness of night, she was touched by mortality. Life was wonderful, but men died.

She looked up at the sky and was reminded of a night – she thought of it as some hour near midnight but it must have been early on a winter evening – when she had walked with her father along the Eastsea promenade. The invisible sea had scratched on the pebbles below. Her father had

pointed out stars to her – Orion's Belt, the Plough, the Bear, the Dog. He had said: 'They are worlds, like ours.'

'With people?'

'Perhaps. Why not?'

For the first time in her life she had realised the sky was not a solid, light-pricked canopy, but infinite space.

The night before he was taken to the sanatorium they had walked by the sea for a little way, very slowly. He had said: 'You know, I may not come back.'

Hoping to seem courageous in her fear, she had asked: 'Do you mean you may die?'

He said: 'Yes, but it does not matter. Our destiny is not here.'

She had remembered that as she had remembered nothing spoken at the Pratt Hill Baptist Chapel.

That was ten years ago. Already she could look back ten years! How quickly one aged! She saw time stretching like a shadow behind her, like the long, dark, empty promenade on which the two figures, very small in her memory, pressed against the wind. Her father had known that he was dying. Perhaps it was death that had drawn his glance up to the stars.

The Embankment meant she was nearly home. When she neared Oakley Street, she crossed the road at a run. She lived here in this impressive street where the houses stood in the street-lights like façades cut upon solid rock. She had found her room advertised on a postcard in a sweet-shop. Who could otherwise have guessed that such houses were boarding-houses? The long, glossy, upcurve of tarmac road was deserted. Ellie began to imagine herself a spirit, perhaps isolated in some dimension of her own – but, no, there was someone else in the world. Round the corner, in Upper Cheyne Row, a door-knocker was being furiously banged against a door. The knocking stopped. There was

the squeak of a window going up. A woman's voice called out: 'The bell *is* working, dear.' There was silence, then suddenly, into Oakley Street, walking on tall, thread-fine heels, a woman came as though in flight. She passed Ellie without noticing her. She was a delicately-shaped woman in a coat of expensive fur. A startling beauty.

Ellie thought: 'She must be somebody. Perhaps she's famous.'

The woman, stumbling at times on her high heels, began to run and wave and shout: 'Taxi! Taxi!' A taxi was coming up from the Embankment. It stopped beside her: she entered it: it turned in the road. Ellie watched it until it was out of sight.

Well, that was London. Profoundly satisfied by her adopted city, Ellie found her key, entered her house and climbed to her room on the top floor. When she reached it, she opened her window and gazed down on the windows of Margaretta Terrace. She was wide awake again and excited as though, even at this last minute of the day, life might extend some new experience. What lay ahead for her? Would she ever rap on door-knockers with the urgency of important emotions? and run round a corner wearing a fur coat? and, lifting a hand to an approaching taxi, impress some other girl named Ellie and fill her with envy and ambition?

Forced by the cold to close the window, Ellie embraced her own shoulders and turned round and round. The room's size did not permit a real dance but she moved as wildly as she could to celebrate the end of her virginity.

Half-an-hour later, when Ellie was about to fall asleep, Quintin was awake, still propped up on pillows as she had left him. The circle of light from his prune-coloured lampshade lit only his hand that held open the second volume of *The Princess Casamassima*. He was not reading.

He was not, as Ellie had been, disturbed by rapture, but by an irritation of the senses that exhausted him and kept him awake. He had involved himself with Ellie from habit, and it was a habit he would soon have to break. The very young, flinging their energy into the transports of love, were becoming too much for him.

When the telephone rang, he supposed it was Ellie again. He was tempted to switch off the bell, but, remembering the eagerness of that childish, peach-bloom face, he smiled compassionately and lifted the receiver. He spoke into it a gentle and encouraging 'Hello'.

He was answered by an unfamiliar male voice asking him if he were Quintin Bellot. He roused himself without enthusiasm. He put down his book and flexed his aching arm while the voice at the other end of the line called him urgently to a milk bar in Bridge Street. His wife, Petta, had been found balancing on the parapet of Westminster Bridge. No spark was roused in him by the emergency.

'Are you the police?' he asked, delaying the moment of getting out of bed.

'No. I was just passing. I said to her: "Don't be silly. Come down," I said, and she came down. When I found she couldn't hardly stand, I brought her here for a coffee. She won't let me leave her alone. I'd be obliged if you'd look slippy. I've got to get home tonight.' The voice was becoming exasperated as nobility of action met with so little response.

'All right. I'll be about fifteen minutes.'

'You get a move on,' the receiver suddenly shouted as Quintin put it down.

He rose and dressed, saying to himself: 'Blast Petta, and blast this busybody who's picked her up,' yet he could not blame the man for wanting someone to take her off his hands. She had no luck. Her shows of helplessness merely produced, sooner or later, a panic to escape her.

Of course, she had deliberately chosen Westminster Bridge. His flat was off Birdcage Walk. As he set out for Bridge Street, a damp, warm wind swept at him from the park. It smelt of decayed leaves, the breath of a false spring. This was the sort of night that in his youth had exhilarated him, forcing him out at all hours in search of experience – and here he was now, tramping across Parliament Square towards some tiresome situation with Petta.

The square seemed deserted. The gates to the Underground were shut. The only sign of life came from the milk bar windows that gave off a light like the glare from molten metal. Petta was sitting inside with her rescuer. Both had a gloomy look of waiting. Both, it seemed, had sunk into silence long ago. There were sandwiches and coffee on the table between them. Under the ghastly violet-white of the fluorescent strips, Petta had the pallor of the unliving. The young man got to his feet as Quintin opened the door. His look of painful impatience, painfully repressed, changed to affable relief. He was a tall, very thin young man in a shrunken raincoat. He looked at his wrist-watch and said: 'The lady'll be all right now. I'd best be getting along. I'll just catch the 12.10.'

Quintin said: 'Thank you. We've wasted a lot of your time.'

He would have left it at that, but Petta murmured something; he recoiled, saying: 'Oh, no, I'm sure he wouldn't . . .' but the young man, though he seemed on the point of going, was still there. Quintin handed over a ten-

shilling note. The young man took it and went in silence as though he had been expecting more.

The food on the table was untouched. The coffee was a livid shade of yellow-green: the sandwiches looked like cement. 'Do you want this stuff?' Quintin asked.

'No. I had to buy something, sitting here so long.' She gave him a quick, uncertain glance, then, making a movement coquettish and pathetic, turned away. She had been crying. Looking down on her head, he noticed among the filmy fairness of her hair a sort of dust of grey hairs. Her whole appearance had taken on a kind of lifeless dryness as though, during the months she had been away, she had been pressed colourless like a flower in a book. Her lipstick had come off. In this light, her lips were mauve.

'Where is Theo?' he asked.

She said contemptuously: 'Oh, Theo!'

'I'd better ring him up.'

'No, Quintin, please. I've left him.'

He wondered what he was going to do with her. He was determined not to take her back to his flat.

'We must find a hotel. Where are your clothes and things?'

'Still at Theo's. I have my dressing-case.' Her voice was plaintive and barely audible. 'We had a row. I threw my latch-key at him and said I was going. When I came back he wouldn't open the door. I kept knocking, then the woman in that flat upstairs shouted at me—' she felt blindly for her handkerchief - 'I didn't know what to do.' She started to weep and he was aware again of her old aura of desperate misfortune. He longed to leave her.

He said: 'Would you like some fresh coffee? You can drink it while I ring round the hotels.' He turned to the bar from where the girl was looking at them with distaste. She had heard what he said. She said sullenly: 'We're closing.'

Petta was gazing at Quintin. It seemed to him she was drawing up from some inner source a sadness that filled her glance and weighed down her shoulders, hanging on her like

a cloak. He felt trapped. This was neither the time nor the place for an argument with her: and it was too late to go elsewhere.

He said: 'I'll get a taxi. You had better come back to my flat and I'll telephone from there.'

When they entered his flat, she looked restored. No doubt she thought she was home. Her manner regained its old vivacity. The lamp had been left on in his bedroom. She walked in there and, after glancing round it with an expert eye, gave him a grin. She picked up his comb. 'Auburn,' she said. 'Has Gem Primrose dyed her hair?'

Smiling coolly, he took the comb from her and said: 'We'd better go into the sitting-room.'

There she settled herself on the sofa. She said: 'How prosperous it all looks after Chelsea. An Adam's fireplace down in the hall; ruby carpet on the stairs.' She looked about her. 'You've brought all your painted satinwood here! I like your lime-green curtains. Sumptuous, aren't they?'

He said nothing.

Now she was safely in out of the dark, she was rapidly coming to life. She gave him a smile that would have left a stranger helpless. It roused no response in him. He observed her critically. For years she had looked much younger than her age; now the mask of her youth was fading. She behaved as though unaware of this. She said: 'Darling, give me a drink,' and kicked off her shoes and put her feet up on the cushions. She curled her toes inside her transparent stockings, laughed and said: 'Cold,' then, wrapping her coat round her, she settled into the sofa corner and smiled at him. She lifted her lashes seductively as though she were here for love.

She had with her a lizard-skin-covered box with golden clasps. She opened it and took from among the gold-topped bottles a box that had once held five hundred cigarettes. When she started smoking her movements became

cramped as though she lit and inhaled her cigarette with difficulty.

He handed her a glass of gin. 'You know you can't stay here.'

'But, darling, I could sleep on this sofa.' She stretched into the cushions. 'I could sleep here for ever, for ever, for ever.'

'No doubt. I prefer to be alone here. I too have a private life.'

'Darling!' she laughed at him as though that were some sort of joke. She stretched out her hand to him, still making all her little movements of charm, perhaps knowing they had no effect upon him, yet pretending to herself they were irresistible. She said: 'You never asked me for a divorce. Didn't you want to marry Gem?'

'She didn't want to marry me. She has always been quite satisfied with Berthold.'

'You mean, Berthold is richer than you.'

'I mean, Gem and I understood one another. She said from the first: "I know what you're after, and it isn't marriage".'

Petta made a gesture of distaste: 'A vulgar beginning!'

'But a propitious one. We knew we were two of a kind.'

'Indeed! Clever Gem! She was to get you by being the one who did not want you. Yet not so clever after all. It didn't work. And there's no retreating from a line like that.'

'You're talking nonsense.' Already he was irritated by her. His natural good humour always went to pieces in her company. He said: 'Gem and I are still friends.'

Petta laughed: 'Serve her right.'

'You flatter me; but the implications of your remarks have no basis in fact. Gem is an intelligent and capable woman, an independent career woman, and fond of her husband. The question of my getting my freedom never arose.'

'After all,' said Petta, 'there are disadvantages in freedom. It leaves you open to remarriage.'

'There are disadvantages in everything,' he said more bitterly than he had intended. He moved about the room,

unwilling to give her, by sitting down, excuse to stay longer. He said: 'I'll ring Worple's in Clarges Street. I know the clerk there. He'll find you a room.'

At once her front broke down. 'Oh, no—' her eyes filled with tears - 'Quintin, darling! I just can't set out again tonight. I'm too tired. And a bleak hotel bedroom, now, when I'm so depressed about things! Please! Don't send me away! Just give me a blanket and let me sleep here. I promise I'll go in the morning.'

Exhausted, knowing himself defeated, he dropped into a chair and told himself defeat had resulted less from Petta's appeals than from the lateness of the hour. If he did find her a room - and it would not be easy - he would have to escort her to the hotel: and she was quite capable of crying or making a scene in front of the reception clerk.

'All right,' he said. 'You will go in the morning. That's a promise,' as though her promises meant anything.

'Yes, darling. I will. I will.' Her face was strained with her desire to convince him. Her hand lying along the sofa back twitched nervously. It looked the hand of an invalid. It caught him, in spite of himself, into a painful pity of her. This must have been visible on his face, for at once she turned on him her gentlest smile and said: 'Had you been willing to take our marriage seriously, it would have meant everything to me. I would have been thankful for a stable emotion in my life.'

'Really! You expect me to believe that?'

He never had believed it, and he would not be induced to believe it now. When she was married to her first husband, she had racketed around with anyone who came along. She had gone off with him, Quintin, on a violent sex spree (he could think of no better term for it) without any preliminaries - and then, giving no warning, she had turned up on his doorstep in the middle of the night, saying: 'I want only you. I've come to you. I know you won't send me away.'

He became increasingly angry at the memory of it. He had tried to reason with her: 'Petta, this is ridiculous. You must go back to Henry at once. You can't leave a young child like Flora. You can't just abandon your home like this.'

She said: 'I had to get away from them. I was so bored.'

'I shall ring Henry and ask him to come and fetch you.'

At that, she had started screaming: 'No, no, no! If you send me away I shall kill myself. I mean it. I shall. I shall!'

He had not known her then as he did now. In the end she was triumphant, but he had never ceased to resent the fact that marriage, a state he had long avoided, should be so forced upon him. And now the same trick (a trick that had probably been played on Theo) was being played on him again! He could scarcely speak for anger. Some moments passed before he was able to ask her:

'What caused the break-up with Theo?'

'Oh!' She dropped her hand and a weight of gold bracelets fell from her coat sleeve to her wrist. 'He behaved abominably. You know I haven't seen Flora for ages! I wanted to take her there for Christmas. Theo wouldn't hear of it. Said he hated young people. Wouldn't have one around.'

'But you know Henry wouldn't let you take Flora to Theo's flat.'

'How would he know where I was taking her? I've a right to see her sometime. I intended telling him we were going to the country, or something.'

As though she could deceive Henry any longer! Quintin smiled wearily. And why had she suddenly decided she must see Flora? A whim, an excuse for a row, for bringing another wretched relationship to a conclusion!

Watching his face, she said: 'The truth was, I wanted to come back to you. I would never have left had you behaved just a little better.'

'I had no intention of behaving "better", as you put it. I never shall behave better, so please have no illusions about

it. A person who is blackmailed into marriage cannot be expected to take marriage seriously. You are being absurd.'

'But why? I loved you. Someone must take something seriously some time, or nothing means anything.'

She smiled as though it had been an encounter of wits and she had got the better of it. He turned away from her. She said: 'How have you managed alone here in this little flat?'

'Well enough. There's Mrs Trimmer in the basement. Alma Wheeldon lives just down the road. She'd probably look after me if I needed looking after.'

'Poor Alma! I hear she's become a widow.' Petta put out her hand to him again: 'Quintin! Do believe me when I say you are the only one who has meant anything to me.'

He did not believe it. He did not want to believe it. He had no intention of believing it. He had had enough of the whole business. He said: 'I'll make up the bed for you in my dressing-room.'

'No. I'll stay here.' She closed her eyes and at once seemed to be asleep. He had often seen her collapse in this way after emotional outbursts. He felt too tired to argue with her. He went to the airing-cupboard for blankets.

While he was out of the room she had roused herself and taken her sleeping-tablets from the case. As he entered she whispered: 'A glass of water, darling!'

'You won't need tablets tonight.'

'Yes, I must take them. You see, I may not sleep - and being afraid of not sleeping keeps me awake.'

He gave her the blankets and fetched the water. As he said Good-night, she lifted her face to him. He ignored the movement, but asked suddenly:

'Why did you choose Westminster Bridge?'

For a moment she had no reply, then she said mildly: 'It has a low parapet.'

The answer seemed absurd to him and yet, he realised, it was reasonable enough. Perhaps, after all, he was wrong in

thinking she had contrived the whole thing. Although more intelligent than most women – which did not mean much – she was capable of great silliness. At their first meeting he had found her mysterious. He had said to her (as he often said to women): ‘You are a mystery; a delicious mystery.’ In propinquity her mystery seemed merely the darkness of the void. He concluded she had no character at all. Her actions were as purposeless as the actions of a branch caught up in a gale.

One day she wanted him, the next she wanted Theo, then some other man. After years of neglecting the child, she had suddenly decided she must have Flora to stay with Theo. That was typical of her – and these whims could lead her to violent action, to rages, to attempted suicides, to bouts of despair; all meaningless.

Himself, he was a peaceful man. How could he be expected to live with a storm-tossed cipher? He knew that at the moment he was being weak with her, but not without reason. A branch flung about by the wind could blind a human being and shatter a life. He was a sensitive man. He was capable of suffering. He had no intention of provoking an action that might cost him years of remorse.

The truth was, she had once frightened him badly. Before that he had treated her threats of suicide as a joke. She had acted suddenly, without any warning, over some wretched girl in a dress-shop who had meant nothing to him.

They had been walking down Piccadilly to Gem Primrose’s sherry party. The dress-shop girl had been scarcely mentioned for days. They had, in fact, walked for two hundred yards without speaking, when Petta said: ‘I can stand no more of it,’ and stepped off the pavement in front of a speeding bus. In the second before the bus could strike her, he pulled her back. She had been pale, but he had been much more disturbed than she. Indeed, her calm had seemed to him abnormal. As she gazed after the bus,

showing no emotion, she said: 'I might have been dead by now.'

'Then let that be a lesson to you,' he said and, overriding his repulsion from her extravagant behaviour, he caught her arm and led her towards the Rivoli. She looked at him with an expression of contempt and sadness, and said: 'You are rather a stupid man, Quintin. Kind enough in your way, but stupid. You look intelligent, even perceptive, but you're nothing of the kind. You're nothing but the *homme moyen et sensuel*.'

'A very good thing to be,' he said with mock heartiness. He ordered a couple of double brandies. Apparently he needed a drink more than she did, for she barely sipped hers. In the end he drank both of them. Seated in a corner, her pale flower-pretty face enhanced by her pretty hat, she watched him with an ill-fitting gravity. Her look disconcerted him. He did not know what to say when she said: 'Death is no retaliation, is it? How could one get at you?'

Her hand lay limp on the table. He covered it with his own hand and at once her calm had collapsed. She looked as though she might burst into tears: instead she caught at his hand and held it fiercely. She seemed unable to speak for some moments, then she whispered: 'Quintin, please, no more girls in dress-shops!'

He agreed at once: 'No more girls of any sort,' for his interest was centred then on Gem Primrose, a mature woman, not to be taken lightly in any way. It was because of Gem that Petta went off with Theo.

The next morning Quintin awoke to the sound of Petta's laughter in the next room. She was charming Mrs Trimmer, making an ally of the woman, resolved no doubt to stay here until she found herself a new Theo.

Quintin, his will restored by sleep, told himself that would not happen.

Mrs Trimmer brought in his breakfast tray. He could see she was bursting to speak of Mrs Bellot. He gave her some orders for the day but made no mention of his wife.

‘Isn’t madam staying?’ Mrs Trimmer asked.

‘No.’

When he had eaten and put the tray aside, he lay for some time considering how best to deal with the situation. Because of his distrust of himself, he felt his wisest move would be to tell her he was going out to keep some engagement. He would expect her to be gone when he returned. He must arrange a genuine engagement: he could not trust his resolution if his statement were not backed by truth. How could he best engage himself?

It was Christmas Eve, nearly mid-day, so he could make no business arrangement. Then he remembered Ellie and her departure for Eastsea. He rang her at once.

He bathed and dressed and entered the sitting-room, to find Petta still on the sofa. Sleep had restored her too. Although she had slept all night in her clothes, she had still the elegance that was her one creative gift. However she lived, her appearance was always exquisite.

At the sight of him she smiled and stretched herself. ‘I slept so well, and your Mrs Trimmer makes delicious coffee.’ She tucked in her feet and said: ‘Come and sit beside me.’

He sat in the chair opposite. ‘I have soon to go out,’ he said, ‘but first we must arrange things for you. Where are you thinking of going when you leave here?’

She shook her head: ‘I don’t know.’ She spoke sadly, looking at him with wide, uncertain eyes. She had made up her face with her usual subtlety. Observing the delicate rose and white of her lips and skin, the film of blue-mauve shadowing her eyes, each colour exactly toned to the ash-fairness of her hair, he thought how few of the women he had known understood this art as she did. Her beauty could still move him. He looked away.

She said: 'Perhaps one of those service flats behind Knightsbridge? But surely I haven't to go at once? You will let me take a bath?'

'Of course. Don't be silly. Go and have one while I ring up the flats.'

He went to the telephone, but she did not move from the sofa. He arranged her bookings. 'There!' he said. 'You can take a taxi round as soon as you're ready. I have to go out, so I'll say good-bye.'

She broke in protestingly: 'Oh no. Surely you haven't to go just yet. Do sit down again and talk.' As he did not sit down, she pleaded: 'Quintin! Darling!'

He looked at his watch. Thank goodness he really had an appointment. He said firmly: 'I'm sorry, my dear, I must go. I'm seeing a friend off at Victoria.'

'A woman?'

'A girl.'

'Oh!' She raised her eyebrows and tried to give a small amused twist to her mouth, keeping up a show of vivacity, but he could see desolation come down on her like a weight on her shoulders. She glanced about her with a frightened and defenceless air, like someone lost in the world.

She said: 'It's Christmas, of course. I'd forgotten. We used to have a lot of fun at Christmas when I was a child.' Her lower lip shook and she pressed her teeth against it. After a pause, she said: 'Are you going away?'

'Yes. Mrs Trimmer wants a holiday. I'm going to my club. There will be no one here, so, in any case, there could be no question of your staying.'

'I know. I know,' she assured him, tears welling in her eyes. She added quickly, as though speaking before her voice could break: 'I'll have a bath now. I promise I'll be gone before you return.' She nodded to him, smiling, but not hiding her desolation that was, he supposed, genuine enough. No doubt all her emotions were genuine, but her

moods were so contradictory, each denied the other. He found it better to believe in none of them.

She went into the bathroom. As he put on his overcoat in the hall, she came out again: she had forgotten her case. In the time she had been alone, she had started crying. Her nostrils were pink, her mouth hung trembling like a baby's, she was dabbing at her eyes. He took up his hat and gloves, appearing to notice nothing. He must hurry. Exposed to the emptiness of the flat, she would fly like a bat exposed to light. He imagined she'd find some sort of companionship, somewhere.

He called 'Good-bye,' and was gone.

Ellie was packing her suitcase when the telephone rang down in the hall. She had nothing to hope for. She and Quintin had said their good-byes, yet from habit she followed the sound of Mrs Mackie's feet trudging up to the first floor, then to the second . . . She was coming to the top! She knocked on Ellie's door.

'Telephone,' she shouted.

'Oh, who is it?' Ellie asked, wanting her to say, as she sometimes did: 'It's a gentleman.' Instead she muttered blackly: 'How should I know?' Passing her, Ellie sped downstairs.

It *was* Quintin. Her excitement paralysed her throat. His voice sounded distant and without warmth. He asked the time she was leaving London. When she told him, he announced his intention of seeing her off.

'Oh, Quintin!' She was mazed with gratitude. After a moment she said: 'How wonderful! How kind!' She almost said: 'How generous!' but was stopped by uncertainty. Why had he suddenly decided to see her off? He was not given to caprice or change of plans. It had occurred to her he intended giving her a Christmas present.

Back in her room, she wondered what she could give to him. She was very worried. She could not buy anything. Having paid her rent in advance, bought her rail ticket and presents each for her mother and sister, she was nearly penniless.

She had only two things she could give away. One was her reproduction of Rousseau's 'Snake Charmer' that hung over her bed. It was her richest possession. In her opinion it 'made' the room – a sliver of a room with dirty cream walls, a torn haircord carpet, and just sufficient space to permit the occupant to pass the bed and reach the window. She sat on the bed for some time and looked at the Rousseau. She

would have thrust it upon Quintin had it not seemed to her an ostentatious gift, unwieldy and difficult to carry.

She would have to give him the other thing.

The glass roof of the station was dark with fog. People tore busily around one another, for there was still room to move, but soon there would not be. There were queues winding out from the platform barriers. Officially it was still daylight. The crowds and the lines of queuing people among them seemed like the darkness clotted at the bottom of a muddy pool. Then the lights came on. Distracted faces appeared, shape and impetus was given to the confusion.

Ellie, who was usually in a panic when catching trains, now cared nothing for her train. She was anxious only to find Quintin. They had arranged to meet at the buffet. As she made her way to it, she saw Quintin, in dark overcoat and bowler-hat, entering the door. A woman on her way out bumped into him, and he raised his hat and stepped aside. As he did so, two young men thrust past him with rough impatience as though his courtesy had been an interference with their liberty.

Ellie, beset with pity and indignation, thought: 'He does not belong here.' She hurried, as though to his defence, but when she reached him, there he was, standing by the counter, looking, as ever, mild and undisturbed.

He said: 'Ah, there you are, my dear! You've plenty of time. Will you have a sandwich or something?'

She shook her head. She looked up at the buffet clock, then out at the crowds, hiding behind all this display of anxiety her excitement at their meeting.

'Come on, then,' he said kindly, taking her small suitcase from her hand, 'we'll find you a seat.'

He passed quickly and efficiently through the crowd. Ellie, at his heels, felt elated by the relationship of their movement among all these people. His appearance seemed

to her exactly right. This was the man she would have chosen for herself. That he should have sought her out still seemed unbelievable felicity. This was the first time he had suggested their meeting for any purpose other than ultimate love-making of one degree or another. It seemed to her their past meetings had been organised, keeping their positions distinct, while this was informal and delightful, and conveyed a sense of permanency as though they were an engaged or married couple.

The train, when they reached it, was already full. In each carriage people sat four-a-side, their outgaze smug and hostile as the ingazers went searching by.

‘We’ll find one. We’ll find one,’ Quintin assured her, but they came to the end of the train and people were standing in the corridor.

Ellie said: ‘It’s all right. I’ll stand.’

‘Oh no.’

‘I often do.’ She got into a carriage before he could walk her back again.

He said: ‘Go into the first class. I’m sure it will be all right in this crowd.’

‘I might get caught.’ She did not say she had not the money to pay the difference. He knew her salary. He stared down the length of the train. She felt it in his mind to give her the money that would cover the first-class fare, and felt also his unwillingness to give it. She diverted him by taking a small parcel from her handbag: ‘A Christmas present.’

‘No! For me? How delightful!’ He stood holding the parcel – nursing it, rather – and smiled as though worried by something.

‘Aren’t you going to open it?’

She watched him taking out the cigarette-case and thought probably she would never see it again. It had been given to her the previous Christmas by a young man in Eastsea who had imagined he was in love with her. She did not smoke. She had never used it, but she had been fond of