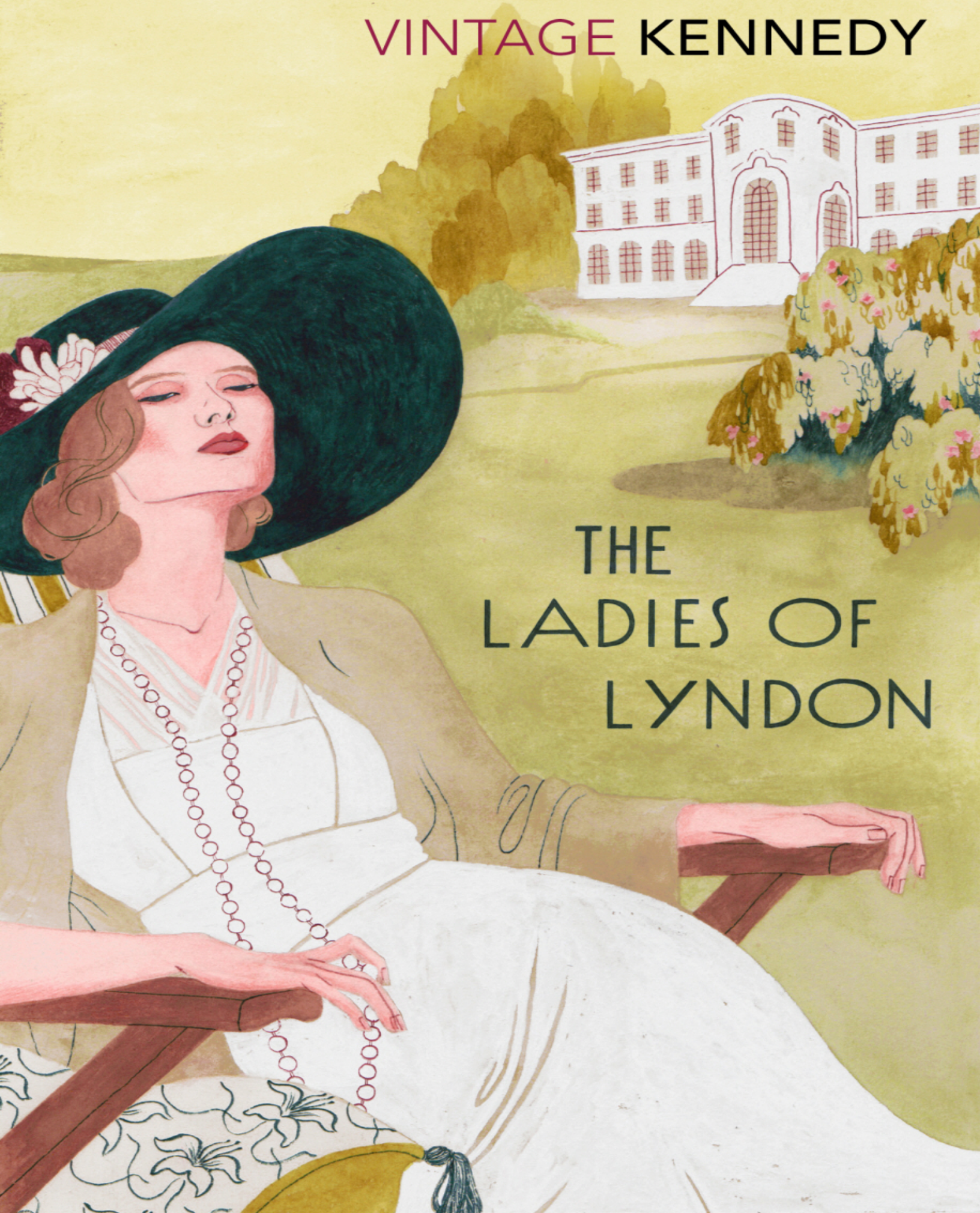
VINTAGE KENNEDY



THE LADIES OF LYNDON

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About the Book

Agatha is aware of an intensity, a powerful storm of emotion briefly awakened by a shortlived love affair with her cousin Gerald, that is entirely lacking from the successful marriage on which she is about to embark. Beautiful, young and carefully brought up, Agatha knows she is securing a perfect and luxurious future in marrying handsome John Clewer and becoming Mistress of Lyndon, and she soon becomes the perfect country house hostess. But when Gerald reappears and war in Europe disturbs the sheltered comfort of Lyndon forever, Agatha is once again haunted by the idea of a different life.

About the Author

Margaret Kennedy was born in London on 23 April 1896, the eldest of four children. She attended Cheltenham Ladies' College, then went on to study history at Somerville College, Oxford. Her first book, a study of modern European history, was published in 1922 and was soon followed by her first work of fiction, *The Ladies of Lyndon* (1923). Her second novel, *The Constant Nymph* (1924), became a worldwide best-seller, and with it Kennedy became a well-known and highly praised writer. The following year she married David Davies, a barrister like her father; they lived in London and had three children. Kennedy went on to write fifteen further novels, many of which were critically commended – *Troy Chimneys* (1953) was awarded the James Tait Black Memorial Prize. She also wrote plays, adapting both her novels *The Fool of the Family* and *The Constant Nymph* into successful productions. The latter opened in the West End in 1926, starring Noël Coward and John Gielgud, to great acclaim. Three different film versions of *The Constant Nymph*, featuring stars of the time such as Ivor Novello and Joan Fontaine, were equally popular, and led to Kennedy's engagement in film work for a number of years from the late 1930s. She also published a biography of Jane Austen (1950) and a work of literary criticism, *The Outlaws on Parnassus*, in 1958. In 1964 Margaret Kennedy moved from London to Woodstock, Oxfordshire, where she lived until her death on 31 July 1967.

ALSO BY MARGARET KENNEDY

The Constant Nymph
Red Sky at Morning
The Fool of the Family
Return I Dare Not
A Long Time Ago
Together and Apart
The Midas Touch
The Feast
Lucy Carmichael
Troy Chimneys
The Oracles
The Wild Swan
A Night in Cold Harbour
The Forgotten Smile

TO MY MOTHER

MARGARET KENNEDY

The Ladies of Lyndon

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

1

The Virtuous Stepmother

1.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, London contained quite a number of distinguished, grey-headed bachelors who owed their celibacy to Mrs Varden Cocks. In her youth she had refused offers of marriage from most of them and they found themselves unable to choose again when she tardily but finally dashed their several ambitions by selecting Varden. Indeed they almost gloried in their shackles, for this lady had reached, at forty-seven, the very zenith of her attractions. She was excessively handsome in the liberal style of the First Empire, and endowed with a wit in keeping with her appearance. She talked a great deal, in a rich, temperamental contralto, and had fine eyes which spoke for her in her rare silences. Her photographs were seldom successful since few of her friends were acquainted with her face in repose.

The fatigued erudition of her husband set off her animation with an especial piquancy. He had been a distinguished scholar when she married him and was, subsequently, never heard to speak. At intervals she would discuss with her friends the advantages of a political career for him, but his views on the subject were not known. He was, fortunately, very tolerably well off.

They had one child, a beautiful but silent daughter, who accompanied them to most places of entertainment and whose wardrobe was a perpetual testimony to a mother’s

taste. It was generally believed that Agatha Cocks was a very nice girl and everyone was pleased when she became engaged, a few months after her introduction, to an entirely suitable young man, a baronet, wealthy, and devotedly attached. Mrs Cocks, who believed in early marriages for young women, was overjoyed. The bridegroom had an additional advantage; he possessed a most exceptional stepmother. Mrs Cocks was accustomed to point out that a stepmother-in-law, of the right kind, is so much easier for a young bride to get on with than the usual mother-in-law. She is less likely to interfere; she has fewer claims. The dowager Lady Clewer was this kind of stepmother. She was a perfect monument of tact. 'I had thought,' Mrs Cocks would say in her rapid, vibrant voice, 'I had thought it to be impossible for a widow and a widower, each with children, to marry and produce a third family without a certain amount of storm and stress. But the Clewers have undoubtedly done it! There they all are, his sons and her daughter, and their child (I forget its sex), living together in perfect peace and amity. But then of course she is unique … and he died pretty soon….' One evening, about ten days before the wedding, this paragon gave a dinner party to which Mrs Cocks took her family. None of the trio anticipated a very pleasant evening, but only Mrs Cocks said so, since she alone could talk audibly and without discomfort while driving through London traffic. Her gloomy forebodings enlivened the entire journey from South Kensington to Eaton Square. This sort of party, she said, was apt to be trying. 'It isn't as if you didn't know all your in-laws already,' she complained. 'You've met them all by now, haven't you? Except the mentally deficient one. To go on meeting in this way is quite unnecessary, I don't gather that anyone will be there in the least congenial to me. Or to your father. Only Clewer relations, I expect. I shouldn't wonder if there aren't enough men to go round. That's what people generally

mean when they call a dinner “quite informal.” I hate a superfluity of women. Even dull men are better than none.’

Agatha sighed. She was disturbed by the tinge of petulance in these remarks. She had never supposed that the vogue of John’s stepmother would last for ever, since Mrs Cocks was very variable in her friendships and, before the engagement, had been accustomed to remember that Lady Clewer’s first husband had been some kind of successful Northern manufacturer, that the upholstered prosperity which her money had brought to Lyndon gave it a very odd look, and that Lois Martin, the manufacturer’s daughter, was rather a second-rate little person. All this she had, for the moment, comfortably forgotten, but Agatha had little doubt but that the Martin vulgarity must be, eventually, disinterred. Only she had hoped for fair weather until after the wedding, and she sighed because she feared that a dull dinner at this point would be most inopportune.

It was, unfortunately, very dull indeed. Besides Varden there were but two men present—Sir John Clewer, the host and bridegroom, and a sadly stolid Major Talbot, his uncle. These failed to inspire the ladies with any sort of liveliness. Depression, like a murky fog, hung over the tasteful brilliance of Lady Clewer’s table and barely lifted with the appearance of dessert, when the company rallied a little, sustained by the prospect of release. Mrs Cocks, with some show of animation, embarked upon the conquest of Major Talbot and was soon discoursing fluently to him about the government of India. At the other end of the table old Mrs Gordon Clewer, John’s great-aunt, was making her neighbours laugh. Her butt was probably the rising generation, a topic upon which she was in the habit of being funny in the epigrammatic style of the early ’nineties. The sulky face of little Lois Martin suggested that some shaft had gone home. Lois did not know what to make of Mrs Gordon Clewer. Against old ladies who were not thus entirely surrendered to age she had the weapons of youth

and personal attraction. But this small, terrifying woman, with her sharp tongue, her arrogant dowdiness and her quaint curled fringe, was invulnerable. She was securely entrenched in the past and made Lois feel disconcertingly raw: mere prettiness went for nothing with her, she had seen so much of it in her time. Her high incisive tones rang out in a sudden pause while Mrs Cocks was eating a *marron glacé:*

'… a whole roomful, I assure you, all dancing in this concentrated, painstaking way; all with this stupefied air. No conversation, you understand; almost like convicts taking exercise. "Good heavens, my dear!" I said to Lady Peel. "What has happened to them all? Surely the ventilation is insufficient? The children appear to me positively *abrutis!* And why do they never change their partners?" "Oh," she said, "it isn't the ventilation. They always look like that now somehow. And they can't change their partners. You know it's this new American dance, the … the Tango, and it's very difficult.…"'

Lois decided that Youth must speak; an attack like this could not be endured in silence. She leant across the table and inquired rather aggressively, in a voice loud enough to be generally heard:

'I say, Agatha, don't you think those old Victorian times, when they danced nothing but stupid old waltzes, must have been perfectly beastly?'

'Perfectly beastly!' murmured Mrs Gordon Clewer joyfully, as though committing the phrase to memory for some future narrative.

It was an unhappy expression: everyone was acutely aware of its stark unsuitability. Poor Lady Clewer, crimson with mortification, was but too sure of the manner in which Mrs Gordon Clewer would tell the tale:

'… That Martin child, Marian Clewer's daughter by her first marriage. A really horrid memorial of poor Marian's remoter past. One wonders so what the father was like. Of

course, one always thinks, looking at the girl, that Martin isn't a Jewish name. Marian is so clever with her—dressing her rather inconspicuously in pale pink, don't you know? But what was it she said? Oh, yes! … Perfectly beastly!'

The unhappy mother plunged into a general discourse upon dancing in a vain attempt to cover her daughter's lapse. Was it true that the Queen disapproved of these new American dances? But Mrs Gordon Clewer was too much pleased with the situation to destroy it.

'Well, child?' she demanded sharply of Agatha. 'What do you think? Do you consider the customs of your elders … er … perfectly beastly?'

The entire table waited to hear the young bride's opinion.

Agatha hesitated, not liking her position. Under her mother's quelling eye she dared not agree with Lois. But to disagree would be a sorry course and hardly sincere in a person of her years. With all the courtesy due to John's great-aunt she must make a stand for her own generation. So she smiled very prettily at Mrs Gordon Clewer and said:

'You know, I can never quite make out what the customs of my elders were exactly. There are such discrepancies in the accounts one gets. This matter of partners, for instance! I've been told that nice girls never danced more than three times with the same man. But … I find it very difficult to believe. Because once I was tidying an old bureau for my mother, and I came upon some of her dance programmes….'

'Never tell me I danced the whole evening with one man!' broke in Mrs Cocks.

'No, Mother! With two.'

They laughed, and she felt that she had not done badly. She had been a little impertinent, but they apparently forgave her for it. Catching the sparkle of approval in her lover's eye, she felt her heart leap with pleasure.

'No good, Mrs Cocks,' Major Talbot was saying to her protesting mother, 'you should have burnt 'em, y'know.'

Lady Clewer, however, did not look pleased. Scarcely recovered from the irritation of her daughter's exposure, she found nothing soothing in the spectacle of Agatha's discretion. Ill-temper was written clearly upon her smooth, fresh face, furrowing her still youthful brow, and emphasizing the massiveness of her jaw. She had the air of rehearsing to herself all the caustic reproofs which Lois should hear when the company departed. She glanced round the room, preparatory to rising, and her little blue eyes were ominous—hard as pebbles. The five women left the dining-room in an atmosphere of heavy displeasure.

Upstairs they found Cynthia, the youngest of the Clewers. This was the solitary child of Marian's second marriage. At fourteen she did not dine downstairs but came into the drawing-room for a short time after her schoolroom supper. She was an exquisite creature, slim but well grown, with a mane of shining hair the colour of honey. She had her mother's flawless skin, but her sharp eyes were dark and set rather close together in the creamy oval of her face. She advanced and made her civilities to the guests with cool self-possession. Lady Clewer immediately demanded, with unconcealed impatience, where James might be. Cynthia replied that he would not come, though Miss Barrington had said that he ought. Lady Clewer's jaw became grim and she was preparing to send for James on the instant when Cynthia demurely added that he had gone to bed. He had further threatened to come down in his pyjamas if anyone bothered him. Lady Clewer sharply bade her daughter to have done, and Cynthia was silent, her keen eyes flitting from face to face. She secretly enjoyed these trying situations invariably created by James; they gave variety to a monotonous life.

The guests were embarrassed at this exposure of the family skeleton. James, the younger brother of John, was supposed to be a little queer in the head. This was due to nothing 'in the family,' as his stepmother had carefully

explained to Mrs Cocks when the engagement was pending. She believed that she had traced it to an injury to the brain received by James at the age of seven months. The first Lady Clewer had died at his birth and he had not acquired a stepmother until he was almost six years old; it must have been during the period when he lacked a mother's care that the harm was done. The servants, who had tended him, could at first remember no accident and indignantly denied Marian's accusations of neglect. But under her astute cross-examination they contradicted themselves and each other, and it became established that there had been a fall. Marian, who had thought the child alarmingly backward, discovered that her worst fears were confirmed. She consulted a specialist immediately; he looked grave but would say nothing save that the child was abnormal. This abnormality became more marked as James grew older. Nothing, it seemed, could be done. At twenty-one he could not be depended upon sufficiently, in the matter of table manners, to dine with the family. He shared Cynthia's schoolroom meals, and his stepmother, always anxious to make the best of him, had decreed that he should be in the drawing-room every evening after dinner.

He had but recently come up to town with Cynthia and the governess, and Agatha had hitherto escaped the introduction. She dreaded it, fearing that she would find him very disagreeable. His future was, she knew, uncertain. Hitherto the whole family had lived at Lyndon, John's property in Oxfordshire. But, upon his marriage, the dowager intended to settle with her daughters in the Eaton Square house which had been left to her by her second husband. She had offered to warehouse James for a time until the young couple, comfortably settled at Lyndon, could make up their minds what to do with him. Agatha had a secret fear that they might have to invite him to live with them.

She had never seen Lyndon, but she understood it to be an imposing mid-Georgian affair, well stocked with the proper sort of furniture and portraits. Sometimes she wondered whether Marian had been able to impose as much of her essential mediocrity there as in Eaton Square. She had such a faculty for making nice things look insignificant, to all her possessions she seemed able to impart a hard, shining newness. Old things looked quite modern when she got hold of them. And her rooms were always so very full of chesterfields; they had struck Agatha's attention when calling in Eaton Square for the first time, and were all she could remember of the drawing-room when she was not in it, save perhaps a portrait of the mother of James and John which hung over the fireplace.

This picture had interested her. The sheen of the green velvet gown, cut in the aesthetic style of the 'eighties, toned well with the green Sèvres on the chimneypiece and was painted with unquestionable ability. The brooding peevishness of the face, however, gave food for reflection. It was a discordant note in a complacent room, suggesting a hidden, bygone rebellion, beyond the power of time to cancel. Glancing towards it, Agatha perceived with surprise that it was gone. A large looking-glass hung in its place. Lady Clewer, observing the direction of her eyes, became extremely benevolent and important:

'Ah, the portrait! Yes, it's gone. I've sent it down to Lyndon. Oh, yes, it's always hung here … But I thought … John's mother … he ought to have it….'

Everyone felt how right this was and Mrs Cocks warmly said so. Marian, beaming, said that it must hang in John's study. Agatha murmured something pretty, but she privately believed that John would not want it in his study. She happened to know that he hated it. He had a photograph, which he much preferred, in which his mother was wearing the clothes he best remembered, a little sailor hat, a blouse with full sleeves and a broad, tight belt. She

was sitting on the south terrace at Lyndon between two dogs. The portrait was certainly less cheerful.

Mrs Gordon Clewer, who had been clucking to herself, now startled Agatha by observing:

'If John takes after his father he won't want it. My poor nephew couldn't do with it at all. That's why he wouldn't have it at Lyndon. It was a great deal too good. And that gown was symbolical of so much in poor Mary that he couldn't abide. She got the greeny-yallery craze very badly and would go about looking like an invertebrate Burne-Jones. That's a little trying, you know, for a man who likes his wife to be well corseted. Smart women in those days had waists. Nowadays we condemn waists as artificial; but a man like John appreciates a certain amount of artificiality in a woman as a tribute to civilization, you understand. And, if I'm not mistaken, his son takes after him.'

She shot a glance at Agatha.

'The portrait has always been considered a very good one,' said Marian in an offended tone.

'Oh, very clever! Undeniably clever!' agreed Mrs Gordon Clewer. 'It was a very clever young man who painted it. A protégé of one of Mary's peculiar artistic friends. Rather *du peuple*, you know, but that was really what gave him distinction. The other artists of the period were mostly gentlemen, or, at any rate, cultured. He came down to Lyndon to paint her, I remember, and if you met him about the house you were apt to mistake him for some tubercular under-gardener or something, come in to water the plants. It's a pity he died so young. He would have distinguished himself. As it was, John would never believe that he really had talent. He used to ask Mary why she must bring such people into the house and why she couldn't get the thing done by somebody really good. Poor Mary! How furious she used to be!'

'Cynthia! Isn't it your bedtime?' inquired Marian with meaning.

It was not, and she knew it, but Mrs Gordon Clewer must really be reminded that poor John was Cynthia's father. She was going a little too far, even for an old lady. Perhaps she felt so herself, for, after a few seconds, she added sweetly:

'Of course it's wonderful of you to have given it up, my dear Marian. And so like you! You have a positive *flair* for this sort of thing.'

Lady Clewer was not quite sure in her own mind what a *flair* was, but she took the remark as a compliment, as it was undoubtedly meant.

2.

Lois at the piano did much to relieve the languors of the evening. It was an employment in which she always appeared to advantage, having good hands and arms. Her mother, fully sensible of this, encouraged her music. She had a little talent and a great deal of temperament—qualities which urged her towards musical composition. She had written several 'Tone Cycles,' which sounded very effective when she sang them. Tonight, however, she larded these more intellectual items in her repertoire with a few simple love songs out of compliment to John and Agatha, who were sitting together on a distant sofa looking at photographs of Lyndon. Cynthia, who never relaxed a sidelong surveillance, was forced to decide that they were dull lovers. They were, indeed, far too well bred to betray themselves by any form of public endearment; their very conversation, though pitched too low to reach the others, was pointedly impersonal.

John appreciated immensely this discreet semi-privacy; it was symbolical of his entire courtship. He had chosen his bride for her gravity and for the sedate composure of her manner, enchanted to find so much reserve and dignity in anything so young. He did not generally care for girls, disliking their vivacity and finding no recondite charms in

inexperience. He had always looked forward to marriage as a duty, inevitable, but infinitely boring and to be postponed if possible.

He had not danced above two or three times with the silent Miss Cocks, however, before he began to be aware that duty can be agreeably reinforced by inclination. Here at last was a girl, beautiful and innocent, yet possessed of a delicate and deliberate assurance;she sampled life discriminately, never losing her poise and never permitting herself to be engulfed. He was vastly pleased to find that he could be so completely in love.

The brevity of their courtship had given them few opportunities for intimate conversation, but he had seen all that he wanted. He suspected that she might be naturally cold in temperament, but this, in a wife, did not displease him. He had no great opinion of fond women, for he had encountered too many of them. Agatha was like none of her predecessors. He could almost enjoy the barriers put upon their intercourse. These decorous weeks, with their wealth of social functions, were like a prologue to the bridal day when, veiled and mysterious, she should be given entirely into his possession. The prolonged privacy of the honeymoon would give him leisure enough in which to contemplate and examine his prize. He was content meanwhile just to watch her as she bent over his photographs and to mark, with a recurrent shock of pleasure, the still pose of her little head. Though she seldom raised her eyes, he was quite sure that she knew all about the admiration in his regard. She had, in such matters, an intuition which she had probably inherited from her mother.

For that mother he had the warmest admiration, since to her training and experience he ascribed many of his bride’s perfections. His good opinion was amply returned. Mrs Cocks could not praise him enough to Mrs Gordon Clewer; he was an ideal son-in-law. The two ladies sat on an

enormous chesterfield in the middle of the room, conversing in undertones because of the music. Mrs Gordon Clewer nodded and chuckled. She, too, had a good opinion of John. He was her favourite great-nephew. The boy had taste. She had always prophesied that he would choose well.

'And your girl, too,' she added, 'I remember saying at the beginning of the Season that you wouldn't have her on your hands for long.'

'I'm very glad she's marrying so promptly,' said Mrs Cocks. 'I do believe in girls marrying young. Of course, she's very young; only just eighteen. But it's so much easier and wiser for them to marry before they form their tastes too much, don't you think?'

'Dear me, yes! They get such decided opinions once they are past twenty, that there's no doing anything with them.'

The old lady took a good look at the unformed Agatha through a small quizzing glass, adding:

'She's being so pretty behaved over those photographs, it's quite a pleasure to watch them. I've known you long enough, haven't I, to say without impertinence that her manners are quite charming?'

'And even if she is young,' pursued the mother, looking gratified, 'he is twelve years older. Old enough to look after her properly.'

'A sensible age,' said the old lady tranquilly. 'Just the age for settling down. And quite time, too! In fact Marian was getting rather anxious. Poor Marian! Always so conscientious! So determined that we are never to forget that John is the head of the family. She couldn't have taken his position more seriously if he'd been her own son. Her feudal instincts are really amazing. And for some months she's been greatly put about because she thought he wasn't going to do his duty and take a wife; so this engagement is an immense relief to her. She has such a sense of responsibility, you know; I really believe she had persuaded

herself that she was in some way to blame because he was evidently enjoying his bachelorhood. And lately I fancy she caught wind of an establishment which … but I expect I'm being indiscreet.…'

She paused for a moment, to discover, perhaps, whether her reference had been news to her companion. It apparently was not, for Mrs Cocks made a little sound of assent. Mrs Gordon Clewer continued:

'Ah, well! I daresay you've heard as much about that coil as I have. Marian was very funny about it. She won't see when things are really best ignored.'

There was a short silence, and then Mrs Cocks said gravely: 'I think John is very sensible, don't you? I mean, I think he'll make a sensible husband.'

'Of course he will, my dear. Men of his type generally do. They marry late, very often, but then they choose well and carefully.'

'I'm so glad you think so,' exclaimed Mrs Cocks. 'Not everyone upholds me on that point.'

And she glanced across the room at her husband who, seated beside Lady Clewer, was sleeping with painful obviousness. His faint objections to the match had been, for a day or two, an inconvenience to her. Mercifully they had soon wilted before her own overpowering common sense. She listened complacently to Lois, who was singing: 'Glad did I live and gladly die!' to an accompaniment of consecutive fifths. Mrs Cocks was not musical, but she had been to enough concerts to mistake the piece for Grieg. Lois was perfectly scarlet with pleasure as she set her right.

'It seems that she composed the thing herself,' observed the lady to her family on the way home. 'She's my friend for life.'

Varden woke up for a few minutes in order to make some strong remarks about the music they had been hearing. He spoke at unusual length and with extraordinary venom. Mrs

Cocks defended Lois, maintaining that the evening would have been very much worse without her.

'And you can't have heard much, Varden,' she added, 'for you slept the whole evening.'

'Not nearly as well as I could have wished.'

'She looks nice playing,' observed Agatha.

'Yes. It's a pity she has her mother's little blue eyes. They don't go well with that rather Jewish colouring. And that clumsy mouth! But she's not bad looking. Personally I'm rather sorry for her. I expect she's catching it now. At dinner I felt Lady Clewer was just saving it up until we'd gone. Didn't she look fierce? For all the world like a wax doll in a tantrum.'

'She was rather tempersome about James, too, I thought.'

'Oh,' cried Mrs Cocks, 'weren't you disappointed not to see James? I was. I'm dying to see how he has grown up. I remember him as a little boy, of course; about nine, I should think. When we stayed at Lyndon once. He was queer then, wasn't he, Varden?'

'I don't recollect him, my dear.'

'Well, we didn't see much of him. But he came into the drawing-room one evening with the little girls. Cynthia was quite a baby; it was very soon before Sir John died. Lois was very nicely behaved – came and shook hands with us quite as she should. But nothing would induce James to look at us. He crawled away and hid himself under a sofa. Such an ugly little boy, too, with this enormous head and very gappy teeth. Children like that are always very slow getting their second teeth, I believe. It's a great sign. She was so good with him, not apologizing particularly, you know, but just saying: "Oh, James is rather shy today, I'm afraid." She really has been wonderful with him.'

It occurred to Agatha that the wisest course would have been to put James under some special training. But she did not say this, as she had no wish to criticize Lady Clewer if she could help it. Varden, however, said it for her.

‘Well, she thought it over,’ explained Mrs Cocks, ‘and felt that it would really be very cruel to send him away to school. He is so shy and sensitive, and at home they understand him and don’t tease him. She felt that his own mother would not turn him out. And, of course, after his father’s death she had all the responsibility for him.’

‘But surely there are specially trained governesses …’

‘Oh, but Miss Barrington has been so splendid! So patient! Lady Clewer was telling me about her the other day. She is really Cynthia’s governess, you know, but she has taken the greatest pains with James. She taught him to read after a fearful struggle. He would not fix his attention. And Lady Clewer hasn’t neglected the question of special training, I can assure you. She’s gone into all this manual training, which is so important where deficients are concerned. Getting him very good drawing lessons. She says he has quite a turn that way.’

Varden gave it up. His wife was evidently determined to see no flaws in Lady Clewer’s stepmotherhood. He went to sleep again and they finished their journey in an unaccustomed silence. It occurred to the bride, with a slight shock, that this was one of the last of their little family expeditions. Very soon she would travel back from parties alone with her husband. This was an odd idea, for she was hardly ever permitted to drive alone with John. It had only happened three times—each of them a most glowing adventure. She was sure she would never get used to the notion of being alone with him as a matter of course. She did not know that she wanted to get used to it. In a way, being engaged was probably nicer than being married. It was more exciting. She ascribed her faint reluctance to regret at parting with her parents. She was convinced that she would miss her mother dreadfully, but she could not manage to feel very strongly over the loss of her father. He never seemed quite like a real person, somehow, though he had given her pearls for a wedding present.

Struck by an unusual contrition, she kissed him goodnight very kindly in the hall before going up to bed. Varden looked a little surprised but had the presence of mind to pat her shoulder with a creditable appearance of tenderness.

'Well, well, well!' she heard him mutter. 'That's a very handsome young sprig you've got hold of. Very handsome! I shouldn't wonder if it turned out quite a success.'

And he shuffled off to dream over books that smelt of dust, crouching all night beside his green-shaded lamp. He looked very withered and old, with his bent shoulders and sharp, yellow face. He was fumbling with the handle of his library door as she climbed the stairs; a strange, dim figure, centuries removed from her own vital youthfulness. She thought that years alone had flung this gulf between them; she could not guess that he was already sundered from his kind by the recognized shadow of approaching death. He knew that his days were short and looked at the rest of humanity as across the unbridgable abyss of the grave. There was not very much time, now, for this father and daughter to know each other better.

Arrived in the seclusion of her bedroom she sat down before a looking-glass and studied herself carefully for a few minutes. She decided happily that fatigue was not unbecoming to her; it merely invested her with an interesting pallor. To these meditations she was impelled by no personal vanity, but by a conscientious and painstaking sense of duty. It was with some difficulty that she had learnt to be concerned over her appearance; for she was naturally indifferent to it. Since her engagement, however, she had made real efforts, aware of the power of her loveliness over John.

Her cousin, Gerald Blair, who had loved her first, was different. He took very little account of her beauty; indeed she had reason to suppose that he scarcely regarded it at

all. But then she had not seen him for two years; not since that undignified episode at Canverley Fair.

She felt herself beginning to blush and saw that the pale person in the glass had got quite pink. The memory of that afternoon was a constant humiliation to her, for she knew that she had been very vulgar. She had conducted herself as no lady should, and a most unladylike retribution had overtaken her. Instigated and abetted by her graceless cousin she had done a lot of low things; she rode in swing-boats, and sucked Dorchester Rock in long pink sticks, and, finally, insisted upon having a look at the Fat Lady. This sight, so unexpectedly horrid, had hastened her doom. She had felt a little sick, she remembered, as she entered the Fat Lady's stuffy booth; its occupant had been a *coup de grâce.* Gerald, who was at that time a medical student, supported her manfully to a fairly private spot behind some caravans. To her gasping apologies he replied that he was used to much worse things in hospital.

Mrs Cocks took a stormy view of the event and was unappeased when the totally ineligible Gerald announced, with some show of penitence, that he and Agatha were engaged. He was promptly eliminated from the horizon and Agatha was sent to school in Paris, where she soon learnt to be ashamed of herself. But, in a mood of self-discipline, she had preserved a memento of her escapade, a wonderful photograph of the pair of them, taken, developed and framed, all in five minutes, by a machine on the fair ground. The proprietor merely had to pull a handle and the photograph came out in 'Brooch, Locket or Tie Pin, As Suits Lady Or Gent, Price One Shilling.' They had purchased one apiece upon entering the fair, which, as the shameless Gerald remarked, was a good thing, for they were in no condition to be photographed when they departed.

She thought of him now a little shyly. He was away in America, working with a friend in some very new kind of hospital. She wondered if he had forgotten all this; it would

be most convenient if he had. Anyhow, when she met him again she would be married and very dignified. As the Lady of Lyndon she could surely manage to live down the past. Gerald would come to stay with them, and she would be extremely nice to him, but matronly. These speculations were interrupted by her mother who, entering briskly, demanded why she was not in bed.

'I brought you home early especially in order that you might get your proper night's rest. I don't want you to be over-tired and in bad looks next week. Hurry up, dear!'

Agatha obediently began to hurry and her mother sat on the bed as if for conversation.

'Not a bad man, Major Talbot, when you come to talk to him. But uncommonly little to say for himself. What is that mark on your shoulder, child? Is it a little spot? Come into the light and let me look! Oh, it's only where a hook has rubbed you. Tell Andrews to sew it down. What was I saying? Oh, yes! About Mrs Gordon Clewer.'

'You began about Major Talbot.'

'Did I? Oh, well, I'd finished about him. Mrs Gordon Clewer said such nice things about you, my dear. I was so pleased. I felt I must tell you. For she's not a person who likes people easily. She thinks your manners are so nice.'

Agatha shook herself free from the clinging softness of her clothes and strolled away to the wash-hand stand. At intervals, while she splashed the warm water into her face and over her ears, she heard fragments of her mother's dissertation on good manners: '… the longer one lives the more one sees the importance … especially in marriage … at the bottom of all these horrid scandals and divorces … ill breeding, pure and simple, is nine-tenths of the trouble … among decent people such things really don't occur….'

Mrs Cocks broke off suddenly to descant upon trousseau lingerie as Agatha slipped into a nightdress. She had, after all, countermanded those sets in embroidered lawn that Agatha had wanted. Silk was so much more serviceable.

Agatha, reflecting that, once married, she could have as many lawn nightdresses as she pleased, assented and jumped into bed. Mrs Cocks continued gravely:

'I expect you think all my remarks about manners and marriage are beside the point. Perhaps they are, now. You are in love for the time being and I daresay it's all very nice. Of course, while that lasts it's all plain sailing. And, my darling, I don't see why it shouldn't last, in your case. For a very long time, at all events. It's such a suitable marriage. But, in case of accidents, a really well-mannered husband is a great stand-by. You'll know what I mean someday, if you don't now.'

She kissed her daughter and departed. Agatha was not at all disturbed by all this talk of love lasting or not lasting. It was unthinkable that John should cease to desire her while she remained beautiful. And, at eighteen, she could expect to be that for years and years. Thirty years at least, since she took after her mother. She would possess all the aids to beauty which wealth can supply. There would be no hardships to dim her fairness or slacken her hold on him. Nothing else could shatter love's illusion save the dallying years. She could very tolerably endure the idea that at sixty his ardour might begin to cool a little. She herself would be forty-eight, and everyone has to get old sometime.

Then, as her mother had said, there would always be beautiful manners. These would perpetually adorn his passionate demands and her own guarded compliance. They would dignify the late season of love's decay. This sentiment reminded her of something she had lately read. She turned to the shelf by her bed, where the carefully chosen books of her girlhood stood in well-dusted rows. Pulling out *Mansfield Park*, she sought through it for a passage dimly remembered. It was something, surely, said by Mary Crawford when she was congratulating her brother on his attachment to Fanny Price:

‘I know that a wife you loved would be the happiest of women; and that even when you ceased to love she would yet find in you the liberality and good breeding of a gentleman!’

3.

Three days later Agatha met James Clewer, the strange brother-in-law of whom she had heard so much. Her first impression was not pleasing, but she was very tired, having spent the afternoon with her mother at a dressmaker’s. There they encountered Lady Clewer and Lois, who was trying on a bridesmaid’s frock and looking very sulky. Agatha perceived that she did not like the dress at all, and seized a moment when the matrons were discussing shoes to whisper anxiously:

‘Do you like it?’

‘Quite,’ said Lois, without enthusiasm.

‘But you don’t! Please say! Is there anything you’d like altered?’

‘Not unless you altered the entire dress,’ burst out Lois. ‘It’s so … dull!’

‘Plain white is always rather nice, don’t you think?’

‘No, I don’t. It suits you, that style. But it makes me look like a mincing missie. And it’s so smug. Almost like a confirmation dress!’

‘We did think of orange sashes shot with gold and bouquets of orange-lilies to match. Do you think that would improve it?’

‘Why, yes! That would be original. If you’ll excuse me, I think pale pink carnations are frightfully ordinary for a bouquet. Why did you give up the idea?’

‘My mother … your … our mothers … decided, I think, that it would be unsuitable for the younger bridesmaids.’

‘Our mothers! It’s not their wedding!’

‘Isn’t it?’ Agatha’s eyes danced. ‘I’m not so sure. But … I’ll see what I can do.’

When she could gain her mother’s ear she asked politely:

‘We’ve quite decided, then, against the orange scarves and flowers?’

‘Yes, quite,’ said Mrs Cocks. ‘As Lady Clewer says, they will be much too conspicuous.’

‘It’s a pity you didn’t decide before your gown was ordered, Mother. You’re bound to have an orange-tawny bouquet with it and it will clash so with the pink and white bridesmaids.’

‘Oh, do you think it will?’ Mrs Cocks looked distressed. ‘How tiresome! In that case the bridesmaids must have orange bouquets.’

‘A little pointless without the sashes, don’t you think?’

‘The sash could always be taken off afterwards if Mam’selle wanted to wear plain white,’ put in the dressmaker, who was all for the more striking effect.

Lady Clewer’s face cleared and she conceded:

‘That is so. We can take it off after.’

‘Not if I know it,’ was the outspoken comment of the two young women.

They exchanged triumphant glances but said nothing until they were left together in the car while their mothers paid a short call, later in the afternoon. Lois dropped the slightly hostile manner which she had formerly adopted towards Agatha and said with confidential friendliness:

‘You managed that very well. Do you always get your own way like that?’

‘Very seldom. It’s too much trouble.’

‘I do hate my clothes. They are so disgustingly *jeune fille.* I wonder if I shall ever be allowed to choose my own things! It’s the limit! I’ve been out two years, and I’m less free than I was in the schoolroom. I’m chaperoned all over the place, and have to read Italian with Miss Barrington, and can’t buy so much as a pair of stockings for myself.

Other girls aren't treated like this; not so badly! You are two years younger than me and after next week you'll be absolutely free and allowed to buy what clothes you please, just because you're married. It's simply silly.'

'You must hurry up and get married too, Lois.'

'How am I to get married I should like to know? There is literally no one. All the boys Mother makes me dance with are so stupid. I couldn't marry anybody but a clever man that I had something in common with. And I'd never be allowed to, because clever men are nearly always poor. Anyhow, I've only met one man I could ever marry, and'—with a stifled giggle—'I'm afraid he's quite impossible. I don't know what Mother would say if she knew I was in love with him.'

Agatha looked very much embarrassed.

'Were you ever in love before you met John?'

'No.'

There was a distinct chilliness in Agatha's voice. She had been brought up to regard this sort of conversation as extremely ill-bred. Her courteous priggishness infuriated Lois, who would have given the world not to have giggled. After an uncomfortable pause Agatha made an attempt at conciliation. She said:

'You'll be allowed to come and stay with us at Lyndon, won't you? I'll invite entire house parties of clever men to meet you. I'll have all the intellect of Oxford to tea every afternoon.'

Before so glorious a prospect Lois softened.

'Oh, Agatha, that will be fun! Will you really? You may laugh, but you don't know how much the idea of any sort of escape appeals to me. My mother is so much worse than yours, if you'll excuse me saying so. She treats me sometimes as if I had no more sense than James.'

'Do you know, I haven't met James yet.'

'Haven't you? Well, you have got a treat coming! It's a good thing you didn't see him before you accepted John. It

might have scared you off.’

‘You alarm me.’

‘I’m only preparing you. You know, Mother doesn’t see that she only makes him worse, the way she goes on.’

‘But how, Lois?’

‘Oh, well … though he’s so quiet he’s really very sensitive. And he minds frightfully when she treats him like a baby. He understands quite enough to feel the indignity. It’s that, more than anything, which makes him so shy. He’s got perfectly awful now. He won’t go anywhere. And he’s always worse if she’s there.’

‘But he was always shy, wasn’t he?’

‘Oh, yes. He never would go to parties or anything, even when he was a little boy. And when other children came to play with us he always hid. Sometimes he came with us to tea at the rectory, but that was the most he would do.’

‘Shyness grows on people so.’

‘Yes, I know. And he’s just terrified of meeting you. He’s been lectured so tremendously about being civil and saying the right thing. If you come back to tea with us today, you will see him.’

‘Am I to come back with you?’

‘John said we were to bring you because he will be in. Then he can take you home if your mother can’t come.’

‘A drive with John! A drive with John!’ sang Agatha’s heart.

Lois was saying:

‘If you do come, please be nice to James and help him out if he puts his foot in it. You know, I sort of understand him, as far as anyone can. We used to back each other up a good bit in the schoolroom days. And I know how much he minds things. She shouldn’t speak to him, in front of people, as if he wasn’t all there.’

‘But … frankly … is he?’

‘I suppose not, if it comes to the point. But he’s got more sense than she thinks.’