

Elizabeth Bowen, "The Return"

Mr and Mrs Tottenham had come home.

The moist brown gravel of the drive and sweep bore impress of their fly wheels. Lydia Broadbent listened from the doorstep to the receding gritty rumble of the empty fly, and the click and rattle as the gate swung to. Behind her, in the dusky hall, Mr Tottenham shouted directions for the disposal of the luggage, flustered servants bumped against each other and recoiled, and Porloch the gardener shouldered the heavy trunks with gasps and lurches, clutching at the banisters until they creaked.

Lydia heard Mrs Tottenham burst open the drawing-room door and cross the threshold with her little customary pounce, as though she hoped to catch somebody unawares. She pictured her looking resentfully round her, and knew that presently she would hear her tweaking at the curtains. During her six weeks of solitude the house had grown very human to Lydia. She felt now as if it were drawing itself together into a nervous rigor, as a man draws himself together in suffering irritation at the entrance of a fussy wife.

'Were these all the letters, Lydia? I hope none were forwarded to Wickly? Porloch, do be careful of the paint! The fly was very stuffy. Lydia. I wish you'd ordered one of Bicklesfield's. His are always clean.'

Mrs Tottenham had darted out of the drawing-room, swept up her letters from the table, and stood hesitating at the bottom of the stairs.

'You might order tea immediately. Yes, the drawing-room for today.' A red shimmer of firelight invited them through the open door. 'Herbert, *Her*-bert!'

Mr Tottenham was clattering in the smoking-room. His face peered crossly at them round the door.

'I wondered if you had gone upstairs. Porloch has been very careless of the paint. You might have watched him, Lydia!' She vanished slowly into the gloom above.

Lydia went into the drawing-room and stood warming her hands before the fire. A servant with a lighted taper passed from gas-bracket to gas-bracket and the greenish lights sprang upwards in her wake. Outside the brown gloom deepened over the November garden. The young distorted trees loomed dark and sullen, the air was thick with moisture, heavy with decay.

Today there had been no time to think. Lydia was aware but dimly of a sense of desolation and of loss. Something was shattered that had built itself around her during these coherent weeks, something violated which had been sacred unawares. Every fibre of her quivered with hostility to these invaders who were the owners of the house. She was at odds with herself again, at odds with her surroundings. She stared at her gaunt reflection in the fireplace and knew that her best companion had drawn back again, forbidding her. She would be baffled once again by the hostility of Lydia Broadbent, her derision, her unsparing scorn. 'I was such friends with myself when they left us together; we were so harmonious and at ease with each other, me and myself and the house. Now we are afraid and angry with each other again.'

Mr and Mrs Tottenham were impossible. They were childless, humourless and

dyspeptic. They were not even funny. There was nothing bizarre about them, or tragic or violent or farcical. They neither loved nor hated each other, there was nothing they did not know about each other; no mystery or fear between them. In the early days of their marriage they had been actively and articulately unhappy. She had had a lover; he had left her for months together and lived in some drab wickedness elsewhere. Then her lover had deserted her, he had been left more money; they had drifted together again, bought 'The Laurels', spun the shams and miseries around them like a web and lurked within them. They visited, were reputable and entertained; and kept a home for Mr Tottenham's nephew, their expectant heir.

'Lydia?'

The thin voice fluted over the banisters. Lydia hurried upstairs, flicked at a panel of Mrs Tottenham's door and entered, her footsteps muffled among the woolliness of many rugs. There was a blot of yellow light from a candle on the writing-table. Mrs Tottenham stood beside the bed, staring at two sheets of close-written paper and an envelope, which she held out fan-wise between rigid fingers, as one holding a hand at cards.

'Did – has my husband taken his mail yet? Did he overlook the letters?'

'I think Mr Tottenham's post is still lying on the hall table. Is there anything you want to show him?' They had all their correspondence in common; it was quite impersonal.

'No, no, Lydia, shut the door, please. Is tea up? It is draughty: I should have liked a fire. You might get the things out of my dressing-bag – there, it's over on the sofa.'

This constant attendance was to begin again. Lydia was well schooled to it; why had she forgotten?

She unpacked the combs and brushes, and Mrs Tottenham fidgeted before the glass.

'Light the gas, please. I hate this half-light!' There was resentment in her glance towards the window, where the last daylight leaked in faintly through draperies of parchment-coloured lace. Why was Mrs Tottenham so agitated, tugging her hat off and patting at her crimped and faded hair?

She bent to a level with the mirror; haggard-eyed and grinning with anxiety, she searched her bleached and baggy face to find what prettiness was there. Lydia watched her with apathetic curiosity from where, on her knees beside the sofa, she unwrapped the shoes and bottles from their little Holland bags.

'Have you seen the photo,' asked Mrs Tottenham suddenly, 'of me when I was twenty-five? On the chiffonier – the plush-framed one – you *must* know it!'

Lydia assented.

'It's a good one, isn't it? D'you think it's like me – now, I mean?' 'Quite a likeness, really, considering.'

'*Considering?*' (How sharp her voice was!)

'Oh, change of fashions makes a difference, doesn't it, and, well . . . time, of course.'

'Of course I know it wasn't taken yesterday, Lydia. *I* don't need telling. But I'm a lot younger than Mr Tottenham to look at. There was a gentleman at the Hydro took us for father and daughter, really he did!'

Her voice was by turns peremptory, confidential, almost appealing. It died out into

silence.

The room was restive and disturbed. 'Oh, you unhappy house,' thought Lydia. 'They have broken into your silence and given you nothing in return.'

'Tea will be ready. I think,' she reminded. Mrs Tottenham turned sharply from the glass, and Lydia saw with amazement that she had reddened her lips. They shone with sticky brightness in her sallow face.

Mrs Tottenham was conscious of her glance. 'Shows rather, doesn't it?' she queried diffidently, and rubbed her mouth with the back of her hand till the red was smeared out over her cheeks.

'One looks so washy after a journey. Just a touch of colour – one wouldn't notice it, hardly, if it wasn't for the glare.' Her muttered extenuations were not addressed to Lydia.

They heard the tea-tray rattling through the hall. Lydia turned the light out, and they prepared to descend. Mrs Tottenham pawed her in the twilight. 'You needn't mention to Mr Tottenham I've opened any of my letters. I'll be showing him the rest. This one was rather particular – from a friend of mine, it was.' An appeal still quavered in her husky tones which her paid companion had never heard before.

From the drawing-room they saw Mr Tottenham scurrying across the grass, drawn teawards by the lighted window. There was something quick and furtive about him; Lydia had never been able to determine whether he dodged and darted as pursuer or pursued.

'Wretched evening, wretched.' He chattered his way across the crowded room. 'Been talking to Porloch – garden's in an awful way; shrubberies like a jungle. Did 'e sell the apples?'

He darted the inquiry at Lydia, turning his head sharply towards her, with his eyes averted as though he could not bear to look at her. At first she had imagined that her appearance repulsed him. She knew herself for a plain woman, but now she had learnt that he never looked at anybody if he could avoid it.

'Oh, he sold them well, I believe. I thought he wrote about them?'

'Oh yes, yes, sharp man, Porloch. Dickie been running round for his things?'

'Not often. He says he wants his letters forwarded to Elham till further notice.'

The reference to Elham tickled Dickie's uncle. He put his cup down, giggled, mopped at his mouth and darted a side glance at his wife.

Mrs Tottenham was not listening. She sat very stiff and upright, staring straight before her, crumbling at her cake.

'Hey, Mollie! Dickie's gone to Elham. Didgehear that? Pore old Dickie's gone to Elham again! Never wrote and told me, never told me anything. The young dog!'

The silence was once more outraged by his falsetto giggles.

He held his cup out for Lydia to refill, and she watched with fascination the convulsive movements his throat made while he drank.

'Hey, Mollie! Don't forget we're going to the Gunnings tomorrow. Write it down, my dear girl, write it down, and tell them about orderin' the cab.' He always referred to Lydia obliquely as 'they' or 'them'.

'Gunnin's a good fellow,' he informed the fireplace.

'This cake is uneatable, Lydia. Wherever did you buy it?' Her grumble lacked conviction; it was a perfunctory concession to her distrust of her companion's housekeeping.

'Birch's. I'm sorry, Mrs Tottenham. Aren't you ready for more tea? It's nice and hot for you, isn't it, after the journey?'

Lydia felt as though she had caught her own eye, and was embarrassed and discomfited. She listened with derision to her glib and sugary banalities of speech. 'The perfect companion!' taunted the hostile self. 'What about all these fine big truths and principles we reasoned out together? Yesterday we believed you were sincere. "*Nice and hot after the journey.*" Bah!'

The mirror in the overmantel now fascinated Mrs Tottenham. She finished her tea mechanically, laid her cup down and stood before the fireplace, patting and tweaking at her hair. Her husband looked at her contemptuously. 'Pretty little daughter I've got!' he mumbled, with his mouth full of cake. It was a bitter comment on the mistake made by the gentleman at the Hydro.

Mrs Tottenham put her hands before her face and hurried from the room.

Lydia began to gather up the tea things, and a servant darkened the windows with a musty clatter of Venetian blinds. Mr Tottenham's chair creaked as he stretched his legs out to the fire. The room was hot with the smell of tea and tea-cakes, and the smell of upholstery and wilting ferns was drawn out by the heat.

The hall outside was cold and quiet. The sense of the afternoon's invasion had subsided from it like a storm. Through a strip of door the morning-room beckoned her with its associations of the last six weeks. She saw the tall uncurtained windows grey-white in the gloom.

Her book lay open on a table: she shut it with a sense of desolation. It would never be finished now, it was too good a thing to read while *they* were in the house; to be punctuated by *her* petulant insistent chatter, *his* little shuffling, furtive steps. If only this room were all her own: inviolable. She could leave the rest of the house to them, to mar and bully, if she had only a few feet of silence of her own, to exclude the world from, to build up in something of herself.

If she did not go upstairs now Mrs Tottenham would call her, and that, in this room, would be more than she could bear. Vaguely she pictured headlines: "Laurels" Murder Mystery. Bodies in a Cistern. Disappearance of Companion.' The darkness was all lurid with her visionary crime.

Mrs Tottenham had not been round the house. She did not say the rooms smelt mouldy, and she left the curtain-draperies alone.

Lydia wondered deeply.

'Did you know Sevenoaks?'

The question abashed her. What had Mrs Tottenham had to do with Sevenoaks?

'N – no. Scarcely. I've been over there sometimes for the day, from Orpington.'

'A friend of mine lives there – a Mr Merton. He wrote to me today. He's come back

from the Colonies and bought a place there. It's funny to hear from an old friend, suddenly. It makes me feel quite funny, really.'

She did not sound funny. Her voice was high-pitched with agitation. Lydia had been told all about Mrs Tottenham's friends, and seldom listened. But she did not remember Mr Merton.

'He wants to come and see us. I really hardly like, you know, to suggest the idea to Mr Tottenham.'

'I thought you'd all your friends in common. How well these night-dresses have washed! They must have laundered nicely at the Hydro.'

'Ah, but this is different, you see.' She laughed a little conscious laugh. 'Mr Merton was a particular *friend* of mine. I – Mr Tottenham didn't used to know him.'

'I see,' said Lydia vaguely. 'A friend of yours before your marriage.'

'Well, no. You see, I was very young when I was married. Quite an inexperienced young girl – a child, you might almost say.'

Lydia supposed that Mrs Tottenham *had* been young. She strained her imagination to the effort.

'I did very well for myself when I married Mr Tottenham,' the wife said sharply. 'I must say I never was a fool. My mother'd never brought me up to go about, but we did a good deal of entertaining at one time, Mr Tottenham's friends and my own, and we always had things very nice and showy. But it was a lonely life.'

Mrs Tottenham's confidences were intolerable. Better a hundred times that she should nag.

'So you liked the Hydro – found it really comfortable?'

'Oh yes, But it's the coming back – to this . . . Lydia, you're a good sort of girl. I wonder if I ought to tell you.'

'Don't tell me anything you would regret,' said Lydia defensively, jerking at the drawer-handles.

'You see, Mr Merton was a good deal to me at one time; then we tore it, and he went off to Canada and married there. I heard he'd been unhappy, and that there was the rumour of a split. Of course he didn't write or anything; we had ab-so-lutely *torn* it; but I couldn't help hearing things, and she seems to have been a really bad sort of woman – there were children, too. He's bringing the children back with him to Sevenoaks.'

'He wants to come and see me. He's been thinking about me a great deal, he says, and wondering if I've changed, and wishing – He always was a straight sort of man; it was only circumstances drove him crooked. I daresay I was a good bit to blame. I've kept his photograph, though I know I didn't ought, but I liked having it by me to look at.'

She had unlocked a drawer and held a stiff-backed photograph up beneath the light, scrutinizing it. Lydia listened to a distant surge of movement in the house beneath her; steps across the oil-cloth, windows shutting, voices cut off by the swinging of a door. She felt, revoltedly, as though Mrs Tottenham were stepping out of her clothes.

'He says he's hardly changed at all. Seventeen years - they go past you like a flash, he says, when you're working.'

'Seventeen years,' said Lydia deliberately, 'are bound to make a difference to a woman. Did you care for him?'

Mrs Tottenham made no answer; she was staring at the photograph. Her eyes dilated, and she licked her lips.

'I suppose you'll be glad to see him again?' suggested Lydia. She felt suddenly alert and interested, as though she were watching through the lens of a microscope some tortured insect twirling on a pin.

Mrs Tottenham sat down stiffly on the sofa, and laid the photo on her lap. Suddenly she clasped her hands and put them up before her eyes.

'I couldn't,' she gasped. 'Not after all these years I couldn't. Not like this. O Lord, I've got so ugly! I can't pretend – I haven't got the heart to risk it. It's been so real to me, I couldn't bear to lose him.'

'It's all gone, it's all gone. I've been pretending. I used to be a fine figure of a woman. How can I have the heart to care when I couldn't keep him caring?'

'You broke it off. It was all over and done with, you told me so. It was wrong, besides. Why should either of you want to rake it up when it was all past and done with seventeen years ago?'

'Because it *was* wrong. It's this awful *rightness* that's killing me. My husband's been a bad man, too, but here we both are, smirking and grinning at each other, just to keep hold of something we neither of us want.'

Lydia was terrified by the dry, swift sobbing. She felt suddenly hard and priggish and immature. All her stresses, her fears and passions, were such twilight things.

Mrs Tottenham stood upright and held the photograph in the flame of the gas jet, watching the ends curl upwards. For all her frizzled hair and jingling ornaments and smudgy tentative cosmetics she was suddenly elemental and heroic.

It was over.

Lydia went quietly out of the room and shut the door behind her.

The place was vibrant with the humanity of Mrs Tottenham. It was as though a child had been born in the house.