THE REMISSION

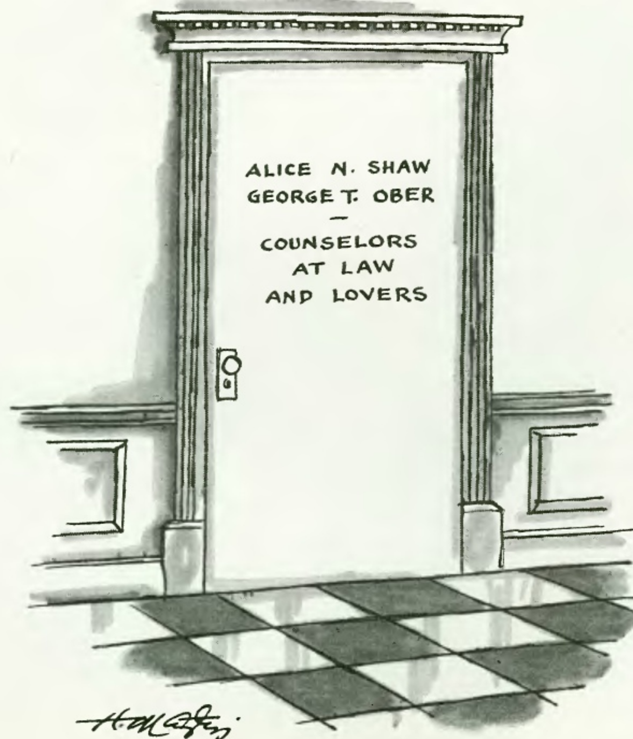
WHEN it became clear that Alec Webb was far more ill than anyone had cared to tell him, he tore up his English life and came down to die on the Riviera. The time was early in the reign of the new Elizabeth, and people were still doing this—migrating with no other purpose than the hope of a merciful sky. The alternative (Alec said to his only sister) meant queuing for death on the National Health Service, lying on a regulation mattress and rubber sheet, hearing the breath of other men dying.

Alec—as obituaries would have it later—was husband to Barbara, father to Will, Molly, and James. It did not occur to him or to anyone else that the removal from England was an act of unusual force that could rend and lacerate his children's lives as well as his own. The difference was that their lives were barely aboveground and not yet in flower.

The five Webbs arrived at a property called Lou Mas in the course of a particularly hot September. Mysterious Lou Mas, until now a name on a deed of sale, materialized as a pink house wedged in the side of a hill between a motor road and the sea. Alec identified its style as Edwardian-Riviera. Barbara supposed he must mean the profusion of balconies and parapets, and the slender pillars in the garden holding up nothing. In the new southern light everything looked to her brilliant and moist, like color straight from a paintbox. One of Alec's first gestures was to raise his arm and shield his eyes against this brightness. The journey had exhausted him, she thought. She had received notice in dreams that their change of climates was irreversible; not just Alec but none of them could go back. She did not tell him so, though in better times it might have interested that part of his mind he kept fallow: being entirely rational, he had a prudent respect for second sight.

The children had never been in a house this size. They chased each other and slid along the floors until Alec asked, politely, if they wouldn't mind playing outside, though one of the reasons he had wanted to come here was to be with them for the time remaining. Dispatched to a flagged patio in front of the house, the children looked down on terraces bearing olive trees, then a railway line, then the sea. Among the trees was a cottage standing empty which Barbara had forbidden them to explore. The children were ten, eleven, and twelve, with the girl in the middle. Since they had no school to attend, and did not know any of the people living around them, and since their mother was too busy to invent something interesting for them to do, they hung over a stone balustrade waving and calling to trains, hoping to see an answering wave and perhaps a decapitation. They had often been warned about foolish passengers and the worst that could happen. Their mother came out and put her arms around Will, the eldest. She kissed the top of his head. "Do look at that sea," she said. "Aren't we lucky?" They looked, but the vast, flat sea was a line any of them could have drawn on a sheet of paper. It was there, but no more than there; trains were better—so was the ruined cottage. Within a week James had cut his hand on glass breaking into it, but by then Barbara had forgotten her injunction.

The sun Alec had wanted turned out to be without compassion, and he spent most of the day indoors, moving from room to room, searching for some gray, dim English cave in which to take cover. Often he sat without reading, doing nothing, in a room whose one window, none too clean, looked straight into the blank hill behind the house. Seepage and a residue of winter rainstorms had traced calm yellowed patterns on its walls. He guessed it had once been assigned to someone's hapless, helpless paid companion, who would have marvelled at the thought of its lending shelter to a dying man. In the late afternoon he would return to his bedroom, where, out on the balcony, an angular roof shadow slowly replaced the sun. Barbara unfolded his deck chair on the still burning tiles. He stretched out, opened a book, found the page he wanted, and at once closed his eyes. Barbara knelt in a corner, in a triangle of light. She had taken her clothes off—all but a sun hat; bougainvillea grew so thick no one could see. She said, "Would you like me to read to you?" No; he did everything alone, or nearly. He was—always—bathed shaved, combed, and dressed. His children would not remember him unkempt or dishevelled, though it might not have mattered to them. He did not smell of sweat or sickness or medicine or fear.



When it began to rain, later in the autumn, the children played indoors. Barbara tried to keep them quiet. There was a French school up in the town, but neither Alec nor Barbara knew much about it; and, besides, there was no use settling them in. He heard the children asking for bicycles so they could ride along the motor road, and he heard Barbara saying no, the road was dangerous. She must have changed her mind, for he next heard them discussing the drawbacks and advantages of French bikes. One of the children—James, it was—asked some question about the cost.

"You're not to

mention things like that," said Barbara. "You're not to speak of money."

Alec was leaving no money and three children—four, if you counted his wife. Barbara often said she had no use for money, no head for it. "Thank God I'm Irish," she said. "I haven't got rates of interest on the brain." She read Irishness into her nature as an explanation for it, the way some people attributed their gifts and failings to a sign of the zodiac. Anything natively Irish had dissolved long before, leaving only a family custom of Catholicism and another habit, fervent in Barbara's case, of anticlerical passion. Alec supposed she was getting her own back, for a mysterious reason, on ancestors she would not have recognized in Heaven. Her family, the Laceys, had been in Wales for generations. Her brothers considered themselves Welsh.

"I had to send the wife upstate for a while. Disco madness."

It was Barbara's three Welsh brothers who had put up the funds for Lou Mas. Houses like this were to be had nearly for the asking then. They stood moldering at the unfashionable end of the coast, damaged sometimes by casual shellfire, difficult to heat, costly to renovate. What the brothers had seen as valuable in Lou Mas was not the villa, which they had no use for, but the undeveloped seafront around it, for which each of them had a different plan. The eldest brother was a partner in a firm of civil engineers; another managed a resort hotel and had vague thoughts about building one of his own. The youngest, Mike, who was Barbara's favorite, had converted from the R.A.F. to commercial flying. Like Alec, he had been a prisoner of war. The two men had that, but nothing else, in common. Mike was the best travelled of the three. He could see, in place of the pink house with its thick walls and high ceilings, one of the frail, domino-shaped blocks that were starting to rise around the Mediterranean basin, creating a vise of white plaster at the rim of the sea.

Because of United Kingdom income-tax laws, which made it awkward for the Laceys to have holdings abroad, Alec and Barbara had been registered as owners of Lou Mas, with Desmond, the engineer, given power of attorney. This was a manageable operation because Alec was entirely honorable, while Barbara did not know a legal document from the ace of diamonds. So when the first scouts came round from the local British colony to find out what the Webbs were like and Barbara told them Lou Mas belonged to her family she was speaking the truth. Her visitors murmured that they had been very fond of the Vaughan-Thorpes and had been sorry to see them go—a reference to the previous owners, whose grandparents had built Lou Mas. Barbara did not suppose this to be a snub: she simply wondered why it was that a war out of which her brothers had emerged so splendidly should have left Alec, his sister, and the unknown Vaughan-Thorpes worse off than before.

The scouts reported that Mr. Webb was an invalid, that the children were not going to school, that Mrs. Webb must at one time have been pretty, and that she seemed to be spending a good deal of money, either her husband's or her own. When no improvements were seen in the house, the grounds, or the cottage, it began to be taken for granted that she had been squandering, on trifles, rather more than she had.

Her visitors were mistaken: Barbara never spent more than she had, but only the total of all she could see. What she saw now was a lump of money like a great block of marble, from which she could chip as much as she liked. It had come by way of Alec's sister. Alec's obstinate refusal to die on National Health had meant that his death had somehow to be paid for. Principle was a fine thing, one of Barbara's brothers remarked, but it came high. Alec's earning days were done for. He had come from a long line of medium-rank civil servants who had never owned anything except the cottages to which they had eventually retired, and which their heirs inevitably sold. Money earned, such as there was, disappeared in the sands of their male progeny's education. Girls were expected to get married. Alec's sister, now forty-four, had not done so, though she was no poorer or plainer than most. "I am better off like this," she had told Alec, perhaps once too often. She was untrained, unready, unfitted for any life save that of a woman civilian in wartime; peace had no use for her, just as the postwar seemed too fast, too hard, and too crowded to allow for Alec. Her only

SHOOTING WHALES

When the shoals of plankton
swarmed into St. Margaret's Bay,
turning the beaches pink,
we saw from our place on the hill
the sperm whales feeding,
fouling the nets
in their play,
and breaching clean
so the humps of their backs
rose over the wide sea meadows.

Day after day
we waited inside
for the rotting plankton to disappear.
The smell stilled even the wind,
and the oxen looked stunned,
pulling hay on the slope
of our hill.
But the plankton kept coming in
and the whales would not go.

That's when the shooting began.
The fishermen got in their boats
and went after the whales,
and my father and uncle
and we children went, too.
The froth of our wake sank fast
in the wind-shaken water.

The whales surfaced close by.
Their foreheads were huge,
the doors of their faces were closed.
Before sounding, they lifted
their flukes into the air
and brought them down hard.
They beat the sea into foam,
and the path that they made
shone after them.

Though I did not see their eyes,
I imagined they were
like the eyes of mourning,
glazed with rheum,
watching us, sweeping along
under the darkening sheets of salt.

When we cut our engine and waited
for the whales to surface again,
the sun was setting,
turning the rock-strewn barrens a gaudy salmon.
A cold wind flailed at our skin.
When finally the sun went down
and it seemed like the whales had gone,
my uncle, no longer afraid,
shot aimlessly into the sky.

Three miles out
in the rolling dark
under the moon's astonished eyes,
our engine would not start
and we headed home in the dinghy.
And my father, hunched over the oars,
brought us in. I watched him,
rapt in his effort, rowing against the tide,
his blond hair glistening with salt.
I saw the slick spillage of moonlight
being blown over his shoulders,
and the sea and spindrift
suddenly silver.

He did not speak the entire way.

At midnight
when I went to bed,
I imagined the whales
moving beneath me,
sliding over the weed-covered hills of the deep;
they knew where I was;
they were luring me
downward and downward
into the murmurous
waters of sleep.

—MARK STRAND

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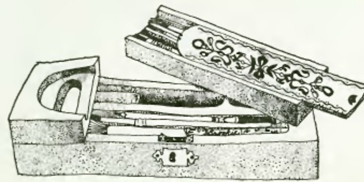
asset was material: a modest, cautiously invested sum of money settled on her by a godparent, the income from which she tried to add to by sewing. Christening robes had been her special joy, but fewer babies were being baptized with pomp, while nylon was gradually replacing the silks and lawns she worked with such care. Nobody wanted the bother of ironing flounces and tucks in a world without servants.

Barbara called her sister-in-law "the mouse." She had small brown eyes; was vegetarian; prayed every night of her life for Alec and for the parents who had not much loved her. "If they would just listen to me," she was in the habit of saying—about Alec and Barbara, for instance. She never complained about her compressed existence, which seemed to her the only competent one at times; at least it was quiet. When Alec told her that he was about to die, and wanted to emigrate, and had been provided with a house but with nothing to run it on, she immediately offered him half her capital. He accepted in the same flat way he had talked about death—out of his driving need, she supposed, or because he still held the old belief that women never require much. She knew she had made an impulsive gesture, perhaps a disastrous one, but she loved Alec and did not want to add to her own grief. She was assured that anything left at



the end would be returned enriched and amplified by some sort of nimble investment, but as Alec and his family intended to live on the capital she did not see how this could be done.

Alec knew that his sister had been sacrificed. It was merely another of the lights going out. Detachment had overtaken him even before the journey south. Mind and body floated on any current that chose to bear them.

For the first time in her life Barbara had enough money and no one to plague her with useless instructions. While Alec slept, or seemed to, she knelt in the last triangle of sun on the balcony reading the spread-out pages of the *Continental Daily Mail*. It had been one thing to have no head for money when there was none to speak of; the present situation called for percipience and wit. Her reading in-

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formed her that dollars were still stronger than pounds. (Pounds were the decaying cottage, dollars the Edwardian house.) Alec's background and training made him find the word "dollars" not overnice, perhaps alarming, but Barbara had no class prejudice to hinder her. She had already bought dollars for pounds, at giddy loss, feeling each time that she had put it over on banks and nations, on snobs, on the financial correspondent of the *Mail*, on her own clever brothers. (One of the Webbs' neighbors, a retired Army officer named Major Lamprey, had confided to Alec that he was expecting the Russians to land in the bay below their villas at any time. He intended to die fighting on his doorstep; however, should anything happen to prevent his doing so, he had kept a clutch of dollars tucked in the pocket of an old dressing gown so that he and his mother could buy their way out.)

In Alec's darkened bedroom she combed her hair with his comb. Even if he survived, he would have no foothold on the nineteen-fifties. She, Barbara, had been made for her time. This did not mean she wanted to live without him. Writing to one of her brothers, she advised him to open a hotel down here. Servants were cheap—twenty or thirty cents an hour, depending on whether you worked the official or the free-market rate. In this letter her brother heard Barbara's voice, which had stayed high and breathless though she must have been thirty-four. He wondered if this was the sort of prattle poor dying old Alec had to listen to there in the south.

"SOUTH" was to Alec a place of the mind. He had not deserted England, as his sad sister thought, but moved into one of its oldest literary legends, the Mediterranean. His part of this legend was called Rivabella. Actually, "Rivebelle" was written on maps and road signs, for the area belonged to France—at least for the present. It had been tugged between France and Italy so often that it now had a diverse, undefinable character and seemed to be remote from any central authority unless there were elections or wars. At its heart was a town sprawled on the hill behind Lou Mas and above the motor road. Its inhabitants said "Rivabella;" they spoke, among themselves, a Ligurian dialect with some Spanish and Arabic expressions mixed in, though their children went to school and learned French and that they descended from a race with blue eyes. What had remained constant to Rivabella was its poverty, and the groves of ancient olive trees that only the strictest of laws kept the natives from cutting down, and the look and character of the people. Confined by his illness, Alec would never meet more of these than about a dozen; they bore out the expectation set alight by his reading, seeming to him classless and pagan, poetic and wise, imbued with an instinctive understanding of light, darkness, and immortality. Barbara expected them to be cunning and droll, which they were, and to steal from her, which they did, and to love her, which they seemed to. Only the children were made uneasy by these strange new adults, so squat and ill-favored, so quarrelsome and sly, so destructive of nature and pointlessly cruel to animals. But, then, the children had not read much, were unfamiliar with films, and had no legends to guide them.

Barbara climbed up to the town quite often during the first weeks, looking for a doctor for Alec, for a cook and a maid, for someone to give lessons to the children. There was nothing much to see except a baroque church from which everything removable had long been sold to antiquarians, and a crumbling palace along the very dull main street. In one of the palace rooms, she was given leave to examine some patches of peach-colored smudge she was told were early-Renaissance fres-

coes. Some guidebooks referred to these, with the result that a number of the new, hardworking breed of post-war traveller panted up a steep road not open to motor traffic only to find that the palace belonged to a cranky French countess who lived alone with her niece and would not let anyone in. (Barbara, interviewing the niece for the post of governess, had been admitted but was kept standing until the countess left the room.) Behind the palace she discovered a town hall with a post office and a school attached, a charming small hospital—where a doctor was obtained for Alec—and a walled graveyard. Only the graveyard was worth exploring; it contained Victorian English poets who had probably died of tuberculosis in the days when an enervating climate was thought to be good for phthisis, and Russian aristocrats who had owned some of the English houses, and Garibaldian adventurers who, like Alec, had never owned a thing. Most of these graves were overgrown and neglected, with the headstones all to one side, and wild grasses grown taller than roses. The more recent dead seemed to be commemorated by marble plaques on a high concrete wall; these she did not examine. What struck her about this place was its splendid view: she could see Lou Mas, and quite far into Italy, and of course over a vast stretch of the sea. How silly of all those rich foreigners to crowd down by the shore, with the crashing noise of the railway. I would have built up here in a minute, she thought.

Alec's new doctor was young and ugly and bit his nails. He spoke good English, and knew most of the British colony, to whose colds, allergies, and perpetually upset stomachs he ministered. British ailments were nursery ailments; what his patients really wanted was to be tucked up next to a nursery fire and fed warm bread-and-milk. He had taken her to be something like himself—an accomplice, "My husband is anything but childish," she said gently.

"Rivabella has only two points of cultural interest," he said. "One is the market on the church square. The other is the patron saint, St. Damian. He appears on the church roof, dressed in armor, holding a flaming sword in the air. He does this when someone in Rivabella seems to be in danger." She saw, in the way he looked at her, that she had begun her journey south a wife and mother whose looks were fading, and arrived at a place where her face seemed exotic. Until now she had thought only that a normal English family had taken the train and the caricature of one had descended. It amounted to the same thing—the eye of the beholder.

From his balcony Alec saw the hill as a rough triangle, with a few straggling farms beneath the gray and umber town (all he could discern was its color) and the apex of graveyard. This, in its chalky whiteness, looked like an Andalusian or a North African village washed up on the wrong part of the coast. It was alien to the lush English gardens and the foreign villas, which tended to pinks, and beiges, and to a deep shade known as Egyptian red. Within those houses was a way of being he sensed and understood, for it was a smaller, paler version of colonial life, with chattering foreign servants who might have been budgerigars, and hot puddings consumed under brilliant sunlight. Rules of speech and regulations for conduct were probably observed, as in the last days of the dissolving Empire. Barbara had told him of one: it was bad form to say "Rivebelle" for "Rivabella," for it showed one hadn't known about the place in its rich old days, or even that Queen Victoria had mentioned "*pretty* little Rivabella" to the Crown Princess of Prussia in one of her affectionate letters.

"All snobs," said Barbara. "Thank God I'm Irish," though there was something she did in a way mind: saying "Rivebelle" had been one of her first mistakes. Another had been hiring a staff without taking advice. She was also suspected of paying twice the going rate, which was not so much an economic blunder as a social affront. "All snobs" was not much in the way of ammunition, but, then, none of the other villas could claim a cook, a maid, a laundress, a gardener, and a governess marching down from Rivabella, all of them loyal, devoted, cheerful, hardworking, and kind.

She wrote to her pilot brother, the one she loved, telling him how self-reliant people seemed to be here, what pride they took in their jobs, how their philosophy was completely alien to the modern British idea of strife and grab. "I would love it if you would come and stay for a while. We have more

"Now, don't pretend, Mr. Delevan. I can always tell when a man is starting to get interested in me."

rooms than we know what to do with. You and I could talk." But no one came. None of them wanted to have to watch poor old Alec dying.

The children would recall later on that their cook had worn a straw hat in the kitchen so that steam condensing on the ceiling would not drop on her head, and that she wore the same hat to their father's funeral. Barbara would remind them about the food. She had been barely twenty at the beginning of the war, and there were meals for which she had never stopped feeling hungry. Three times a day, now, she sat down to cream and butter and fresh bread, new-laid eggs, jam you could stand a spoon in: breakfasts out of a storybook from before the war. As she preferred looking at food to eating it, it must have been the idea of her table spread that restored richness to her skin, lustre to her hair. She had been all cream and gold once, but war and marriage and Alec's illness and being hard up and some other indefinable disappointment had skimmed and darkened her. And yet she felt shot through with happiness sometimes, or at least by a piercing clue as to what bliss might be. This sensation, which she might have controlled more easily in another climate, became so natural, so insistent, that she feared sometimes that its source might be religious and that she would need to reject—out of principle—the felicity it promised. But no; she was, luckily, too earthbound for such nonsense. She could experience sudden felicity merely seeing her cook arrive with laden baskets, or the gardener crossing the terrace with a crate of flowering plants. (He would bed these out under the olive trees, where they perished rapidly.) Lou Mas at such times seemed to shrink to a toy house she might lift and carry; she would remember what it had been like when the children were babies still, and hers alone.

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Carrying Alec's breakfast tray, she came in wearing the white dressing gown that had been his sister's parting gift to her. Her hair, which she now kept thick and loose, was shades lighter than it had been in England. He seemed barely to see her. But, then, everything dazzled him now. She buttered toast for him, and spread it with jam, saying, "Do try it, darling. You will never taste jam like this again." Of course, it thundered with prophecy. Her vision blurred—not because of tears, for she did not cry easily. It was as if a sheet of pure water had come down with an enormous crashing sound, cutting her off from Alec.

Now that winter was here, he moved with the sun instead of away from it. Shuffling to the balcony, he leaned on her shoulder. She covered him with blankets, gave him a book to read, combed his hair. He had all but stopped speaking, though he made an effort for strangers. She thought, What would it be like to be shot dead? Only the lingering question contained in a nightmare could account for this, but her visionary dreams had left her, probably because Alec's fate, and so to some measure her own, had been decided once and for all. Between house and sea the gardener crouched with a trowel in his hand. His work consisted of bedding-out, and his imagination stopped at salvia: the ground beneath the olive trees was dark red with them. She leaned against the warm parapet and thought of what he might see should he look up—herself, in white, with her hair blazing in the sun. But when he lifted his face it was only to wipe sweat from it with the shirt he had taken off. A dream of loss came back: she had been ordered to find new names for refugee children whose names had been forgotten. In real life, she had wanted her children to be called Giles, Nigel, and Samantha, but Alec had interfered. All three had been conceived on his wartime leaves, before he was taken prisoner. The children had her gray eyes, her skin that freckled, her small bones and delicate features (though Molly showed signs of belonging to a darker, sturdier race), but none of them had her richness, her shine. They seemed to her and perhaps to each other thin and dry, like Alec.

Everything Mademoiselle said was useless or repetitive. She explained, " 'Lou Mas' means 'the farm,' " which the children knew. When they looked out the dining-room window, she remarked, "You can see Italy." She came early in order to share their breakfast; the aunt she lived with, the aunt with the frescoes, kept all the food in their palace locked up. "What do you take me for?" she sometimes asked them, tragically, of some small thing, such as their not paying intense attention. She was not teaching them much—only some French, and they were picking this up faster now than she could instruct. Her great-grandfather had been

"Believe me, it's hell to live with genius—even advertising genius."

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a French volunteer against Garibaldi (an Italian bandit, she explained); her grandfather was founder of a nationalist movement; her father had been murdered on the steps of his house at the end of the war. She was afraid of Freemasons, Socialists, Protestants, and Jews, but not of drowning or falling from a height or being attacked by a mad dog. When she discovered that the children had been christened (Alec having considered baptism a rational start to agnostic life), she undertook their religious education, which was not at all what Barbara was paying for.

After lunch, they went upstairs to visit Alec. He lay on his deck chair, tucked into blankets, as pale as clouds. James suddenly wailed out, believing he was singing, "We'll ring all the bells and kill all the Protestants." Silence; then James said, "Are there any left? Any Protestants?"

"I am left, for one," said his father.

"It's a good thing we came down here, then," said the child calmly. "They couldn't get at you."

Mademoiselle said, looking terrified, "It refers to old events in France."

"It wouldn't have mattered." Alec's belief had gone to earth as soon as he had realized that the men he admired were in doubt. His conversation, like his reading, was increasingly simple. He was reading a book about gardening. He held it close to his face. Daylight tired him; it was like an intruder between memory and the eye. He read, "Nerine. Guernsey Lily. Ord. Amaryllidaceae. First introduced, 1680." Introduced into England, that meant. "Oleander, 1596. East Indian Rose Bay, 1770. Tamarind Tree, 1633. Chrysanthemum, 1764." So England had flowered, become bedecked, been bedded-out.

The book had been given him by a neighbor. The Webbs not only had people working for them, and delicious nursery food to eat, and a garden running down to the sea, but distinguished people living on either side—Mr. Edmund Cranefield of Villa Osiris to the right, and Mrs. Massie at Casa Scotia on the left. To reach their houses you had to climb thirty steps to the road, then descend more stairs on their land. Mr. Cranefield had a lift, which looked like a large crate stood on its side. Within it was a kitchen chair. He sat on the chair and was borne up to the road on an electric rail. No one had ever seen him doing this. When he went to Morocco, during the worst of the winter, he had the lift disconnected and covered with rugs, the pond drained and the fish put in tanks, and his two peacocks, who screamed every dawn as if a fox were at them, boarded for a high fee with a private zoo. Casa Scotia belonged to Mrs. Massie, who was lame, wore a tweed cape, never went out without a hat, walked with a stick, and took a good twenty minutes to climb her steps.

Mr. Cranefield was a novelist, Mrs. Massie the author of a whole shelf of gardening books. Mr. Cranefield never spoke of his novels or offered to lend them; he did not even say what their titles were. "You must tell me every one!" Barbara cried, as if she were about to rush out and return with a wheelbarrow full of books by Mr. Cranefield.

He sat upstairs with Alec, and they talked about different things, quite often about the war. Just as Barbara was beginning to imagine Mr. Cranefield did not like her, he invited her to tea. She brought Molly along for protection, but soon saw he was not drawn to women—at least, not in the way she supposed men to be. She wondered then if she should keep Will and James away from him. He showed Barbara and Molly the loggia where he worked on windless mornings; a strong mistral had once blown one hundred and forty pages across three gardens—some were even found in a hedge at Casa Scotia. On a table were oval picture frames holding the likeness of a fair girl and a fair young man. Looking more closely, Barbara saw they were illustrations cut out of magazines. Mr. Cranefield said, "They are the pair I write about. I keep them there so that I never make a mistake."

"Don't they bore you?" said Barbara.

"Look at all they have given me." But the most dispossessed peasant, the filthiest housemaid, the seediest nail-biting doctor in Rivabella had what he was pointing out—the view, the sea. Of course, a wave of the hand cannot take in everything; he probably had more than this in reserve. He turned to Molly and said kindly, "When you are a little older you can do some typing for me," because it was his experience that girls liked doing that—typing for Mr. Cranefield while waiting for someone to marry. Girls were fond of him: he gave sound advice about love affairs, could read the future in handwriting. Molly knew nothing about him then, but she would recall later on how Mr. Cranefield, who had invented women deep-sea divers, women test pilots, could not imagine—in his innocence, in his manhood—anything more thrill-

ing to offer a girl when he met one than "You can type."

Barbara broke in, laughing: "She is only eleven."

This was true, but it seemed to Molly a terrible thing to say.

Mrs. Massie was not shy about bringing *her* books around. She gave several to Alec, among them "Flora's Gardening Encyclopedia," seventeenth edition, considered her masterpiece. All her books were signed "Flora," though it was not her name. She said about Mr. Cranefield, "Edmund is a great, pampered child. Spoiled by adoring women all his life. Not by me." She sat straight on the straightest chair, her hands clasped on her stick. "I do my own typing. My own gardening, too," though she did say to James and Will, "You can help in the garden for pocket money, if you like."

IN the late spring, the second Elizabeth was crowned. Barbara ordered a television set from a shop in Nice. It was the first the children had seen. Two men carried it with difficulty down the steps from the road, and soon became tired of lifting it from room to room while Barbara decided where she wanted it. She finally chose a room they kept shut usually; it had a raised platform at one end and until the war had been the site of amateur theatricals. The men set the box down on the stage and began fiddling with antennae and power points while the children ran about arranging rows of chairs. One of the men said they might not have a perfect view of the Queen the next day, the day of the Coronation, because of Alps standing in the way. The children sat down and stared at the screen. Horizontal lightning streaked across its face. The men described implosion, which had killed any number of persons all over the world. They said that should the socket and plug begin to smoke, Barbara was to make a dash for the meter box and pull out the appropriate fuse.

"The appropriate fuse?" said Barbara. The children minded sometimes about the way she laughed at everything.

When the men had gone, they trooped upstairs to tell Alec about the Alps and implosion. He was resting in preparation for tomorrow's ceremony, which he would attend. It was clear to Molly that her father would not be able to get up and run if there was an accident. Kneeling on the tiles (this was in early June), she pressed her face to his hand. Presently he slipped the hand away to turn a page. He was reading more of the book Mrs. Massie had pounded out on her 1929 Underwood—four carbons, single-spaced, no corrections, every page typed clean: "Brussels sprouts—see Brassica." Brassica must be English, Alec thought. That was why he withdrew his hand—to see about Brassica. What use was his hand to Molly or her anxiety to him now? Why hold her? Why draw her into his pale world? She was a difficult, dull, clumsy child, something of a moper when her brothers teased her but sulky and tough when it came to Barbara. He had watched Barbara, goaded by Molly, lose control of herself and slap the girl's face, and he had heard Molly's pitiful credo: "You can't hurt me. My vaccination hurt worse than that." "Hurt more," Alec in silence had amended. "Hurt me *more* than that."

He found Brassica. It was Borecole, Broccoli, Cabbage, Cauliflower. His eyes slid over the rest of what it was until "Native to Europe—BRITAIN," which Mrs. Massie had typed in capital letters during the war, with a rug around her legs in unheated Casa Scotia, waiting for the Italians or the Germans or the French to take her away to internment in a lorry. He was closer in temper to Mrs. Massie than to anyone else except his sister, though he had given up priorities. His blood was white (that was how he saw it), and his lungs and heart were bleached, too, and starting to disintegrate like snowflakes. He was a pale giant, a drained Gulliver, cast up on the beach, open territory for invaders. (Barbara and Will were sharing a paperback about flying saucers whose occupants had built Stonehenge.) Alec's intrepid immigrants, his microscopic colonial settlers, had taken over. He had been easy to subdue, being courteous by nature, diffident by choice. He had been a civil servant, then a soldier; had expected the best, relied on good behavior; had taken to prison camp thin books about Calabria and Greece; had been evasive, secretive, brave, unscrupulous only sometimes—had been English and middle-class, in short.

That night Alec had what the doctor called "a crisis" and Alec termed "a bad patch." There was no question of his coming down for the Coronation

"And for those of you who may disagree with my public stance on Salt II, remember, privately I'm saying quite the opposite."

the next day. The children thought of taking the television set up to him, but it was too heavy, and Molly burst into tears thinking of implosion and accidents and Alec trapped. In the end the Queen was crowned in the little theatre, as Barbara had planned, in the presence of Barbara and the children, Mr. Cranefield and Mrs. Massie, the doctor from Rivabella, Major Lamprey and his old mother, Mrs. Massie's housekeeper, Barbara's cook and two of her grandchildren, and Mademoiselle. One after the other, these people turned their heads to look at Alec, gasping in the doorway, holding on to the frame. His hair was carefully combed and parted low on one side, like Mr. Cranefield's, and he had dressed completely, though he had a scarf around his neck instead of a tie. He was the last, the very last, of a kind. Not British but English. Not Christian so much as Anglican. Not Anglican but giving the benefit of the doubt. His children would never feel what he had felt, suffer what he had suffered, relinquish what he had done without so that this sacrament could take place. The new Queen's voice flowed easily over the Alps—thin, bored, ironed flat by the weight of what she had to remember—and came as far as Alec, to whom she owed her crown. He did not think that, precisely, but what had pulled him to his feet, made him stand panting for life in the doorway, would not occur to James or Will or Molly—not then, or ever.

He watched the rest of it from a chair. His breathing bothered the others: it made their own seem too quiet. He ought to have died that night. It would have made a reasonable ending. This was not a question of getting rid of Alec (no one wanted that) but of being able to say later, "He got up and dressed to see the Coronation." However, he went on living.

A nurse came every day, the doctor almost as often. He talked quietly to Barbara in the garden. A remission as long as this was unknown to him; it smacked of miracles. When Barbara would not hear of that, he said that Alec was holding on through will power. But Alec was not holding on. His invaders had pushed him off the beach and into a boat. The stream was white, and the shoreline, too. Everything was white, and he moved peacefully. He had glimpses of his destination—a room where the hems of thin curtains swept back and forth on a bare floor. His vision gave him green bronze doors sometimes; he supposed they were part of the same room.

He could see his children, but only barely. He had guessed what the boys might become—one a rebel, one turned inward. The girl was a question mark. She was stoic and sentimental, indifferent sometimes to pleasure and pain. Whatever she was or could be or might be, he had left her behind. The boys placed a row of bricks down the middle of the room they shared. In the large house they fought for space. They were restless and noisy, untutored and bored. "I'll always have a packet of love from my children," Barbara had said to a man once (not Alec).

AT the start of their second winter one of the Laceys came down to investigate. This was Ron, the hotelkeeper. He had dark hair and was thin and pale and walked softly. When he understood that what Barbara had written about servants and dollars was true, he asked to see the accounts. There were none. He talked to Barbara without raising his voice; that day she let everyone working for her go, with the exception of the cook, whom Ron had said she was to keep because of Alec. He seemed to feel he was in a position of trust, for he ordered her—there was no other word for it—to place the children at once in the Rivabella town school: Lou Mas was costing the Lacey brothers enough in local taxes—they might as well feel they were getting something back. He called his sister "Bab" and Alec "Al." The children's parents suddenly seemed to them unlike anyone.

YOU SEE?

When I was a child in West Virginia
we drove out in the car
on summer nights,
windows rolled down,
looking for relief from the heat
that wallowed, trapped, in our valley.
The gray plush upholstery of the back seat,
a comfort in winter,
prickled angrily at the backs of my legs.

"Now wait, just you wait," my mother said,
and my father slowed down.
"You'll see," she said to me,
"if you put your head out the window—now!"

I thrust my head into the night
and suddenly
my face was awash in deep black air,
cool as the bottom of a well
and smelling of the thick earth beneath trees.
And then it was gone.
"You see?" my mother said.
"I knew that hollow was there."

Now I get off the subway
at a station in the old market
and walk down the platform
to a spot beneath a sidewalk grating.
Suddenly my face is awash
in the dark, turkey-red smell
of cinnamon and cloves
undercut by the hot yellow of horse urine
on straw.
I am deep in a past more ancient than my own.
"You see?" I say to myself.
"You see?"

—JOHN RATTI

• •

"Evolution sure goofed there. Those guys aren't particularly good at anything."

• •

When Ron left, Barbara marched the children up to Rivabella and made them look at the church. They had seen it, but she made them look again. She held the mistaken belief that religion was taught in French state schools, and she wanted to arm them. The children knew by now that what their mother called "France" was not really France down here but a set of rules, a code for doing things, such as how to recite the multiplication table or label a wine. Instead of the northern saints she remembered, with their sorrowful preaching, there was a southern St. Damian holding up a blazing sword. Any number of persons had seen him; Mademoiselle had, more than once.

"I want you to understand what superstition is," said Barbara, in clear, carrying English. "Superstition is what is wrong with Uncle Ron. He believes what he can't see, and what he sees he can't believe in. Now, imagine intelligent people saying they've seen this—this apparition. This St. George, or whatever." The church had two pink towers, one bearing a cross and the other a weathervane. St. Damian usually hovered between them. "In armor," said Barbara.

To all three children occurred "Why not?" Protect me, prayed the girl. Vanquish, said Will. Lead, ordered the youngest, seeing only himself in command. He looked around the square and said to his mother, "Could we go soon, please? Because people are looking."

That winter Molly grew breasts; she thought them enormous, though each could have been contained easily in a small teacup. Her brothers teased her. She went about with her arms crossed. She was tall for her age, and up in the town there was always some man staring. Elderly neighbors pressed her close. Major Lamprey, calling on Alec, kissed her on the mouth. He smelled of gin and pipe smoke. She scrubbed her teeth for minutes afterward. When she began to menstruate, Barbara said, "Now, Molly, you are to keep away from men," as if she weren't trying to.

The boys took their bicycles and went anywhere they wanted. In the evening they wheeled round and round the church square. Above them were swallows, on the edge of the square men and boys. Both were starting to speak better French than English, and James spoke dialect better than French. Molly disliked going up to Rivabella, unless she had to. She helped Barbara make the beds and wash the dishes, and she did her homework and then very often went over to talk to Mr. Cranefield. She discovered, by chance, that he had another name—E. C. Arden. As E. C. Arden, he was the author of a series of thumbed, comfortable novels (it was Mrs. Massie who lent Molly these), one of which, called "Belinda at Sea," was Molly's favorite book of any kind. It was about a girl who joined the crew of a submarine, disguised as a naval rating, and kept her identity a secret all the way to Hong Kong. In the end, she married the submarine commander, who apparently had loved her all along. Molly read "Belinda at Sea" three or four times without ever mentioning to Mr. Cranefield that she knew he was E. C. Arden. She thought it was a matter of deep privacy and that it was up to him to speak of it first. She did, however, ask what he thought of the saint on the church roof, using the name Barbara had, which was St. George.

"What?" said Mr. Cranefield. "That Ethiopian?"

The girl looked frightened—not of Ethiopians, certainly, but of confusion as to person, the adult world of muddle. Even Mr. Cranefield was *also* E. C. Arden, creator of Belinda.

Mr. Cranefield explained, kindly,

that up at Rivabella they had made a patron saint out of a mixture of St. Damian, who was an intellectual, and St. Michael, who was not, and probably a local pagan deity as well. St. Michael accounted for the sword, the pagan for the fire. Reliable witnesses had seen the result, though none of these witnesses were British. "We aren't awfully good at seeing saints," he said. "Though we do have an eye for ghosts."

Another thing still troubled Molly, but it was not a matter she could mention: she did not know what to do about her bosom—whether to try to hold it up in some way or, on the contrary, bind it flat. She had been granted, by the mistake of a door's swinging wide, an upsetting glimpse of Mrs. Massie changing out of a bathing suit, and she had been worried about the future shape of her own body ever since. She pored over reproductions of statues and paintings in books belonging to Mr. Cranefield. The Eves and Venuses represented were not reassuring—they often seemed to be made of India rubber. There was no one she could ask. Barbara was too dangerous; the mention of a subject such as this always made her go too far and say things Molly found unpleasant.

She did remark to both Mrs. Massie and Mr. Cranefield that she hated the Rivabella school. She said, "I would give anything to be sent home to England, but I can't leave my father."

After a long conversation with Mrs. Massie, Mr. Cranefield agreed to speak to Alec. Interfering with other people was not his way, but Molly struck him as being pathetic. Something told him that Molly was not useful leverage with either parent and so he mentioned Will first: Will would soon be fourteen, too old for the school at Rivabella. Unless the Webb children were enrolled, and quickly, in good French establishments—say, in lycées at Nice—they would become unfit for anything save menial work in a foreign language they could not speak in an educated way. Of course, the ideal solution would be England, if Alec felt he could manage that.

Alec listened, sitting not quite straight in his chair, wearing a dressing gown, his back to a window. He found all light intolerable now. Several times, he lifted his hand as if he were trying to see through it. No one knew why Alec made these odd gestures; some people thought he had gone slightly mad because death was too long in coming. He parted his lips and whispered, "French school . . . If you would look after it," and then, "I would be grateful."

Mr. Cranefield dropped his voice, too, as if the gray of the room called for hush. He asked if Alec had thought of appointing a guardian for them. The hand Alec seemed to want transparent waved back and forth, stiffly, like a shut ivory fan.

All Barbara said to Mr. Cranefield was "Good idea," once he had assured her that French high schools were not priest-ridden.

"It might have occurred to *her* to have done something about it," said Mrs. Massie, when this was repeated.

"Things do occur to Barbara," said Mr. Cranefield. "But she doesn't herself get the drift of them."

The only disturbing part of the new arrangement was that the children had been assigned to separate establishments, whose schedules did not coincide; this meant they would not necessarily travel in the same bus. Molly had shot up as tall as Will now. Her hair was dark and curled all over her head. Her bones and her hands and feet were going to be larger, stronger, than her mother's and brothers'. She looked, already, considerably older than her age. She was obstinately innocent, turning her face away when Barbara, for her own good, tried to tell her something about men.

Barbara imagined her willful, ignorant daughter being enticed, trapped, molested, impregnated, and disgraced. *And* ending up wondering how it happened, Barbara thought. She saw Molly's seducer, brutish and dull. I'd get him by the throat, she said to herself. She imagined the man's strong neck and her own small hands, her brittle bird bones. She said, "You are never, ever to speak to a stranger on the bus. You're not to get in a car with a man—not even if you know him."

"I don't know any man with a car."

"You could be waiting for a bus on a dark afternoon," said Barbara. "A car might pull up. Would you like

"I tell you, Harry, there are no echelons like the upper echelons."

a lift? No, you must answer. No and no and no. It is different for the boys. There are the two of them. They could put up a fight."

"Nobody bothers boys," said Molly.

Barbara drew breath but for once in her life said nothing.

Alec's remission was no longer just miraculous—it had become unreasonable. Barbara's oldest brother hinted that Alec might be better off in England, cared for on National Health: they were paying unholy taxes for just such a privilege. Barbara replied that Alec had no use for England, where the Labour government had sapped everyone's self-reliance. He believed in having exactly the amount of suffering you could pay for, no less and no more. She knew this theory did not hold water, because the Laceys and Alec's own sister had done the paying. It was too late now; they should have thought a bit sooner; and Alec was too ravaged to make a new move.

THE car that, inevitably, pulled up to a bus stop in Nice was driven by a Mr. Wilkinson. He had just taken Major Lamprey and the Major's old mother to the airport. He rolled his window down and called to Molly, through pouring rain, "I say, aren't you from Lou Mas?"

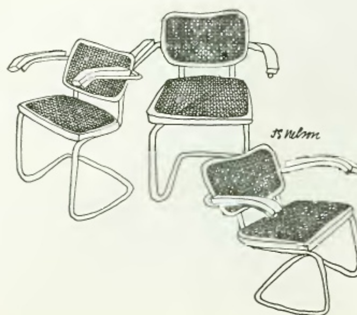
If he sounded like a foreigner's Englishman, like a man in a British joke, it was probably because he had said so many British-sounding lines in films set on the Riviera. Eric Wilkinson was the chap with the strong blue eyes and ginger mustache, never younger than thirty-four, never as much as forty, who flashed on for a second, just long enough to show there was an Englishman in the room. He could handle a uniform, a dinner jacket, tails, a monocle, a cigarette holder, a swagger stick, a polo mallet, could open a cigarette case without looking like a gigolo, could say without being an ass about it, "Bless my soul, wasn't that the little Maharani?" or even "Come along, old boy—fair play with Monica, now!" Foreigners meeting him often said, "That is what the British used to be like, when they were still all right, when the Riviera was still fit to live in." But the British who knew him were apt to glaze over: "You mean Wilkinson?" Mrs. Massie and Mr. Cranefield said, "Well, Wilkinson, what are you up to now?" There was no harm to him: his one-line roles did not support him, but he could do anything, even cook. He used his car as a private taxi, driving people to airports, meeting them when they came off cruise ships. He was not a chauffeur, never said "sir," but at the same time kept a certain distance, was not shy about money changing hands—no fake pride, no petit-bourgeois demand for a slipped envelope. Good-natured. Navy blazer. Summer whites in August. Wore a tie that carried a message. What did it stand for? A third-rate school? A disgraced, disbanded regiment? A club raided by the police? No one knew. Perhaps it was the symbol of something new altogether. "Still playing in those films of yours, Wilkinson?" He would flash on and off—British gent at roulette, British Army officer, British diplomat, British political agent, British anything. Spoke his line, fitted his monocle, pressed the catch on his cigarette case. His ease with other people was genuine, his financial predicament unfeigned. He had never been married, and had no children that he knew of.

"By Jove, it's nippy," said Wilkinson, when Molly had settled beside him, her books on her lap.

What made her do this—accept a lift from a murderer of schoolgirls? First, she had seen him somewhere safe once—at Mr. Cranefield's. Also, she was wet through, and chilled to the heart. Barbara kept refusing or neglecting or forgetting to buy her the things she needed: a lined raincoat, a jersey the right size. (The boys were wearing hand-me-down clothes from England, but no one Barbara knew of seemed to have a daughter.) The sleeves of her old jacket were so short that she put her hands in her pockets, so that Mr. Wilkinson would not despise her. He talked to Molly as he did to everyone, as if they were of an age, informing her that Major Lamprey and his mother were flying to Malta to look at a house. A number of people were getting ready to leave the South of France now; it had become so seedy and expensive, and all the wrong people were starting to move in.

"What kind of wrong people?" She sat tense beside him until he said, "Why, like Eric Wilkinson, I should think," and she laughed when his own laugh said she was meant to. He drove beyond his destination—a block of flats that he waved at in passing and that Molly in a confused way supposed he owned. They stopped in the road behind Lou Mas; she thanked him fervently, and then, struck with something, sat staring at him: "Mr. Wilkinson," she said. "Please—I am not allowed to be in cars with men alone. In case someone happened to see us, would you mind just coming and meeting my mother? Just so she can see who you are?"

"God bless my soul," said Wilkinson, sincerely.



Once, Alec had believed that Barbara was not frightened by anything, and that this absence of fear was her principal weakness. It was true that she had begun drifting out of her old life now, as calmly as Alec drifted away from life altogether. Her mock phrase for each additional Lou Mas catastrophe had become "the usual daily developments." The usual developments over seven rainy days had been the departure of the cook, who took with her all she could lay her hands on, and a French social-security fine that had come down hard on the remains of her marble block of money, reducing it to pebbles and dust. She had never filled out employer's forms for the people she had hired, because she had not known she was supposed to and none of them had suggested it; for a number of reasons having to do with government offices and tax files, none of them had wanted even this modest income to be registered anywhere. As it turned out, the gardener had also been receiving unemployment benefits, which, unfairly, had increased the amount of the fine Barbara had to pay. Rivabella turned out to be just as grim and bossy as England—worse, even, for it kept up a camouflage of wine and sunshine and olive trees and of amiable southern idiots who, if sacked, thought nothing of informing on one.

She sat at the dining-room table, wearing around her shoulders a red cardigan Molly had outgrown. On the table were the Sunday papers Alec's sister continued to send faithfully from England, and Alec's lunch tray, exactly as she had taken it up to him except that everything on it was now cold. She glanced up and saw the two of them enter—one stricken and guilty-looking, the other male, confident, smiling. The recognition that leaped between Barbara and Wilkinson was

the last thing that Wilkinson in his right mind should have wanted, and absolutely everything Barbara now desired and craved. Neither of them heard Molly saying, "Mummy, this is Mr. Wilkinson. Mr. Wilkinson wants to tell you how he came to drive me home."

IT happened at last that Alec had to be taken to the Rivabella hospital, where the local poor went when it was not feasible to let them die at home. Eric Wilkinson, new family friend, drove his car as far as it could go along a winding track, after which they placed Alec on a stretcher; and Wilkinson, Mr. Cranefield, Will, and the doctor carried him the rest of the way. A soft April rain was falling, from which they protected Alec as they could. In the rain the doctor wept unnoticed. The others were silent and absorbed. The hospital stood near the graveyard—shamefully near, Wilkinson finally remarked, to Mr. Cranefield. Will could see the cemetery from his father's new window, though to do so he had to lean out, as he'd imagined passengers doing and having their heads cut off in the train game long ago. A concession was made to Alec's status as owner of a large villa, and he was given a private room. It was not a real sickroom but the place where the staff went to eat and drink when they took time off. They cleared away the plates and empty wine bottles and swept up most of the crumbs and wheeled a bed in.

The building was small for a hospital, large for a house. It had been the winter home of a Moscow family, none of whom had come back after 1917. Alec lay flat and still. Under a drift of soot on the ceiling he could make out a wreath of nasturtiums and a bluebird with a ribbon in its beak.

At the window, Will said to Mr. Cranefield, "We can see Lou Mas from here, and even your peacocks."

Mr. Cranefield fretted. "They shouldn't be in the rain."

Alec's neighbors came to visit. Mrs. Massie, not caring who heard her (one of the children did), said to someone she met on the hospital staircase, "Alec is a gentleman and always will be, but Barbara . . . Barbara." She took a rise of the curved marble stairs at a time. "If the boys were girls they'd be sluts. As it is, they are ruffians. Their old cook saw one of them stoning a cat to death. And now there is Wilkinson. Wilkinson." She moved on alone, repeating his name.

Everyone was saying "Wilkinson" now. Along with "Wilkinson" they said "Barbara." You would think that having been married to one man who was leaving her with nothing, leaving her dependent on family charity, she would have looked around, been more careful, picked a reliable kind of person. "A foreigner, say," said Major Lamprey's mother, who had not cared for Malta. Italians love children, even other people's. She might have chosen—you know—one of the cheerful sort, with a clean shirt and a clean white handkerchief, proprietor of a linen shop. The shop would have kept Barbara out of mischief.

No one could blame Wilkinson, who had his reasons. Also, he had said all those British-sounding lines in films, which in a way made him all right. Barbara had probably said she was Irish once too often. "What can you expect?" said Mrs. Massie. "Think how they were in the war. They keep order when there is someone to bully them. Otherwise . . ." The worst she had to say about Wilkinson was that he was preparing to flash on as the colonel of a regiment in a film about desert warfare; it had been made in the hilly country up behind Monte Carlo.

"Not a grain of sand up there," said Major Lamprey. He said he wondered what foreigners thought they meant by "desert."

"A colonel!" said Mrs. Massie.

"Why not?" said Mr. Cranefield.

"They must think he looks it," said Major Lamprey. "Gets a fiver a day, I'm told, and an extra fiver when he speaks his line. He says, 'Don't underestimate Rommel.' For a fiver I'd say it"—though he would rather have died.

The conversation veered to Wilkinson's favor. Wilkinson was merry; told irresistible stories about directors, unmalicious ones about film stars; repeated comic anecdotes concerning underlings who addressed him as "Guv." "I wonder who they can be," said Mrs. Massie. "It takes a Wilkinson to find them." Mr. Cranefield was more indulgent; he had to be. A sardonic turn of mind would have been resented by E. C. Arden's readers. The blond-headed pair on his desk stood for a world of triumphant love, with which his readers felt easy kinship. The fair couple, though competent in any domain, whether restoring a toppling kingdom or taming a tiger, lived on the same plane as all human creatures except England's enemies. They raised the level of existence—raised it, and flattened it.

Mr. Cranefield—as is often and incorrectly said of children—lived in a world of his own, too, in which he kept everyone's identity clear. He did not confuse St. Damian with an Ethiopian, or Wilkinson with Raffles, or Barbara with a slut. This was partly out of the habit of neatness and partly because he could not make up his mind to live openly in the world he wanted, which was a homosexual one. He said about Wilkinson and Barbara and the blazing scandal at Lou Mas, "I am sure there is no harm in it. Barbara has too much to manage alone, and it is probably better for the children to have a man about the place."

When Wilkinson was not travelling, he stayed at Lou Mas. Until now his base had been a flat he'd shared with a

"Look, if you can't stand the Byzantine intrigue, perhaps you should get out of the cabal."

• •

friend who was a lawyer and who was also frequently away. Wilkinson left most of his luggage behind; there was barely enough of his presence to fill a room. For a reason no one understood Barbara had changed everyone's room around: she and Molly slept where Alec had been, the boys moved to Barbara's room, and Wilkinson was given Molly's bed. It seemed a small bed for so tall a man.

Molly had always slept alone, until now. Some nights, when Wilkinson was sleeping in her old room, she would waken just before dawn and find that her mother had disappeared. Her feeling at the sight of the empty bed was one of panic. She would get up, too, and go in to Will and shake him, saying, "She's disappeared."

"No, she hasn't. She's with Wilkinson." Nevertheless, he would rise and stumble, still nearly sleeping, down the passage—Alec's son, descendant of civil servants, off on a mission.

Barbara slept with her back against Wilkinson's chest. Outside, Mr. Cranefield's peacocks greeted first light by screaming murder. Wilkinson never moved. Had he shown he was awake, he might have felt obliged to say a suitable line—something like "I say, old chap, you are a bit of a trial, you know."

Will's mother picked up the nightgown and robe that lay white on the floor, pulled them on, flung her warm hair back, tied her sash—all without haste. In the passage, the door shut on the quiet Wilkinson, she said tenderly, "Were you worried?"

"Molly was."

Casual with her sons, she was modest before her daughter. Changing to a clean nightdress, she said, "Turn the other way." Turning, Molly saw her mother, white and gold, in the depths of Alec's mirror. Barbara had her arms raised, revealing the profile of a breast with at its tip the palest wash of rose, paler than the palest pink flower. (Like a Fragonard, Barbara had been told, like a Boucher—not by Alec.) What Molly felt now was immense relief. It was not the fate of every girl to turn into India rubber. But in no other way did she wish to resemble her mother.

Like the residue left by winter rains, awareness of Barbara and Wilkinson seeped through the house. There was a damp chill about it that crept to the bone. One of the children, Will, perceived it as torment. Because of the mother defiled, the source of all such knowledge became polluted, probably forever. The boys withdrew from Barbara, who had let the weather in. James imagined ways of killing Wilkinson, though he drew the line at killing Barbara. He did not want her dead, but different. The mother he wanted did not stand in public squares pointing crazily up to invisible saints, or begin sleeping in one bed and end up in another.

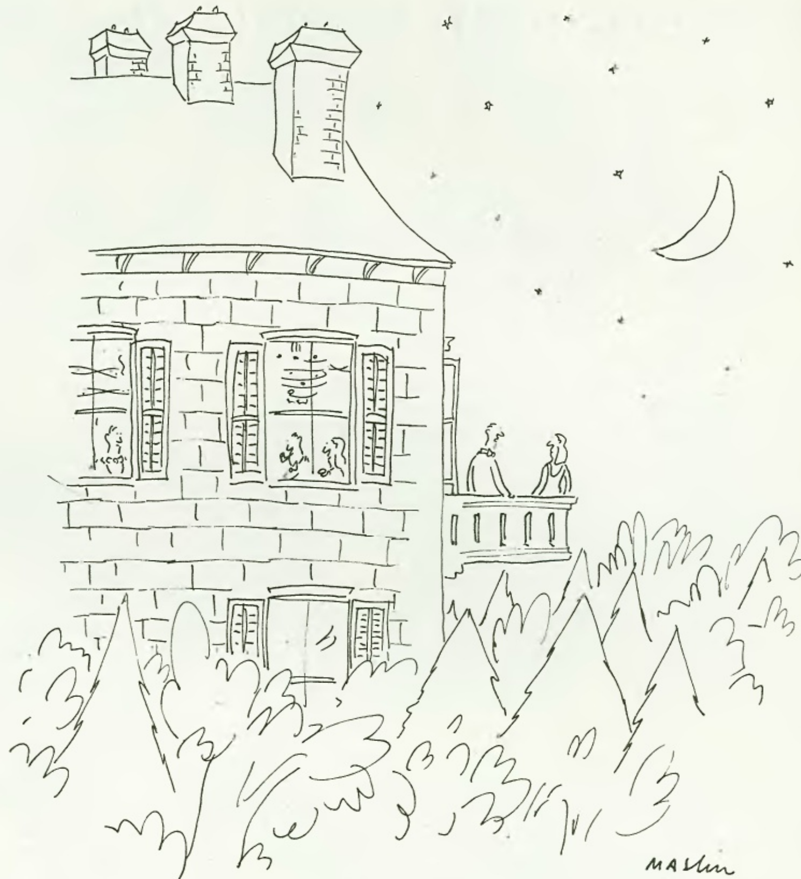
Barbara felt that they were leaving her; she put the blame on Molly, who had the makings of a prude, and who, at worst, might turn out to be something like Alec's sister. Barbara said to Molly, "I had three children before I was twenty-five, and I was alone, and there were all the air raids. The life I've tried to give you and the boys has been so different, so happy, so free." Molly folded her arms, looked

down at her shoes. Her height, her grave expression, her new figure gave her a bogus air of maturity: she was only thirteen, and she felt like a pony flicked by a crop. Barbara tried to draw near: "My closest friend is my own daughter," she wanted to be able to say. "I never do a thing without talking it over with Molly." So she would have said, laughing, her bright head against Molly's darker hair, if only Molly had given half an inch.

"What a cold creature you are," Barbara said sadly. "You live in an ice palace. There is so little happiness in life unless you let it come near. I always at least had an *idea* about being happy." The girl's face stayed shut and locked. All that could cross it now was disappointment.

One night when Molly woke Will, he said, "I don't care where she is." Molly went back to bed. Fetching Barbara had become a habit. She was better off in her room alone.

When they stopped coming to claim her, Barbara felt it as mortification. She gave up on Molly, for the moment, and turned to the boys, sat curled on the foot of their bed, sipping wine, telling stories, offering to share her cigarette, though James was still twelve. James said, "He told us it was dangerous to smoke in bed. People have died that way." "He" meant Alec. Was this all James would remember? That he had been warned about smoking in bed?



"I must ask you something, Miss Begett. Did you try the tortoni?"

James, who was embarrassed by this attempt of hers at making them equals, thought she had an odd smell, like a cat. To Will, at another kind of remove, she stank of folly. They stared at her, as if measuring everything she still had to mean in their lives. This expression she read as she could. Love for Wilkinson had blotted out the last of her dreams and erased her gift of second sight. She said unhappily to Wilkinson, "My children are prigs. But, then, they are only half mine."

Mademoiselle, whom the children now called by her name—Geneviève—still came to Lou Mas. Nobody paid her, but she corrected the children's French, which no longer needed correcting, and tried to help with their homework, which amounted to interference. They had always in some way spared her; only James, her favorite, sometimes said, "No, I'd rather work alone." She knew now that the Webbs were poor, which increased her affection: their descent to low water equalled her own. Sometimes she brought a packet of biscuits for their tea, which was a dull affair now the cook had gone. They ate the biscuits straight from the paper wrapping: nobody wanted to wash an extra plate. Wilkinson, playing at British something, asked about her aunt. He said "Madame la Comtesse." When he had gone, she cautioned the children not to say that but simply "your aunt." But as Geneviève's aunt did not receive foreigners, save for a few such as Mrs. Massie, they had no reason to ask how she was. When Geneviève realized from something said that Wilkinson more or less lived at Lou Mas, she stopped coming to see them. The Webbs had no further connection with Rivabella then except for their link with the hospital, where Alec still lay quietly, still alive.

Barbara went up every day. She asked the doctor, "Shouldn't he be having blood transfusions—something of that kind?" She had never been in a hospital except to be born and to have her children. She was remembering films she had seen—bottles dripping liquids, needles taped to the crook of an arm, nursing sisters wheeling oxygen tanks down white halls.

The doctor reminded her that this was Rivabella—a small town where half the population lived without employment. He had been so sympathetic at first, so slow to present a bill. She could not understand what had changed him; but she was hopeless at reading faces now. She could scarcely read her children's.

She bent down to Alec, so near that her eyes would have seemed enormous had he been paying attention. She told him the name of the scent she was wearing; it reminded her and perhaps Alec, too, of jasmine. Eric had brought it back from a dinner at Monte Carlo, given to promote this very perfume. He was often invited to these things, where he represented the best sort of Britishness. "Eric is being the greatest help," she said to Alec, who might have been listening. She added, for it had to be said sometime, "Eric has very kindly offered to stay at Lou Mas."

Mr. Cranefield and Mrs. Massie

continued to plod up the hill, she with increasing difficulty. They brought Alec what they thought he needed. But he had no addictions, no cravings, no use for anything now but his destination. The children were sent up evenings. They never knew what to say or what he could hear. They talked as if they were still eleven or twelve, when Alec had stopped seeing them grow.

To Mr. Cranefield they looked like imitations of English children—loud, humorless, dutiful, clear. "James couldn't come with us tonight," said Molly. "He was quite ill, for some reason. He brought his dinner up." All three spoke the high, thin English of expatriate children who, unknowingly, mimic their mothers. The light bulb, hanging crooked, left Alec's face in shadow. When the children had kissed Alec and departed, Mr. Cranefield could hear them taking the hospital stairs headlong, at a gallop. The children were young and alive, and Alec was forty-something and nearly always sleeping. Unequal chances, Mr. Cranefield thought. They can't really beat their breasts about it. When Mrs. Massie was present, she never failed to say, "Your father is tired," though nobody knew if Alec was tired or not.

The neighbors pitied the children. Meaning only kindness, Mr. Cranefield reminded Molly that one day she would type, Mrs. Massie said something more about helping in the garden. That was how everyone saw them now—grubbing, digging, lending a hand. They had become Wilkinson's secondhand kin but without his panache, his ease in adversity. They were Alec's offspring: stiff. Humiliated, they overheard and garnered for memory: "We've asked Wilkinson to come over and cook up a curry. He's hours in the kitchen, but I must say it's worth every penny." "We might get Wilkinson to drive us to Rome. He doesn't charge all that much, and he's such good company." Always Wilkinson, never Eric, though that was what Barbara had called him from their first meeting. To the children he was, and remained, "Mr. Wilkinson," friend of both parents, occasional guest in the house.

THE rains of their third southern spring were still driving hard against the villa when Barbara's engineer brother wrote to say they were letting Lou Mas. Everything dripped wet as she stood near a window, with bougainvillea soaked and wild-looking on one side of the pane and steam forming on the other, to read this letter. The new tenants were a family of planters who had been forced to leave Malaya; it had a connection with political events, but Barbara's life was so full now that she never looked at the papers. They would be coming there in June, which gave Barbara plenty of time to find another home. He—her brother—had thought of giving her the Lou Mas cottage, but he wondered if it would suit her, inasmuch as it lacked electric light, running water, an indoor lavatory, most of its windows, and part of its roof. This was not to say it could not be fixed up for the Webbs in the future, when Lou Mas had started paying for itself. Half the rent obtained would be turned over to Barbara. She would have to look hard, he said, before finding brothers who were so considerate of a married sister. She and the children were not likely to suffer from the change, which might even turn out to their moral advantage. Barbara supposed this meant that Desmond—the richest, the best-educated, the most easily flabbergasted of her brothers—was still mulling over the description of Lou Mas Ron must have taken back.

With Wilkinson helping, the Webbs moved to the far side of the hospital, on a north-facing slope, away from the sea. Here the houses were tall and thin with narrow windows, set in gardens of raked gravel. Their neighbors included the mayor, the more prosperous shopkeepers, and the coach of the local football team. Barbara was enchanted to find industrial activity she had not suspected—a thriving ceramics factory that produced figurines of monks whose heads were mustard pots, dogs holding thermometers in their paws, and the patron saint of Rivabella wearing armor of pink, orange, mauve, or white. These were purchased by tourists who had trudged up to the town in the hope of seeing early-Renaissance frescoes.

Barbara had never missed a day with Alec—not even the day of the move. She held his limp hand and told him stories. When he was not stunned by drugs, or too far lost in his past, he seemed to be listening. Sometimes he pressed her fingers. He seldom spoke more than a word at a time. Barbara described to him the pleasures of moving, and how pretty the houses were on the north side, with their gardens growing gnomes and shells and tinted bottles. Why make fun of such people, she asked his still face. They probably know, by instinct, how to get the best out of life. She meant every word, for she was profoundly in love and knew that Wilkinson would never leave her except for a greater claim. She combed Alec's hair and bathed him; Wilkinson came whenever he could to shave Alec and cut his nails and help Barbara change the bedsheets; for it was not the custom of the hospital staff to do any of this.

Sometimes Alec whispered, "Diana," who might have been either his sister or Mrs.

Massie. Barbara tried to remember her old prophetic dreams, from that time when, as compensation for absence of passion, she had been granted second sight. In none had she ever seen herself bending over a dying man, listening to him call her by another woman's name.

They lived, now, in four dark rooms stuffed with furniture, some of it useful. Upstairs resided the widow of the founder of the ceramics factory. She had been bought out at a loss at the end of the war, and disapproved of the new line of production, especially the monks. She never interfered, never asked questions—simply came down once a month to collect her rent, which was required in cash. She did tell the children that she had never seen the inside of an English villa, but did not seem to think her exclusion was a slight; she took her bearings from a very small span of the French middle-class compass.

Barbara and Wilkinson made jokes about the French widow lady, but the children did not. To replace their lopped English roots they had grown the sensitive antennae essential to wanderers. They could have drawn the social staircase of Rivabella on a blackboard, and knew how low a step, now, had been assigned to them. Barbara would not have cared. Wherever she stood now seemed to suit her. On her way home from the hospital she saw two men, foreigners, stop and stare and exchange remarks about her. She could not understand the language they spoke, but she saw they had been struck by her beauty. One of them seemed to be asking the other, "Who can she be?" In their new home she took the only bedroom—an imposing matrimonial chamber. When Wilkinson was in residence he shared it as a matter of course. The boys slept on a pullout sofa in the dining room, and Molly had a couch on a glassed-in veranda. The veranda contained their landlady's rubber plants, which Molly scrupulously tended. The boys had stopped quarrelling. Alec's children seemed to have been collected under one roof by chance, like strays, or refugees. Their narrow faces, their gray eyes, their thinness and dryness were similar but not alike; a stranger would not necessarily have known they were of the same father and mother. The boys still wore secondhand clothes sent from England; this was their only connection with English life.

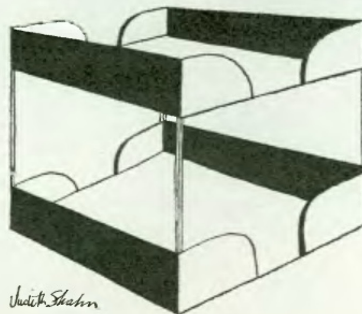
On market days Molly often saw their old housemaid or the laundress. They asked for news of Alec, which made Molly feel cold and shy. She was dressed very like them now, in a cotton frock and rope-soled shoes from a market stall. "Style is all you need to bring it off," Barbara had assured her, but Molly had none—at least not that kind. It was Molly who chose what the family would eat, who looked at prices and kept accounts and counted her change. Barbara was entirely busy with Alec at the hospital, and with Wilkinson at home. With love, she had lost her craving for nursery breakfasts. She sat at table smoking, watching Wilkinson telling stories. When Wilkinson was there, he did much of the cooking. Molly was grateful for that.

The new people at Lou Mas had everyone's favor. If there had been times when the neighbors had wondered how Barbara and Alec could possibly have met, the Malayan planter and his jolly wife were an old novel known by heart. They told about jungle terrorists, and what the British ought to be doing, and they described the owner of Lou Mas—a Welshman who was planning to go into politics. Knowing Barbara to be Irish, no one could place the Welshman. The story started up that Barbara's family were bankrupt and had sold Lou Mas to a Welsh war profiteer.

Mrs. Massie presented the new people with "Flora's Gardening Encyclopedia." "It is by way of being a classic," she said. "Seventeen editions. I do all my typing myself."

"Ah, well, poor Barbara," everyone said now. What could you expect? Luckily for her, she had Wilkinson. Wilkinson's star was rising. "Don't underestimate Rommel" had been said to some effect—there was a mention in the *Sunday Telegraph*. "Wilkinson goes everywhere. He's invited to everything at Monte Carlo. He must positively live on lobster salad." "Good for old Wilkinson. Why shouldn't he?" Wilkinson had had a bad war, had been a prisoner somewhere.

Who imagined that story, Mr. Cranefield wondered. Some were mixing up Wilkinson with the dying Alec, others seemed to think Alec was already dead. By August it had become established that Wilkinson had been tortured by the Japanese and had spent the years since trying to leave the memory behind. He never mentioned what he'd been through, which was to his credit. Barbara and three kids must have been the last thing he wanted, but that was how it was with Wilkinson—too kind for his own good, all too ready to lend a hand, to solve a problem. Perhaps, rising, he would pull the Webbs with him. Have you seen that girl hanging about in the market? You can't tell her from the butcher's child.



From Alec's bedside Barbara wrote a long letter to her favorite brother, the pilot, Mike. She told about Alec, "sleeping so peacefully as I write," and described the bunch of daisies Molly had put in a jug on the windowsill, and how well Will had done in his finals ("He will be the family intellectual, a second Alec"), and finally she came round to the matter of Wilkinson: "You probably saw the rave notice in the *Telegraph*, but you had no way of knowing of course it was someone I knew. Well, here is the whole story. Please, Mike, do keep it to yourself for the moment, you know how Ron takes things sometimes." Meeting Eric had confirmed her belief that there was something in the universe more reasonable than God—at any rate more logical. Eric had taken a good look at the Lou Mas cottage and thought something might be done with it after all. "You will adore Eric," she promised. "He is marvellous with the children and so kind to Alec," which was true.

"Are you awake, love?" She moistened a piece of cotton with mineral water from a bottle that stood on the floor (Alec had no table) and wet his lips with it, then took his hand, so light it seemed hollow, and held it in her own, telling him quietly about the Lou Mas cottage, where he would occupy a pleasant room overlooking the sea. He flexed his fingers; she bent close: "Yes, dear. What is it, dear?" For the first time since she'd known him he said, "Mother." She waited; but no, that was all. She saw herself on his balcony at Lou Mas in her white dressing gown, her hair in the sun, saw what the gardener would have been struck by if only he had looked up. She said to herself, "I gave Alec three beautiful children. That is what he is thanking me for now."

Her favorite brother had been away from England when her letter came,

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so that it was late in September when he answered to call her a bitch, a trollop, a crook, and a fool. He was taking up the question of her gigolo boyfriend with the others. They had been supporting Alec's family for three years. If she thought they intended to take on her lover (this written above a word scratched out); and here the letter ended. She went white, as her children did, easily. She said to Wilkinson, "Come and talk in the car, where we can be quiet," for they were seldom alone.

She let him finish reading, then said, in a voice that he had never heard before but that did not seem to surprise him, "I grew up blacking my brothers' boots. Alec was the first man who ever held a door open for me."

He said, "Your brothers all did well," without irony, meaning there was that much to admire.

"Oh," she said, "if you are comparing their chances with Alec's, if that's what you mean—the start Alec had. Well, poor Alec. Yes, a better start. I often thought, Well, there it is with him, that's the very trouble—a start too good."

This exchange, this double row of cards face up, seemed all they intended to reveal. They instantly sat differently, she straighter, he more relaxed.

Wilkinson said, "Which one of them actually owns Lou Mas?"

"Equal shares, I think. Though Desmond has power of attorney and makes all the decisions. Alec and I *own* Lou Mas, but only legally. They put it in our name because we were emigrating. It made it easier for them, with all the taxes. We had three years, and not a penny in rent."

Wilkinson said, in a kind of anguish, "Oh, God bless my soul."

It was Wilkinson's English lawyer friend in Monte Carlo who drew up the papers with which Alec signed his share of Lou Mas over to Barbara, and Alec and Barbara revoked her brother's power of attorney. Alec, his obedient hand around a pen and the hand firmly held in Barbara's, may have known what he was doing but not why. The documents were then put in the lawyer's safe to await Alec's death, which occurred not long after.

THE doctor, who had sat all night at the bedside, turning Alec's head so that he would not strangle vomiting (for that was not the way he wished him to die), heard him breathing deeply and ever more deeply and then no longer. Alec's eyes were

closed, but the doctor pressed the lids with his fingers. Believing in his own and perhaps Alec's damnation, he stood for a long time at the window while the roof and towers of the church became clear and flushed with rose; then the red rim of the sun emerged, and turned yellow, and it was as good as day.

There was only one nurse in the hospital, and a midwife on another floor. Summoning both, he told them to spread a rubber sheet under Alec, and wash him, and put clean linen on the bed.

At that time, in that part of France, scarcely anyone had a telephone. The doctor walked down the slope on the far side of Rivabella and presented himself unshaven to Barbara in her nightdress to say that Alec was dead. She dressed and came at once; there was no one yet in the streets to see her and to ask who she was. Eric followed, bringing the clothes in which Alec would be buried. All he could recall of his prayers, though he would not have said them around Barbara, were the first words of the Collect: "Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid."

Barbara had a new friend—her French widowed landlady. It was she who arranged to have part of Barbara's wardrobe dyed black within twenty-four hours, who lent her a black hat and gloves and a long crêpe veil. Barbara let the veil down over her face. Her friend, whose veil was tied round her hat and floated behind her, took Barbara by the arm, and they walked to the cemetery and stood side by side. The Webbs' former servants were there, and the doctor, and the local British colony. Some of the British thought the other woman in black must be Barbara's Irish mother: only the Irish poor or the Royal Family ever wore mourning of that kind.

The graveyard was so cramped and small, so crowded with dead from the time of Garibaldi and before, that no one else could be buried. The coffins of the recent dead were stored in cells in a thick concrete wall. The cells were then sealed, and a marble plaque affixed in lieu of a tombstone. Alec had to be lifted to shoulder level, which took the strength of several persons—the doctor, Mr. Cranefield, Barbara's brothers, and Alec's young sons. (Wilkinson would have helped, but he had already wrenched his shoulder quite badly carrying the coffin down the hospital steps.) Molly thrust her way into this crowd of male mourners. She said to

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her mother, "Not you—you never loved him."

God knows who might have heard that, Barbara thought.

Actually, no one had, except for Mrs. Massie. Believing it to be true, she dismissed it from memory. She was composing her own obituary: "Two generations of gardeners owed their . . ." "Two generations of readers owed their gardens . . ."

"Our Father," Alec's sister said, hoping no one would notice and mistake her for a fraud. Nor did she wish to have a scrap of consideration removed from Barbara, whose hour this was. Her own loss was beyond remedy, and so not worth a mention. There was no service—nothing but whispering and silence. To his sister, it was as if Alec had been left, stranded and alone, in a train stalled between stations. She had not seen him since the day he left England, and had refused to look at him dead. Barbara was aware of Diana, the mouse, praying like a sewing machine somewhere behind her. She clutched the arm of the older widow and thought, I know, I know, but she can get a job, can't she? I was working when I met Alec, wasn't I? But what Diana Webb meant by "work" was the fine stitching her own mother had done to fill time, not for a living. In Diana's hotel room was a box containing the most exquisite and impractical child's bonnet and coat made from some of the white silk Alec had sent her from India, before the war. Perhaps a luxury shop in Monte Carlo or one of Barbara's wealthy neighbors would be interested. Perhaps there was an Anglican clergyman with a prosperous parish. She opened her eyes and saw that absolutely no one in the cemetery looked like Alec—not even his sons.

The two boys seemed strange, even to each other, in their dark, new suits. The word "father" had slipped out of their grasp just now. A marble plaque on which their father's name was misspelled stood propped against the wall. The boys looked at it helplessly.

Is that all? people began wondering. What happens now?

Barbara turned away from the wall and, still holding the arm of her friend, led the mourners out past the gates.

It was I who knew what he wanted, the doctor believed. He told me long before. Asked me to promise, though I refused. I heard his last words. The doctor kept telling himself this. "I heard his last words"—though Alec had not said anything, had merely breathed, then stopped.

"Her father was a late-Victorian

poet of some distinction," Mrs. Massie's obituary went on.

Will, who was fifteen, was no longer a child, did not look like Alec, spoke up in that high-pitched English of his: "Death is empty without God." Now, where did that come from? Had he heard it? Read it? Was he performing? No one knew.

As they shuffled out, all made very uncomfortable by Will, Mrs. Massie leaned half on her stick and half on James, observing, "You were such a little boy when I saw you for the first time at Lou Mas." Because his response was silence, she supposed he was waiting to hear more. "You three must stick together now. The Three Musketeers." But they were already apart.

Major Lamprey found himself walking beside the youngest of the Laceys. He told Mike what he told everyone now—why he had not moved to Malta. It was because he did not trust the Maltese. "Not that one can trust anyone here," he said. "Even the mayor belongs to an anarchist movement, I've been told. Whatever happens, I intend to die fighting on my own doorstep."

The party was filing down a steep incline. "You will want to be with your family," Mrs. Massie said, releasing James and leaning half her weight on Mr. Cranefield instead. They picked up with no trouble a conversation dropped the day before. It was about how Mr. Cranefield—rather, his other self, E. C. Arden—was likely to fare in the second half of the nineteen-fifties: "It is a question of your not being too modern and yet not slipping back," Mrs. Massie said. "I never have to worry. Gardens don't change."

"I am not worried about new ideas," he said. "Because there are none. But words, now. 'Permissive.' "

"What's that?"

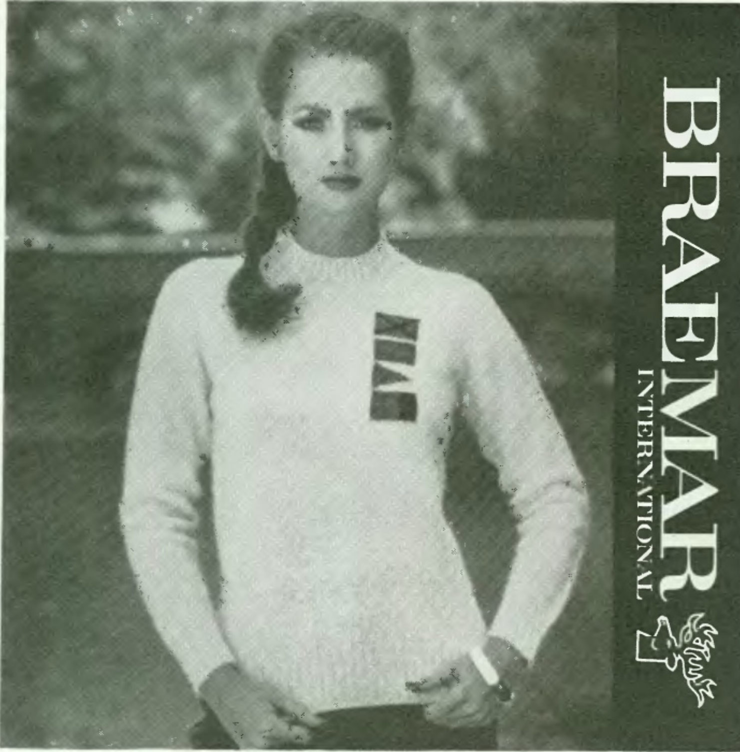
"It was in the *Observer* last Sunday. I suppose it means something. Still. One mustn't. One can't. There are limits."

Barbara met the mayor coming the other way, too late, carrying a wreath with a purple ribbon on which was written, in gold, "From the Municipality—Sincere Respects." Waiting for delivery of the wreath had made him tardy. "For a man who never went out, Alec made quite an impression," Mrs. Massie remarked.

"His funeral was an attraction," said Mr. Cranefield.

"Can one call that a funeral?" She was still thinking about her own.

Mike Lacey caught up to his sis-



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ter. They had once been very close. As soon as she saw him, she stood motionless, bringing the line behind her to a halt. He said he knew this was not the time or place, but he had to let her know she was not to worry. She would always have a roof over her head. They felt responsible for Alec's children. There were vague plans for fixing up the cottage. They would talk about it later on.

"Ah, Mike," she said. "That is so kind of you." Using both hands, she lifted the veil so that he could see her clear gray eyes.

The procession wound past the hospital and came to the church square. Mr. Cranefield had arranged a small after-funeral party, as a favor to Barbara, who had no real home. Some were coming and some were not; the latter now began to say goodbye. Geneviève, whose face was like a pink sponge because she had been crying so hard, flung herself at James, who let her embrace him. Over his governess's dark shoulder he saw the faces of people who had given him secondhand clothes, thus (he believed) laying waste to his life. He smashed their faces to particles, left the particles dancing in the air like midges until they dissolved without a sound. Wait, he was thinking. Wait, wait.

Mr. Cranefield wondered if Molly was going to become her mother's hostage, her moral bail—if Barbara would hang on to her to show that Alec's progeny approved of her. He remembered Molly's small, anxious face, and how worried she had been about St. George. "You will grow up, you know," he said, which was an odd thing to say, since she was quite tall. They walked down the path Wilkinson had not been able to climb in his car. She stared at him. "I mean, when you grow up you will be free." She shook her head. She knew better than that now, at fourteen.

Mr. Cranefield's attention slipped from Molly to Alec to the funeral, to the extinction of one sort of Englishman and the emergence of another. Most people looked on Wilkinson as a prewar survival, what with his I say's and By Jove's, but he was really an English mutation, a new man, wearing the old protective coloring. Alec would have understood his language, probably, but not the person behind it. A landscape containing two male figures came into high relief in Mr. Cranefield's private image of the world, as if he had been lent trick spectacles. He allowed the vision to fade. Better to stick to the blond pair

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on his desk; so far they had never let him down. I am not impulsive, or arrogant, he explained to himself. No one would believe the truth about Wilkinson even if he were to describe it. I shall not insist, he decided, or try to have the last word. I am not that kind of fool. He breathed slowly, as one does when mortal danger has been averted.

The mourners attending Mr. Cranefield's party reached the motor road and began to straggle across: it was a point of honor for members of the British colony to pay absolutely no attention to cars. The two widows had fallen back, either so that Barbara could make an entrance or because the older woman believed it would not be dignified for her to exhibit haste. A strong west wind flattened the black dresses against their breasts and lifted their thick veils.

How will he hear me, Molly wondered. You could speak to someone in a normal grave, for earth is porous and seems to be life, of a kind. But how to speak through marble? Even if she were to place her hands flat on the marble slab, it would not absorb a fraction of human warmth. She had to tell him what she had done—how it was she, Molly, who had led the intruder home, let him in, causing Alec, always courteous, to remove himself first to the hospital, then farther on. Disaster, the usual daily development, had to have a beginning. She would go back to the cemetery, alone, and say it, whether or not he could hear. The disaster began with two sentences: "Mummy, this is Mr. Wilkinson. Mr. Wilkinson wants to tell you how he came to drive me home."

Barbara descended the steps to Mr. Cranefield's arm in arm with her new friend, who was for the first time about to see the inside of an English house. "Look at that," said the older widow. One of the peacocks had taken shelter from the wind in Mr. Cranefield's electric lift. A minute earlier Alec's sister had noticed, too, and had thought something that seemed irrefutable: no power on earth would ever induce her to eat a peacock.

Who is to say I never loved Alec, said Barbara, who loved Wilkinson. He was high-handed, yes, laying down the law as long as he was able, but he was always polite. Of course I loved him. I still do. He will have to be buried properly, where we can plant something—white roses. The mayor told me that every once in a while they turn one of the Russians out, to make room. There must be a waiting list. We could put

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Alec's name on it. Alec gave me three children. Eric gave me Lou Mas.

Entering Mr. Cranefield's, she removed her dark veil and hat and revealed her lovely head, like the sun rising. Because the wind had started blowing leaves and sand, Mr. Cranefield's party had to be moved indoors from the loggia. This change occasioned some confusion, in which Barbara did not take part; neither did Wilkinson, whose wrenched shoulder was making him feel ill. She noticed her children helping, carrying plates of small sandwiches and silver buckets of ice. She approved of this; they were obviously well brought up. The funeral had left Mr. Cranefield's guests feeling hungry and thirsty and rather lonely, anxious to hold on to a glass and to talk to someone. Presently their voices rose, overlapped, and created something like a thick woven fabric of blurred design, which Alec's sister (who was not used to large social gatherings) likened to a flying carpet. It was now, with Molly covertly watching her, that Barbara began in the most natural way in the world to live happily ever after. There was nothing deliberate about this: she was simply borne in a single direction, though she did keep seeing for a time her black glove on her widowed friend's black sleeve.

Escorting lame Mrs. Massie to a sofa, Mr. Cranefield said they might as well look on the bright side. (He was still speaking about the second half of the nineteen-fifties.) Wilkinson, sitting down because he felt sick, and thinking the remark was intended for him, assured Mr. Cranefield, truthfully, that he had never looked anywhere else. It then happened that every person in the room, at the same moment, spoke and thought of something other than Alec. This lapse, this inattention, lasting no longer than was needed to say "No, thank you" or "Oh, really?" or "Yes, I see," was enough to create the dark gap marking the end of Alec's span. He ceased to be, and it made absolutely no difference after that whether or not he was forgotten. —MAVIS GALLANT

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Meanwhile, Lieut. James Cowan of the Manhattan Burglary Squad said that there had been no break in last Saturday's theft of $750,000 worth of gold and silver from the Rand Paseka Manufacturing Company's offices at 153 Waverly Place. He said the Insurance Company of North America had raised its offer of a reward to $750,000 for information leading to recovery of the property and arrest of the thieves. —*The Times.*

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