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CHAPTER I.

"You won't be late?" There was anxiety in Marjorie Carling's voice, there was something like entreaty.

"No, I won't be late," said Walter, unhappily and guiltily certain that he would be. Her voice annoyed him. It drawled a little, it was too refined—even in misery.

"Not later than midnight." She might have reminded him of the time when he never went out in the evenings without her. She might have done so; but she wouldn't; it was against her principles; she didn't want to force his love in any way.

"Well, call it one. You know what these parties are." But as a matter of fact, she didn't know, for the good reason that, not being his wife, she wasn't invited to them. She had left her husband to live with Walter Bidlake; and Carling, who had Christian scruples, was feebly a sadist and wanted to take his revenge, refused to divorce her. It was two years now, since they had begun to live together. Only two years; and now, already, he had ceased to love her, he had begun to love someone else. The sin was losing its only excuse, the social discomfort its sole palliation. And she was with child.

"Half-past twelve," she implored, though she knew that her importunity would only annoy him, only make him love her the less. But she could not prevent herself from speaking; she loved him too much, she was too agonizingly jealous. The words broke out in spite of her principles. It would have been better for her and perhaps for Walter, too, if she had had fewer principles and given her feelings the violent expression they demanded. But she had been well brought up in habits of the strictest self-control. Only the uneducated, she knew made "scenes." An imploring "Half-past twelve, Walter," was all that managed to break

through her principles. Too weak to move him, the feeble outburst would only annoy. She knew it, and yet she could not hold her tongue.

"If I can possibly manage it." (There; she had done it. There was exasperation in his tone.) "But I can't guarantee it; don't expect me too certainly." For of course, he was thinking (with Lucy Tantamount's image unexorcisably haunting him), it certainly wouldn't be half-past twelve.

He gave the final touches to his white tie. From the mirror her face looked out at him, close beside his own. It was a pale face and so thin that the down-thrown light of the electric lamp hanging above them made a shadow in the hollows below the cheek-bones. Her eyes were darkly ringed. Rather too long at the best of times, her straight nose protruded bleakly from the unfleshed face. She looked ugly, tired, and ill. Six months from now her baby would be born. Something that had been a single cell, a cluster of cells, a little sac of tissue, a kind of worm, a potential fish with gills, stirred in her womb and would one day become a man—a grown man, suffering and enjoying, loving and hating, thinking, remembering, imagining. And what had been a blob of jelly within her body would invent a god and worship; what had been a kind of fish would create and, having created, would become the battle-ground of disputing good and evil; what had blindly lived in her as a parasite worm would look at the stars, would listen to music, would read poetry. A thing would grow into a person, a tiny lump of stuff would become a human body, a human mind. The astounding process of creation was going on within her; but Marjorie was conscious only of sickness and lassitude; the mystery for her meant nothing but fatigue and ugliness and a chronic anxiety about the future, pain of the mind as well as discomfort of the body. She had been glad, or at least she had tried to be glad, in spite of her haunting fears of physical and social consequences, when she first recognized the symptoms of her pregnancy. The child, she believed, would bring Walter closer. (He had begun to fade away from her even then.) It would arouse in him new feel-

ings which would make up for whatever element it was that seemed to be lacking in his love for her. She dreaded the pain, she dreaded the inevitable difficulties and embarrassments. But the pains, the difficulties would have been worth while if they purchased a renewal, a strengthening of Walter's attachment. In spite of everything, she was glad. And at first her previsions had seemed to be justified. The news that she was going to have a child had quickened his tenderness. For two or three weeks she was happy, she was reconciled to the pains and discomforts. Then, from one day to another, everything was changed; Walter had met that woman. He still did his best, in the intervals of running after Lucy, to keep up a show of solicitude. But she could feel that the solicitude was resentful, that he was tender and attentive out of a sense of duty, that he hated the child for compelling him to be so considerate to its mother. And because he hated it, she too began to hate it. No longer overlaid by happiness, her fears came to the surface, filled her mind. Pain and discomfort—that was all the future held. And meanwhile ugliness, sickness, fatigue. How could she fight her battle when she was in this state?

"Do you love me, Walter?" she suddenly asked.

Walter turned his brown eyes for a moment from the reflected tie and looked into the image of her sad, intently gazing grey ones. He smiled. "But if only," he was thinking, "she would leave me in peace!" He pursed his lips and parted them again in the suggestion of a kiss. But Marjorie did not return his smile. Her face remained unmovingly sad, fixed in an intent anxiety. Her eyes took on a tremulous brightness, and suddenly there were tears on her lashes.

"Couldn't you stay here with me this evening?" she begged, in the teeth of all her heroic resolutions not to apply any sort of exasperating compulsion to his love, to leave him free to do what he wanted.

At the sight of those tears, at the sound of that tremulous and reproachful voice, Walter was filled with an emotion that was at once remorse and resentment; anger, pity, and shame.

"But can't you understand," that was what he would have liked to say, what he would have said if he had had the courage, "can't you understand that it isn't the same as it was, that it can't be the same? And perhaps, if the truth be told, it never was what you believed it was—our love, I mean—it never was what I tried to pretend it was. Let's be friends, let's be companions. I like you, I'm very fond of you. But for goodness' sake don't envelop me in love, like this; don't force love on me. If you knew how dreadful love seems to somebody who doesn't love, what a violation, what an outrage . . ."

But she was crying. Through her closed eyelids the tears were welling out, drop after drop. Her face was trembling into the grimace of agony. And he was the tormentor. He hated himself. "But why should I let myself be blackmailed by her tears?" he asked and, asking, he hated her also. A drop ran down her long nose. "She has no right to do this sort of thing, no right to be so unreasonable. Why can't she be reasonable?"

"Because she loves me."

"But I don't want her love, I don't want it." He felt the anger mounting up within him. She had no business to love him like that; not now, at any rate. "It's a blackmail," he repeated inwardly, "a blackmail. Why must I be blackmailed by her love and the fact that once I loved too—or did I ever love her, really?"

Marjorie took out a handkerchief and began to wipe her eyes. He felt ashamed of his odious thoughts. But she was the cause of his shame; it was her fault. She ought to have stuck to her husband. They could have had an affair. Afternoons in a studio. It would have been romantic.

"But after all, it was I who insisted on her coming away with me."

"But she ought to have had the sense to refuse. She ought to have known that it couldn't last for ever."

But she had done what he had asked her; she had given up everything, accepted social discomfort for his sake. Another piece of blackmail. She blackmailed him with

sacrifice. He resented the appeal which her sacrifices made to his sense of decency and honour.

"But if *she* had some decency and honour," he thought, "she wouldn't exploit mine."

But there was the baby.

"Why on earth did she ever allow it to come into existence?"

He hated it. It increased his responsibility toward its mother, increased his guiltiness in making her suffer. He looked at her wiping her tear-wet face. Being with child had made her so ugly, so old. How could a woman expect . . . ? But no, no, no! Walter shut his eyes, gave an almost imperceptible shuddering shake of the head. The ignoble thought must be shut out, repudiated.

"How can I think such things?" he asked himself.

"Don't go," he heard her repeating. How that refined and drawling shrillness got on his nerves! "Please don't go, Walter."

There was a sob in her voice. More blackmail. Ah, how could he be so base? And yet, in spite of his shame and, in a sense, because of it, he continued to feel the shameful emotions with an intensity that seemed to increase rather than diminish. His dislike of her grew because he was ashamed of it; the painful feelings of shame and self-hatred, which she caused him to feel, constituted for him yet another ground of dislike. Resentment bred shame, and shame in its turn bred more resentment.

"Oh, why can't she leave me in peace?" He wished it furiously, intensely, with an exasperation that was all the more savage for being suppressed. (For he lacked the brutal courage to give it utterance; he was sorry for her, he was fond of her in spite of everything; he was incapable of being openly and frankly cruel—he was cruel only out of weakness, against his will.)

"Why can't she leave me in peace?" He would like her so much more if only she left him in peace; and she herself would be so much happier. Ever so much happier. It would be for her own good. . . . But suddenly he saw through his own hypocrisy. "But all the same, why the devil can't she let me do what I want?"

What he wanted? But what he wanted was Lucy Tantamount. And he wanted her against reason, against all his ideals and principles, madly, against his own wishes, even against his own feelings—for he didn't like Lucy; he really hated her. A noble end may justify shameful means. But when the end is shameful, what then? It was for Lucy that he was making Marjorie suffer—Marjorie, who loved him, who had made sacrifices for him, who was unhappy. But her unhappiness was blackmailing him.

"Stay with me this evening," she implored once more.

There was a part of his mind that joined in her entreaties, that wanted him to give up the party and stay at home. But the other part was stronger. He answered her with lies—half lies that were worse, for the hypocritically justifying element of truth in them, than frank whole lies.

He put his arm round her. The gesture was in itself a falsehood.

"But my darling," he protested in the cajoling tone of one who implores a child to behave reasonably, "I really must go. You see, my father's going to be there." That was true. Old Bidlake was always at the Tantamount's parties. "And I must have a talk with him. About business," he added vaguely and importantly, releasing with the magical word a kind of smoke-screen of masculine interests between himself and Marjorie. But the lie, he reflected, must be transparently visible through the smoke.

"Couldn't you see him some other time?"

"It's important," he answered, shaking his head. "And besides," he added, forgetting that several excuses are always less convincing than one, "Lady Edward's inviting an American editor specially for my sake. He might be useful; you know how enormously they pay." Lady Edward had told him that she would invite the man if he hadn't started back to America—she was afraid he had. "Quite preposterously much," he went on, thickening his screen with impersonal irrelevancies. "It's the only place in the world where it's possible for a writer to be over-paid." He made an attempt at laughter. "And I really need a bit of overpaying to make up for all this two-guineas-a-

thousand business." He tightened his embrace, he bent down to kiss her. But Marjorie averted her face. "Marjorie," he implored. "Don't cry. Please." He felt guilty and unhappy. But oh! why couldn't she leave him in peace, in peace?

"I'm not crying," she answered. But her cheek was wet and cold to his lips.

"Marjorie, I won't go, if you don't want me to."

"But I *do* want you to," she answered, still keeping her face averted.

"You don't. I'll stay."

"You mustn't." Marjorie looked at him and made an effort to smile. "It's only my silliness. It would be stupid to miss your father and that American man." Returned to him like this, his excuses sounded peculiarly vain and improbable. He winced with a kind of disgust.

"They can wait," he answered and there was a note of anger in his voice. He was angry with himself for having made such lying excuses (why couldn't he have told her the crude and brutal truth straight out? she knew it, after all); and he was angry with her for reminding him of them. He would have liked them to fall directly into the pit of oblivion, to be as though they had never been uttered.

"No, no; I insist. I was only being silly. I'm sorry."

He resisted her at first, refused to go, demanded to stay. Now that there was no danger of his having to stay, he could afford to insist. For Marjorie, it was clear, was serious in her determination that he should go. It was an opportunity for him to be noble and self-sacrificing at a cheap rate, gratis even. What an odious comedy! But he played it. In the end he consented to go, as though he were doing her a special favour by not staying. Marjorie tied his scarf for him, brought him his silk hat and his gloves, kissed him good-bye lightly, with a brave show of gaiety. She had her pride and her code of amorous honour; and in spite of unhappiness, in spite of jealousy, she stuck to her principles—he *ought* to be free; she had no right to interfere with him. And besides, it was the

best policy not to interfere. At least, she hoped it was the best policy.

Walter shut the door behind him and stepped out into the cool of the night. A criminal escaping from the scene of his crime, escaping from the spectacle of the victim, escaping from compassion and remorse, could not have felt more profoundly relieved. In the street he drew a deep breath. He was free. Free from recollection and anticipation. Free, for an hour or two, to refuse to admit the existence of past or future. Free to live only now and here, in the place where his body happened at each instant to be. Free—but the boast was idle; he went on remembering. Escape was not so easy a matter. Her voice pursued him. "I insist on your going." His crime had been a fraud as well as a murder. "I insist." How nobly he had protested! How magnanimously given in at last! It was card-sharpping on top of cruelty.

"God!" he said almost aloud. "How could I?" He was astonished at himself as well as disgusted. "But if only she'd leave me in peace!" he went on. "Why can't she be reasonable?" The weak and futile anger exploded again within him.

He thought of the time when his wishes had been different. Not to be left in peace by her had once been his whole ambition. He had encouraged her devotion. He remembered the cottage they had lived in, alone with one another, month after month, among the bare downs. What a view over Berkshire! But it was a mile and a half to the nearest village. Oh, the weight of that knapsack full of provisions! The mud when it rained! And that bucket you had to wind up from the well. The well was more than a hundred feet deep. But even when he wasn't doing something tiresome, like winding up the bucket, had it really been very satisfactory? Had he ever really been happy with Marjorie—as happy, at any rate, as he had imagined he was going to be, as he ought to have been in the circumstances? It should have been like "Epipsychidion"; but it wasn't—perhaps because he had too consciously wanted it to be, because he had deliberately tried to model his feelings and their life together on Shelley's poetry.

"One shouldn't take art too literally." He remembered what his brother-in-law, Philip Quarles, had said one evening, when they were talking about poetry. "Particularly where love is concerned."

"Not even if it's true?" Walter had asked.

"It's apt to be too true. Unadulterated, like distilled water. When truth is nothing but the truth, it's unnatural, it's an abstraction that resembles nothing in the real world. In nature there are always so many other irrelevant things mixed up with the essential truth. That's why art moves you—precisely because it's unadulterated with all the irrelevancies of real life. Real orgies are never so exciting as pornographic books. In a volume by Pierre Louys all the girls are young and their figures perfect; there's no hiccupping or bad breath, no fatigue or boredom, no sudden recollections of unpaid bills or business letters unanswered, to interrupt the raptures. Art gives you the sensation, the thought, the feeling quite pure—chemically pure, I mean," he had added with a laugh, "not morally."

"But 'Epipsychidion' isn't pornography," Walter had objected.

"No, but it's equally pure from the chemist's point of view. How does that sonnet of Shakespeare's go?

"My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red:
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks. . . .

"And so on. He'd taken the poets too literally and was reacting. Let him be a warning to you."

Philip had been right, of course. Those months in the cottage hadn't been at all like "Epipsychidion" or *La Maison du Berger*. What with the well and the walk to the village. . . . But even if there hadn't been the well

and the walk, even if he had had Marjorie unadulterated, would it have been any better? It might even have been worse. Marjorie unadulterated might have been worse than Marjorie tempered by irrelevancies.

That refinement of hers, for example, that rather cold virtuousness, so bloodless and spiritual—from a distance and theoretically he admired. But in practice and close at hand? It was with that virtue, that refined, cultured, bloodless spirituality that he had fallen in love—with that and with her unhappiness; for Carling was unspeakable. Pity made him a knight errant. Love, he had then believed (for he was only twenty-two at the time, ardently pure, with the adolescent purity of sexual desires turned inside out, just down from Oxford and stuffed with poetry and the lucubrations of philosophers and mystics), love was talk, love was spiritual communion and companionship. That was real love. The sexual business was only an irrelevancy—unavoidable, because unfortunately human beings had bodies, but to be kept as far as possible in the background. Ardently pure with the ardour of young desires taught artificially to burn on the side of the angels, he had admired that refined and quiet purity which, in Marjorie, was the product of a natural coldness, a congenitally low vitality.

"You're so good," he had said. "It seems to come to you so easily. I wish I could be good, like you."

It was the equivalent, but he did not realize it, of wishing himself half dead. Under the shy, diffident, sensitive skin of him, he was ardently alive. It was indeed hard for him to be good, as Marjorie was good. But he tried. And meanwhile, he admired her goodness and purity. And he was touched—at least until it bored and exasperated him—by her devotion to him, he was flattered by her admiration.

Walking now toward Chalk Farm station, he suddenly remembered that story his father used to tell about an Italian chauffeur he had once talked to about love. (The old man had a genius for getting people to talk; all sorts of people, even servants, even workmen. Walter envied him the talent.) Some women, according to the chauffeur,

are like wardrobes. *Sono come cassettoni*. How richly old Bidlake used to tell the anecdote! They may be as lovely as you like; but what's the point of a lovely wardrobe in your arms? What on earth's the point? (And Marjorie, Walter reflected, wasn't even really good-looking.) "Give me," said the chauffeur, "the other kind, even if they're ugly. My girl," he had confided, "is the other kind. *E un frullino, proprio un frullino*—a regular egg-whisk." And the old man would twinkle like a jovial, wicked old satyr behind his monocle. Stiff wardrobes or lively egg-whisks? Walter had to admit that his preferences were the same as the chauffeur's. At any rate, he knew by personal experience that (whenever "real" love was being tempered by the sexual irrelevancies) he didn't much like the wardrobe kind of woman. At a distance, theoretically, purity and goodness and refined spirituality were admirable. But in practice and close to they were less appealing. And from someone who does not appeal to one even devotion, even the flattery of admiration, are unbearable. Confusedly and simultaneously he hated Marjorie for her patient, martyred coldness; he accused himself of swinish sensuality. His love for Lucy was mad and shameful, but Marjorie was bloodless and half dead. He was at once justified and without excuse. But more without excuse, all the same; more without excuse. They were low, those sensual feelings; they were ignoble. Egg-whisk and chest of drawers—could anything be more base and ignoble than such a classification? In imagination he heard his father's rich and fleshy laugh. Horrible! Walter's whole conscious life had been orientated in opposition to his father, in opposition to the old man's jolly, careless sensuality. Consciously he had always been on the side of his mother, on the side of purity, refinement, the spirit. But his blood was at least half his father's. And now two years of Marjorie had made him consciously dislike cold virtue. He consciously disliked it, even though at the same time he was still ashamed of his dislike, ashamed of what he regarded as his beastly sensual desires, ashamed of his love for Lucy. But oh, if only Marjorie would leave him in peace! If only she'd refrain from clamouring for a

return to the unwelcome love she persisted in forcing on him! If only she'd stop being so dreadfully devoted! He could give her friendship—for he liked her, genuinely; she was so good and kind, so loyal and devoted. He'd be glad of her friendship in return. But love—that was suffocating. And when, imagining she was fighting the other woman with her own weapons, she did violence to her own virtuous coldness and tried to win him back by the ardour of her caresses—oh, it was terrible, really terrible.

And then, he went on to reflect, she was really rather a bore with her heavy, insensitive earnestness. Really rather stupid in spite of her culture—because of it perhaps. The culture was genuine all right; she had read the books, she remembered them. But did she understand them? *Could* she understand them? The remarks with which she broke her long, long silences, the cultured, earnest remarks—how heavy they were, how humourless and without understanding! She was wise to be so silent; silence is as full of potential wisdom and wit as the unhewn marble of great sculpture. The silent bear no witness against themselves. Marjorie knew how to listen well and sympathetically. And when she did break silence, half her utterances were quotations. For Marjorie had a retentive memory and had formed the habit of learning the great thoughts and the purple passages by heart. It had taken Walter some time to discover the heavy, pathetically uncomprehending stupidity that underlay the silence and the quotations. And when he discovered, it was too late.

He thought of Carling. A drunkard *and* religious. Always chattering away about chasubles and saints and the immaculate conception, and at the same time a nasty drunken pervert. If the man hadn't been quite so detestably disgusting, if he hadn't made Marjorie quite so wretched—what then? Walter imagined his freedom. He wouldn't have pitied, he wouldn't have loved. He remembered Marjorie's red and swollen eyes after one of those disgusting scenes with Carling. The dirty brute!

"And what about me?" he suddenly thought.

He knew that the moment the door had shut behind him, Marjorie had started to cry. Carling at least had the

excuse of whiskey. Forgive them, for they know not what they do. He himself was never anything but sober. At this moment, he knew, she was crying.

"I ought to go back," he said to himself. But instead, he quickened his pace till he was almost running down the street. It was a flight from his conscience and at the same time a hastening toward his desire.

"I ought to go back, I ought."

He hurried on, hating her because he had made her so unhappy.

A man looking into a tobacconist's window suddenly stepped backward as he was passing. Walter violently collided with him.

"Sorry," he said automatically, and hurried on without looking round.

"Where yer going?" the man shouted after him angrily. "Wotcher think you're doing? Being a bloody Derby winner?"

Two loitering street boys whooped with ferociously derisive mirth.

"You in yer top 'at," the man pursued contemptuously, hating the uniformed gentleman.

The right thing would have been to turn round and give the fellow back better than he gave. His father would have punctured him with a word. But for Walter there was only flight. He dreaded these encounters, he was frightened of the lower classes. The noise of the man's abuse faded in his ears.

Odious! He shuddered. His thoughts returned to Marjorie.

"Why can't she be reasonable?" he said to himself. "Just reasonable. If only at least she had something to do, something to keep her occupied."

She had too much time to think, that was the trouble with Marjorie. Too much time to think about him. Though after all it was his fault; it was he who had robbed her of her occupation and made her focus her mind exclusively on himself. She had taken a partnership in a decorator's shop when he first knew her; one of those lady-like, artistic, amateurish decorating establishments in Kensing-