THIS DAY, THEN TOMORROW

Something out of the ordinary had happened in the Hatton household. Ruth, at twenty-two the youngest of the Hatton girls, had got a novel accepted for publication. The publisher's letter was on the breakfast table when she came down, and the sudden joyful spring of colour to her cheeks as she opened and read it betrayed her to Mrs Hatton, so that she was forced to break the news not at a moment of her own choosing, but there and then.

'Two hundred and fifty pounds advance on royalties!' Mrs Hatton said. 'And what's this novel about, ever?'

Ruth made a movement of her hand. 'Oh...'

'Two hundred and fifty pounds?' Mr Hatton took the letter in his turn. 'I didn't know you were writing a novel, Ruth.'

'She's been going to that literature class in the evenings for nearly two years,' Mrs Hatton said, as though he were somehow more remiss than herself in. not knowing what their daughter was up to. 'And she's always scribbled in her room.'

'I thought she was studying people like Shakespeare and Dickens,' Mr Hatton said, 'not writing books of her own.'

'Why ever shouldn't Ruth write a novel, Bernard?' Mrs Hatton said. 'She's had a good education.'

Mr Hatton was too used to his wife's instant allotting of their roles in any situation – her own one of perception and concern, his that of a neglectful obtuseness – to become irritated.

'We study literary composition,' Ruth said, 'and we're expected to do some original writing.'

'But a novel!' Ruth's older sister Celia said. 'You can't deny you've kept it quiet, Ruth. It must have made a fair-sized parcel to put in the post.'

'Well... I didn't know whether it was any good or not, so there was no point in saying anything yet.'

'But we're here to share your disappointments as well as your successes, surely, Ruth,' her mother said.

Some of them, anyway, Ruth thought. She had prepared herself for their knowing if the manuscript were returned, but she could not have endured the initial waiting period except alone. Once her mother had seized on such an event outside the normal life of the household she would not have let it drop. There would also have been the necessity of letting her read and comment on the book. Now, of course, when it had acquired a cachet of a publisher's acceptance, it was different. Or was it? The contents were still the same, and soon now they would become public property. For the first time Ruth felt a tiny tremor of anxiety.

Her father was more concerned with the business aspects of the matter. ‘They say they’ll send you a contract to sign,’ he said. ‘Perhaps you ought to get legal advice on that.’

‘It’s a standard procedure.’

‘Yes, but you don’t want to sign your rights away.’

‘Dad, they’re among the most reputable publishers in London.’

‘You don’t think they’re going to cheat the girl, do you, Bernard?’ Mrs Hatton said.

‘Of course not. But they’re businessmen and it’s their job to make a profit.’

‘Perhaps you can let Mr Astley glance at it, Ruth,’ her mother suggested.

Mr Astley had acted for Mr Hatton in the purchase of their house and in a number of other routine matters. Ruth didn’t think that he, or any other solicitor in the district, would know much about authors’ rights in a literary agreement.

‘I’ll show it to my tutor at the class,’ she said. ‘He’s had poetry published, and some stories.’

Mrs Hatton’s mouth pursed in an expression that was almost a smirk. ‘What a feather in your cap when you walk in and tell them about it!’

Mr Hatton, leaving first, patted Ruth’s head and twinkled at her from the doorway. ‘Well done! It looks as though we’re going to have a celebrity in the house.’

She was called to the telephone in her free period that morning. The male voice at the other end of the line belonged to a reporter on the local weekly newspaper.

‘I understand you’ve had a novel accepted for publication.’

‘Well, yes. How do you know?’

‘Your mother rang the editor, I believe.’

Ruth felt a spasm of irritation. She had wanted to savour the good news privately for a while; to ponder this development in her life and come to terms with it before speaking of it to anyone. But already she was being pushed along at someone else’s pace.

‘I wondered if I could come along and talk to you about it. It’ll make a very interesting item for our readers.’

‘Our readers.’ Everybody. Common knowledge. That Hatton girl’s written a book. She suddenly became acutely conscious of how many people who didn’t read a novel from one year’s end to the next would read this one because she was its author. And how, of course, they would presume to judge it. With that thought came a keen desire to put this man off, to make any excuse to avoid having to talk to him. But wasn’t all this part of the process? She had written a book and offered it for publication. So now the public would read it, and what they made of it and her were factors over which she had control. She ought to be flattered and pleased by this instant opportunity of publicity, but instead she felt something more like fright. Oh, Lord! Why had she done it?

‘Well, then?’ she asked.

‘I thought I might call round this evening. We go to press tomorrow.’

‘But it’ll be months before the book’s published.’

‘Oh, we can do a follow-up piece nearer the time, but we’d like to be first with the original story.’

First? Who else could be interested?

She said, ‘All right. Will seven o’clock be convenient?’

‘Righto, seven. I have the address.’

Arthur Debenham, who taught Senior English, passed by as she left the telephone cubicle. He glanced at her and nodded. Ruth turned her head and watched him stroll along the corridor with his long slow stride and curious swing of the shoulders. Debenham was in his fifties and given to occasional caustic denunciations in the staff room of contemporary trends in the arts. What usually provoked him were newspaper reports of a new play or novel by ‘the latest back-street genius from Bradford’ or ‘Bermondsey’. ‘We’re living in the age of the literate illiterate,’ was Debenham’s line. Everybody’s writing novels or plays. They’ve none of them anything to say, and they don’t know how to say it anyway, but they’re so full of their own insignificant – and usually grubby – feelings, they have to share them with the world.’

What would he make of her adding to the number? Because soon he would know. Everybody would know.

‘A few biographical details first, I think.’ The reporter was a young man about Ruth’s age. It was raining outside and his gingerish suede boots were darkly wet on the toes, but he had gauchely declined to remove the blue anorak which he wore over a grey roll-neck sweater and Mrs Hatton glanced at him from time to time as though apprehensive that he would lean back and stain with damp the lime-green cover of the chair in which he was sitting. But he remained forward on the edge, a cheap throwaway ballpoint poised over the open notebook on his knee. Beside him on the arm of the chair the cup of tea Mrs Hatton had pressed upon him stood untouched and cooling, with a biscuit soggily absorbing the liquid slopped over into the saucer.

‘You’re, er, how old?’

‘Twenty-two.’

‘You were educated at the local grammar school?’

‘Yes.’

‘And then... ?’

‘I went to a training college.’

‘And now you teach, what, domestic science? Why didn’t you study a subject connected with writing?’

‘I’ve always been interested in housecraft and so on. The writing thing’s comparatively recent.’

‘Even as a little girl Ruth was handy about the house,’ Mrs Hatton put in. ‘Of course I encouraged her and taught her all I could, purely for the sake of it. That kind of ability’s never lost.’

‘No, quite... So how did you become interested in writing?’

‘I started going to a literary composition class in the evenings, just as a change. We were expected to do some writing of our own.’

‘How long did it take you to write this novel?’

‘Oh, about a year.’

‘That would be working in the evenings?’

‘And a few hours at weekends, when I could manage.’

‘Did your family encourage you?’

‘They didn’t know what I was doing.’

‘Oh?’ The young man looked at Mrs Hatton, who tried an indulgent laugh.

‘No, we had no idea until this morning when the letter came.’

‘You preferred nobody to know?’

‘Well, yes. I think when you’ve never done anything like that before it seems a very personal thing. You become rather self-conscious about it. I mean, it might just be self-indulgence.’

‘But in your case, it seems the novel is good enough for publication.’

‘Yes. Perhaps I’ve been lucky.’

‘I think you’re too modest, Miss Hatton. Publishers have their standards.’

‘I think so too,’ her mother said. ‘We’re all very proud of her.’

‘By the way, what’s the book called?’

‘This Day, then Tomorrow.’

The reporter repeated the title after her, putting it in full among the shorthand symbols in his notebook.

‘And can you give me some idea of what it’s about?’

She had expected that question, and thought about it at odd moments in the day, but without much result.

‘Well... that’s not easy.’

‘I don’t expect you to tell me the plot. But is it a love story, a thriller, or an historical piece... you know.’

‘It hasn’t got much of a plot to tell. It’s a love story, I suppose.’ Oh yes, it was about love. And innocence. About the necessity for trust and the inevitability of its defencelessness in the face of betrayal.

‘A romantic novel.’

‘Oh no. It doesn’t fall into that slot.’

The firmness of her reply quickened his interest. ‘You mean it’s too outspoken?’

‘I’d prefer to say it’s honest.’

‘What about the main characters, and the background?’

‘The main character is a girl who’s away from home for the first time, at college.’

‘You mean, like yourself?’

‘No, not exactly.’

‘It’s not autobiographical, then?’

‘No, look. A writer uses settings and the kind of life he or she knows well then adds observation and imagination.’

‘I see. So you don’t expect the reader to identify you with the main character.’

‘I hope not. If you’d read the book I don’t think you’d ask me that.’

‘Oh, why not?’

‘The girl in the novel has an abortion.’

And now she had gone too far, revealed much more than at this stage she had ever intended. Her mother’s gaze was on her. Did it contain the first flicker of alarm?

Ruth said quickly, ‘Look, I’d be grateful if you didn’t mention that. It sounds so sensational out of context.’

‘Well, of course not, if you say so.’ The reporter looked disappointed at losing the spicy core of his story as soon as it had been revealed. ‘But our readers aren’t going to be shocked by the mention of a word like that.’

‘I know your readers,’ Ruth said. ‘They’ve got the same proportion of the prudish, the hypocritical, the bigoted, and the just plain ignorant as any other community, and I don’t think it’s fair that either I or my book should be prejudged by mentioning such an emotive subject at this stage. I can justify what I’ve written in its context, but they’ll have to read the book to arrive at a balanced judgement.’

‘I think you could be wrong.’ The young man frowned. ‘A little bit of the right kind of publicity can help to sell books.’

‘That’s not the kind of publicity I want.’

‘Certainly not,’ Mrs Hatton said. ‘We do have to live in this town.’

‘Yes, of course. But Ruth could almost hear him thinking: but if that’s the case you can’t blame me if your daughter writes a book which she finds it embarrassing to talk about.’

She began to bring the interview to a close.

‘Have you got as much as you need to be going on with?’

‘Yes, I suppose so. Just a few more background facts. Your father is Mr Hatton the dentist? And have you any brothers or sisters?’

‘Ruth has an older sister who works for a firm of estate agents,’ Mrs Hatton said, ‘and my eldest daughter is married to an officer in the army, who’s stationed abroad at present.’

‘Righto, then. Thank you very much.’ The young man stood up, almost dislodging with his elbow the tea-cup beside him. ‘Sorry, I’d forgotten that.’ He took the cup and in his eagerness to show that he’d really wanted the tea, drank the lot so quickly that drops spilled down the front of his anorak. The biscuit he left in the saucer.

‘It will be in the paper this weekend?’ Mrs Hatton asked.

‘All being well. By the way, do you know when the book’s being published?’

‘I’ve no idea.’ Ruth gave a little laugh. ‘It’s all a bit premature, really. I haven’t even signed the contract yet.’

‘Oh, that’ll be all right, I’m sure,’ the young man said. ‘I’ll look forward to reading it.’

She saw him out then went back into the sitting-room. Her mother was standing on the hearthrug.

‘Don’t you think it’s time you let me read this book?’

‘If you want to.’

‘Well, of course I want to. I want to for its own sake; and after this weekend people are bound to stop me and mention it. I ought to know what my daughter’s been doing, didn’t I?’

Ruth said, ‘I’ll get it for you now.’ She went to her room and brought down the carbon of the typescript. Her mother felt the weight.

‘There seems to be a lot of it.’

‘It’ll be a normal-length book when it gets into print.’

‘It’s not the kind of thing you can read in bed, anyway. All that typing, and I never knew.’

‘The typing’s the least of it,’ Ruth said. ‘By the time you reach the final copy you’re laughing.’

Mrs Hatton glanced at the first couple of pages. ‘Ruth... it isn’t... well, sensational, is it? I mean, there’s so much stuff between covers these days that I wouldn’t have in the house.’

‘I’ve written a novel, Mother,’ Ruth said. ‘It’s neither a fairy story nor something that exploits dirt for its own sake or for money. You’ll have to make up your own mind.’

The young reporter rang up the next morning to ask for a photograph of Ruth. Mrs Hatton lent him a formal portrait taken while Ruth was at college. Ruth didn’t like it. She wasn’t unattractive, she knew. She had been told more than once that her legs were good and there had been a time when she would stop

on catching sight of her naked body in a mirror and take in the fineness of her skin and the way her narrow back emphasised the plumpness of her breasts in a sensual reverie of self-love which was a reflection of another's professed adoration, an exulting in what she had to give and the way in which it was taken. Once upon a time... But all the camera ever showed was a pale bespectacled face with an insipid half-smile: the face of one fitted for nothing more passionate than studying, passing examinations, writing a book. There was, she supposed wryly, a kind of justice in it.

Her mother read the manuscript during the day, when she was alone in the house. Ruth found herself tensed for the reaction and tried to interpret something from her mother's behaviour. But there was nothing to be seen and no word passed between them on the subject until Mrs Hatton had finished the novel.

'I suppose it's well written. I don't know what other people will make of it, though.' Ruth was silent. 'It's not... well, it's hardly the kind of book I'd have expected you to write.'

'Oh?'

'Did you... did you know somebody at college who had an abortion?'

'You pick up all manner of information if you keep your eyes and ears open, if you talk to people, listen to what they tell you, and fill in the bits they don't.'

'But this girl that the book's about, who has the love affair. Was it necessary to go into so much detail?'

'I wanted to make it vivid and real.'

'Yes, but... I must say, I felt myself blushing more than once. Why, there are things in there I hardly knew about myself.'

'Oh, come on, Mother. You've had three children.'

'Well, I didn't know till after I was married.'

'Times change.'

'Yes. So I'm to take it – I mean, I can't do any other than take it – that you've already –'

'Mother,' Ruth said firmly, 'the book's the book and my private life is my own business.'

'All the same, when I think of the mortal danger you've been in. And I thought I'd brought you up so well, the three of you.'

'I'm sorry, Mother, but if you call bringing-up well teaching your daughters to bake and sew, seeing they're fed and clothed, encouraging them to go to church once a week, but telling them almost nothing about some of the most fundamental aspects of life, then you can't wonder they expose themselves to mortal danger the minute they leave the house.'

'Well, if that's what you think...'

'I'm sorry, Mother, really,' Ruth said. 'I didn't mean to hurt you.'

The words had, indeed, sounded shockingly harsh; but she was on the defensive, fearful of an attitude which could sap her confidence, turn her pride in something honestly achieved into a timid conformity with all those stultifying approaches to life that she most detested.

'I'm sorry if you think I've failed you in any way,' her mother said stiffly.

'Just so long as –' Ruth began, then stopped.

'So long as what?'

So long as you don't cripple me now by imposing your small-town sensibility on me, was that she wanted to say. But that would only force her mother further into injured pride.

'Mother, I know,' she said carefully, 'that I'm bound to come up against a number of people who'll put the worst possible construction on what I've done. But I hope they'll be far out-numbered by the other people who'll like and appreciate the book, or at least respect it for what it's meant to be. I want to think you're one of the latter people and that you're on my side.'

'I'm always on your side, you know that, whatever you do and I shall defend you to the last. I just can't help wishing you'd written, well, a nicer book, something more wholesome. I don't know what your father will make of it, I'm sure.'

'Doesn't it affect you at all?' Ruth said. 'Don't you find yourself concerned for the girl in any way?'

'Oh, yes, I'm sorry for her. All that sorrow and pain. And there's no doubt that the young man does treat her shabbily. But on the other hand, I can't help feeling that most of it's her own fault. And as for that awful mother, always putting her husband down…'

Ruth began to smile but her mother, not looking at her, didn't see. There was a silence, then Mrs Hatton sighed.

'I suppose it'll be all right in the long term.'

'A nine-day wonder,' Ruth said.

'All the same, I'm rather sorry now I was in such a hurry to ring up the paper. I could have had a little time to get used to it all if I'd read the book first.'

Ruth laughed.

'Never mind. Let's hope it makes a lot of money for me. That'll justify it in everybody's eyes.'

But oh, that damned self-consciousness!

It started at the beginning of her first class on Monday morning, with whispers in a group of junior-school girls.

'Saw your picture in the paper, Miss.'

'Have you really wrote a book, Miss?'

'Written,' Ruth corrected. 'Written a book.'

‘Well, have you, Miss?’

‘Yes, I have.’

‘What’s it about, Miss?’

‘Are you going to be on the telly, Miss?’

‘Now, look, let’s all settle down, shall we? This isn’t the time to go into all that. This morning we’re going to make some biscuits…’

She met Arthur Debenham drinking coffee in the staff room during morning break.

‘Ah, here’s our own Edna O’Drabble. Or is it Margaret Brien?’

‘What a lot of ignorance you pretend to, Arthur,’ Ruth said. ‘Have you really not read either of them?’

‘You ought to know by now, Ruth, that only the literary dead have any chance of winning Arthur’s grudging respect,’ Lois Rayner said. ‘His secret vice is lesser known women novelists of the Edwardian period.’

Ruth laughed. Lois was a toughie; a stocky, flat-chested spinster of about Debenham’s age, with yellow in the roots of her grey hair and ferocious flyaway frames on her glasses.

‘No, I wanted to congratulate you,’ Debenham said. ‘I suppose it’s still something of an achievement to get a book published, even in these days. Perhaps it’s expecting too much to hope that it might be readable as well.’

Ruth gasped and flushed heavily as he put down his cup and walked away. Even Lois was taken aback.

‘Of all the miserable devils!’ she said as the door closed behind him.

‘I don’t suppose he meant it to be taken like that,’ Ruth said.

‘If he knows so much about English Literature he should have learned how to frame his words at his age.’ Lois’s eyes flashed behind her glasses. She poured coffee and handed Ruth a cup. ‘Here you are, honey. I think you’ll learn more about stupidity than malice. Though they do say the literary world’s riddled with it. That and back-scratching. You do my washing and I’ll do yours.’

‘I wouldn’t know about that. I’m just a novice.’

‘First steps,’ Lois said. ‘Who knows what they can lead to? Anyway, I hope you’ll give me a signed copy for sticking up for you.’

Ruth smiled. ‘I’ll see what I can do.’

‘They do say his wife gives him hell.’

‘Oh?’

‘Oh, yes. Makes his life a misery, by all accounts.’

From the members of the evening class she received an envy in which she basked, behind an outward demeanour that was quietly modest. The class met in an adult-education centre in a larger town some

miles from Ruth's home, and the first some of her fellow students knew of her success was when their tutor, Jim Thomas, announced it at the start of the session.

'Our congratulations are due to Ruth Hatton, who's got a novel accepted for publication. And our admiration for her reticence in keeping the fact that she was working on one to herself until it was proved successful.'

Thomas shared the envy of the others. 'D'you know I've written three novels without one offer of publication?' he said to her afterwards.

'But you've published poems and stories.'

'Yes, just enough to reassure me that I'm not wasting my time entirely.'

'Oh, come now. I don't know how you can talk like that.'

'Don't you? It's one thing spouting in a knowledgeable way about the subject, and another doing it oneself.'

'But isn't there an awful lot of stuff published that you wouldn't put your name to?'

'Oh, yes. And quite a bit I'd give my eye teeth to have written.'

'Well, you don't know yet which category my book comes into.'

'No, that's true.' He looked at her reflectively for a second, then they laughed together.

'And now I shall be terribly self-conscious about your seeing it.'

'You won't have any choice, though. If you offer something to the world, the world has a right to express its opinion.'

'Yes.'

'Does the thought bother you?'

'A little.'

'The excitement must more than make up for it, though, eh?'

'Oh, yes!'

The sudden clear blaze of delight in her eyes made him laugh out loud again. He put his hand on her shoulder as they walked to the door.

'I wish you luck with it.'

An antidote to Mrs Hatton's reaction, and the largely uncomprehending wonder of the family's friends and acquaintances, was provided by a trip to London to see the publishers. Half-term was fortunately near so Ruth was able to arrange to go within ten days of their asking to see her.

London was hot, the air heavy. After a short journey on the Underground she took a wrong turning and for a time was lost. When she rediscovered her direction she was late and had to hurry, arriving at the tall old house in a leafy square, near the British Museum, with the composure she had gradually drawn

round herself on the train evaporated in the heat, and feeling her body sticky inside the suit which had seemed just right in the chilly morning at home, but which was far too heavy for the weather here.

Ruth had imagined vaguely, in her naivety, a place like a newspaper building, with glass-partitioned offices and the faint hum of printing presses from below; but here she was reminded of a solicitor's premises as, after waiting in the reception office for a few minutes, she was led up the narrow creaking stairs past the blank doors on each landing.

The room she was shown into had two tall paned windows looking out onto the green foliage of the trees. It had obviously been an upstairs drawing-room when, in the time of a novelist like Thackeray, the houses in the square were occupied by London's prosperous upper middle class. She wondered how many distinguished literary figures of today had been shown into this room, offered a seat in this overstuffed armchair of indeterminate age, and plied with cigarettes and sherry, as she was now while polite enquiries were made about her journey and small talk exchanged about London and the unexpected warm weather. The cigarette she refused; the sherry she accepted. The diversion of an incoming telephone call allowed her a few moments to turn her head to the books on the fronted shelves behind her: row after row of the firm's titles at which she peered to see the names of those writers published under the imprint to which she herself would soon belong.

'Well...' Raymond Waterford put down the receiver and smiled at her across his desk. He was the firm's editorial director, the person with whom she had corresponded, a bulky man in his middle forties with untidy thinning wavy hair and a square fleshy face. He wore a navy-blue pinstriped suit and, in flamboyant contrast, a huge yellow bow tie with blue spots. He fiddled with a new briar pipe but didn't fill it. He wasn't a pipe-smoker, he'd already told her, but he was trying any method he could think of to break himself of the habit of an enormous daily consumption of cigarettes.

'We like your novel very much, Miss Hatton. All my colleagues agree with me about its exceptional quality.'

'Thank you.'

'It isn't always the case. Are you working on something else?'

'I haven't had the time since I finished that one.'

'You mean we're the first people to see it?'

'Yes.'

'What made you choose us?'

'You publish one or two writers I admire. If you're good enough for them you should be all right for me.'

Waterford laughed. 'Quite. And I think you'll find we're as good as anyone else in London at selling fiction. You are going to write another novel, though, I take it?'

'Oh, yes. I'm mulling over an idea now.'

'Good. A publisher likes to look to the future, you know. Most first novels don't make any money; it's with the second or third that the dividends start to come in. In this case, though, providing the reviewers

can see what's in front of their noses, and the public respond in the right way, we might have a small success. But don't let me build you up too much. This business is full of people who've come unstuck with their predictions.'

Ruth hesitated. It seemed silly here in this room. But she asked just the same.

'You don't think it might be a bit too much in parts?'

'What? How d'you mean?'

'A bit outspoken.'

'Too graphic, d'you mean? Goodness me, no. Nobody here has suggested anything of the kind.' He smiled. 'Do you still live with your family?' Ruth nodded. 'I sometimes think,' he said 'that the only tenable situation for a writer would be an omniscient anonymity, knowing everything but not taking any part in it.'

'You mean something like a Catholic priest?'

He gave a guffaw. 'Yes, something like that.'

'Except that readers seem inclined to see it the other way round,' Ruth said. 'That it's the writer who's making the confession.'

'Yes...' His attention had wandered. He moved papers on his desk as though looking for something, then glanced at his watch. 'We ought to be going to lunch.'

He asked if she wanted to freshen up and, calling in the girl who had brought her upstairs, had Ruth shown to a small lavatory on the next landing. Then, a few minutes later, she and Waterford were walking across the square, he swinging a tightly rolled umbrella with which he pointed the way at each intersection. In the restaurant, a low-ceilinged room with oak-panelled walls, red velvet upholstery and quiet, attentive waiters who addressed Waterford by name, Ruth, her tongue loosened by a mixture of excitement and wine, became talkative, telling Waterford at his prompting, about her family, her career at college, her work now, and which writers she admired. At one point she recognised the face of an actor whom she'd seen in films at a nearby table and Waterford amused her by recounting a slightly scandalous anecdote about the man. Then Ruth switched to questioning him. When was her book likely to be published? How long before she would see the proofs...?

'You haven't got an agent, have you?' Waterford asked.

'No. Should I have?'

'Yes. You won't be able to handle the subsidiary rights yourself. A paperback sale is our province, but then there are all the other pickings: foreign rights, both in the United States and on the Continent; possible serialisation before publication; film rights, and so on.'

'Can you recommend anybody?'

'I should think so. It's a question of who'll be best for you. How long are you going to be in town?'

'Till tomorrow. I'm staying with a friend tonight.'

‘In any case, he’d want to read the book before deciding whether or not to take you on. Have you got a spare typescript?’

‘Just one carbon.’

‘If you could send that on to me as soon as you get back. You won’t need it, will you?’

‘I don’t suppose so.’

‘No. You forget this one now and get on with the next. In any case, if I have it you’ve a perfect excuse for preventing people from reading it before the proofs are ready.’ He smiled.

‘All right.’

‘I fancy it’s something that writers have to get used to,’ he said, returning to the subject they’d begun to discuss in his office. ‘I mean the question of saying in print what you possibly wouldn’t discuss in so-called polite society. It’s not easy to be honest. So far as I can gather the solution is to find an environment in which you can feel free and at ease, yet not cut off altogether from the sources of your inspiration – if we may use such a word. Your material, if you like. That’s why so many young writers come to London after their first success. And why too many of them find that in doing so they’ve lost their basic nourishment. The other side of the coin is the danger in becoming too big a fish in too small a pond.’

‘The pond may be small,’ Ruth said. ‘But I think it’s very deep.’

‘Well, then. We shall have to wait and see what you haul out of it with your next book. In the meantime, you won’t really mind becoming quite well known and having your picture in the papers, will you?’

‘No,’ Ruth admitted. ‘No, I don’t suppose I shall.’

‘No,’ Waterford said, ‘you’d be quite a rare human being if you did.’

In the middle of the afternoon, slightly muzzy headed from the lunchtime wine, Ruth made her way by Underground to the flat of her friend, in Baron’s Court. Monica Darrell had been in Ruth’s year at college, but soon after qualifying she had given up teaching to go on the stage. After a year with a provincial repertory company she had landed a regular role in a television serial and now she was combining this with a part in a long-running West End play, which had been recast for the second time.

‘I wish you’d write something decent for me,’ Monica said. ‘This play I’m in is a terribly creaky old thing; but the public love it and it looks as though it’ll run forever. Why don’t you write a super television play and tell them you simply must have me for the lead?’

‘I’ll have to think about that,’ Ruth said.

‘It’s all a living, though. And God knows I shouldn’t grumble when there are any number like me out of work. Anyway, it’s lovely to see you, Ruth, and absolutely marvellous news about the novel. You are a sly boots, though, not saying anything about it before.’

Ruth gave the excuse she’d given everyone else. Not that she minded one bit Monica’s reading the book. She was the kind of intelligent equal for whom she’d written it, and whom she expected to be her most perceptive audience.

‘When is it coming out, then?’

‘They’re going to try to get it into the autumn list. That means before Christmas at the latest.’

‘And do they seem pleased with it?’

‘Yes, they were very flattering.’

‘Let’s hope you have a big success with it, get lovely notices and make pots of money.’

Ruth turned from the window. They were high up under the roof of the house. ‘That field’s a bit of luck, isn’t it?’ she said. ‘So totally unexpected when you’re in the street.’

‘It’s the grounds of a church,’ Monica told her. ‘You can’t see the building itself for those trees, but if you look past that wall you can just make out the tops of some gravestones.’

Ruth sat down on the bed-settee. ‘You know,’ she said. ‘I’ve got the funniest feeling about the book. I think it’s going to do very well indeed.’ She was silent for a moment, then she laughed, breaking the intent seriousness of her features. ‘Probably no more than wishful thinking.’

‘Sillier things have happened, as my Aunt Amelia used to say. You just keep your fingers crossed, lovey, and hope for the best.’

Monica brewed a pot of tea and made some toast.

‘Lucky I’m written out of the series for a couple of weeks,’ she said, ‘or I should hardly have had a chance to talk to you. When I’m rehearsing that and doing the play as well it’s all go, go, go from nine-thirty in the morning till ten-thirty at night. I usually wait and eat properly after the show. Then if I’m lucky there’s someone to pay for my supper too.’

‘Is there anybody special?’

‘No, not just now. And that reminds me.’ Monica arrested the motion of the teacup towards her mouth. ‘I saw Maurice Waring the other week.’

‘Oh? Where?’

‘In the Salisbury. I nipped in for a drink with a friend after the show and there he was.’

‘Did you speak to him?’

‘For a minute. He seemed quite pleased to see me. Glamour of the stage, and all that. I suppose he’ll be mad keen to read your book when he hears about it. Very fond of the off-beat success things, is our Maurice.’

‘Did he say what he was doing now?’

‘Teaching at a grammar school somewhere in the Home Counties. I forget just where he said. Ruth, he’s not queer at all, is he?’

‘Whatever makes you ask that?’

‘Oh, I don’t know exactly. Something about the way he was standing there eyeing people when we went in. Maybe my imagination. He was probably just looking out for celebrities.’

‘Anyway,’ Ruth said, ‘I don’t know that he is. Or I should say was.’

‘You should know, I suppose,’ Monica’s gaze lingered on her for a second. Ruth felt it rather than saw, because stupidly she couldn’t bring herself at this moment to look back at Monica. She had nothing to hide. Except, that was, the way her heart had lurched at the mention of his name, and the trembling hollowness just under her ribs now, which it seemed to her must show in an unsteady control of her voice.

‘Is he married, or anything?’

‘How can he be if I got the impression he might be queer? But then, I don’t know. I didn’t ask him and he didn’t say.’

‘Did he... did he ask about me?’ She was impatient with herself for putting the question. She had thought herself in command of her emotions on the subject; that the long labour of the novel had purged her of bitterness, bringing her to the realisation that to keep her wounds open was to destroy the beauty of what she had felt at the time. She had come to terms with it, so she’d thought. But now she was undone again, jealous of Monica who had spoken to him, stood near him, only a few weeks ago, when she herself had not seen him for more than two years.

‘He asked about the old gang in general, then mentioned you. Did I ever see you. So I told him we wrote to each other, and what you were doing.’

‘And that was that?’

‘Yes. What else did you expect?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Ruth...’ Monica said in a moment, gently chiding.

‘I know.’ Ruth poured herself another cup of tea. ‘He’ll get a shock if he does read the novel.’

‘Oh? It’s all in there, is it?’

‘Well, I used it rather than recorded it. I mean, that’s what a writer does. But it’s close enough for him to recognise it. The girl in the book has an abortion.’

‘Wow! You don’t mean...? You couldn’t have...’

‘Not without you and perhaps some of the others knowing, no. But he’d gone away by that time. No, I just extended it all a bit, pushed it to a further extreme. I did think for a time that I was pregnant, you see.’

‘And you never said a word!’

‘No, I kept it to myself. Terrified out of my wits for nearly three weeks.’

‘I don’t think I was ever absolutely certain that you and he...’

‘Had been sleeping together? Weren’t you? It was bloody marvellous, Monica. The most stupendous uplifting experience of my life. Until it turned sour, of course.’

‘I was never quite sure before how badly he’d behaved... So when he reads the novel he’s going to wonder if you…’

‘I expect he will.’

‘Serve the swine right. If he’s got enough conscience for it. Of course, I’ve got to be honest and tell you that I never really did care for him myself…’

In the early evening they set out for the theatre. While Monica was getting ready for the performance, Ruth wandered along Shaftesbury Avenue, looking into the shop windows. The play was, as Monica had said, a rather creaky, contrived piece and not the kind of thing she would have gone to on her own initiative. But Ruth had never seen her friend working on the stage before and was glad of the chance. Afterwards, she met Monica at the stage door.

‘Is there anywhere special you’d like to go?’

‘I don’t think I’ve ever been to that pub you mentioned. The Salisbury, was it?’

‘Oh, it’s just a place in St Martin’s Lane where you can sometimes find a few actors after the show.’ Monica paused.

‘It’s not his local, you know, Ruth.’

‘No,’ Ruth said. She felt foolish, found out in something unworthy of her. ‘Let’s go and eat, shall we?’

While still in London she could to some extent keep her main concerns at bay; but once on the train, with the thread which connected her to the familiar and the past drawing tighter over every mile, she gave herself to a brooding examination of her state of mind.

The conviction which had come to her yesterday, that the novel would be a success, was as strong as ever; and on its foundation she allowed herself to build the notion of a new life. She saw opening out before her prospects of which she would hitherto hardly have dreamed; saw them with a prophetic clarity, but soberly now, without elation. For she knew that whatever small measures of fame and fortune came to her with this book would have to be justified by the long and continuous labour of the future; saw also that the task before her would provide no magic shield against the disappointments and deprivations of her life; rather would it, in its conscientious execution, expose her to a raw-nerved apprehension of reality such as she had never known before.

And, oh, that all this should have come to her so soon, while the joy was still fresh in her!

If she were not, therefore, to lose everything there was above all else the grave necessity of making something of herself: of learning somehow to hang on until she found, if not happiness, a strength of mind to endure whatever in its probing, analysis and self-questioning this new life could challenge her with, so that through it all she would in her basic purpose keep firm and true both to her talent and the memory of that exultant womanhood she had known when Maurice loved her.

Had she been a praying girl she would have prayed. As it was, she closed her eyes and addressed herself with stern resolve.

A little while later a white-jacketed steward slid open the door of the compartment and announced the first sitting for lunch. Ruth had not thought herself hungry but now she got up and made her way towards the dining-car, swaying from side to side as she balanced herself against the motion of the train.