

For a moment, looking back, she saw her life move down its long determined track, marked erratically here and there by emotions, incidents and circumstances: her passionate love for Geoffrey, her husband; her passionate maternal love for Rodney and Edwin; the death of her father; her sons' marriages; her husband's sudden and widespread literary recognition; Edwin's death, and then her husband's death followed immediately by the birth of Lavinia's son, her only great-grandchild. She looked down at her thin old hands with the loose rings slipping up the fingers, and thought with clear lucidity: what changes are wrought by the alchemy of years in this poor human stuff.

Immediately her age, her weariness, her thousand bodily discomforts, crowded into the present and engulfed the past.

"Miss Dorset," she said querulously, "help me to bed, Miss Dorset, I'm tired."

II

When a hen's life is ended by the chopper the severed head falls to the ground, but the body with spattered wings awkwardly outstretched steps erratically this way and that, watched from the ground by its own surprised eyes until its ultimate surrender to the laws of death and gravity.

Miss Dorset fifteen years ago had suffered and lived through a kindred mutilation, being forced to watch from the edge of a cliff her twin sister and only relative drowning a hundred yards from the shore. Mary Dorset had gone bathing, Clara Dorset had gone walking. Mary took cramp, struggled a little, and sank, while Clara on the top of the cliff darted a few steps to the right, a few to the left, screaming, and finally fell to the ground, overborne by the shocking realisation of her loss and of her utter impotence to have prevented it.

Since then Miss Dorset, always competent, always adequate, had been curiously incomplete. Anæsthetized by this early tragedy she was invulnerable to further suffering, impervious to the pinpricks of poverty and dependence, and utterly unmoved in the face of any difficulty or crisis. Sometimes at night between waking and sleeping, or in the early morning between sleeping and waking, she was stabbed by a poignant vision of that scene of fifteen years ago, but no trace of emotion showed, as a rule, in her quiet manner of life.

She had lived with Mrs. Greene for seven years, at first as housekeeper and secretary. Since Mr. Greene's death, however, which had occurred suddenly three years ago, her role had been much more comprehensive. She managed the household, prepared for visitors, welcoming them unobtrusively on their arrival, and discreetly beckoning one guest out as she shepherded another in, lest the fatigue of prolonged conversation should lead to a restless night for the old lady. But she was also Mrs. Greene's constant companion, on her walks, in the house and at meals; there were indeed few moments in the day when she could contrive to be alone.

The measured routine of life was rarely broken in its succession of small daily services and arrangements, but when any of the grandchildren came for a visit Miss Dorset showed a natural grace not only in her methods of self-effacement but in leaving undone those trivial duties which, carried out by Geoffrey, Lavinia or Hugh, became a source of pleasure to Mrs. Greene. "Give me a cushion, Geoffrey, and arrange my shawl," she would say; and when Geoffrey had fumbled the cushion into place Miss Dorset, fully conscious of the fact that he had not added to Mrs. Greene's comfort, nevertheless appreciated the pleasure that it had given her to be waited on by her grandson.

There was a genuinely comfortable relationship between Mrs. Greene and Miss Dorset: Mrs. Greene seldom resented the fact of her physical dependence on Miss Dorset, and Miss Dorset understood, too well to be wounded by any sharpness of tongue, the old woman's kindliness, sagacity and clear sightedness.

At 9.15 every morning Miss Dorset brought up the letters, and waited quietly by the bedside, watching the unsteady fingers tearing open the envelopes and slowly withdrawing the rustling sheets. It would have been easy to offer help, but Miss Dorset was infinitely patient. "Mrs. Greene likes to do little things for herself," she would explain. "It takes a few moments longer, but she has a great deal of leisure, you know."