Requiescat

MAJENDIE HAD BOUGHT the villa on his honeymoon, and in April, three months after his death, his widow went out there alone to spend the spring and early summer. Stuart, who had been in India at the time of Howard Majendie's death, wrote to Mrs Majendie before starting for home and her reply awaited him at his club; he re-read it several times, looking curiously at her writing, which he had never seen before. The name of the villa was familiar to him, Majendie had been speaking of it the last time they dined together; he said it had a garden full of lemon trees and big cypresses, and more fountains than you could imagine – it was these that Ellaline had loved. Stuart pictured Mrs Majendie walking about among the lemon trees in her widow's black.

In her letter she expressed a wish to see him – in a little while. 'I shall be returning to England at the end of June; there is a good deal of business to go through, and there are several things that Howard wished me to discuss with you. He said you would be willing to advise and help me. I do not feel that I can face England before then; I have seen nobody yet, and it is difficult to make a beginning. You understand that I feel differently about meeting you; Howard wished it, and I think that is enough for both of us. If you were to be in Italy I should ask you to come and see me here, but as I know that you will be going straight to Ireland I will keep the papers until June, all except the very important ones, which I must sign without quite understanding, I suppose.' In concluding, she touched on his friendship with Howard as for her alone it was permissible to touch. Stuart wired his apologies to Ireland and planned a visit to the Italian lakes.

Three weeks afterwards found him in the prow of a motor-boat, furrowing Lake Como as he sped towards the villa. The sky was cloudless, the hills to the right rose sheer above him, casting the lengthening shadows of the afternoon across the luminous and oily water; to the left were brilliant

and rugged above the clustered villages. The boat shot closely under Cadenabbia and set the orange-hooded craft bobbing; the reflected houses rocked and quivered in her wake, colours flecked the broken water.

'Subito, subito!' said the boatman reassuringly and Stuart started; he did not know that his impatience was so evident. The man shut off his engines, let the boat slide further into the shore, and displacing Stuart from the prow, crouched forward with a ready boat-hook. They were approaching the water-stairway of the villa.

For a few moments after he had landed, while the motor-boat went chuffing out again into the sunshine, Stuart stood at the top of the stairway looking irresolutely through the iron gates. He was wondering why he had come to Italy, and whether he even cared at all for Mrs Majendie. He felt incapable of making his way towards her under the clustered branches of those trees. If there had been a little side-gate it would have been easier to go in; it would not have been so difficult, either, if he had ever been here with Howard Majendie. But this was *Her* place; she had loved it because of the fountains.

He pushed open the big gate, already cold in the shadow, and followed the upward curve of the avenue among the lemon trees. Beyond the villa disclosed itself, unlike all that he had expected; he was surprised at his own suprise and did not realize till then how clearly he must have visualized it. There was a wide loggia, a flight of steps, a terrace on a level with the loggia running along the side of the hill. Cypress trees rose everywhere, breaking up the view. He passed under the windows, climbed the steps and crossed the loggia, not looking to left or right for fear that he might see her suddenly, or even one of her books. The loggia had an air of occupation; it was probable that on any of those tables, or among the cushions, he might see her book, half open, or the long-handled lorgnettes that Majendie had given her in France.

The servant said that Mrs Majendie was in the garden. She showed Stuart into a tall, cool parlour and disappeared to find her mistress. Stuart, distracted by a scent of heliotrope, made an unseeing circle of the room; he was standing before a Florentine chest when the girl came back with a message. Mrs Majendie would see him in the garden. It would have been easier to meet her here; he had pictured them sitting opposite to one another in these high-backed chairs. He followed the girl obediently out of the

house, along the terrace, and down a long alley between hedges of yew. The white plume of a fountain quivered at the end, other fountains were audible in the garden below. He could hear footsteps, too; someone was approaching by another alley that converged with his beyond the fountain. Here they met.

She was less beautiful than he had remembered her, and very tall and thin in her black dress. Her composure did not astonish him; her smile, undimmed, and the sound of her voice recalled to him the poignancy of his feelings when he had first known her, his resentment and sense of defeat – she had possessed herself of Howard so entirely. She was shortsighted, there was always a look of uncertainty in her eyes until she came quite near one, her big pupils seemed to see too much at once and nothing very plainly.

'I never knew you were in Italy,' she said.

He realized that it would have been more considerate to have written to prepare her for his visit.

'I came out,' he said, 'quite suddenly. I had always wanted to see the Lakes. And I wanted to see you, but perhaps I should have written. I – I never thought … It would have been better.'

'It doesn't matter. It was very good of you to come. I am glad that you should see the villa. Are you staying near?'

'Over at Varenna. How beautiful this is!'

'The lake?'

'I meant your garden.' They turned and walked slowly back towards the house. 'I hope I didn't take you too much by surprise?'

'Oh no,' she said. It almost seemed as though she had expected him. 'Yes, it is beautiful, isn't it? I have done nothing to it, it is exactly as we found it.'

They sat down on a stone bench on the terrace, looking a little away from one another; their minds were full of the essential things impossible to be said. Sitting there with her face turned away from him, every inch of her had that similitude of repose which covers tension. His lowered eyes took in her hands and long, thin fingers lying against the blackness of her dress. He remembered Howard telling him (among those confidences which had later ceased) how though he had fallen in love with the whole of her it was her

hands that he first noticed when details began to detach themselves. Now they looked bewildered, helpless hands.

'I took you at your word,' he said; 'I wanted to help; I hoped there might be something I could do, and in your letter —'

'I took you at your word in asking for help. There is a great deal I must do, and you could make things easier for me, if you will. I shall be very grateful for your help about some business; there are papers I must sign and I don't understand them quite. There were things that Howard had never explained.' She looked full at him for a moment and he knew that this was the first time she had uttered her husband's name. It would be easier now.

'He had told me everything,' he said quickly, as though to intercept the shutting of a door. 'I was always to be there if you should need me – I had promised him.' She must realize that she owed him nothing for the fulfilment of a duty. He thought she did, for she was silent, uttering no word of thanks.

'Why did you so seldom come and see us?' she asked suddenly. 'Howard had begun to notice lately, and he wondered.'

'I was in India.'

'Before you went to India.' A little inflection in her voice made him despise his evasion.

'There is a time for all things, and that was a time for keeping away.'

'Because he was married?'

Stuart did not answer.

'We wanted you,' she said, 'but you didn't understand, did you?'

She did not understand, how could she? She must have discussed it all, those evenings, with the Majendie that belonged to her; he had not understood either.

'I was mistaken, I suppose,' he said. 'I – I should have learnt later.'

There was a slight contraction of her fingers, and Stuart knew that he had hurt her. If he hurt her like this a little more, it would probably be possible to kill her; she was very defenceless here in the garden that Majendie had bought her, looking out at the unmeaning lake. He had crowded out all tenderness for her, and her loneliness was nothing but a fact to him.

'There were messages for you,' she said, turning her head again.

'Were there?'

‘He said —,’ her lips moved, she glanced at him a little apprehensively and was silent. ‘I have written down everything that he said for you. And I believe he left you a letter.’

‘Can you remember the messages?’ he asked curiously.

‘I wrote them down; I have them in the house.’ She looked at him again with that short-sighted intensity; she knew every word of the messages, and with an effort he could almost have read them from her eyes.

‘Did he expect to see me?’

‘Yes, once he knew that he was ill. He knew that you could not possibly leave India before April, but he kept on – expecting. I wanted to cable to you and he wouldn’t let me. But I know he still believed, above all reason, that you’d come.’

‘If I’d known, if —’

‘You think I should have cabled without telling him?’ She thought he blamed her and she evidently feared his anger. Curious … He had been so conscious of her indifference, before; he had been a person who did not matter, the nice friend, the family dog – relegated. It was that that had stung and stung. After all he need never have gone to India, it had been a resource of panic. It had saved him nothing, and there had been no question of saving *her*. He wondered why she had not cabled; it was nothing to her whether he went or came, and Howard’s happiness was everything.

‘Yes, I wonder you didn’t cable.’

‘I am sorry; I was incapable of anything. My resource was – sapped.’

He looked at her keenly; it was a doctor’s look.

‘What have you been doing since?’ he asked (as the medical man, to whom no ground was sacred). ‘What are you going to do?’

‘I was writing letters, shutting up the house. And here I’m trying to realize that there’s nothing more to do, that matters. And afterwards —’

‘Well?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said wearily; ‘I’d rather not, please … Afterwards will come of itself.’

He smiled as now he took upon himself the brother-in-law, the nice, kind, doggy person. ‘You should have somebody with you, Ellaline. You should, you owe it to yourself, you owe it to’ – he realized there was no one else to whom she owed it – ‘to yourself,’ he repeated. ‘You must think, you must be wise for yourself now.’

She looked, half-smiling, at him while he counselled. He had never achieved the fraternal so completely.

'It's not that I don't think,' she said. 'I think a great deal. And as for wisdom – there is not much more to learn once one has grown up. I am as wise as I need be – "for myself."'

'When are you going back to England?'

'If you would do one or two things for me I needn't go back until the autumn.'

'You can't stay here all the summer.'

'No,' she said, looking round at the cypresses – how pitiful she was, in Howard's garden. 'They say I couldn't, it would be too hot; I must go somewhere else. But if you could help me a little this autumn I could finish up the business then.'

'I may have to be in Ireland then.' He tore himself away from something brutally, and the brutality sounded in his voice.

She retreated.

'Of course,' she said, 'I know you ought to be there now – I was forgetting.'

Because he was a person who barely existed for her (probably) she had always been gentle with him, almost propitiatory. One must be gentle with the nice old dog. It was not in her nature to be always gentle, perhaps she had said bitter things to Howard who mattered to her; there was a hint of bitterness about her mouth. At himself she was always looking in that vague, half-startled way, as though she had forgotten who he was. Sometimes when he made a third he had found her very silent, still with boredom; once or twice he had felt with gratification that she almost disliked him. He wondered what she thought he thought of her.

Now it was the time of the Angelus, and bells answered one another from the campaniles of the clustered villages across the lake. A steamer, still gold in the sun, cleft a long bright furrow in the shadowy water. The scene had all the passionless clarity of a Victorian water-colour.

'It is very peaceful,' Stuart said appropriately.

'Peaceful?' she echoed with a start. 'Yes, it's very peaceful … David' (she had called him this), 'will you forgive me?'

'Forgive you?'

‘I think you could understand me if you wished to. Forgive me the harm I’ve done you. Don’t, don’t hate me.’

How weak she was now, how she had come down! ‘What harm have you done to me?’ he asked, unmoved.

‘You should know better than I do. I suppose I must have hurt you, and through you, Howard. An – an intrusion isn’t a happy thing. You didn’t give me a chance to make it happy. You came at first, but there was always a cloud. I didn’t want to interfere, I tried to play the game. Now that we’ve both lost him, couldn’t you forgive?’

‘I’m sorry I should have given you the impression that I resented anything – that there was anything to resent. I didn’t know that you were thinking that. Perhaps you rather ran away with a preconceived idea that because you married Howard I was bound to be unfriendly to you. If you did, you never showed it. I never imagined that I had disappointed you by anything I did or didn’t do.’

‘It was not what you didn’t do, it was what you *weren’t* that made me feel I was a failure.’ (So *that* was the matter, he had hurt her vanity!)

‘A failure,’ he said, laughing a little; ‘I thought you were making a success. If I didn’t come oftener it was not because I did not think you wanted me.’

‘But you said just now —’

‘A third is never really wanted. I had set my heart on seeing Howard happy, and when I had, I went away to think about it.’

‘Oh,’ she said hopelessly. She had guessed that he was putting her off. ‘Shall we walk a little down the terrace? There is a pergola above, too, that I should like you to see.’ She was taking for granted that he would not come to the villa again.

They rose; she stood for a moment looking irresolutely up and down the terrace, then took a steeper path that mounted through the trees towards the pergola. Stuart followed her in silence, wondering. The world in her brain was a mystery to him, but evidently he had passed across it and cast some shadows. For a moment he almost dared to speak, and trouble the peace of the garden with what had been pent up in him so long; then he knew that he must leave her to live out her days in the immunity of finished grief. The silence of imperfect sympathy would still lie between them, as it had always lain; his harshness could no longer cast a shadow in her world, that was

now as sunless as an evening garden. His lips were sealed still, and for ever, by fear of her and shame for his dead loyalty to Howard. The generosity of love had turned to bitterness within him, and he was silent from no fear to cause her pain.

'Beautiful,' he said, when they reached the pergola and could look down on lake and garden through the clustered roses.

'Will you be long at Varenna?'

'I don't expect so, no. Some friends want me to join them on Lake Maggiore, and I think of going on tomorrow afternoon.'

'That will be better,' she said slowly. 'It *is* lonely seeing places alone – they hardly seem worth while.'

'I'm used to it – I'm going back to India in six months,' he said abruptly.

'Oh, I didn't know.' Her voice faltered. He had not known himself till then. Her face was whiter than ever in the dusk of the pergola, and her hands were plucking, plucking at the creepers, shaking down from the roses above white petals which he kept brushing from his coat.

'I'm sorry you're going back,' she said. 'Everybody will be sorry.'

'I won't go until I have finished everything that I can do for you.'

An expression came into her eyes that he had never seen before. 'You have been a friend,' she said. 'Men make better things for themselves out of life than we do.'

'They don't last,' he said involuntarily.

'I should have said that so far as anything is immortal —' He watched a little tightening of her lips.

'It takes less than you think to kill these things; friendship, loyalty —'

'Yours was unassailable, yours and his'; she spoke more to herself than to him. 'In those early days when we three went about together; that time in France, I realized that.'

'In France?' he said stupidly.

'Yes. Don't you remember?'

He remembered France; the days they had spent together, and the long evenings in starlight, and the evening he had strolled beside her on a terrace while Majendie tinkered with the car. It was a chilly evening, and she kept drawing her furs together and said very little. The night after, he had lain

awake listening to her voice and Majendie's in the next room, and making up his mind to go to India.

'Yes,' he said. 'Now, will you let me have the papers and we could go through them now? I could take any that are urgent back to town with me; I shall be there in a week.'

She twisted her hands irresolutely. 'Could you come tomorrow, before you go? I would have them ready for you then, if you can spare the time. I'm tired this evening; I don't believe I would be able to understand them. Do you mind?'

'No, of course not. But may I come in the morning? I am going away early in the afternoon.'

She nodded slowly, looked away from him and did not speak. She was evidently very much tired.

'I think I ought to go,' he said after a pause.

'If you hurried you could catch that steamer down at Cadenabbia.'

'Then I'll hurry. Don't come down.'

'I won't come down,' she said, holding out her hand. 'Good-bye, and thank you.'

He hurried to the end of the pergola, hesitated, half turned his head, and stopped irresolutely. Surely she had called him? He listened, but there was no sound. She stood where he had left her, with her back towards him, leaning against a pillar and looking out across the lake.

Turning, he pushed his way between the branches, down the overgrown path. The leaves rustled, he listened again; somebody was trying to detain him. As the slope grew steeper he quickened his steps to a run, and, skirting the terrace, took a short cut on to the avenue. Soon the lake glittered through the iron gates.

She leant back against the pillar, gripping in handfuls the branches of the climbing rose. She heard his descending footsteps hesitate for a long second, gather speed, grow fainter, die away. The thorns ran deep into her hands and she was dimly conscious of the pain. Far below the gate clanged, down among the trees. The branches of the roses shook a little, and more white petals came fluttering down.