

OF AGE AND INNOCENCE

GEORGE LAMMING

INTRODUCTION BY JEREMY POYNTING



P E E P A L T R E E

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INTRODUCTION

At the funeral of Walter Rodney in 1980, Supriya Nair reports the rueful admission of some young Guyanese student activists that, while they hugely admired Lamming's political stand and witnessing presence, they found his fiction 'too hard'.¹ This was a tragic confession in the circumstances since one can argue that *Of Age and Innocence* set out to answer the question, amongst others, of why the radical anticolonial movement in British Guiana had by 1954 collapsed into inter-ethnic competition, the very divide that Walter Rodney had been trying to bridge. But the response also raises the question: if Lamming's novels are indeed 'hard', for what purpose do they challenge the reader? Lamming seems to have asked himself this question when he was writing *Of Age and Innocence*. As J. Dillon Brown shows, Lamming embeds in this and others of his novels elements that make a plea for an ideal reader – one who doesn't take surfaces for granted and is prepared to make imaginative connections.² I first read *Of Age and Innocence* many years ago and was impressed, but suspected that aspects of the novel eluded me. How did the group of European visitors fit in? Wasn't there something rather puzzling about the treatment of the apparent opposites of the novel's title? I was inclined to agree with Wilson Harris's verdict that the novel suffers from a 'diffusion of energies', that it fails to keep 'to its inherent design'.³ At the time it was the novel's treatment of ethnic politics that really interested me and this I felt was flawed by a lack of inwardness in its handling of the Indian Caribbean world.⁴ A little later, I read the novel again, more closely, and came to different conclusions. Cultural authenticity became less important than how the novel's multiple layerings fitted together. Harris was wrong; Lamming wasn't stuck awkwardly between the conventional novel of classes and social distinctions – which he writes very well indeed when it

serves his purpose⁵ – and the novel of speculative imagination. Lamming brings the late colonial world into sharp focus but he also creates, in Harris's words, a 'profound, poetic and scientific scale of values'. *Of Age and Innocence* criticises ways of seeing which regard temporary 'realities' as fixed, and views of the person which, in Harris's words, 'consolidate one's preconception of humanity'.⁶ Here Lamming and Harris share a similar goal. The difference is that Lamming roots such possibilities within existing history and human society, in contrast to Harris's metaphysical idealism.

Rereading the novel after twenty-five years, and looking at some recent criticism, I felt that my second, closer reading held up, but again found much in the novel that I hadn't seen before. There isn't the space to do more than outline some of these approaches, but their variety emphasises that this is a rich novel that repays multiple readings. For on, there has been the huge compliment that V.S. Naipaul paid the novel's significance in his dialogic, answering narrative of *The Mimic Men* (1967).⁷ There has been Gordon Rohlehr's reading of the novel through its treatment of language⁸ – a focus developed by J. Dillon Brown and Supriya Nair (though neither reference Rohlehr). There has been Wilfred Cartey's 'The Search for Polity'⁹ that reads beyond the novel's political surface to see deeper temporalities and a poetic ecology of scale. There has also been the often painful compliment that Caribbean actuality has continued to pay the novel's prophetic qualities. Rohlehr, writing in the 1990s, by which time there had been ample time to see the 'mixture of folly and murder' which characterised the unsteady paths of the new nations, points to the prophecy in Mark Kennedy's vision at the political rally. Kennedy is overwhelmed by 'a constant and perceptible disintegration of things: leaves, grass, asphalt, the hooves of the animals...' (p. 198). He hallucinates the apocalyptic bloody birth of a kid and hears 'voices announcing the crowd's wish to be ruled. Vote for the star. Vote for the donkey. Vote for the aeroplane. Vote for the knife...' (p. 199)¹⁰. I am reminded here of Stanley Greaves' acerbic and visionary series of paintings, *There Is a Meeting Here Tonight*.¹¹

According to Rohlehr, Lamming understands that challenging the 'old consolidated Western Atlantic order' cannot do other than awaken its malevolence; that the birth of a new Caribbean

order is unlikely to be other than traumatic. My recent reading was dominated by a feeling that here was a novel with a tragic vision in which utopian impulses engage with darker fears of human limitation. What Terry Eagleton has described as ‘tragic humanism’¹² seemed to offer another pertinent framework for reading – though whilst *Of Age and Innocence* engages with a religious world-view, it never becomes trapped in Eagleton’s fixed Catholic ontologies of evil.

This tragic vision struck me most clearly in an element that no critic appears to have commented on: the relationship between Thief and Rockey and their importance to the novel. There’s nothing beyond touch and the holding of hands (‘Rockey turned to face Thief, and his hand moved blindly over the sand to touch Thief’s’ (p. 378), and ‘Thief felt for Rockey’s hand, and they stood, silent and perplexed...’ (p. 423)), but it is unmistakably a relationship of love, and one that points to the tension between the novel’s vision of human community (of which their love is the least equivocal image) and its realistic/pessimistic view not only of historical circumstance, but of human capacity, in particular the perceptual processes which go into the making of consciousness.

Of Age and Innocence is profoundly concerned with the struggle to overcome alienation, and this is seen not only in Marxist and Sartrean terms but spiritually, too. Of Ma Shephard and her mission to bring the Word to the inmates of the asylum we are told: ‘It was not the physical pain of hell which she taught, but the eternal separation from a source of love which the soul required but could no longer achieve’ (p. 285). That this is a struggle taking place both inside and outside immediate human history is conveyed in Ma Shephard’s story about the great flood. Her tale of the island being ‘put to rest’ and rising from the water again on ‘that Day o’ Deliverance... renewed with riches’ (p. 87) is a mythical vision of cycles of defeat and renewal that connects both to the Shelleyan/Promethean reference to a ‘dark and melancholy sojourn of time that happened before the discovery of speech’ (p. 197), and to the vision expressed by Kennedy at the rally:

Freedom and Death, like opposites and contradictions working in harmony, are the two facts which we cannot bargain, the two great facts, Freedom and Death, twin gods or forces or

whatever you like which haunt every human existence. Beyond these is nothing but that infinite and indefinable background against which we ramble in the service of Freedom and the expectation of Death. But here we can choose... (p. 197)

The rhetorical play on such capitalised abstractions points to the way such terms thread through the novel. Readers will rapidly pick up how terms such as Age, Innocence, Freedom, Law, Loyalty, Betrayal and others continually surface. What's worth recognising is how Lamming uses and deconstructs them. They exist in the language and consciousness of some of his characters as abstractions that cannot be questioned (the 'Law' represents, for one of the policemen, a divinely inspired value locked in a chain of being) but for others as particularities embedded in history and materiality. Lamming, indeed, uses the motifs of Age and Innocence with no less a sense of inversion and dialectical instability than Blake.

My initial route into the novel's vision was through its focus on perception and ways of knowing. I still see this as its main connective thread, but now also see its deep engagement with existential questions of being and consciousness. The sections where Mark Kennedy contemplates suicide (pp. 332-335), or where Thief debates with Rockey about carrying the name of his calling, and which came first (p. 378ff), suggest that a reading which is alert to this focus would yield a further network of ideas running through the novel.¹³

A more gender-aware reading (than indeed were my earlier ones) would no doubt query, as Sandra Pouchet Paquet does, the novel's sexual politics, particularly in the polarised gender split between Ma Shephard and the male political leadership (and Singh's and Lee's recessive wives).¹⁴ This is pertinent, though it's worth noting how frequently Lamming finds himself having to argue, in an authorial voice, with the powerfully created presence of Ma Shephard. And if she, in the end, betrays the future, it is not because she is a woman, but because of her innocence – an innocence that is epistemic and ethical, and more fundamental than gender. There is too the vileness of Shephard's misogynistic cursing of Penelope on the plane; this seems to me a very explicit critique of a wider sickness in the male psyche, and Penelope's role in the novel is more signifi-

cant than has sometimes been acknowledged – and is briefly recognised below.

I want to open my more detailed discussion of this novel with Rohlehr's focus on its concern with language.¹⁵ He draws a parallel between Lamming's statement that the novelist's challenge is to bridge 'the world of the private and hidden self, the social world he lives in and the understanding of the reader'¹⁶ and the ideas explored in the diary writings of the mulatto character, Mark Kennedy. (Rohlehr, indeed, describes Kennedy as 'the author's mouthpiece', which I think goes too far – indeed, elsewhere he is quite clear about the novel's multivocal, dialogic qualities.) Rohlehr locates Lamming's treatment of Kennedy's crisis as a writer, his loss of faith in his capacity to communicate what he sees and knows, in both a Modernist scepticism about the communicative capacity of language in general, and the character's particular circumstance as a Caribbean intellectual. As such, he is separated by colonial education and exile from all but the most fragile memories of the counter-world of African Caribbean 'folk'. It is only when Kennedy makes common cause with Shephard in the 'charismatic' context of making a speech to the working-class supporters of the People's Communal Movement that he 'enters his voice' in a state of possession and uncharacteristic volubility.

Rohlehr also shows how Lamming explores Kennedy's division between language and silence to draw attention to the difficulty of finding a fictional form to express the 'perhaps inexpressible quality of personal experience' (Rohlehr, p. 9). The fictional self-reflexiveness is paradoxical: Kennedy, in expressing his angst, is, as Rohlehr observes, both 'lucid and lyrically eloquent'. Kennedy communicates only too well, as the doctor reprimands him when Marcia attempts suicide after reading his diary's painful honesty about the impasse in their relationship: 'And you didn't think of the damage you might have done by letting her know how she existed in your mind?' (p. 284). As J. Dillon Brown suggests, there is a good deal of reflexiveness embedded in the novel about the kind of reader/reading that *Of Age and Innocence* requires.¹⁷ Brown doesn't mention this incident with Marcia, but deals specifically with Bill Butterfield's *misreading* of the fragment of Mark Kennedy's diary

that he uses to bolster his irrational view that Shephard is responsible for Penelope's death in the asylum fire, and his determination to murder Shephard in revenge.

He spread it out again, and brought it closer, searching for some further reference to Shephard. He read a line, skipped angrily over a passage which seemed irrelevant to his need... The word 'betray' had aroused his interest. He read the passage slowly, waiting for the name of Shephard to increase his frenzy. (p. 330)

As Brown points out, Mark's diary in fact carries a powerful warning about the self-destructiveness of revenge. Brown's focus alerts us to look for other instances in the novel where the issues of writing and reading are foregrounded, for instance in the clash between the narrative the fisherman Rockey wants to tell the court about finding the dying Shephard ('He is trying to invent a language of darkness and absence to convey the black splendour that surrounded him' (p. 363)), and the restricted version the judge wishes to hear. This and Singh's critique ('He did not trust words, and he had never encouraged the habit of reading, for that was like playing into the enemy's hands' (p. 271)) form another layer that connects to the novel's epistemic and ethical centre.

The other reading I want to develop further is Wilfred Cartey's brief focus on the treatment of place and time in the novel. He writes of 'the author's injunction of the necessary visceral interpenetration of man and land',¹⁸ and quotes, as his starting point, Mark Kennedy's impassioned definition of the nationalist project:

the private feeling you experience of possessing and being possessed by the whole landscape of the place where you were born, the freedom which helps you to recognise the rhythm of the winds, the silence and aroma of the night, rocks, water, pebble and branch, animal and bird noise, the temper of the sea and the mornings arousing nature everywhere to the silent and sacred communion between you and the roots you have made on this island... (p. 198)

Cartey directs us to 'a recurrent cohering motif throughout the novel', where '[e]nvironment and phenomena correlate and correspond to the movement of the story' (Cartey, p. 345). He gives as an example the macaw that presages the asylum fire: 'The sun made a blazing circle of flame with the scarlet ring of feathers... the

vivid flame of feathers burning green above the roof...’ (p. 284). The environment frequently echoes the novel’s key motifs (seeing, the eye, being observed) that image the characters’ states of mind. As Marcia begins to disintegrate she senses that outside her window ‘the light fluttered like an eyelid closing into the shade of the window pane...’ (p. 184). Worth exploring, too, is the way that ants become another connective thread running through the novel.¹⁹ And there are the descriptions of the bats that surround Thief and Rockey as they search for consolation after the cataclysm of political failure, recalling Martin Carter’s ‘University of Hunger’ with the ‘sea sound of the eyeless flitting bat’²⁰ and reminding us that Lamming was a poet before he started publishing novels:

The bats burst from the trees and swished the air in a furious swoop that pitched them sightless into the light. They grew dizzy in a mad pursuit of shapes, colliding like lines on a map before swinging skyward through the wide, soothing obscurity of the night. (p. 419)

However, Lamming’s landscape does more than carry ‘within it its very history’, as Cartey suggests; it has a presence that pre-dates and ignores any kind of human activity. When the boys climb the volcanic hill, what they encounter is a nature which ‘rose, reckless and arbitrary, like an insurrection which had nothing to prove but the fact of its power’ (p. 136). But if Cartey doesn’t report this disjunction, his recognition of the intersecting temporal zones of the novel – the plot time of the action, the legendary time of the fire, the mythical time of the flood, the edenic time of the boys’ narrative (‘when the world know only nature an’ noise [...] before sense start to make separation betwixt some things an’ somethings’ (p. 117)), and the primordial time of the island’s volcanic eruption from the seabed – provides a salutary perspective on Lamming’s sense of scale in his location of the human present.

But the way in to *Of Age and Innocence* that I want to spend longest on, because it provides an underpinning for other readings, is its exploration of the epistemic foundations of an ethics of political culture, and social and intimate personal relations.

Recently, I stumbled across Amanda Fricker’s concept of ‘epistemic injustice’, which very neatly describes Lamming’s dissection of colonial society.²¹ Her distinction between ‘testimonial

injustice' (the failure to grant credibility to somebody's words – and more fundamentally their means of knowing – on the basis of prejudice) and 'hermeneutical injustice' (where a society refuses to ask the questions by which injustice or inequality may be recognised) is highly pertinent to Lamming's novel. How the three surviving boys are denied belief in their attempt to tell the truth about Singh's and Lee's only tangential involvement in the asylum fire is an example of the first; and, like Fricker, Lamming recognises that *how* we know is located in systems of power, and that systems of ethics cannot be separated from their epistemic roots. Shephard knows why the privileged elite will resist his project. It is not so much material retribution that they fear:

But they are really frightened that the order of privilege which is an essential part of their conception of themselves can be revalued, redistributed, or even abolished completely. They are terrified of becoming like the chair which is defenceless against the idea of chair. I am the one who now sees them, not they me. (p. 228)

Lamming's San Cristobal is a composite of the most crucial features of Caribbean reality in the period immediately before political independence. Its present is deeply shaped by its past, an island where 'Africa and India shake hands with China', but where each 'pursues all its separate parts' (p. 81). This separateness has held back the anti-colonial movement and allowed opportunist petit-bourgeois politicians like Paravecino to strut the stage.

In the use of multiple narrative perspectives, private forms such as the diary and extensive use of free indirect speech, Lamming represents a world in which subjective realities are abnormally fragmented and partial. Shephard, for instance, sees his own psychic division as intimately related to San Cristobal's ethnic segmentation:

I know San Cristobal. It is mine, me, divided in a harmony that still pursues all its separate parts... No new country, but an old land inhabiting new forms of men who can never resurrect their roots and do not know their nature. (p. 81)

Similarly, Kennedy's failure to commit himself to the nationalist movement has the same roots as the failure of his relationship with Marcia. Both are located in the colonialist denial of the

Other, which Lamming sees expressed archetypally in Prospero's attitude to Caliban where:

... the real sin is not hatred, which implies an involvement, but the calculated and habitual annihilation of the person whose presence you ignore but never exclude.²²

Lamming's emphasis on the links between personal and public relates to his view that 'what a person thinks is very much determined by the way that person sees'.²³ The peculiar emphasis Lamming gives this statement in *The Pleasures of Exile* is matched by the emphasis on modes of perception in this novel, and how the individual's idea of himself/herself is shaped by an awareness of how he/she is regarded by others. This reciprocity is summed up by Thief when he reproves Rockey for his naivety:

'How my actions innocent I know,' said Rockey, 'like I know my face.'

'But it ain't matter what you know,' said Thief, ' 'tis what the next man don't see.'

'I can talk,' said Rockey, 'innocence can talk.'

'It ain't got no language,' said Thief, 'unless the next man lend you his belief.' (p. 392)

Lamming follows Fanon in seeing that the colonial relationship concerns not only the determination of the colonised person's material conditions of life, but the consciousness that arises out of knowing knows he/she exists in the mind of the coloniser. Lamming shows how this 'regard of the other' also structures the relationships between the different ethnic groups.²⁴

Shephard and Mark Kennedy return to San Cristobal as stigmatised persons contaminated by exile. On the plane Shephard has 'the face of a fugitive'; at the rally Mark is the 'angry vagrant'. Both feel that they are always judged 'in spite of' their colour and colonial status. Both are driven towards forms of madness by this constant reservation. Shephard tells Mark:

Of all the senses that serve our knowledge of those around us, it is the eye I could not encounter in peace. It is as though my body defined all of me... So that the eye of the other became for me a kind of public prosecutor... And there were times when I have felt my presence utterly burnt up by the glance which another had given me... (p. 134).

Whereas Shephard's sanity is threatened by his acute vulnerability, Mark has evolved defence mechanisms. When, for instance, Marcia tells him that she feels ashamed that their friends have seen how he neglects her, his 'disinclination' becomes even more pronounced:

He brought his foot down from the chair and shoved her hand away... Whenever Marcia mentioned anyone else in order to sharpen her rebuke he would withdraw. He became resentful at the thought that his life was a spectacle which others were observing, and took refuge in his silence. (p. 176)

Lamming uses the contrast between Shephard and Kennedy to dramatise his conception of the relationship between ways of seeing, experience and action. The men are two sides of the same coin: Shephard acts as if his vision annihilates the real world; Kennedy's passivity annihilates his being in the face of the world's material appearances.

Shephard's strategy is to confront his neurosis through the situation which has fashioned it. His starting point is a rigorous self-analysis of what the regard of the other has done to him. As he tells Penelope on Bird Island:

I discovered that until then... I had always lived in the shadow of a meaning which others had placed on my presence in the world, and I had played no part at all in the making of that meaning, like a chair which is wholly at the mercy of the idea guiding the hand of the man who builds it. (p. 226)

Although Shephard wants to be a man without exterior definition, his response is to confront that regard by living through the definition which has been imposed on him:

Similarly, I accept me as the meaning I speak of has fashioned me... But from now on I deny that meaning its authority. When it suits my purpose I shall use it, when it doesn't I shall be hostile. I am at war... What I may succeed in doing is changing that conception of me. But I cannot ignore it. (p. 228)

His method is to offer up his vulnerability to searching exposure as a man upon whom all eyes are fixed. 'I went into politics in order to redefine myself through action,' he says. But Shephard's politics are not merely the means of healing a private neurosis. As he says, the meaning imposed on him 'applies equally to millions'.

The novel repeatedly stresses that rebellion, action and struggle are essential to humanity's true nature, and there is no mistaking where between the two extremes of Shephard and Kennedy Lamming locates possibility – which is of course in the direction of Shephard. Lamming implies a very fine dividing line between the necessity of refusing to accept reality as fixed and Shephard's denial of a reality separate from his will (though ultimately his extreme subjectivity corrupts possibility). Mark has seen the disorder in their shared boyhood, when he observed Shephard preaching to the empty chairs of his father's chapel, giving him the disquieting feeling that the boy Shephard did 'not seem to see any real difference between a boy's play and what is real... If he were a man I would say he was mad' (p. 132). And on the night before the elections, Shephard's 'sense of power beyond control' destroys his last links with the real world existing outside his fantasy. 'He seemed to see the world concede its worth to his touch,' Lamming comments authorially, in one of his overt intrusions. Now his delusions of power are grand but terrifying:

I shall hold this land in the palm of my hand, and bend it like a wheel to meet my intention...

...You remember it? ...My wooden children waiting my words... Can you see them now? My wooden children waiting my words [...] you remember how they kneel at my bidding? ...Tomorrow it will come to pass again. (p. 339)

Lamming contrasts, dialectically, Shephard's delusions with Kennedy's failure to exercise choice. Kennedy recalls a moment which epitomises his disease. He is sitting on a beach observing 'a pebble, a piece of iron and a dead crab'. What disturbs him is the absence of any sensuous relationship between himself and the objects, and this 'endowed the pebble with a formidable and determined power of its presence' (p. 94). This perception of the power of the object makes him incapable of reaching out to touch them. The resulting feeling of 'disinclination' paradoxically (as the Djuna Barnes' epigraph to the novel asserts) has the same annihilating consequences as Shephard's inverse relationship to things:

This feeling of disinclination surrounds me like space. It enters me like air... I can feel it like a clutch around my throat, an annihilation of things about me, a sudden and natural disloca-

tion of meaning. And it is no force other than me which moves me. It is me. (p. 95)

Mark's mode of perception has its logical end in his feeling that the objects around him 'watch him with a silent and unerring contempt', his contemplation of suicide and his conclusion that he is unfit to make even this existential choice.

It is in the context of these two key frameworks of 'ways of seeing' and 'the regard of the other', that Lamming portrays the relationship between Indians and Africans. Indeed, Shephard's passage to joining Singh and Lee to form the People's Communal Movement is portrayed not so much as a political process but as an extension of his attempt to heal his psychic/epistemic division.

The movement that brings Africans and Indians together collapses, of course, with Shephard's murder by Baboo. But neither Baboo's motivation nor the ethnic breakdown is explored in political-historical terms. Baboo's action is located in his extreme passivity of perception – like Kennedy's – his sense of oppression by a fixed, unchangeable order of things.

Lamming has prefigured this political breakdown in the collapse of the relationship of Mark, Marcia, Bill and Penelope as part of his strategy to focus not on the obviousness of ethnic difference, but on the perceptual processes that underlie all relationships. On the plane bringing them to San Cristobal, Mark describes them as a 'little world, made by four people whose happiness... no argument can deny' (p. 52), but their experience of San Cristobal drives them apart. Mark can neither explain to his three white friends his attraction towards Shephard's Movement, nor tell anyone his reason for withdrawing from it. Marcia is destroyed by her knowledge of how she exists in Mark's mind. Bill enters the society a fastidious liberal and leaves it 'no longer averse to the ways of Crabbe' (p. 331). Penelope, in her moment of desire for Marcia, learns what it must mean to exist in another's mind always qualified by the label 'in spite of', concluding that for the Black or the homosexual, 'it is not their difference which is disturbing. It is the way their difference is regarded which makes for their isolation' (p. 174).

This connection between the suspicion of the 'eye of the other' and the consequent retreat into secrecy then threads through their relationships like a cancer. Misunderstandings occur, until

the four lapse into 'solitary and different worlds of understanding' (p. 206). Penelope, indeed, is the only one who grows in the course of the novel, in her understanding of the epistemic injustice of the colonial world.

A parallel process of retreat into solitary and different worlds occurs in the relationship of Africans and Indians after Shephard's death when each group retreats into isolation to nurse its sense of defeat. Each returns to the stifling security of stereotypes that, initially external, have become self-imposed. The Africans revert to the nihilistic sullenness of the slave and sit,

heavy, large, indolent, unwilling and destructive. They rebuked all possessions by a show of indifference. They killed time with their hands. Their labour was irrelevant and misplaced. (p. 408)

The Indians recoil to the image of the indentured worker, clannish, temporary and rootless, saving every last cent, waiting for the passage home:

The Indians worked furiously with small push carts, hurrying up and down along the pier. They were cruel with labour to their bodies, and their faces were strained with secrecy and spite and expectation. They were going to rob the future of what was left. (p. 408)

But this portrayal of a defeat does not support a philosophy of despair. There are, indeed, tragic outcomes to Penelope's journey towards understanding, to the relationships of Shephard, Singh and Lee and to the little Society of the boys. But these are pathways interrupted, not dead ends. In each case the journey requires learning an open vulnerability to the other's way of seeing as a means of mutual enrichment or, as Lamming writes elsewhere, a 'desirable extension of reality'.²⁵ There are, for instance, contrary attitudes to land. Ma Shephard, echoing Kennedy's sense of oppression by objects to which he feels no connection, explains to the boys why the slaves burned down the cane:

The men who make that fire fret how their labour went robbed in a lan' which refuse to make them brother an' sister, or feed them with a right reward for the sweat they drip night and day. The lan' come to look like a tyrant in their eye, an' they decide to burn whatever memory hol' them to the plough. (p. 91)

By contrast, Singh's son tells his friends:

My father say education is losin' all the time... An' he tell me is safer to stay with the lan'. He is for education too, but he say you must never swap the lan' for education. Hurricane or whatever hell have can come, but hol' to the lan', hol' to the lan'... (p. 141)

His father's commitment to the land and suspicion of colonial education is the basis for his psychological independence from the white world. As Lamming argues elsewhere, the educated colonial is made absolutely dependent 'on the values implicit in the language of the colonizer'.²⁶ Whereas Shephard's mind is one where 'the two worlds... met in the same chaos' (p. 77), Singh has a consciousness described as 'physical, integral as a root to the branch and body of the tree... There was no difference between the thing he knew and the man he was. He was his knowledge' (p. 264). This certitude, the 'concentration, purpose and will' is a source of strength for Shephard who feels that '[Singh] was like the road itself which said there was only one way' (p. 273).²⁷ Conversely, in his relationship with Shephard, Singh discovers a closed-upness, a limitation in himself. The story he tells of himself as a boy on the sugar estate seems to be one he has not previously shared. Without Shephard, we see Singh becoming enmeshed in the politics of plotting and revenge, a mirror image of the world of Crabbe. As Singh tells Crabbe:

There never was a man who make me feel more deep than Shephard... He expose himself to me in a way I never learn to do to any friends however near. An' through him I learn for the first time what it could mean to feel loyal, not only to the cause but loyal to the person too. I come as near to lovin' Shephard as any man come to lovin' a next, and it was his murder twist my heart like it was my own son dying in front my face. (p. 402)

What Singh describes is a profound remaking of the inner person and one senses that for Lamming this is (like the political imperative of love) essential to the revolutionary remaking of the colonial world. He shows, though, that the vulnerable exposure this involves is necessarily painful. When Shephard, Singh and Lee are discussing their differences and private misgivings, the labour of breaking silence is very powerfully conveyed in the rhythms of Lamming's prose:

It had happened again: the frenzied argument, then the sudden pause like a frozen breath separating the sound of a voice from the echo you expected. ... Then each would know it was his duty to break the spell of what had not yet been said. Each knew it was the moment to explode the motive which nursed this pause; and each, uncertain and yet determined, tried; so that the pause flared into a clutter of voices which left something unsaid. Then the tremor would begin, a moment after the voices had retreated into a tired procession of syllables, noiseless as petals fallen into silence... (p. 264)

Singh fears that if they cannot achieve absolute openness and trust, then Paravecino's allegation that 'the surface friendship is going to spell misery for one group or the other' will become the truth. And, of course, when there is a knock at the door of their private room, guilts over actions and knowledge unrevealed erupt. As Penelope recognises, 'Secrets are difficult to conceal because a secret is by nature contagious' (p. 172), and the words 'spying', 'secrecy', 'informer', 'conceal', 'suspicion', 'vigilance', 'treachery' toll through this episode and through the novel, connecting Mark's guilt over recording the life of Fern Row in his diary ('Shall I concede that I may be a spy and that my activity is a kind of treachery?' (p. 54)) to Baboo's duplicitous activities. Later, after Shephard learns that Butterfield had come to warn him of Crabbe's murderous plans, he tells the boys, 'Do not suspect too much. Suspicion is the end. It will rot everywhere, everything we do' (p. 310).

'Suspicion' is frequently the symptom of an 'innocent' way of seeing in the novel, less a product of deviousness than of an unthinking, perceptually passive response to the 'obvious'. Laming's paradoxical treatment of the nature of innocence is particularly revealed in his portrayal of Baboo. When Baboo brings his murder as an offering to Singh and is shocked by Singh's horrified rejection, Baboo's voice is 'almost innocent in its cry of sad and despairing solicitude':

...was only for you, Singh, was only for you I do it... from infancy I dream to see someone like myself, some Indian with your achievement rule San Cristobal. My only mistake was to wish it for you Singh, was only for you I do what I do... (p. 407)

His action is rooted in a way of seeing that is naively unreflective,

passively dependent on a fixed outer reality. Like Kennedy, Baboo is a victim of the obvious:

His glances seemed effortless, incurious and without intention, as though some instinct of dumb and bored credulity had defined their function. His eyes revealed no possibility of doubt; no tendency for surprise or expectation was entertained. His eyes were casual, unhurried, almost reluctant, as though they had refused to trespass beyond those objects that interrupted the ordinary line of vision. He did not look. His attention had to be seduced. It surrendered to the thing which it could not avoid, lingered for a moment, and then withdrew, innocent, without calculation, impartial. ...He did not look. But he saw. Baboo saw everything. That look of innocent renunciation was the mask which neutralised his interest, and lead everything finally within the range of his motive. His treachery was faceless, transparent, freed from any form of visible intrigue or cunning. (p. 413)

The intensity and deliberate superfluity of this description of Baboo's perceptual passivity links profoundly the epistemic and the ethical. We are in the Blakean territory of 'the five senses whelm'd' the 'fluxile eyes' turned 'into two stationary orbs, concentrating all things',²⁸ where imaginative vision has met empirical death. Lamming has already traced the destructiveness of seeing but not looking in Kennedy's life. He does not need to spell out the implications of this way of seeing in a society where the most obvious 'fact' has been the apparent difference of the ethnic other.

The innocence of Baboo's way of seeing links the questions of loyalty, perception and action to the ironies of the novel's title, the paradox that whilst Age stands for action, experience and the acceptance of responsibility, Innocence is passive and profoundly conservative. The conventional connotations (as expressed by Ma Shephard when she tells the boys at the beginning of the novel, 'I feel your innocence take to me' (p. 93)) are subverted in a thoroughly Blakean way. As Lamming wrote in *The Pleasures of Exile*, 'To be innocent is to be eternally dead',²⁹ and as the young Bob thinks, 'Age is nothing if there ain't no doing' (p. 138). Later, the equation between innocence and existential nullity is reinforced by Mark [Kennedy]'s diary entry when he berates himself for his

mere semblance of mourning for Marcia: 'I felt innocent as the clouds which collected overhead. Innocent and free' (p. 333).

In failing to see the ironies in Lamming's use of Age and Innocence in the novel, some critics seem to me to have misread the role of the four boys, Bob, Singh, Lee and Rowley. Their importance in the novel is commonly seen as Lamming's attempt to portray the germ of a true human community which unites the divided ranks of the colonised, and also includes the children of the former ruling whites who have climbed down from their ladder of privilege.³⁰ This may be so, but it has also been assumed that the secret society of the four boys is the Innocence of the novel's title. Mervyn Morris, for instance, quotes from *The Pleasures of Exile* of 'the distance which separates Age which apprehends, from Innocence which can only see', but then comments: 'Yet in this novel, Innocence seems in the end to see more accurately than Age'.³¹ This misreading, which fails to recognise in what respects the boys are not so different from their elders, is perhaps a consequence of not really grasping Lamming's emphasis on perception. And not seeing how the same problems of relationship affect the boys, nor how much the boys are changed in the course of the novel, misses the true depth of their tragedy.

We are introduced to them, it is true, with a slightly sentimental picture of their lack of racial bias. As they listen to the altercation on the seashore between Thief and Baboo, Bob's and the young Singh's race is stressed, but, we are told, 'they showed no awareness of this difference as they listened' (p. 102).

They share a common perception of the island's past in their 'easy co-ordination' in telling the legend of the Tribe Boys and the Bandit Kings; but their boast that they had surpassed their elders, who were 'whining and shouting about San Cristobal and the future as though it had always been an impossible journey' (p. 140) is rather too obviously smug, as is their easy confidence that they were transforming 'the myth of the political meetings into some reality which no one could question', and other such self-congratulatory phrases. The comment that 'San Cristobal had contracted to a pebble in their hands' (p. 140), with its echo of Shephard's vision of megalomaniac control, ought to warn us that there is an hubristic irony at work. It should remind, too, of

the moment recorded in Kennedy's diary of the 'little world... which no force can annihilate' (p. 52). There is, too, the boys' enjoyment of 'secrecy' and 'power', temptations that connect them to, rather than distinguish them from, the world of their elders. Their growth towards experience begins when they accept Rowley Crabbe as one of the little Society, and of course, immediately after the burst of self-congratulation this involves, the boys make the fatal (and innocent) error of giving Singh's father's cigarette lighter to Rowley as a token of acceptance.

The way the boys are most like their elders is in the game of hide-and-seek they play in the woods. Separated from each other, the boys' sense of oneness is subverted by private knowledge. Singh knows his father burns to murder Rowley's father, a secret that gives him a 'feeling like shame... a charge which, even in his innocence, he wanted to avoid' (p. 156). When Bob catches sight of his sister masturbating in the wood, he discovers an hitherto unconscious racial shame when he considers that the person to whom he could least confess what he has seen is Singh. Rowley imagines inviting Bob, Singh and Lee to his house, but 'they did not fit... the chairs would not admit of their presence' (p.160). He has to puzzle over why his father's and grandmother's affection for him should be at the root of their rejection of Bob and Singh and Lee. Later, on Bird Island, where the boys have taken Penelope on one of their 'works', and where they encounter Shephard, Rowley is divided from the other boys by his awareness that the accident with the boat will be known because his father is having Shephard watched. The others 'felt he knew something which they could not guess, and he was afraid' (p. 217). Their response is to turn inwards, to form, as their elders do, an exclusive circle which isolates them and threatens to destroy the very openness which brought them together. They see themselves as a secret society taking on the rest of San Cristobal, as in their strategy to get oil for Crabbe during the power strike. They, too, succumb to the temptations of power, when Rowley feels that it 'was the secret Society outwitting San Cristobal, and his power surpassing that of his father' (p. 295).

It is Rowley's death which finally marks their passage from innocence to experience, as they learn that they must carry the responsibilities for the consequences of their actions, for failure

as well as achievement. They have to suffer as historically aware persons, knowing that they sought to create a vision of community at a moment when as the elder Singh says, 'The time for separating has come' (p. 269).

Their tragedy lies in their powerlessness to make anyone understand what the little Society has meant, or to save Singh's father from possible conviction and execution for the mental hospital fire. When the court refuses to hear the evidence that could have saved him, and even Ma Shephard turns against them, the boys feel that they 'had no power to persuade anyone who did not understand and could not believe what they had done' (p. 433). It is a feeling which recalls Thief's rejoinder that innocence has no language 'unless the next man lend you his belief'. They have been initiated into a society where the negative regard of the other is part of the meaning of daily life. Their tragedy is the prematurity of their bid to realise the essential unity-in-difference of the human race. This is Lamming's historical realism. The personal friendship of Singh's and Crabbe's sons does not change the oppressive structure of a colonised society. As Thief tells Rockey, '...it goin' to take a terrible crime to make them [oppressor and oppressed] meet in a common place' (p. 417). The boys have passed beyond the innocence which sees but does not apprehend. It is now Ma Shephard who says with unconscious irony, 'But I am innocent, innocent as the day that now leavin' this land. I was innocent an' whole in what I do' (p. 396). The boys have seen that mysterious abstraction 'Law' for what it is, the 'mind-forg'd manacles' of the ruling class. When they resist the curfew, we are told that 'The Law could not now enter their feeling' (p. 425).

Lamming inhabits many voices in the novel, and at no point offers either a blueprint for how to conduct the struggle for decolonisation or a vision of what a decolonised society might look like. But, besides those of the boys, the voices that I believe Lamming most wants us to hear beyond the novel's end are Thief's and Rockey's. Their discussion of the revengeful mayhem that Thief wishes to visit on the invading troops brings together the novel's core tension between the attractions of a Fanonian vision of the purifying fires of anti-colonial violence and a Shelleyan vision of revolutionary pacificism and love:

‘ ’Tis like the sea, Thief, life ain’t got no favours to give but the favour each man can take. An’ if you choose a murderin’ evil, whatever reason you choose it make no difference, then you buildin’ a tabernacle that can only house one breed, an’ the sun goin’ set a lastin’ disgrace on the bones that help you build. For ever an’ ever, Thief, till time change to eternity it will go on an’ on...’

‘But a man don’t make his feeling,’ said Thief. ‘They just hold him an’ hold him, till he an’ it come together as one. An’ ’tis a feelin’ that hold me when I watch these troops.’

‘It hold me too,’ said Rockey, ‘an’ ’tis why I ask what will happen tomorrow.’ (pp. 417-418)

It is Rockey who expresses Lamming’s recognition of the endless potentiality of people and his conviction that, though particular struggles may fail, it is in the process of struggle that people begin to tap those unguessed-at potentialities:

Everyman hides many sources... an’ there’s no tellin’ till the lids be taken off. (p. 380)

Thirty years is a lot o’ years for a man to struggle with life... But when my struggle was real an’ help to make more life, I could struggle again an’ again till the Almighty call me home. A man must struggle, Thief, ’cause that is what man was fashioned for, but his struggle got to keep a clear meanin’ in his head an’ heart, or else... (p. 415)

So what might the young Guyanese radicals at the university have gained if they had persisted with the ‘hardness’ of Lamming’s novels? In the case of *Of Age and Innocence*, they might have shared – all too pertinently for those times – with Shephard, Singh and Lee the fearful temptations and pains of political vanguardism and the bitter ash of the politics of revenge. They might have begun to understand in depth, not the appearance but the construction – historical, psychological and epistemic – of what oppressed them, why it was so hard to make changes even in a society crying out for change. They might have been drawn to seeing that this was in part because of our complexity as beings whose processes of knowing and understanding both unite and divide us. They might have understood why Lamming challenges the reader to probe beneath the surface of things. But they could also have taken to heart Rockey’s vision and aspired to Thief’s

high praise of his friend: 'Where you get your heart, Rockey, 'tis high as any hill with hope. You never say no' (p. 380).

ENDNOTES

1. Supriya Nair, *Caliban's Curse: George Lamming and the Revisioning of History*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1996, p. 20.
2. J. Dillon Brown, 'Changing the Subject: The Aesthetics and Politics of Reading in the Novels of George Lamming', in *The Locations of George Lamming*, ed. by Bill Schwarz, London, MacMillan, 2007, pp. 91-111.
3. Wilson Harris, *Tradition, the Writer and Society*, London, New Beacon Books, 1967, p. 28.
4. In 'The West Indian People' (*New World Quarterly*, [2. 2], 1966, pp. 63-74) Lamming confesses to an ignorance of the inner Indian world, and in *Of Age* he deals with Indian communal solidarity as a primordial bond or as a scaled-up matter of individual psychology, rather than seeing it as culturally rooted in the kind of socio-religious institutions to which many Indians in Trinidad and Guyana then gave their loyalty. Although in this essay, he stresses Indian 'difference' as a positive value, in the novel he minimises the extent to which Indians are culturally distinctive. So, whereas the social and ethno-cultural roots of Shephard's or Crabbe's or Butterfield's feelings are acutely drawn, Baboo and Singh are defined only by their race.
5. See the acerbic satire of the 'Pink Curtain' episode depicting colonial functionaries with nebulous pseudo-jobs and locals who have prostituted themselves in one way or other to the colonial order (pp. 208-228).
6. Harris, *Tradition, the Writer and Society*, p. 28.
7. The connections between Naipaul's and Lamming's novels are worth an essay in their own right. Far beyond the superficial resemblances between San Cristobal and Isabella, there is the use that Naipaul makes of the idea of the person made in the eyes of the other (though for Naipaul the need for interpersonal witness can only be a weakness and never a strength, because he ignores Lamming's sense of dialectic).
8. See Rohlehr, 'The Problem of the Problem of Form' in *The Shape of that Hurt and Other Essays*, Port of Spain, Longman Trinidad, 1992, pp. 7-15 ('Man Entering His Voice': Lamming's *Of Age and Innocence*).
9. W. Cartey, *Whispers from the Caribbean*, Los Angeles, Center for Afro-American Studies, University of California, 1991, pp. 334-347.
10. See also Sandra Pouchet Paquet's chapter on *Of Age and Innocence* in her *The Novels of George Lamming*, London, Heinemann, 1982,

- pp. 48-66, where she provides a useful summary of the narrative and locates the novel in the politics of the colonial revolt of the 1950s.
11. Painted between 1992 and 2001, the series is reproduced and discussed in Rupert Roopnaraine's *Primacy of the Eye: The Art of Stanley Greaves*, Leeds, Peepal Tree Press, 2005, pp. 160-186.
 12. See for instance Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2010.
 13. Confirmation of Lamming's engagement with Sartrean existentialism is given by Philip Nanton in 'Knowing and Not Knowing George Lamming: Personal Style and Metropolitan Influences' (in *The Locations of George Lamming*) on the basis of an interview with Lamming. Nanton doesn't, though, extend the analysis to the novels, and indeed there appears to have been little writing on other Caribbean authors of the period – qv Orlando Patterson – that explores responses to radical European thought in their work.
 14. Pouchet Paquet, *The Novels of George Lamming*, p. 52.
 15. Rohlehr, 'The Problem of the Problem of Form', pp. 9-11.
 16. Lamming, 'The Negro Writer and his World', *Presence Africaine*, The 1st International Conference of Negro Writers and Artists, Paris, 1956, pp. 324-332.
 17. Brown, 'Changing the Subject', pp. 100-101. See also Supriya Nair's *Caliban's Curse* (1996), which follows Rohlehr in drawing connections between Lamming as writer and Mark Kennedy as fictive analogue. Both face the challenge of re-inventing a Caribbean literary culture under the burden of a language and forms entrenched in colonial history. Thus Mark abandons a work of colonial historiography he has been writing and asks: 'Why did I ever believe that it was possible to reconstruct the life of that three-fingered rebel?' (*Of Age and Innocence*, p.129).
 18. Cartey, *Whispers from the Caribbean*, p. 334.
 19. Warrior ants feature in the story of the Tribe Boys and Bandit Kings, the 'terrible cargo' the Kings return with, who cannot be fought because 'ants don't understand, an' you can't fight an enemy who don't understand...' (p. 120); as a moral epithet used by the boys to account for Thief's career ('So he behave like the ants... that is without seein' what they kill or why...' (p. 115)); and, of course, in the episode when the boys watch the ants in the woods (pp. 146-149) and then kill as many of them as they can, an episode that provides scale and a point of learning. Finally, there is the image right at the end of the novel, of 'a regiment of ants... waiting, patient and furious, to devour the flesh of the living' (p. 434), an image both of the nihilistic violence that may lurk under the surface of societies like San Cristobal, and of the fearsome energies that enable survival against the bleakest odds.

20. Martin Carter, *Poems of Resistance*, Georgetown, University of Guyana, 1964, p. 1 (first published, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1954).
21. See Amanda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, Oxford, OUP, 2007.
22. Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile*, London, Michael Joseph, 1960, p. 116.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
24. In *The Pleasures of Exile* Lamming describes the arrival of the Indians as one of the three most important events in the history of the Caribbean (pp. 36-37), and in a speech delivered in 1965 he argues that in the very difference of the Indians' cultural heritage lay 'a most desirable extension of the West Indian reality'. He spoke of the Indians as 'perhaps, our only jewels of a true native thrift and industry. They have taught us by example the value of money; for they respect money as only people with a high sense of communal solidarity can' ('The West Indian People', p. 69).
25. 'The West Indian People', p. 69.
26. *The Pleasures of Exile*, p. 35.
27. There are obvious parallels between the relationship of Shephard and Singh and that between L'Ouverture and Dessalines which Lamming draws attention to in his discussion of C.L.R. James's *The Black Jacobins* in *The Pleasures of Exile* (pp. 125-150). Lamming follows James in seeing Toussaint, the educated man, as having become, at a crucial stage in the revolt, confused and hesitant about his objectives because his loyalty to the ideal of French civilisation conflicted with the revolutionary demands of the mass of the black slaves. Dessalines, the ex-field slave, narrower in outlook and uninvolved with the white world, has always known precisely what had to be done. When they discuss the rumour that the People's Communal Movement wants to kill the whites, Shephard says he does not want to kill anyone, but Singh rejoins: 'Unless it is necessary... Remember they don't think twice about killing if it is necessary' (p. 244). (Wilson Harris, characteristically, sees in Toussaint's wavering a 'groping towards an alternative to conventional statehood, a conception of wider possibilities', (*Tradition, the Writer and Society*, p. 45).
28. William Blake, *Europe*, Plate 11 (13), lines 11-12, *The Continental Prophecies*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1995, p. 242. There are a number of Blakean echoes in *Of Age and Innocence*, not least in the discussion of the decision to betray Crabbe by the two policemen (pp. 319-320) and the short one's claim that 'Lucifer an' Christ is blood brothers in spirit.'
29. *The Pleasures of Exile*, p. 103.
30. 'The West Indian People', p. 69
31. Mervyn Morris, 'The Poet as Novelist', in *The Islands In Between*, Oxford, OUP, 1968, p. 78.

A strong sense of identity makes a man feel he can
do no wrong; too little accomplishes the same.

Djuna Barnes (*Nightwood*)

BOOK ONE

FLIGHT

Suddenly the land was no longer there, and the airliner had lifted itself like a cripple grown used to his crutches. The sky was coming closer as the light turned to cloud which travelled always like a tramp. And the weather was absent. Two small bulbs, half-hidden in a roof of metal, were stammering a language of red and green flickers, and the girl with the strawberry face that smiled every wish away passed among her passengers like the air, easy and important.

But Marcia could tell from his sudden preoccupation with the diaries that Mark had felt something was going to happen. He was leaning forward, supported by his elbows and his hands fixed flat against his face in its clownish manoeuvre down and across the pages which lay on his lap. For the second time his hands slipped, and his fingers slid together to make a curve of knuckles which rested his chin; but his sense could not receive what his eyes were seeing. His attention was tarnished. The pages remained in their natural state, a familiar contrivance of words and paper which ignored all desire. And he wished that time would leap the hours and hurry without interruption to an immediate arrival. Each second was a sickening obstacle.

She put her hand on his shoulder and creased the overcoat with her nails, but he avoided her affection, and kept his eyes on the page. He was feeling in his habitual way, which great altitudes always exaggerated, that something was bound to happen. But the airliner only snored, gently, like a roomful of children carried by the same dream. The green light blinked frantically, but the red bulb was still, a scarlet socket deprived of its eye. Marcia pressed on his shoulder again. He smiled and kissed her mouth; and then, without the least delay, he continued reading as though the words needed his attention, and his attention was the only possible chance against the disaster which he suspected. Marcia took her hand away and closed her eyes.

The airliner found its course, making a grumble, low and genial like an old man singing in his sleep. A huge bank of cloud collapsed and spread into flat, white wings that sailed under its belly. And voices dimmed gradually to a whisper, cosy and reminiscent. Marcia was alone. Gradually her eyes opened, wandering across the silver grey partition with the transparent lettering which carved the order, no smoking. The yellow light which filled the space with words was already turned off, and the order was no longer effective. She was going to have a cigarette, but her eyes closed again, and it seemed that her need had also ended. The voices rose behind her, full of habit, and her eyes opened. They closed and opened in a play of light and darkness like the red and green flickers of the small bulbs which were now idle and sightless.

Mark had withdrawn into a fearful isolation. She turned away in search of Bill and Penelope who were sitting two rows ahead on the other side. She could recognise their heads turned towards each other as they talked. For a moment she felt an urge to hear what they were saying, but other voices had intervened. There was an uneven rhythm of talk which rose and fell around her like the near drone of the airliner. These passengers had already made this vehicle their transitory home. And she thought that she would do the same. She crouched deeper into her seat, and looked in the direction of Bill and Penelope, and wondered again what they were saying. But their voices were taken by the loud hum of the airliner, and gradually she felt the effort to remember them in some other place. She was coaxing her memory to revive their first meeting, so that she might relive through this flight some of the events which filled that time and finally turned their first meeting into a friendship which held all four of them so close together: Bill and Penelope, herself and Mark.

She could see Bill's head slide away over the seat as though he were about to sleep. She stretched her hand to touch Mark who was staring outside at the airliner's wing. She glanced at him, then at Bill and Penelope, but she was separated from them all by silence and reverie, and Mark's fear. She turned indolently in the seat, withdrawing her hand from Mark's arm, and wondered how he might have differed from Bill, and what, at the root of their

friendship, was her real attraction for Penelope. The seat slipped lower under her, and her neck found a new rest.

Words were collecting in her head, vague and vagrant like a movement of shadows over an indifferent surface. She could almost feel them stray, as though they refused to obey their normal use. They slipped from their meaning, sailing briefly like feeble noises that stumble for a while before returning to the silence which contains them. The signs did not cohere. The ends would not meet in a meaning which would help her memory. In order to tidy the mess which they were accumulating in her mind, she thought aloud: 'I want to marry Mark and bear him children.' The words surprised her. She thought others might have heard, but Mark was still reading, looking up now and again to observe the weather. Perhaps he had heard, but she had often told him, and it was not likely that he would have taken a special interest in her slip. She glanced at him, and thought again to herself: 'But he always says he doesn't want children, and he is afraid of marriage, as he is of the plane.' Then the words receded leaving their inept traces over the surface of her mind. She would abandon them and give herself to the vague shapes of places which her memory was striving slowly to restore. She noticed Mark's hand tremble as he turned the pages of the diary, and she waited to hear again the voices which were trying earlier to make their signatures on the air. But everyone was quiet, and the airliner seemed to make its own kind of silence too.

She lay back, her head at rest on the reclining seat, and looked at the small bulbs so securely set in their cells, and felt the natural intimacy of sheets, hoping that Mark would hold her hand and love her only with his presence beside her. That was all she asked as the liner sailed the air like a hand through water. But Mark could not appreciate this pleasure. It was real for Marcia. She knew peace like the palm of her hand.

The liner slipped in a pocket of air, and a shudder shook Mark. His elbows had slipped from their rest and his hands automatically hid his eyes. When he raised his head he saw the sign EXIT painted in gold against a red margin at the top of the sliding door. He looked at the door with misgiving, and his glance moved like a man in hiding across the area of the airliner and gradually

towards the life-belt which peeped out from the back of another passenger's seat. The pages remained on his lap, submissive and indifferent, while his fingers pecked at the life-belt. His nerves were screwed by a single anxiety which forced his glance past the window towards the tip of the airliner's wing. He could detect with a frightening precision where the curve of the wing came to an end, and the air in an infinite superfluity registered nothing. There was an absence of things outside; and that absence, transparent and impenetrable had taken meaning from his mind. He looked about the airliner with its quiet cargo of lives before guiding his glance again past the window towards the territory of absence which encompassed them; and nothing seemed meaningful but the arrogant little order EXIT on the door and the incalculable absence which had labelled the air. He was getting dizzy. Fear shook him like the wind, alive and real as an enemy, and he hurried his attention to the pages. But his eyes could not find the words which made an intolerable noise in his head. His ears would let nothing in but that distant and official voice, false and cheerful: FROM LONDON TO SAN CRISTOBAL... FLYING TIME... IN THE INEVITABLE EVENT... IN THE INEVITABLE EVENT... The words rattled through his head like dice rolled across a surface of dry bone. His hands were wet. He placed one hand on Marcia's shoulder, and set some of the pages down on her lap; and she knew, like a horse its stable, what she should do. She would read the pages and let her interest in these fragments of the diary become his distraction.

She settled the pages on her lap and wondered why he had always postponed his promise to let her read them. Her curiosity had almost failed but she had decided to wait. Now, like the sudden shudder of the plane which tumbled some of the pages off his knee, he had passed them to her. For a moment it pleased her to think that she would be the only other person who had seen them, and she leaned across and kissed him. He tried to smile, but his face was tight, his lips barely moved. And she thought 'it's because he's afraid, it's only in a moment of weakness that he really wants to share his feelings.' And she felt an overwhelming sympathy for him. She wanted to crush his ears between her hands, and bring his body against hers. But his anxiety had already

separated them. He had drawn the small, green blinds to obstruct his view of the airliner's wing and continued reading the pages which he had kept. Marcia considered the sheets. Her hands were excited, and she was almost beyond herself with elation. There was no need to tax her memory with new errands. His first sentence was more immediate.

'Midnight and a year since we have known each other. I see this voyage and Marcia in another moment which I recognise, feel almost I can touch: my father dying, and the day looking ordinary outside where brown birds with blue necks fly over the mud shore and children are pushing their scabby fingers mining for false gold. And on the same night my father, now a naked corpse, is taken into a small room smelling of camphor, and my mother's friends assemble to wake him with weeping and coffee. Their fingers nibble pink cubes of cheese, and a voice says, "someday the clouds will roll away forever." Not only this moment on the deck but that time too waits here beside me and Marcia. It does not stretch towards anything but the sea which pursues us and connects Barcelona with the Balearic islands; and Marcia and the boat are part of the mud shore and the festival of mourning for my father, and twenty years largely forgotten, obscured with living. Now I am standing somewhere between islands and mainland.

'The sea surrounds us. The surface sparkles with light and a little sentiment where the moon charges from behind the black hump of hills. They look like men marking time, large and indifferent, and they will be with us all the way and in similar attitudes until the day returns to tell their colour and their age. But now they look splendid and I am with them under the same anonymous cover of night. The deck is wet and cold, and this voyage becomes an adventure which denies health and seems beyond reason. I try to think about Marcia, but suddenly the wind comes up, touching us with spray, and I remember Bill and Penelope who have taken a cabin for the night.

'The young German passes in his heavy wind-breaker and the thick black boots which reach to his knees. I hear the boots pause, and notice he has stopped. Marcia leans forward to make sure someone is standing there, in front of us. Then she closes her eyes

and makes herself smaller under the blanket. I surrender to the wind, frozen beyond feeling. Marcia puts her head in my hands and stretches full length on the bench, and when she falls asleep I make a pillow with the end of the blanket under her head and let her lie alone. The German leans over the rails fiddling with the ropes which tied the ship in harbour. I know that he wants to talk, and I am curious to know what he is thinking. I remember his face earlier in the afternoon, lively and strong, yet without much meaning, like a coin that takes the wrong turn down a slot. Can it be that he has boarded the wrong boat on purpose? It excites me to think that this is true, so I don't shirk from his effort at conversation. He asks after Bill and Penelope.

“They took a cabin,” I say. He laughs in the crook of his arm like a child trying to conceal a secret mischief, and I wonder whether he is mad. He's serious again, making his knuckles crack in the wind.

“It's too short a journey for a cabin,” he says. “We arrive in the morning.”

‘I want to ask him whether he doesn't feel the cold, but I reply: “I think so too.”

‘Agreement makes him eager to talk, and I recall him in the afternoon sitting on the deck staring at his black boots like a refugee who has been refused. Then Marcia was asking him when the boat would sail and he suggested they should cut the ropes and let it drift. Ever since she has avoided him.

‘Now he lets go of the ropes and puts his fingers in the narrow slots that slice the sides of the wind-breaker. Standing before me, he shows a face evenly divided by the night and the moon. I move closer to make sure it is the same face, narrow, tense, and hardy.

‘“You were not in the war?” he asks, and suddenly turns his back to the rails, raising the ropes between his fingers. I hesitate.

‘“Where were you?” I ask, and it seems that he has forgotten my answer which I avoid.

‘“I was sent to Poland and Czechoslovakia,” he says. He is looking down at the water as he talks, holding the ropes idly between his fingers. “They drafted me at fifteen,” he says, then grins like a thief caught defenceless. He takes his hand from the rails, presses them along his body down to the enormous black

boots, and I see his body bend, easy and agile, up and down in a tiresome exercise. He has refused to care. It is not the objectionable toughness of one who is callous by vocation. Just a certain obscurity of intention.

‘“Well, that war is over,” he says, and he makes it sound like news.

‘“And you are taking a holiday, now?”

‘“I’m just going,” he says. He pushes his sleeve above his watch to see the time, and I suddenly think, with unaccountable malice, that he is in some illegal traffic between North Africa and the Spanish Coast.

‘“Have you ever been to North Africa?”

‘“As a prisoner,” he says. The wind blows his hair about his ears, and he looks, in his natural indifference of manner, like one who is used to ignoring the weather.

‘Marcia is getting restless on the bench, and I go over to stroke her hair. But I still think about the German, that face which does not seem to belong anywhere, and the casual, quick voice, telling his experience like one offering tips to an unseen waiter. I try to talk with Marcia about him. She is awake and there is nothing else to occupy us. We are both feeling the largeness of the night. The ship is rolling heavily. Marcia folds the blanket into a cushion which makes two seats, and we sit, leaning against each other. The wind has changed direction. The night is cooler. Marcia’s speech is slow and lazy, and I suddenly remember that Marcia has always got to make an elaborate ritual of awakening. It proceeds by stages.

‘“I’m not sleeping now,” she says, “you know my habit.”

‘Sometimes this irritates me, the way she can slip like a seal into a perfect lethargy of nature.

‘“We’re an impossible pair,” she says, and I think: “That’s true, and it’s probably why we’re together.” She confronts me as an example of something I cannot define in myself. But I am about to tell her that we are perfectly matched, and it’s foolish to complain, that I am satisfied. I press her arm and kiss her on the mouth. “I don’t think we can make a go of this,” I say.

‘Suddenly Marcia comes alive with an agility which seems almost deliberate. She warms my hands under her blouse and presses her face against my neck. We are feeding a little life to the

night, but the memory of the young German alters our intentions. Slowly, she releases her arms.

“What are you thinking?” Marcia asks, and I answer, “Nothing.”

‘But I am thinking again about the night they carried my father’s corpse into the small room, and the voices singing, “someday the clouds will roll away forever.” I ignore Marcia’s waiting and wonder about the faith of the friends kneeling beside my father’s corpse, and the wish of all who declare that the shape and conduct of our world may be contained in one mind. I try to imagine a consciousness which carries my secret and the German’s, and all the secret lives that include every instance of life before and always. I see the German passing again and slowly, surely, I hear, like the plodding hoof of his boots, the words: out of touch, out of touch. He walks past, and the words keep returning like a fever, beyond my control; and I wonder what can be my interest in this brief meeting with a man who will pass me on the street tomorrow like the wind, experienced and yet beyond real human contact. Is it that he suggests myself?’

“Tell me what you’re thinking,” Marcia says. I hesitate, and she adds, “Do you love me?” But she also chooses my answer before I can forget the words that echo like iron from the German’s boots. “Kiss me,” she says.

‘She holds my face and her eyes close on my mouth. We watch the moon trying to recover its stride behind the hills, and the sea seems to sail like our silence out of sight, leaving us with the privilege of the deserted deck.’

Marcia reread the last paragraph, but before she had turned the page the boy who sat directly in front raised his head. Mark was distracted and Marcia smiled, but the boy ignored them and turned his glance on the other passengers. They passed before him like troops for whom an afternoon inspection has become a formality. Now and again he would turn to speak with the woman who sat beside him, but she was always curt and uncommunicative in reply. He was in search of company, but the faces were all foreign, and he remembered the warnings he had heard against mixing with strangers in San Cristobal. Marcia thought it was

time he sat down, and the woman, who seemed to feel her neighbour's wish, suddenly ordered him with a jerk of the wrist. He huddled into the seat, and sat quietly, looking towards the cockpit. Mark looked relieved, and Marcia reached for his arm and tried to coax him into speech.

'You think we'll meet that German in San Cristobal?'

'What German?' Her voice had surprised him.

'The man you met on the boat from Barcelona,' she said. 'He sounds like someone who would turn up anywhere.'

'I don't remember much about San Cristobal,' said Mark. 'I don't know what sort of people turn up there.'

He had avoided any mention of the diaries. Marcia reflected. She wanted to distract him from this anxiety about the plane, but the boy had raised his head again. Mark was staring outside at the airliner's wing. The boy might have spoken now, but Marcia was considering the pages. She showed no sign of acknowledging his presence, and the boy dipped his head and slumped down like a fruit into his seat. He could not find anyone to help him kill time with talk, and he started to count backwards from ten to five on the fingers of one hand. He paused, spread the next hand over his knee and started again from five to one. He looked up to see whether the woman had noticed, but his effort was in vain. She was reading the map which showed the route they were taking from London to San Cristobal.

'Granny!'

'What is it?' she exclaimed.

He noticed that he had scared her, and he hurried to say something before she turned her head away.

'Will Daddy be there to meet us?' he asked.

'What makes you think not?' she said.

He had not really thought, and the question was a way of making her talk. Now her answer had confused him and he tried to remember what he wanted to say. He saw her finger stretch to where the red lines intersected on the map and he felt he was gradually losing her attention. He told himself that he would not miss this chance, and suddenly he blundered into speech.

'Why does Daddy choose to live out of England?' he asked.

'It's his duty to live where his work takes him,' she said, and turned

to check the name where the red lines showed land on the map. He wanted to interrupt her, but he felt that his attempt had failed and it would be better to wait until she had lost interest in the map.

He raised his head and looked round at the passengers. Some were already asleep, effortless and unworried as the airliner. The hostess had taken care of their fears. Sound had frozen their ears to a state of unhearing. It was as though their departure from the land had granted them a reprieve to share the freedom of the air. And Marcia was reliving through the diaries the morning of their arrival on another island.

“The boat crawls wilfully through the bay as though it wants to prolong our waiting. Marcia warns that the German is approaching. Soon he joins us, looking towards the hills which are now shaggy and brown. A desert in air claiming small pockets of life along the levelled areas of the land. I wonder what is happening there now. I would be there and here on this boat at the same time, and beyond the curve of the bay where the faces are blurred by light and distance. I neither like nor dislike the German. He is simply there, and I am here beside Marcia who is impatient to arrive. The German watches us sideways, but I pretend not to notice, and Marcia remains stubbornly silent. I do not know what he sees, but I think I shall speak to him. Marcia anticipates this and warns me with her elbow. I decide to let him alone. We shall soon disperse, and that will be the end of my interest.

“When do you think we’ll arrive?” I ask. Marcia frowns.

“Half an hour,” the German says. He smiles like a card player who knows that the game is his. Marcia avoids his glance, and I am suddenly angered by this face which seems so cunning. I remember our conversation last night, and it occurs to me that something will happen if I call him a Nazi. Say Nazi, I tell myself, and see what happens. I hold Marcia’s hand and turn to the German, and I can feel the word tighten my tongue. There is something like noise in my mouth.

“Tell me,” I say, “what time is it?”

“Ten o’clock,” he says. He drops his hand and smiles.

“Let’s go on the other side,” says Marcia, “we can see everything better from there.”

‘I have abandoned my little enterprise. But the German is rebuked. He turns to watch us go and his smile changes to a tight-lipped grimace.

‘The light is sharp and clear, and the sea is a repetitive frolic. Ten o’clock. Ahead of us the houses are arranged above each other, following the slope of the hills. They slide quietly down to the shops and cafés which wait for the ship. Approaching the pier, the hills begin to close round us on all sides. The police are waiting like amiable watchdogs. The boat grazes the pier, and the crowd press forward, waving a general welcome to the arriving voyagers. A whole village has come to see. It is a morning of delight. The air is startled, and the bars stare from the edge of the street.

‘“What a beautiful setting,” says Marcia. She is holding my hand staring through her dark sunglasses. The baggage men are beginning to crowd on to the boat, and their cries scatter in all directions.

‘“These people haven’t come to anyone in particular,” I say. Marcia does not answer, but she cuddles under my arm, and I understand her feeling. The sun arouses her. Desire pricks her from the back, like a pistol. She is looking at me the way she always does when this happens. And I want to laugh.

‘“You’ll have to wait,” I say.

‘She leans her chin on the iron rail and stares down at the water. Then she is alerted, and stands erect, taking her hand away from my shoulder.

‘“How long shall we stay here?” she asks.

‘“Until the money is finished,” I say.

‘“I can let you have some,” she says, “if you try to finish the book you started.”

‘I feel my skin twitch, and I pretend disinterest. I do not want to encourage this talk, because I cannot fulfil my part of the bargain. I am relieved to see one of the baggage men making towards us, but I know that Marcia is waiting for me to speak.

‘“Would you take the money on that condition?”

‘I reply promptly that I shall not, and Marcia looks wounded.

‘“You don’t want to feel any responsibility,” she says, “not even to me.”

‘“And why did you come here?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” she says. Then she adds very quickly, “because I love you.”

‘A baggage man is trying to rent us a small house at the top of the hill. Bill and Penelope have left the boat and are lingering in the street, and Marcia tells the man that we must consult with them before making any decisions. I point to the street to show him where Bill is standing, and I notice the German walking down the gangway. He waves a card at the Civil Guards and walks across the street. Marcia notices, and remarks, as though it were illegal, “But he has no baggage at all.”

‘I watch him follow the street as far as the wall which rises and spreads around the mutilated castle and the mute steeple of the cathedral beyond. Then he disappears like a rat which has found its hole, and I feel that I shall not see him again, but always I shall remember the night smelling of camphor round my father’s corpse happening again in the same moment that I hold Marcia beside me on the deck and hear the iron of the German’s boots echoing the words: out of touch, out of touch.’

Marcia paused in the middle of the page and tried to recall the months which had preceded that trip to the Mediterranean. She had moved to London in the hope that Mark would share her uncle’s flat. It was the first serious decision she had made on his behalf, and it had caused an unbearable tension between herself and her uncle. Mark would arrive every day, and they would remain together until night and the last train. Sometimes he missed the train and had to remain overnight, but he would always leave early the following morning. Marcia would lie in bed and read until he returned. Sometimes she had not yet changed out of her night clothes, and Mark, on his return, would get back into bed. But she could not persuade him to make a permanent arrangement. Nor would it ever occur to her to insist. And she thought, as she thumbed the pages, that the interval which he always chose between morning and the lunch hour must have given him the feeling that he was still on his own. It was, she felt, another example of his refusal to take the offer which he had mentioned in the diaries. She would have liked to talk with him about the pages she had read, but she was unsure of his response.

She looked up from the pages and felt for his arm. She was surprised when he took her hand and rubbed it gently along his knee as he tapped his fingers against her wrist. He was probably getting used to his trespass in the air.

‘I wonder whether San Cristobal will be as nice,’ she said.

‘Bill and Penelope will be the best judges,’ he said, and stroked her hand again. She was warming to his affection.

‘You should be very excited to see it,’ she said, ‘after how many years...?’

‘I don’t remember much,’ he said with some emphasis, but his voice was intimate, and she felt that he was really trying to remember a little about his childhood. He was about ten when his father died and he left San Cristobal. The intervening years had taken him to three or four countries, and at thirty it required some effort to recall with clarity some of the events of those years.

‘There used to be a boy whose name I forget,’ he said. ‘He used to catch worms.’

‘Why worms?’

Mark continued as though he were determined to enjoy his own story. He had tightened his hand round Marcia’s.

‘He just went in search of them,’ said Mark, ‘like a man after treasure, digging up cabbage roots, grass, anything that might be hiding his worms.’

‘What the devil did he want with worms?’ Marcia asked.

‘He used to eat them,’ Mark said calmly. ‘Every one he caught was chewed and swallowed. Just like that.’

He made a small hole with his mouth and slipped two fingers in and out. Marcia brushed his hand away, and rearranged the pages on her lap.

‘Why didn’t they feed him properly?’ said Marcia.

‘It had nothing to do with hunger,’ Mark said. ‘He just thought they looked like spaghetti.’

‘But worms don’t taste like spaghetti,’ she said, and she made a face as though she were going to be sick.

‘But they looked like spaghetti, and he thought they should taste like spaghetti,’ said Mark. ‘After that nobody could stop him...’

He paused as though he had suddenly remembered something which was far more astonishing than the boy’s behaviour. He

took Marcia's hand unthinkingly and bent her fingers back to touch her wrist. She was going to make a noise when he dropped her hand and continued with the story.

'...except the old woman,' he said, as though he were now talking to himself. 'It was only the old woman who could get him to stop...'

'What old woman?' Marcia asked.

'The old woman of San Cristobal,' Mark said. 'She's probably dead now.'

'Who is this old woman?' Marcia asked. She was enjoying Mark's secret delight with this recollection.

'She used to deliver babies,' he said, 'a kind of village midwife. Primitive perhaps, but somehow successful. She might have had a hand in my arrival for all I know...' He glanced down at Marcia to see whether she was showing sufficient interest in his story.

'And then when she must have been well over fifty,' he said, 'she had a baby. Believe it or not, the old woman had a baby, and the island was wild with rumour. Some said it was a miracle, and some said it was a freak.'

'Did the child live?' Marcia asked.

'He was alive up to the time I left,' said Mark, 'but miracle or freak, he was...'

The plane seemed to stumble and shudder, and Mark released her hand, and shifted in his seat. Marcia felt the change that had come over him. She settled the pages, and tried to take his hand. But everything was different. He did not really concede it. He was nervous. The plane moved, calm and even in its flight; but its shudder a moment ago was like a warning which predicted disaster. Mark could not trust the emptiness of the air.

'Look at that man's head,' Marcia said, trying to distract him, 'it shines like glass.'

Mark refused to share her fascination, but Marcia had found a new and absorbing interest in the shaven black object which grazed the rim of the seat. The naked black skull scraped the seat from side to side, and Marcia tried again to win Mark's attention. But the plane rubbed the clouds again with a sudden jerk, and Mark dropped his head in his hands, and stared ahead towards the cockpit. The lettered partition of the plane was illuminated, and the

order had returned: no smoking. He thought he saw a new terror in the warning of the sign. He glanced quickly towards the airliner's wing, and he thought he saw it flap under the pressure of the wind.

He was surrendering San Cristobal to the future and all those who would follow in a more fortunate circumstance of transport. He looked at the wing again, and it seemed quite steady. He was encouraged. The plane moved soberly; and all was well until his eye caught a flame that flashed like lightning under the wing. Another flame flew, and another; and he searched for Marcia's arm. It was like trying to say goodbye. But suddenly the boy had interrupted his terror with that curious and determined voice with which he addressed his grandmother. She turned eagerly to hear what he was saying. Her attention was like a gift, and Mark sat up and tried to listen. It was part of his attempt to forget what he had seen outside. The boy was asking questions.

'Why exit?' he asked.

The woman coaxed the boy's head to her mouth and whispered in his ear. They remained silent for a while. Then the boy spoke. His grandmother put her hands round his neck in order to cross his lips if he became too audible.

'I've been in a plane before, Granny. In a dream in the hospital.'

He scratched his ear and turned his head up to her face. 'It was the time Uncle Basil took my tonsils out,' he said. 'When they put me on the table to put me to sleep, and Uncle Basil took up the knives and told me to close my eyes.'

'You didn't see any knives,' she said. The boy checked his memory.

'I did, Granny, the knives –' and suddenly she pressed her index finger across his lips, and he lowered his head and frowned.

'But I was in a plane,' he said. 'It's the truth. In a dream. In the hospital. I don't remember getting in or sitting down like we are here, but I remember the plane won't stop. It just went flying and flying forever.'

'And how did you get out?'

'I don't know,' he said, 'but I remember being back in the hospital in my bed and Uncle Basil saying "wake up, Rowley, the tonsils are out," and I think I asked Uncle Basil what happened to the plane.'

‘Well, you were dreaming,’ she said, and pushed her fingers through his hair. The boy scratched his ears and rubbed his head against his grandmother’s shoulder. He looked bewildered, and she held her head away as though she wanted to show a lack of interest in his story.

‘But suppose our plane doesn’t stop, Granny, we’d have to use the exit.’

She used her silence to discourage him, and she kept her head turned away. But he knew she was listening, and he stretched across to take a look outside beyond the wing of the airliner.

‘Granny,’ he said, ‘we couldn’t reach the bottom from here, could we? I mean if we had to jump.’

She pushed him gently away, and searched her bag for a sweet. He was still staring outside, trying to imagine the distance below. He took the sweet which she offered and said thanks before putting it in his pocket.

‘Don’t you want it?’ she asked, and he nodded to let her know he would have it later.

She pressed her arm against his forehead, and drew him closer to her. Her affection was a bargain for his silence. She was used to these outbursts of curiosity. During his holidays from boarding school they were particularly frequent, but she dreaded their occurrence in public. At home she could cope with him as she had done for years during his father’s absence in San Cristobal. But she felt something inappropriate, even indelicate, about what she would call private talk, being offered indiscriminately for the ears of strangers. She was a woman of the Sunday afternoon fire and the whispered reminiscence. She hated noise, and it was a reason people like her never spoke during public transport. It had nothing to do with shyness, or the need to conceal their feelings. But there was a certain nicety about privacy which their silence on the public occasion usually reminded them of. Moreover, you could never tell whether what you were saying might not have, even in the remotest way, some association of discomfort for your neighbour. Then you would be guilty, as Rowley probably was, of being unpleasant.

She looked down at the boy to see what he was doing, and she thought about her son and the life he had chosen. It was true that

he was a man of great importance in San Cristobal, and it was his duty to remain until his work was done. But any place beyond England was for her a 'foreign part', and she had uneasy reservations about 'foreign parts'. She was relieved to turn Rowley over to his father, but she was doubtful about the decision. A 'foreign part' might serve its purpose, but it was hardly the place for an English boy who was also her grandson. She wished the boy's mother were alive, and she wondered how her son and Rowley would manage if she decided that San Cristobal was not worth her effort to adjust. She was trying to imagine what her life would be like in such a place, but Rowley had interrupted again.

'Granny!

'What is it now?'

'You don't think this plane will crash?' he said.

'What's come over you?' she said, and her voice was at once solicitous and severe. She had anticipated an unpleasant exchange of questions and rebukes.

Mark, who had been following the boy's questions, took some of the pages from his lap. One hand found his ears, and his knees were shaking slightly under the pages.

'I'm not afraid,' the boy said, 'but I was thinking...'. He paused and looked round at the passengers as though he were trying to remember for all time the order in which they were seated. He pushed himself up and looked over the seat to see Mark and Marcia.

'What were you thinking?' the woman asked, and steered him back to the seat.

'How if the plane crashed we'd try to remember the faces of those who died.'

The woman was dumb with fury. She was trying to shape some rebuke that would silence him for the rest of the flight, but Rowley was indifferent. It seemed that he could not imagine an accident which would destroy him too.

'The papers wouldn't have had a chance to photograph them,' he added.

'How monstrous, Rowley, shut up!'

Her face was scarlet, and she had become suddenly embarrassed by her own vehemence. Some of the passengers had

turned to see who had spoken. Rowley had burst into tears. He buried his head in her bosom and wept his pardon.

The sobbing distracted Marcia who now shifted in her seat and shuffled the pages before setting them down on her thighs. She pushed her elbow further into Mark's side, but he was unfeeling. Fragments of the boy's sentence had strayed through his mind... 'remember the faces of those who died.' The words worked on his nerves with a smooth and gradual destructiveness like flakes of glass losing their way through flesh. Marcia forced her attention on the diaries, for she knew that in certain circumstances any gesture of sympathy towards Mark was like an act of intrusion. He had changed his position again as he always did during such experiences of discomfort... 'remember the faces of those who died.'

The boy had taken his head from his grandmother's bosom. He was towing the sweet from side to side on his tongue.

Then the airliner lurched and as quickly climbed the air, throbbing like an enormous balloon which had been bruised by the wind. The sensation was sudden, and Rowley's grandmother drew him closer and slipped three fingers into his empty pocket. They were inseparable. Mark drew the small blinds and cut off his glance from the view outside. The currents of air seemed unruly, and the airliner was riding defensively. It lurched again, and proceeded in a throbbing and cautious ascent like a boy who is bargaining with branches at the top of a tree he has not climbed before. Some of the passengers remarked that the weather had changed. The airliner leaned awkwardly to one side, then straightened with a jolt, and continued its climb. Someone called in a loud voice for a Scotch, and the hostess, in her role of comfort and apology, started on her patrol, leaning from side to side to say that all was well. Her smile was becoming absurd, but the flame of strawberry still supported her cheeks.

She had entered the cockpit, but when she returned Mark avoided her glance. He saw her coming towards them, and he pretended to be busy with the pages which he had stopped reading. Her smile was a false assurance and he suspected that she knew something was wrong. She stopped to talk with Marcia, but Mark had already turned to look outside at the airliner's wing.

The hostess passed on and his eyes found the pages again, but he could not recognise the words on the page. They had merged into the language which his imagination had already invented for the disaster he suspected. He closed his eyes and listened to his fear describe a future which he could never experience.

...me to myself after my darkest departure, laid out at my usual length like my father in a case of cedar stained in turpentine, screwed with silver... exact, uncontroversial symbol of my absence ever after... my coffin cruel and cosy in silken linen receiving me, forever unalive under false roses hired for the evening ritual of wreaths and rhyming wishes for a life hereafter... abide with me, the darkness deepens, Lord with me, me, me, carried like crockery through an avenue of flowering corpse-land, carefully, carefully, carefully carried... abide with me entering earth, raising wishes for a heaven whose embassy is there alert in the vigil of angels in stone, hearing my hope and the hope of all men meeting in dust and ashes to dust and ashes... death is unspeakably cheap, cheap, cheap, cheap... there's no cheaper than the cheapness of being, as me to myself now see me, dead... dead... here lie the remains of Mark Kennedy... born... crashed...

'Crashed...' His fear had turned to a whisper like a voice talking to itself.

'You ought to take the tablets, darling,' Marcia drew his head to her and tried to kiss him. She could feel his lips in a spasm, drawn thin and dry.

'Don't you think they ought to turn back?'

'Are you feeling ill?' she asked. She had coaxed his head on to her shoulder, and she could feel the warmth which burnt his ear.

'It's such an odd sensation,' he said, as he slid easily away from her, trying to rescue the pages from falling off his knees.

'Take three of the tablets,' said Marcia, 'they'll work in no time.'

'I'll be all right,' he said, and she watched him gulp the tablets and lean his head slowly against the seat.

The airliner was steadier now, climbing through a quieter region of air. A few voices were making some comment on the interval which had shaken them from sleep. And Mark waited as though he anticipated the effect of the tablets. He stretched his

legs and folded his hands across his stomach. Marcia rearranged the pages, and put the small bottle in her pocket. She hoped the tablets would soon put him to sleep. Then she continued reading.

‘And one evening returns to remind me of something which seems always possible. The lane is littered with honeysuckle, and the smell has lulled us to silence. We have walked from the bay through a crooked marl road which rambles across the grass to where the potato field begins. I walk ahead with the young Spaniard who is our guide, and Bill and Penelope lag behind with Marcia who is feeling exhausted. We reach the lane of honeysuckle, and Bill sits on the grass to rest his legs. But Marcia and Penelope have stooped to examine the weed as though they have seen something which reminds them of their village. The hills appear purple and grey from the light of the sun which has reached the sea, and there is no wind. Then Marcia scales the grass which makes a hedge around the field of wheat. Penelope follows her, and they lie for a while in a curve of earth where someone has rested before. Bill raises himself from the grass, and shouts for Penelope. She seizes Marcia’s hand, and trails her along, and the three hurry towards me. We stand at the brink of the grass where the honeysuckle starts on its ramble through the lane. And it seems to me, standing between Marcia and Penelope, with Bill and the guide silently watching the hills that lean so steeply to the sea, that something has happened for us. And I tell myself that formerly I have only been in love with Marcia, and Bill and Penelope were simply friends who move about me like the weather which takes its seasons for granted. Penelope has her hand on my shoulder, and I draw Marcia closer to me and not until now, which no force can annihilate, have I felt the presence of this little world, made by four people whose happiness, in this moment, no argument can deny.’

Marcia paused. She was trying to recall the incidents of that evening. It was nearly two years since their holiday in Spain, and the diaries had suddenly sharpened her memory of what had happened ever since Mark’s first arrival at Fern Row. She glanced towards Bill and Penelope, wondering whether they might have

shared Mark's experience of that evening. For she felt, as she read the passage, that it was probably such an evening which had encouraged them to decide on this flight to San Cristobal.

She could barely see Bill and Penelope who seemed alike in their disavowal of danger. The airliner might have travelled with the violence of the weather, and they would not have been disturbed until the worst had happened. She glanced at Mark who was dozing. His hands lay open on his thighs, and his lips had lost their edge. But she wished he were awake to talk about Bill and Penelope and his first visit to Fern Row. She remembered the evening he arrived for Penelope's birthday party. It was not long after Bill had left his job at the BBC. She lived with her uncle in the neighbouring cottage, and now and again she and Bill met at the small public house which had become their favourite village institution. Her uncle never visited the public house, and he had very definite views about strangers who did. Nevertheless, she invited Bill and Penelope to visit the cottage, and her uncle surprised her by showing an immediate affection for his neighbours. It was a triumph for Marcia.

Some months later, during her uncle's absence in Malaya, Mark arrived. He was one of a party of six whom Bill had invited from London. Two of them were Bill's former colleagues, and three were newspaper men. Mark said he had had no certain occupation, but he had been left enough money to keep him for a few years. He was trying at the time to write a book about a three-fingered pirate who was notorious in the West Indies during the first half of the eighteenth century. It was his account of this pirate which had started his acquaintance with Bill. That evening they talked about little except the pirate; and it suddenly struck Marcia, like evidence which she had not suspected, that it was she who had suggested to Penelope that Mark should stay for the weekend.

Marcia looked at the pages on her lap, and it seemed that the diary had reduced the details of that evening. They had merged into one vivid recollection of a particular experience, like the feeling which Mark had described about their holiday in Spain. There were no details to remember. He would return to Fern Row almost every weekend, and there were letters during his absence.

Three months after his departure from London, her uncle

returned to consult Marcia about her plans. He had been made Governor of an important colony which was then at peace with England. It was suggested that Marcia should join him there. She said she had decided to live in London; and since he had always known her to show an unspeakable loathing of London, he asked no questions and returned to his post in a state of bewilderment which had seldom been noticed in Sir Henry Nicholson.

Marcia's eyes fell on the diaries again, and her curiosity was quickened by a reference to Penelope and Bill.

'Shall I concede that I may be a spy and that my activity is a kind of treachery? But my behaviour that evening has never seemed part of my intention, and yet I dare not confess to Penelope and Bill. I fear that they may misinterpret my curiosity, and I do not want either of them to question my loyalty.

'I have just returned from a walk round the village. It is evening, and as I approach the house, I notice the light spread across the back garden. It means that they have left one of the side doors open, and I decide to go through that door and down the passage into the living-room. A window is open, and I can see Bill and Penelope sitting opposite each other. They are probably waiting for me to return. Then we shall eat and go out for a drink. I pause at the window, because it amuses me to watch them, not suspecting that I am there. It is like a child's game of hide-and-seek. I wait at the window, unseen, and suddenly my ears become alert, almost amused like my eyes. I listen for a moment, and as I am about to move, it seems that Penelope's voice has changed. It is earnest and firm, and I become curious.

' "It's the way I feel," Penelope says. "What can we do?"

' "I'm all for trying a new place," Bill replies, "where we can both feel that we're being useful without sacrificing any of the pleasures we've been used to. I don't want to go all over the world justifying causes, whether it's for the unfortunate in Africa or Asia, or wherever they may be..."

' "In a way I am quite happy here at Fern Row," says Penelope, "I make myself useful, and I have got you. But I don't feel I can bear it for a lifetime. It's not so much the other people's unhappiness which troubles me. It's the happiness at Fern Row, just our

life here without relating it to anything. And after you have known what it is to be happy like this, it seems that there is nothing to do but go on being happy. But it makes me want for something else, and it's this waiting which disturbs me."

"Isn't it enough to know that we love each other?" Bill asks her.

'Penelope does not reply and suddenly I discover that I do not want to go. It seems that it is not an inquisitive intention which detains me, but the substance of their talk, for I, too, have been thinking of a change of place, and I begin to believe that since our speculations are now similar, it is not really improper for me to listen. Moreover, I fear that my presence will be an interruption, and it does not seem the right moment for me to intrude. I find myself standing in the passage, unwilling to enter, and suddenly eager to go on listening.

"You mustn't think I'm complaining," Penelope says. "I hope you don't think so."

' "Of course not," Bill says, "and even if you were..."

'They are quiet for a while, and I push my head further forward to observe their attitudes. Penelope's eyes are bright as though she will cry any minute now. But Bill stares at the floor. Now that I see their faces, I seem to feel more acutely the urgency of what they are saying. I make ready to go, but Penelope has spoken again, and I tell myself there must be no interruption. I don't believe my presence in the room will help. It is better to wait until they show some sign of coming to an end.

"Do you want to go on talking?" Penelope asks. "I should hate to be a nuisance."

' "Penelope!"

'It is a kind voice which assures her, and I notice that Bill has leaned forward to take her hand. She seems to regard him with misgiving. Someone emerges whom she does not know so intimately as she has always thought.

"We have loved each other for a long time," she says, "and you know that is not likely to change."

' "Of course."

' "You really understand how I feel..."

"I understand perfectly," says Bill, "but I've never wanted to tell you..."

‘Bill pauses, and Penelope seems to sit up, waiting for something quite unexpected. I think now that I shall go, because it is not their secrets that I want to discover, only the substance of their talk which relates to my own desire for a change of place.

‘“It’s the way I have felt for a long time,” says Bill, “not yesterday.”

‘“But you never showed it,” Penelope says. And again she seems startled, as though Bill has suddenly revealed a self which she has not known.

‘“One survives it,” he says. “Happiness here at Fern Row or anywhere else may not be enough, but you can’t get beyond it. And when you begin to feel like you say, there is very little anyone can do. Happiness becomes a duty which you must bear.”

‘“You mean I shall survive Fern Row by remaining always at Fern Row?”

‘“Not at all,” Bill says, “although, in a way, I could wish that was true.”

‘“Shall we go somewhere else, some other country?”

‘Bill considers her question, and it seems that he has resigned himself to Penelope’s wish. I begin to wonder about their choice, and I begin to think that I must go from the window. This is becoming a secret which I want to avoid hearing.

‘“Anywhere you ask,” says Bill, “but a change of place won’t make any difference if you feel the way you do.”

‘“You don’t mean that we’re likely to separate,” Penelope asks.

‘“It’s out of the question,” says Bill, “but it is possible that...”

‘Suddenly I raise my body from the window, and make a noise in the passage. I do not want to hear anything that does not relate to my feeling about a change of place. They know that I have arrived, but I wait in the passage for a while. Then I enter, trying to avoid their eyes, because I am afraid they have suspected. The room is silent until Penelope shouts for Maisie to set the table.’

Marcia slackened the safety-belt and crossed her legs. One of the pages fell from her lap, and she waited for a while before retrieving it. She glanced at Mark who was asleep, and then at Bill and Penelope who were drinking whisky from the same glass.

The plane was like a slave who knew to perfection his master's need. There was a sense of safety everywhere.

'I wonder why Mark never told me about that evening,' Marcia said quietly. The words had left her mouth like a noise unwilling, without instructions. Then she said in a breath, 'But then he probably didn't want me to know that he was spying.'

He couldn't relate that story without explaining his presence, and it would have been difficult for him to confess that he was spying. And why was Mark spying, she wondered. Spying on Bill and Penelope, of all people. She turned to consider Mark, relaxed in his seat, snoring softly.

There was for Marcia a moment which wiped out her knowledge of everything and everyone, and made her confront Mark like a thing which she had never before encountered. Her gaze was passive like a receptacle which takes in its contents without judgement. She saw him now, for those few moments, as a mirror embraces some reflection. She was an eye poised here, and Mark was an object situated there.

The object penetrated her eye with all its visible qualities: his head almost square in its natural wilderness of bush. His nose shone with sweat, and his skin, which the stubble punctured along his chin, crawled over his bones, staining his face with the bright, hard colour of copper. The lean, brittle fingers came like roots out from his hands. The rest of him was hidden, but her eye had received its assault of copper singing through the wiry wilderness of his hair. And suddenly her eye became a glance, critical and intentional. That moment had gone, and the object was redeemed. It was Mark.

She said, smiling, 'And it's never occurred to me to question whether you really love me. Never.' She found herself watching him as she had done some minutes ago, and wishing, too, that he were awake to talk about the diaries, but the tablets had done their work. 'Just as you say,' she whispered, 'like the weather taking its seasons for granted.'

Her hands fell to the diaries, and the dialogue she had read returned with all its force of revelation and suspicion. What were Penelope and Bill really thinking as they sipped the whisky, passing the glass from one to the other? The pages which were

falling into order under her hands seemed to ask her the question which was gradually forming in her mind: Why were they leaving Fern Row and England? And she thought, too, looking down at Mark's diaries, that she knew the answer. She knew but she could not explain. She understood only for herself; she could not communicate what she understood, just as the dialogue she had just read was at once final and incomplete. It was not a simple business of trying another country, and they were not, for the time being, in search of work. Moreover, they admitted, in a sense, that life at Fern Row was nearly always very happy. They were leaving England because they felt, for some unaccountable reason, that there was somewhere an alternative to Fern Row. San Cristobal was just another place which they had chosen by the accident of their friendship. Mark was going, and since it was the place he belonged to by birth, they had had little difficulty in accepting his suggestion. Also, Bill had been persuaded by his oldest friend, Peter Flagstead, who had settled in San Cristobal. They were ripe for suggestion, and Mark and Flagstead had confirmed that choice.

And why am I leaving? Marcia asked herself. She saw her reason clearly. She was in love with Mark, and she could afford to make the trip. She held the pages up, feeling the feebleness of her own interrogation. Mark was the only one among them whose choice could not be explained or understood in the way she understood Penelope and Bill. She looked at him, feeling an urge to disturb him. She wanted to talk with him, but the plane bumped again, and she remembered his anxiety. She would wait until he was awake. What she knew for certain was that Mark's choice could not be explained by the sentiment of going home. Of all the places he had known, San Cristobal would have been the last he would have thought of as home.

He turned, and Marcia felt his arm rub against her. His eyes half-opened as though he were trying to recognise his surroundings. She held his hand and drew closer to him, and his head leaned on her shoulder.

Then she said in a breath as she had done before: 'Why are you going to San Cristobal, Mark?' And in that gradual fall towards his original sleep he heard the word, and spoke.

‘What about San Cristobal?’

Marcia was surprised by his voice. She said, in a hurry, ‘We’re getting there soon.’

And Mark, slipping deeper into sleep, said, ‘Where?’

Marcia released her hand and continued with the diaries. There was no further mention on this page of that conversation; and Mark, it would seem, had made no notes of what had taken place during the evening. She checked the pages to see whether any were missing, but it seemed that the diaries followed no regular order in time. She had no way of knowing when this conversation had taken place between Bill and Penelope. There must have been a gap of many months because the next item referred to the last party which Penelope and Bill had given at Fern Row.

‘It’s our last weekend in this cottage. But it seems hardly the right time to celebrate, since I shall miss it. Bill looks pleased, and so is their friend Flagstead who has been living in San Cristobal for five years, and whom I have met only twice.

‘The room is crowded with all their friends. The music has just come to an end, slowly like a lid coming down over a box. I have hardly disengaged my arm when Penelope’s friend, Fox, cuddles her shoulder and shepherds her to a corner. It is a natural gesture, very easy and intimate like the voices chattering away through the long, low room. Bill changes the record and walks back to his seat on the sofa. The liquor has lit his eyes with mischief. His hands move wilfully over Maisie, stroking the frilled skirt that finishes abruptly below her knees. I like the way Maisie moves about this room, without the usual restraint of an employee on such occasions. She has never been excluded from a party at Fern Row, and the cottage will never be the same without her.

‘She holds Bill’s hands as though she wants to scold the fingers that are playing with her skirt. Then she drags him up from the sofa, and they waltz into the crowd. The voices have lowered, and the music fills the room.

‘“Aren’t you dancing, Mark?”

‘“Not this one,” I say, and step back quickly to avoid collision with Bill and Maisie who have just completed a hilarious spin which disturbs their balance, and sends them stumbling in my

direction. Maisie is laughing, but Bill has found his legs again, and glides with drunken authority out of the reach of those who cross his path. It is a delight to watch Maisie's face, resting quietly on his shoulder.

'I pour a drink for Flagstead who is not dancing. He swallows it quickly, and wipes a trickle from his chin. The fire has reddened his face, and his hands work rapidly with a handkerchief which he passes round his neck, and down his collar to his chest. He shows no interest in the dance, and I turn to pour another drink.

'“Have you seen Fox?” he asks. His voice is sharp, almost angry.

'“Isn't he dancing?”

'Flagstead looks about the room, but he knows Fox is not there. He turns irritably, and sees his neck with the handkerchief. Bill and Maisie are coming towards us. When they reach, Bill slaps him on the shoulder and tells him to find a girl. And for a while it seems that he has taken this advice. He walks towards the stairs which lead to a small balcony. Actually he has gone in search of Fox. But now I can guess what is happening. Is this the reason for Flagstead's anger? Looking towards the balcony I can see Fox and Penelope barely visible between the bookcase and the wall. It is an awkward moment. Bill and Maisie sail in bliss to the possessive call of the music. Penelope, almost hidden by the bookcase, betrays her presence by a show of arms which swings Fox's head away from her mouth. I wonder where Flagstead has got to, and what is his role in these relations.

'“You haven't seen the madam?” Maisie asks.

'“She has probably gone to bed,” says Bill.

'“Good night, Mr Mark.”

'“Good night, Maisie. Why are you going so soon?”

'“I must be up early,” says Maisie. “Shall I call you?”

'“You needn't bother.”

'“Good night.”

'Bill follows her out of the room, but soon I forget them, because Fox and Flagstead have returned. They are standing in the far corner, facing each other in attitudes of defiance and contempt. No one seems to notice them, but I don't like the look of their faces, and the rapid exchange of words which can hardly be casual. I walk to the end of the room and stand beside Flagstead

whose face is wet. He keeps his hands in his pockets, completely ignoring my intrusion.

‘“What the hell business is it of yours?” says Fox.

‘“You want to know?”

‘“Yes, blast you, I want to know,” Fox answers.

‘“Then, let’s go outside,” Flagstead challenges.

‘He points to the door. Fox brushes past Flagstead who follows close, until I seize his arm, and ask to have a word. Flagstead turns with reluctance, while Fox waits at the door, impatient for a fight. I struggle to say something which might distract Flagstead. Then Bill, ignorant of the issue, enters, and pulls Fox merrily behind him to the bar. This interruption has worked a kind of reprieve, and gradually their tempers subside, like a burst of rain which has suddenly failed.

‘“You wouldn’t want to spoil the party,” I say, holding Flagstead’s arm.

‘“The bastard,” he says, trying to communicate his rage and his disappointment. “I would have crushed the life out of him.”

‘For a moment I feel almost crushed by the malevolence of his voice. He mops his brow, as he looks in the direction of Fox who is now helping Bill to change the records. The music begins, and Fox and Bill walk slowly back to the bar, and I see Penelope hurrying tipsily towards me. She tries to conceal her embarrassment, but Flagstead keeps his glance in the opposite direction, and when she reaches us, he says very quietly, “Good night.” He pockets his hands again, and walks through the door which leads to the passage and the garden. Penelope asks me to dance, and we hold each other close, moving quietly about the corner. I pretend that nothing has happened, but I am lost for words, and I know she is waiting for me to ask her what has happened.

‘“I don’t know what you’re thinking,” she says, “but Flagstead’s behaviour must seem quite strange.”

‘My first impulse is to lie, but it is silly to pretend that there is nothing noticeable about Penelope. I make room between us, and turn my head away.

‘“It seems that he is in love with you,” I say.

‘“He hates Fox,” says Penelope. Her manner is guarded, and nervous.

“Is Fox in love with you, too?”

Penelope lowers her head, and her hands tighten round mine, as though she may be considering the chances she risks in making such an admission. The music seems to isolate our voices, and Penelope comes closer, trying not to restrain the intimacy which she now feels.

“I feel nothing towards Fox,” she says, “and Flagstead has no such interest in me.”

“Why were they going to fight?” I ask.

Penelope starts, and I am afraid that I have said too much. She relaxes her hold, and walks towards a table. I wait for a while, then follow. Penelope sits, wipes the back of her hand against her nose, and looks up at me.

“It’s on Bill’s account that Flagstead behaved the way he did,” she says. “He would have behaved the same way towards you or anyone else.”

“Will he be returning to San Cristobal?”

“He has settled there for good,” says Penelope. She pauses.

“And you think he will hold this evening against you?”

“He is Bill’s closest friend,” says Penelope, “it was he who brought us together.”

I try to avoid any mention of Fox, so I ask Penelope to dance again. We remain at the back of the room, trying to catch the rhythm of the music. Fox has remained with Bill on the sofa.

“I don’t want to bother you with any explanations,” says Penelope.

“There is no need to explain anything,” I say.

“But I really want her to say why she went up the stairs with Fox. I feel a sudden resentment towards Fox who looks quite unconcerned as he talks with Bill. And I wonder, too, whether Penelope is lying about their relationship.

“Does Bill know about Fox?” I ask her.

“There is nothing to know,” says Penelope.

“Then why did you go upstairs to kiss him?” The question makes me feel involved, and I want to apologise.

“Bill would understand if I told him,” she says. “I’m sure he would.”

Penelope looks more assured. She takes a small handkerchief

from her bosom and pats her nose. She adjusts her hair with both hands, then comes towards me, and we dance. My curiosity increases. It makes me almost inquisitive, and I encourage her to go on talking.

“Will you tell Bill about this evening?” I ask.

She hesitates, but it is no longer uncertainty which fails her. She is confident, a little puzzled, perhaps, but self-controlled.

“There is no need to,” she says, “and Bill understands, anyway.”

I am amazed by her words, because I have never thought Bill a cuckold. But I do not believe Penelope is telling the truth about Bill, and I feel that I want to be assured of his place in her affections.

“What would Bill understand?” I ask her.

“Bill understands why I want to leave Fern Row,” she says.

Her voice is resigned as though it is useless to explain anything to me. Perhaps she has noticed my astonishment.

“It might not have happened,” says Penelope, “but if you were with us when we discussed leaving Fern Row, you might understand.”

It is the first time I have heard that evening mentioned, and I do not want to betray my knowledge. Nor do I want her to repeat something that I should not have heard at the time. It seems to me this faked ignorance would be real spying. So I speak as though I was there. But I must have missed some part of their talk, for I do not remember any reference to Fox or anyone else.

“Is it because of Fox that you want to leave Fern Row?”

“We have stopped dancing for a while, and Penelope takes her hand away. I urge her to answer, then she speaks as she turns away.

“Bill can tell you why I want to leave,” she says, then pauses. “But it’s probably part of the reason for going up the stairs with Fox. It’s nothing to do with my desire for him,” she adds, “it’s almost the opposite.”

Then I notice that Penelope has started to cry. There is nothing I can say, because it seems that her meaning belongs entirely to her, and I doubt whether Bill does understand such an explanation. She is quiet, thinking, it seems, about this evening and her behaviour with Fox, and her conversation with Bill.

‘“Shall I pour you a drink?” I ask.

‘It will give me time to recall what I heard her tell Bill that evening, and to make some sense of this strange opposition between her act and her intention. For what I understand seems only a suggestion. It is her happiness at Fern Row which makes her leave, and almost a lack of desire for Fox which seduces her up the stairs.’

When Marcia looked up from the page, considering this incident, she noticed that huge black head turn on its side against the seat. She wanted to draw someone’s attention to it, but Mark was asleep and she did not think it a good reason for disturbing him. Her eyes caught Bill and Penelope close and quiet on the other side, and then she heard the boy in front tell his grandmother about the naked head which had emerged another inch above the seat. It seemed that the man was getting restless.

But the incident at Fern Row recalled her attention. She wondered what Bill and Penelope were thinking which neither could guess. Penelope was always emphatic about her loyalty to Bill, and Mark’s account of the party confirmed this. For she felt no special interest in Fox, and there was never any question of seeing him as an alternative to Bill. There was no danger of disloyalty, and her dissatisfaction with life at Fern Row was no reflection on her marriage. In its way Fern Row was perfect.

Then why this meaningless behaviour with Fox? she asked herself. It seemed that this incident, like Penelope’s decision to leave Fern Row, existed without reference to any logic of thinking or feeling. Or the feeling was too vague for anyone but Penelope to understand. It had occurred; that was all. She felt that there was something disturbing about Penelope’s behaviour, which could not be related to any particular source of motive or ambition. In a way this absence of motive was equally true of her relation to Mark. But hers made for a feeling which was clear and vivid. It seized her and found its fulfilment in her relationship with Mark. And it was part of her duty to keep it alive. But Penelope’s choice seemed like a denial of the pleasure she had known, even with Bill. And yet she needed Bill.

The plane bumped, and Marcia saw the strange black head

shudder. The boy was telling his grandmother about it again. The airliner groaned angrily at the jeering mass of cloud, and sleep was gradually losing its hold on Mark. Marcia settled the pages, and nestled against his side, waiting for the airliner to recover its calm.

2

Penelope was polishing the pink glass beads which made a pattern of islands over her skirt. She raised her head and looked over the seat to see what Mark and Marcia were doing. Then she turned to Bill and held his hand.

‘You should see them now,’ she said, ‘they make you feel old sometimes.’

‘Mark is probably trying to sleep,’ said Bill, ‘he gets so terrified.’

‘But I think Marcia brought the tablets,’ Penelope said.

She raised her head again and looked to see whether Mark was sleeping, but she could only glimpse Marcia’s head leaning on his shoulder. Bill moved closer to her, and she let her face rest on his shoulder.

‘You remember that evening on the island,’ Penelope said, ‘the evening they fell into the sea.’

‘They frightened the life out of me,’ said Bill.

He paused considering the incident which Penelope had mentioned. The sun had set late that evening and the sea was red. He and Penelope were lying on the pebbles where a huge brown rock leaned like a jaw over the sea. Mark had come running over the precipice, dragging Marcia like an exhausted poodle behind. She stumbled at the edge of the rock and they both plunged into the water.

‘They were such a long time surfacing,’ Bill said, ‘I couldn’t think where they had got to.’

‘He nearly drowned her,’ Penelope said.

Bill nodded but he did not speak. He had remembered the expression of terror on Marcia’s face when she waded up the shore and stood trying to vomit the water she had swallowed.

Marcia was angry when she recovered, and there was a quarrel. Mark accepted the blame for what had happened, but after he had seen Marcia safe on the shore he seemed to behave as though nothing had happened.

‘But it was almost a joy to see them quarrelling,’ said Penelope.

‘I remember,’ said Bill.

They had crawled up the pebbles, and Penelope remembered how the four of them lay there, and the sun, large as the sea, seemed to marvel at their silence.

‘I would have liked her uncle to see them,’ said Bill, ‘something might have softened in the old blimp’s heart.’

‘It is probably too late for that,’ said Penelope, ‘and it doesn’t matter anyway because Marcia has found what she wants, and Mark couldn’t care less about Sir Harold.’

They looked out at the clouds turning somersaults round the airliner’s wing, and tried to follow them until they dispersed and vanished out of sight. In the distance the clouds had formed a range of mountains which the air was slaughtering into separate peaks. They looked firm and fixed like an enormous wave that had suddenly halted and hardened into ice. The view had guided their thinking towards the sky.

‘One sees all sorts of things at this height,’ Bill said, ‘and all sorts of fancies enter your mind.’

‘Look there,’ said Penelope, pointing to the shape of a head, ‘a real lion, all white and fluffy.’

‘I was thinking of children,’ said Bill, ‘and fairies and harmless ghosts walking idly towards the sky. One believes it is almost possible.’

Penelope was thinking again of their trip to the Mediterranean, and the afternoon they had described. It had become her standard for comparing different sensations of delight.

‘Do you envy Mark?’ Penelope asked. Bill did not answer, because he was staring idly at the clouds.

‘Do you?’ Penelope said again, and Bill jerked his head round and stared at her.

‘What are you talking about?’

‘I mean in a nice way,’ Penelope said, ‘you can envy people in a nice way.’

‘Why should I envy Mark in any way?’ Bill said. ‘Why should I?’

‘I mean in a nice way,’ Penelope repeated, ‘like I envy Marcia her cheeks.’ Penelope laughed.

Bill slapped her gently on her leg, and turned to look at the clouds.

‘You mean whether I should prefer to be Mark’s colour?’

‘No, that’s different,’ said Penelope, ‘I mean something silly, like not having to use make-up.’

Bill turned to look in the direction of Mark and Marcia, but they were hidden. Penelope reminded him that it was unnecessary to check his memory. He had always remarked on Marcia’s natural colour. That was true. Her cheeks were a natural pink like her lips.

‘You know what I mean,’ Penelope insisted. ‘Many a woman would give anything for some natural colour. I would. That’s all I mean.’

Bill was turning his head indolently from the window towards Penelope. ‘Do you think Mark envies me my natural colour?’

‘Of course not,’ Penelope said. ‘You don’t understand me.’

Bill paused, spying the bottle to see whether there was any whisky left. Penelope drained it clean, and took a sip before returning the glass to him.

‘Mark does seem a little strange sometimes,’ he said.

‘In what way?’ Penelope seemed apprehensive. Was Bill going to say something that she had never heard? She pressed him to finish the whisky. They covered the bottle with the glass, and Bill placed them between his legs. Penelope elbowed him.

‘In what way is Mark strange?’ She was excessively curious.

‘I don’t mean anything serious,’ Bill said, ‘like you and the make-up.’

‘I know, but what do you mean?’

‘Sometimes he seems so private,’ Bill said. ‘That’s all.’

‘Yes,’ Penelope said, and stopped.

‘If you didn’t know him well, you’d think he was hiding something.’ Bill eased round in his seat and let his leg slide the bottle flat on to the floor.

‘Yes,’ Penelope said again, ‘I’ve felt that too, I mean the

privacy.’ She paused, waiting for Bill to speak. Then she said: ‘But it’s probably because he’s so warm most of the time, that his silence makes you think something is wrong.’

‘I never think anything particular is wrong,’ Bill said. ‘It’s just that his silence seems sometimes to be worse than secrecy, as though you’re really shut out, not excluded from some secret, but just shut right out, absolutely shut out, from Mark himself.’

‘Has Marcia ever told you that?’ Penelope asked.

‘Of course not,’ Bill said. ‘Has she ever told you?’

Penelope was quiet, then she bent to retrieve the glass which had fallen off the bottle and was rolling under another passenger’s seat.

‘Once, a long time ago, she mentioned it.’ Penelope turned to get a view of Mark who was slouching out of sight. ‘But it doesn’t make him any less friendly, does it?’

Bill did not reply. He was following his own line of thought. ‘You know,’ he said, ‘Mark once told me something very odd.’

‘What about?’

‘Nothing much,’ said Bill, ‘but he made it sound so strange.’

‘What happened?’ Penelope asked.

‘They were just walking,’ said Bill, ‘and you know Marcia’s passion for Christmas trees. Well, Mark said he saw a very large one beautifully lit, and he noticed that Marcia was looking in the other direction, but he never drew her attention to it.’

‘Obviously he got lost in the thing himself,’ said Penelope.

‘No, no,’ said Bill, ‘that’s exactly what he tried to explain. His first thought was to show Marcia. He knew she was looking elsewhere, but he made no attempt to distract her while he argued with himself, looking back all the while at the house where he had seen it.’

‘But why didn’t he tell her?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Bill, ‘but he just kept arguing with himself that he ought to show her before it was too late.’

‘It seems very strange,’ said Penelope.

‘All he remembered was a sudden confusion when Marcia jerked him round and asked what he was looking at.’

‘And didn’t he say?’

‘She didn’t believe him,’ Bill said.

‘That he had seen the tree?’

‘Mark said he wasn’t looking at anything.’

Penelope stared through the window, only half believing him.

‘Are you making this up, Bill?’

‘Not at all,’ said Bill, ‘that’s exactly why he told me. He said he couldn’t for the life of him understand why he had lied.’

‘How very strange,’ said Penelope, ‘he didn’t want to tell her.’

‘Or he didn’t like having to do so,’ said Bill. ‘I don’t know.’

Penelope was quiet, thinking of the incident which Mark had related to Bill. She wondered whether he had ever told Marcia about it, and suddenly, as though she had perceived some flaw in their relationship, she was thinking about Marcia’s uncle. He was less than thirty years their senior, and already he had become a fossil in their understanding.

‘I wonder what he will do now,’ said Bill.

‘What the devil can anyone do about two people who love each other.’

‘I mean Mark,’ said Bill. ‘He has lived away from San Cristobal for twenty years and he was never really at home in England.’

‘I suppose they will get married.’

‘But you’ve got to have a home somewhere,’ said Bill, ‘and that means having some sort of work.’

‘But he can always get a job,’ Penelope said. ‘If his money is coming to an end, there should be some kind of job in San Cristobal.’

‘A job is not enough,’ said Bill, ‘a man like Mark needs more than a job. He has to have work. You remember what he told the people in the San Cristobal section of the BBC. They walk in and out of a studio the same way they walk in and out of the lavatory. They talk because they have to eat just as they shit because they have eaten. And he really meant it.’

‘And if he doesn’t find this work in San Cristobal,’ Penelope said. She was going to continue, but Bill had already spoken.

‘I believe it’s the only place he will find it,’ he said.

The airliner was still cheating the weather. It gave the passengers the feeling that its movement proceeded in a series of circles. The clouds had made a spectacle of waves frozen stiff, precipitous and immobile as far as the eye could see. The flight had not been

very smooth, and the sudden interruptions of weather had created a certain suspense and impatience.

'You mustn't point, Rowley,' the woman said, and Marcia looked up to see what had attracted the boy's attention. Rowley lodged his finger in his mouth, while he stared at the naked head which came up like an enormous vegetable over the seat. But the boy could not resist his curiosity. And Marcia understood. Her interest had turned to a kind of awe as she looked at the man's head. She could see one ear like a loop of flesh untidily tucked onto the side of his face. His neck was hidden by the seat. The man never shifted, and his head remained motionless but for an occasional shudder like the throb of the airliner. She wished Mark were awake to see it. His skull was smooth and brilliant as though it had been scraped and polished like a bone taken from the sea, and she got the feeling that a stone let down gently on the top would have caused it to crack like glass. An authority of silence surrounded it in that calm and suspended pose.

'Granny, it's like his brain will walk out any minute,' the boy said.

'You must be quiet,' the woman said.

Rowley held his head down and spoke in a whisper. Marcia looked towards Bill and Penelope who were staring at that huge black head which crowned the seat. Then the airliner stopped, churned the clouds and rose again. There was no signal to fasten the belts, but the atmosphere had turned heavy with expectation and surprise. No one understood what had happened.

3

Mark was awake. Marcia stopped reading. Bill watched the conduct of the clouds. Rowley sweated. His grandmother crossed her hands. Penelope put a pill under her tongue and felt the dissolution sail her throat. The hostess hoisted her cap. A man said, 'Scotch.' A whispering chorus commended the weather. The light was firm, but the sudden absence of sound was dark, dark and dangerous; an unreliable neutrality, a cold quiet which

made no clear prediction. The silence was a sieve which let peace through. Mark coughed. Rowley hiccupped. His grandmother censored a sneeze. Bill watched the weather. Penelope pinched her ear. Marcia said in a whisper, 'Mark.' But Mark would not hear. He asked his eyes to shut everything out. This was the moment his habit had predicted... 'remember the faces of those who died...'

'Please, Rowley, be quiet.'

'Granny,' the boy cried, 'I'm afraid. It frightens me, honest, it does.'

'Don't look, darling, that will help.'

'Please, Granny, please.'

'It is nothing, darling, believe me.'

'I cannot, I cannot.'

The sob had strangled his voice, and his neck convulsed in terror under her arm.

'What do you say about that, Mark?'

Mark pretended to be distracted by the airliner's wing.

'Will it really be all right?' the boy implored.

'It can't be a joke, Mark, it really can't,' Marcia insisted.

Mark would not answer. Like Rowley's grandmother, he was trying to avoid a conviction. It would have been disastrous to feel sure. He begged his eyes not to see. He resisted Marcia's hand and looked over at Rowley. The boy's body shook in his grandmother's arms, firm and ineffectual in their caress.

'Tell him to stop,' the boy cried, 'please, tell him.'

'It is terrifying,' Marcia said. 'Where is the hostess?'

Marcia caught Penelope's head, turning to confirm their fear. She brought the diaries to her face and hid her eyes.

'He is getting up,' Mark said quietly.

'Mark, darling.'

'It would be better not to look,' Mark said.

'Mark.'

'Hold my hand,' said Mark, 'and look at me.'

The enormous black skull which had been wagging from side to side like a clock's dull tongue rose gradually, showing its heavy thick neck, and the ample shoulders that sloped abruptly into arms.

'He is standing,' Rowley said. 'Granny, why did he get up?'

'Someone should do something,' Marcia said.

'He is turning,' Mark said. 'Just hold my hand, Marcia, and look away.'

'It doesn't help, darling.'

'Granny, please, Granny.'

'Try a sweet,' the woman said.

The man turned slowly, ignoring his neighbours, his hands falling stolidly down his sides, and his massive ears twitching under the naked dome of skull. He stood heavy and still, staring vacantly over the heads of those who immediately confronted him. His presence made the air thick with confusion.

'Whatever does he want?' Marcia said.

'Granny,' the boy cried, 'what will he do?'

No one knew what words would make for an adequate consolation. There were scurrying whispers of enquiry at the back, but no voice dared the silent, towering authority of that figure. He remained standing, heavy, square, and certain, feeling his ears twitch, and his fingers scrape lightly the even rim of his coat.

'There's the hostess,' Marcia said.

'What will she do?' the boy said.

'Don't worry, darling,' his grandmother said. 'Take my hand.'

'His lips are moving,' Marcia said.

'The hostess is smiling,' the boy said. But his voice cracked when he noticed the hostess's face change colour and her hands behind her back trembled. The man was repeating his request.

'Did you say fire?' the hostess said.

'To fire a pee,' the man said. His voice was solid and certain.

'My bladder is boiling,' he added, and his fingers crawled with a furtive and meticulous caution between the buttons that kept his fly.

The hostess dropped her head, and turned her back, pointing in the opposite direction to the toilet. Everyone pretended not to notice when he passed, following her direction, mumbling to himself, 'It is full to the top. Full, full, full.'

But in those moments of uncertain animation, the airliner had travelled with incomparable ease. The weather waited its approach with a soft and solicitous welcome. The winds had wandered amiably in favour of its course. The clouds had left

the way clear. And nothing now changed. The storm had retreated.

The airliner paraded the miracle of its comfort, calm and unfelt. The hostess had restored herself to her role, but there was a more obvious emphasis on her assurance. She carried her magnificent figure with control. She leaned expertly to console someone, and the split of her skirt parted to show her marvellous calf. She had touched up her cheeks and brightened her lashes, but her eyes remained suspicious. She was performing in the interest of her passengers who had to be reminded that nothing disastrous could ever occur during this flight. Graceful and endearing in this prescribed deportment, she was now at war with the restraint which sullied her work. Her duty was in danger, for it was her responsibility to ensure the safety and peace of everyone's feelings. She checked the names on her list, and waited with a patient and impossible dignity for the man who had asked her the way to the toilet. She wanted specially to receive him when he appeared, so that she might lead him back to his seat and prove a courage which she knew it was hard for anyone to believe.

'Mr Shephard was just a bit disturbed,' she said, patting Penelope on her shoulder. 'It's probably his first experience in the air.'

She moved along the carpeted passage nearer the toilet, rolling the list between her hands, and smiling with a secret, conspiratorial intimacy at those who met her glance.

'It would be an awkward situation,' Bill said, 'very awkward, indeed.'

'You mean for the hostess?' Penelope was hesitant and curious.

'For everyone,' Bill said.

'No one is with him,' Penelope said. 'Of course, he might have had too much to drink.'

'You never can tell,' Bill said. 'He looked quite sinister.'

'I thought so too. But would he dare disturb...'

'Could you see very well from here?'

'Not really,' Penelope said, 'but no one served drinks to that row.'

'He is alone, I think.'

‘Are you worried, Bill?’

‘I think so. Perhaps you might see what the others are doing.’

‘Mark is pretending not to notice anything,’ Penelope said, ‘but the little boy in front of them is scared, and that would upset Marcia.’

‘Is there another toilet?’ Bill asked.

‘Couldn’t you wait until he came out?’

‘I would prefer not to see him,’ Bill said.

‘You are afraid, Bill.’

‘For a moment I thought I was,’ Bill said, ‘but it seems all right now.’

‘I think she is terrified,’ Penelope said, indicating the hostess.

‘She is doing very well,’ Bill said. ‘I would have thought it safer to be out of the way.’

Bill turned his head and looked outside and watched the sky, distant and grey, make its enormous curve ahead of the airliner. The sun had spread a little light thinly on the spreading arc of the sky, and it was a relief to see the airliner race through the elusive haze. It made him feel they were arriving somewhere very soon. Penelope rested her head on his arm and tried to share the view.

Softly, without a shudder, the airliner sailed. Its calm made a mockery of their discomfort, for their nerves were roaring the possibility of the man’s return from the toilet. And their fear was loud.

‘Is he still in the toilet, Granny?’

‘Be quiet, Rowley, and don’t worry.’

‘You saw where he put his hands, like a little boy asking to pass water.’

‘I didn’t notice, Rowley,’ she said, ‘try another sweet.’

‘I couldn’t eat it, not until I was sure nothing will happen.’

‘I’m sure,’ she said. ‘No one else is afraid.’

‘I hope he stays in the toilet, don’t you?’

‘Put your head here, darling,’ she said, offering her arm, and drawing him closer to her.

‘I don’t think he is going to come out, Granny, it doesn’t seem so.’

Behind him, he could hear the crumple of paper which Mark

and Marcia were putting away. The boy rested his head and listened till the noise of the sheets was unheard.

'He has certainly been in a long time,' Marcia said, looking towards the toilet.

It was the voice which shook them, a sudden and soulful tremor of confession and prayer. The hostess shivered in retreat, bouncing her smooth round rump against a passenger's shoulder.

'There he comes,' said Rowley in tears. But his voice was lost in the great cavern of sound which rolled from Mr Shephard's throat:

*I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter... laughter...*

The words were spoken from a depth of torture and delight, and his face, like a lost piece of night carving its image upon the afternoon, was the face of a fugitive who had meandered through all weathers to a season of insanity. A red rage coaxed his eyes from their sockets, and the words churned his passion to a fury which now separated him from the memory of himself. Some animal of the air, more fantastic than beasts or birds of the familiar earth, inhabited his brain and romped with the words which had made subversion among his senses. All sense had gone away, and the music that mastered his mouth had flattered him into a recognition of himself as a poet whose lunatic contagion could not evoke pity or pardon from the passengers. They watched aghast when Shephard thrust his hands out as though he wanted to seize the rhythms which his memory had exploded.

*I sought no more that after which I strayed
In face of man or maid;
But still within the little children's eyes
Seems something, something that replies;
They at least are for me, surely for me!
I turned me to them very wistfully;
But, just as their young eyes grew sudden fair*

*With dawning answers there,
Their angel plucked them from me by the hair...*

They looked at him, incapable of pardon just as their blame would have been a poor reply to his performance. And during each interval, as he waited for the words to work his tongue, they were suddenly reminded of their possible ruin. Suppose! Suppose! Supposing this man in a mad fantasy of power decided to take over from the pilot. Their faces made a unanimous supposition of disaster, and it was then they seemed to realise the evil rejection of the air. Escape was inconceivable. They were caught at an altitude where any choice was a wasteful proposition. But now it was the harmless power of ordered speech which held Shephard captive.

*I am defenceless utterly.
I slept, methinks, and woke,
And, slowly gazing, find me stripped in sleep.
In the rash lustihead of my young powers,
I shook the pillaring hours
And pulled my life upon me; grimed with smears
I stand amid the dust o' the mounded years.*

There was a pause, much longer than the interval which preceded each intonation of verse, and then a general sigh was felt, like a lurch of the airliner, when he seemed to fall back into his seat, overcome with exhaustion.

The attendants crowded round him, agile and indulgent, brimming over with a forced and false encouragement. It was nothing very serious. The captain suggested a shot of brandy, and the hostess who might have anticipated the order was ready at his word. They slipped the glass between his lips, and let the liquor dribble down his throat. Shephard wriggled in his seat, and opened his eyes, regarding them ungratefully. It was an astonishing response to their indulgence. His roving eyes rebuked their attentions, and his hands, trembling with rage, signalled their immediate dismissal. The hostess was the first to explain the misunderstanding, but the captain intervened, and Shephard was suddenly smitten by a need to defend himself. He sat erect, fierce

and resistant to their concern, a man whose solitude had been rebuked by their presence.

‘I beg your pardon, sir...’

‘My pardon is beyond your begging,’ Shephard snapped, and the language of verse was still fresh on his tongue. It was appropriate to his excitement.

‘I was trying to explain, sir...’

‘Beyond, beyond, beyond,’ he raved, ‘beyond any manner of meaning you can make. Let me be by Grace of God, or the power of my arm, let me be.’

The hostess tried to smile her way into his affections, but it was too late for words. He turned a malevolent eye on her.

‘Your waist has made many a man weep,’ he said, softly, like a gentle croon. And then his manner roughened, and the hostess stepped back, humiliated by his words: ‘You are the odour of your underwear.’

The captain disappeared in the cockpit, and Shephard’s sense of danger increased, and that was itself a great danger. He would not trust anyone’s absence at this stage. He stood, making impatient gestures in the air, a man who had suddenly felt his authority slip. Defence was the word and the deed which would undo them in his mind. The captain, who was returning from the cockpit, was cut short by a scream. Rowley had screamed, and it seemed the end for everyone. Shephard held two pistols cocked, most carefully cocked, and anxious for action.

‘Now take your seats, every one of you, be seated.’ His voice was firm and cruel. It was an incredible return of sanity which had made him place himself so that there could be no attack from the back. It was the airliner against an armed man of uncertain and perplexed mind. The marvellous incantation of the verse and the assured control of the triggers were two worlds which met in the same chaos. Everyone was seated.

‘And I swear now,’ Shephard said, ‘as a man who is not given to grossness will swear, that if you, meaning any of you, move in a wrong manner, in word or deed move mean with me, you can say your prayers. Without a word on your part, and in a matter of moments. And you must not lie. Remember, above all else, remember, you must not lie. For that poet, my poet, me, John

Isaac Shephard, picturing that pursuit that is darker than your likely death, claimed no need to diminish the truth.'

His eyes rolled to the gentle balance of his head and they thought his attention had strayed as he intoned:

*Now of that long pursuit
Comes on at hand the bruit;
That Voice is round me like a bursting sea:
'And is thy earth so marred,
Shattered in shard on shard?
Lo, all things fly thee, for thou fliest Me!
Strange, piteous, futile thing,
Wherefore should any set thee love apart?'*

He stammered another line, but his voice was inaudible, and it seemed that his memory had now failed him completely. He looked around him as though he understood what was happening. He could feel power like the pistols in his hand, and he embarked upon a curious game of enquiry. He ordered the passengers to stand, as he indicated, and state the purpose of their flight. Without the pistols he might have seemed very comic, but now his occasional insistence on certain details added to their sense of danger. They were beginning to feel embarrassment. The captain tried to show his disapproval, but he was fearfully reminded that any action might be dangerous. Shephard had started the investigation.

'Going on business, if you please.'

'Just a holiday, Sir.'

'To see my family.'

'I have always wanted to see the beautiful island.'

'On the doctor's orders.'

Shephard suddenly indicated a halt.

'Are you tubercular, lady, tell me the truth.' The woman shrieked and fainted on her neighbour's shoulder. But Shephard seemed unaware of what had happened. 'Let us continue,' he said sharply.

'My brother is dying.'

'Are you happy?' he asked, fixing the man with a malicious look.

'Happy?' the man said, bewildered.

‘Never mind, never mind,’ Shephard said. ‘Next.’

‘I need a change.’

‘A change of what?’ he asked quickly.

‘My husband thinks I ought to have a change of air,’ the woman said feebly.

Shephard thought he heard someone giggle, but it was the boy, Rowley, stifling his fear.

‘Your husband thinks you need a change,’ Shephard said sadly. He regarded the woman with a fierce and passionate show of scorn. ‘I know,’ he said, his voice low and heavy with contempt. ‘You have unmanned him, eh? I know the meaning of a woman’s need for change. You have unmanned him, I know, but you’ll pay for it. All over the world, the sperm is running dry. The vultures have sucked our sex. Sucked it up all, clean, clean.’ He paused to revive his scorn: ‘She says she needs a change.’

‘Next, what’s your business?’ But he did not hear what was said, for he was still thinking of the other woman, whispering to himself: ‘Even in my island, she’ll wear the weapons out.’

‘My granny is taking me, sir.’

That was Rowley, standing erect, trying to control the shake of his little hands. But it was hardly necessary. Shephard’s manner softened. He seemed to like the boy, and for a brief moment he smiled. Rowley’s grandmother smiled back, but Shephard was not to be taken in by that. His attention was exclusively for Rowley.

‘You have a good, sensible face,’ he said, ‘courageous and strong. That is good.’ Rowley did not seem to make much sense of what he was saying, but it did not matter. Shephard was lured by his own need to speak. ‘I hope you shall escape the poison of your forbears’ breeding,’ he said. ‘Of course, I prefer little girls your age, with your nice manners. I really prefer them until the mirror draws their attention to themselves. Sit down, my son, I shan’t harm you.’ Rowley sat, crouching against his grandmother, while Shephard, watching the pistols, intoned, ‘Mirrors, it is the mirror which has mopped up all our moisture. What a pity, the mirrors.’

‘Next, what’s your nationality?’

‘I’m English,’ the man said. He had a silly animal’s grin as he spoke, and Shephard seemed displeased.

'English,' he said regretfully. 'Where were you born?'

'Actually,' the man said, picking his nose.

Shephard interrupted brutally. 'Are you lying?'

'No sir,' the man said. He was hardly audible. 'I was born in Australia, but I left at an early age.'

'Australia,' Shephard murmured. 'It is a sad civilisation which starts with rabbits and rogues. Cricket is about all they're good for, and talking about developing the country.' The sweat was making wrinkles on his face. He looked angry and hateful, and beckoned the man disdainfully to sit. 'All this human dreg trying to start afresh,' he whispered, as though talking to himself. 'The new country people, Australians, Canadians, South Africans, dregs, dregs, dregs, developing the country, and the land of the future. The land of the future my foot. Just scum, comfortable scum.' He paused for breath.

'Next, hurry up, next.'

This sudden irritation had increased their restlessness. For a while they seemed slightly numbed by his talk, and they were relieved by his apparent lack of violence. But whenever he showed such irritation, his eyes rolled, and his hands trembled, and everyone expected the worst.

'You, yes you, come forward,' he said, pointing at Penelope. Mark and Marcia were cold, and Bill raised his body timidly from the seat. But he dared not interrupt.

'Ignore the hostess,' Shephard ordered. 'She is only a servant.'

Penelope stood in front of him, white and frail, watching the pistols. The moments seemed to lag, and everyone's fear was heavy. 'But you,' Shephard said. 'You are beautiful, and that is why, that's the reason...' He was stammering for breath, and Bill hoped despairingly there would not be an accident. The captain was squatting in his seat. 'I should like to see you in another form.' Shephard's voice had regained control, soft and firm and spiteful.

'Cactus, yes, cactus, I'd love to see cactus flowering from your hair and clinging only to your nipples. Your nipples are pink, I know, the ones that poison and never give milk. Let the cactus hang there weighing you down, and maggots crowd your mouth, carrying your lips off clean with their crawling, and crowd your mouth, marching to and fro through the perforated flesh up to

your eyeballs, pestering them, but leaving your vision clear, for the mirror, that is, and causing you only an endless itch in the eye. I should leave your legs in all their natural lechery, but I'd have fat snails, out of their shells, slide plentifully into your womb, leaving you heavy and full with a lasting slime.'

Penelope shrieked with tears, but Shephard, fierce and unrelenting, tried to think of every malediction that would torture. They had not before seen such hate in his eyes.

'Yes,' he said, and his voice was gradually acquiring its customary intonation, 'I would rejoice to see you ugly. Ugly, ugly, ugly. You beautiful bitch.' He brushed the sweat from his brow and shoved her back. 'Bitch,' he muttered irritably, 'the bitch, like the other bitch I remember... I remember...'

Penelope fell into her seat, hardly conscious of Bill's hand pressing against her. Her heart was pounding and her lips twitched, and there was no feeling at all left in her. There was nothing Bill could do, but whisper a little cheer and press her lovingly to him.

Shephard's shirt had stuck like leather to his skin, and he could feel the sweat make rain down his face. His head shone black like glass in the night. His eye had caught a shadow of land, and they saw him smile. The pistols leaned downwards as he widened his smile; and suddenly he spread his hands out again as though he wanted to fly. He held one pistol aimed at the window where he had seen land, and they saw his lips move slowly, heavily, with sound.

'San Cristobal, San Cristobal,' he intoned. 'You let rumour argue against reason in a voyage to San Cristobal which every race has reached and where the sea is silver and the mountains climb to the moon. You do not know San Cristobal, coming up by accident one morning from water, the tiny skull of a mountain top which was once asleep under the sea. Here Africa and India shake hands with China, and Europe wrinkles like a brow begging every face to promise love. The past is all suspicion, now is an argument that will not end, and tomorrow for San Cristobal, tomorrow is like the air in your hand. I know San Cristobal. It is mine, me, divided in a harmony that still pursues all its separate parts. No new country, but an old old land inhabiting new forms of men who can never resurrect their roots and do not know their

nature. Colour is their old and only alphabet. The whites are turning whiter, and the blacks are like an instinct which some voice, my voice, shall exercise. San Cristobal so old and yet so new, no place, this land, but a promise. My promise, and perhaps yours too...'

His reverie of San Cristobal had relaxed their fear, but suddenly he paused, looking at Marcia and Mark, and it seemed that he would begin again his earlier interrogations. His glance lingered on Mark who turned his head away. But Shephard had come to an end. He leaned forward, and his lips began to beat like a clown's, and his head rocked slowly into his shoulders. It seemed the moment for the captain to intervene. The pistols had fallen to the floor, and it looked as though a fit had seized his body, bending it forward. His teeth were set, and his legs were stiff. The captain and the hostess stooped over him, regarding his seizure with pity and contempt. But it was difficult for the passengers to follow the progress of his limbs. The airliner was stooping cautiously, and suddenly it bumped and rolled, making a proud circle across the land, which lay below them, incredibly patient and loyal after every hazardous survival.