

Mrs Fitzhubert at the breakfast table looked out on to the mist-shrouded garden and decided to instruct the maids to begin putting away the chintzes preparatory to the move to velvet and lace in Toorak.

'This ham is distinctly over-cooked,' said the Colonel.

'Where the deuce has Mike got to?'

'He asked for some coffee in his room. You must admit those two are ideally suited.'

'Positively ragged at the knuckle! Who?'

'Michael and Irma Leopold, of course.'

'Suited for what? Reproduction of the species?'

'There's no need to be vulgar. I saw them going down to the lake yesterday . . . Have you no heart?'

'What the devil's my heart got to do with overdone ham?'

'Oh, bother the ham! Can't you understand, I'm trying to tell you that our little heiress is coming to lunch today!'

For the Fitzhuberts, the punctual appearance of the delicious meals borne on enormous trays to the dining-room was a sacred ritual, serving to define and regulate their idle otherwise formless days. Simultaneously with the striking by the parlourmaid of an Indian gong in the hall, a sort of gastronomical timepiece located in the Fitzhubert stomach would inwardly proclaim the hour. 'I shall take a short nap after lunch my dear . . . We shall be having tea on the verandah at a quarter past four . . . Tell Albert to bring round the dog-cart at five.'

Luncheon at Lake View was at one o'clock sharp. Irma, warned by the nephew that unpunctuality was a cardinal sin in a visitor, smoothed out her crimson sash in the porch and glanced at her tiny diamond watch. The mist had cleared at last to a sultry yellow light in which the rambling façade of the villa under its mantle of Virginia creeper seemed strangely unreal. As Mike was nowhere in sight, she made her way to a less forbidding entrance on a side verandah. The bell brought a parlourmaid from a dark tiled passage where a sorrowful moose's head presided above a miscellany of hats, caps, coats, tennis racquets, umbrellas, fly veils, solar topees and walking sticks. In the drawing-room overlooking the lake the very air seemed pink, heavy with the scent of La France roses in silver vases. Flanked by yesterday's pink satin cushions, Mrs Fitzhubert rose to greet her guest from a little pink sofa. 'The men will

be here directly. Here comes my husband now, walking straight into the hall with clay from the rose garden all over his boots.'

Irma, who had seen sunset on the Matterhorn and moonlight on the Taj-Mahal, truthfully exclaimed that Colonel Fitzhubert's garden was quite the loveliest she had ever seen.

'Clay is very difficult to remove from a good carpet,' Mrs Fitzhubert said. 'Wait till you have one of your own, my dear.' The girl was certainly a beauty and wore her deceptively simple frock with an air. The Leghorn hat with the crimson ribbons was probably Paris. 'My mama had two – the first was French.'

'Aubusson?' Mrs Fitzhubert enquired.

Oh, Heavens! If only Mike would come! 'I mean husbands – not carpets . . .' Mrs Fitzhubert was not amused. 'The Colonel used to tell me in India that a really good carpet is the best investment after diamonds.'

'Mama always says you can judge a man's taste pretty well by his choice of jewellery. My papa is quite an expert on emeralds.' The older woman's neat little faded mouth had fallen open. 'Indeed?' There was simply nothing else to be said and both ladies looked hopefully towards the door. It opened to admit the Colonel followed by two ancient slobbering spaniels.

'Down dogs! Down! I forbid you to lick this young lady's lily white hand. Ha! Ha! Fond of dogs, Miss Leopold? My nephew tells me these brutes are too fat – where is Michael?' Mrs Fitzhubert's eyes swept the ceiling as if the nephew might conceivably be concealed in the pelmet

drapes or hanging head downwards from the chandelier. 'He knows perfectly well we lunch at one.'

'He mentioned something last night about a stroll up to the Pine Forest – but that's no excuse for being late the very first time Miss Leopold comes to luncheon,' said the Colonel turning a glassy blue stare on the visitor and automatically registering the emeralds on the slender wrist. 'You'll just have to put up with us two old fogies. No other guests I'm sorry to say. At the Calcutta Club eight was always considered the perfect number for a small luncheon party.'

'Fortunately we are not lunching off those detestable Indian chickens,' said his wife. 'Colonel Sprack kindly sent us over some mountain trout from Government Cottage last night.' The Colonel looked at his watch. 'We won't wait for that young scapegrace or the fish will be ruined. I hope you like grilled trout, Miss Leopold?' Irma obligingly adored grilled trout and even knew about the right sauces. The Colonel thought that damned idiot Mike would be lucky if he landed the little heiress. Why the devil didn't Mike turn up?

A shared appreciation of the trout's delicate flavour could hardly be expected to keep a three-handed conversation going throughout the long leisurely meal. Mike's place was presently removed from the table. An uneasy silence accompanied the mousse of tongue despite the host's monologues on rose growing and the outrageous ingratitude of the Boers towards Our Gracious Queen. The two ladies discussed with desperate animation the Royal Family, the bottling of fruit – to Irma the most boring of

CLASS

mysteries – and as a last resort, music. Mrs Fitzhubert's younger sister played the piano, Irma the guitar, 'with coloured streamers and those divine gypsy songs.' As soon as coffee was served the host lit a cigar and left the ladies marooned on the pink sofa behind the carved Indian table. Beyond the French windows Irma could just see the lake, leaden under a sombre sky. The drawing-room had grown uncomfortably warm, with Mrs Fitzhubert's little puckered face coming and going on the pink air like the face of the Cheshire cat in *Alice in Wonderland*. Why, oh, why had Mike failed to appear at luncheon? Now Mrs Fitzhubert was enquiring if Mrs Cutler was any sort of a cook? 'Dear Mrs Cutler! She cooks like an angel! I have the recipe for her divine chocolate cake.'

'I remember learning to make mayonnaise at my boarding school – drop by drop with a wooden spoon...' Irma descended from the pine forest where Mike wandered incorporeal through the mist. The drawing-room was spinning.

At last the clock on the mantelpiece proclaimed a reasonable hour for departure and Irma rose to go. 'You look a little fatigued,' Mrs Fitzhubert said. 'You must drink plenty of milk.' The girl had pretty manners and quite an air for seventeen. Michael was twenty – exactly right. She accompanied the visitor to the hall door – unfailing sign of social approval – and hoped, for reasons too complicated to be entered upon here, that Irma would visit them in Toorak. 'I don't know if our nephew has told you that we intend giving a ball for him after Easter. He knows so few young people in Australia, poor boy!'

After the suffocating warmth of the drawing-room the damp pine-scented air of the garden was blessedly cool. A sudden flurry of wind sent a long shiver through the Virginia creeper, scattering its crimson leaves on the gravel before the house, bowing the heads of the prim standard roses in the circular flower bed. Then stillness again and the distant striking of the stable clock echoing across the lake. Gone now the misty transparencies of the morning. Opaque saffron clouds piling up on a muddy sky; the pine forest an iron crown encircling the mountain's crest with stiff spikes. On the other side of the forest, far below, the unseen plains forever shimmering in waves of honey-coloured light, and rising out of them the dark reality of the Hanging Rock. Doctor McKenzie was right: 'Don't think about the Rock, dear child. The Rock is a nightmare, and nightmares belong to the Past.' Try to follow the old man's advice and concentrate on the Present, so beautiful here at Lake View with the white peacock spreading its tail on the lawn, fat grey pigeons waddling on little pink feet, the stable clock striking again, bees going home in the fading light. A few drops of rain plopped on the Leghorn hat. Mrs Cutler was coming out of the Lodge with an umbrella. 'Mr Michael reckons there's a storm coming up. My corns are shooting something cruel.'

'Michael? You've seen him?'

'A few minutes ago. He called in with a letter for you, Miss. If ever a young man had lovely manners it's him – oh, my! your pretty hat!' The Leghorn was tossed aside on Mrs Cutler's shining linoleum.

'Don't bother – I shall never wear it again – the letter, please.' The door of her best bedroom closed disappointingly

on the cosy chat Mrs Cutler had been looking forward to all day. The hat, however, was presently retrieved, its ribbons tenderly ironed, to appear for many a year at church on Mrs Cutler's devoted head.

In Irma's room the Venetian blinds were closed against the heat of the day. She had just thrown up the window and was about to open Mike's letter when a streak of lightning zig-zagged across the pane. In a flash of blue light the weeping elm stood out with not a leaf stirring. Suddenly a mighty wind rose up from nowhere, strangely warm, the elm began to shiver and shake, the curtains billowed out into the room. To drum rolls of thunder, the storm broke, with full bellied clouds exploding in the heaviest rain the Macedon people could remember on the Mount, within minutes washing the gravel from the carriage drives and swelling the mountain streams. In the Lake View pool the muddied water came swirling down over the head of the stone frog. Out on the lake, the punt, torn from its moorings, rocked wildly on the lily pads. Driven by the gale, half-drowned birds fell to the ground from the tossing trees and a dead dove went sailing past the window like a mechanical toy. At last the wind and rain lost their initial fury. A pallid sun came out; the sodden lawns and ravaged flower beds took on a theatrical glow. It was over, and Irma, still at the window, opened the stiff square envelope.

Formally addressed and strictly impersonal, it might have been an invitation card or a bill, except for the oddly childish handwriting with neat copy book loops and a sprinkling of spiky verticals painfully acquired during a brief

Mike
encounter with the classics at the University of Cambridge. Cambridge or no, for Mike the very act of taking up a pen put his head in a whirl and made him forget what he was trying to say. Whereas Irma, who spelled by the light of nature and confined her punctuation to the impulsive dash or exclamation mark, was entirely herself in the briefest of notes. The letter began with apologies for having stayed too long in the pine forest this morning and for having forgotten to look at his watch until it was too late to be on time for the trout ('all the more for you'). With a mounting sense of irritation she turned the page: *I had a letter from home this morning asking me to call on our banker immediately. A bore, but there it is. I am up to the eyes in packing and will have to be off by the early train tomorrow. Long before you are awake! As Lake View will be closed for the winter in a few days now, I've decided not to come back here, which means I'm afraid that I won't be seeing you to say good-bye. It's rotten luck but I'm sure you'll understand. So if we don't meet again in Australia thank you for having been so nice to me, Irma dear. The last few weeks would have been impossible without you.*

Love from Mike.

P.S. I forgot to say I intend taking a fairly long look at Australia beginning with Northern Queensland, do you know it at all?

For a person who found difficulty in expressing himself on paper, the writer had conveyed his meaning remarkably well.

Use in dreams para

Although we are necessarily concerned, in a chronicle of events, with physical action by the light of day, history suggests that the human spirit wanders farthest in the silent hours between midnight and dawn. Those dark fruitful hours, seldom recorded, whose secret flowerings breed peace and war, loves and hates, the crowning or uncrowning of heads. What, for instance, is the plump little Empress of India planning in bed in a flannel nightgown at Balmoral, on this night in March in the year nineteen hundred, that makes her smile and purse her small obstinate mouth? Who knows?

Apple Use

So, too, in stillness and silence do the obscure individuals who figure in these pages plot, suffer and dream. In Mrs Appleyard's heavily curtained bedroom the suet-grey mask of the woman on the bed is literally bloated and blotched by evil vapours invisible by the light of day. A few doors away the child Sara's little peaked face is illumined, even in sleep, by a dream of Miranda so filled with love and joy that she carries it about with her all next day, earning countless order marks for inattention in class, and at the instigation of Miss Lumley, half an hour strapped to a backboard in the gymnasium for 'slouching' with drooping, dream-heavy head. At Lake View, the stable clock striking five awakens the cook who rises yawning to set the oatmeal for Mr Michael's early breakfast. Mike is awake after a restless night, productive mainly of dreams of banking and packing and procuring a seat on the Melbourne Express this morning. Once he dreams of Irma hurrying towards him down the corridor of a swaying train. 'Here, Mike, there's a seat here beside me,' and pushes her away with his umbrella.

Down at the Lodge, Irma too has heard the clock strike five; only half awake and staring out at the garden slowly taking on colour and outline for the coming day. At the Hanging Rock the first grey light is carving out the slabs and pinnacles of its Eastern face – or perhaps it is sunset . . . It is the afternoon of the picnic and the four girls are approaching the pool. Again she sees the flash of the creek, the wagonette under the blackwood trees and a fair-haired young man sitting on the grass reading a newspaper. As soon as she sees him she turns her head away and doesn't look at him again. 'Why? Why? . . .' 'Why?' screeches the peacock on the lawn. Because I knew, even then . . . I have always known, that Mike is my beloved.