

§ 8

All through that summer we saw much of each other. I was up at the House perhaps every other day; we young people were supposed to be all in a company together down by the tennis lawns, but indeed we dispersed and came and went by a kind of tacit understanding, Guy and Philip each with one of the Fawney girls and I with Mary. I put all sorts of constructions upon the freedom I was given with her, but I perceive now that we still seemed scarcely more than children to Lady Ladislaw, and that the idea of our marriage was as inconceivable to her as if we had been brother and sister. Matrimonially I was as impossible as one of the stable boys. All the money I could hope to earn for years to come would not have sufficed even to buy Mary clothes. But as yet we thought little of matters so remote, glad in our wonderful new discovery of love, and when at last I went off to Oxford, albeit the parting moved us to much tenderness and vows and embraces, I had no suspicion that never more in all our lives would Mary and I meet freely and gladly without restriction. Yet so it was. From that day came restraints and difficulties; the shadow of furtiveness fell between us; our correspondence had to be concealed.

I went to Oxford as one goes into exile; she to London. I would post to her so that the letters reached Landor House before lunch time when the sun of Lady Ladislaw came over the horizon, but indeed as yet no one was watching her letters. Afterwards as she moved about she gave me other instructions, and for the most part I wrote to her in envelopes

addressed for her by one of the Fawney girls, who was under her spell and made no enquiry for what purpose these envelopes were needed.

To me of course Mary wrote without restraint. All her letters to me were destroyed after our crisis, but some of mine to her she kept for many years; at last they came back to me so that I have them now. And for all their occasional cheapness and crudity, I do not find anything in them to be ashamed of. They reflect, they are chiefly concerned with that search for a career of fine service which was then the chief preoccupation of my mind, the bias is all to a large imperialism, but it is manifest that already the first ripples of a rising tide of criticism against the imperialist movement had reached and were exercising me. In one letter I am explaining that imperialism is not a mere aggressiveness, but the establishment of peace and order throughout half the world. "We may never withdraw," I wrote with all the confidence of a Foreign Secretary, "from all these great territories of ours, but we shall stay only to raise their peoples ultimately to an equal citizenship with ourselves." And then in the same letter: "and if I do not devote myself to the Empire what else is there that gives anything like the same opportunity of a purpose in life." I find myself in another tolerantly disposed to "accept socialism," but manifestly hostile to "the narrow mental habits of the socialists." The large note of youth! And in another I am clearly very proud and excited and a little mock-modest over the success of my first two speeches in the Union.

On the whole I like the rather boyish, tremendously serious young man of those letters. An egotist, of course, but what youth was ever anything else? I may write that much freely now, for by this time he is almost as much outside my personality as you or my father. He is the young Stratton, one of a line. I like his gravity; if youth is not grave with all the great spectacle of life opening at its feet, then surely no age need be grave. I love and envy his simplicity and honesty. His sham modesty and so forth are so translucent as scarcely to matter. It is clear I was opening my heart to myself as I opened it to Mary. I wasn't acting to her. I meant what I said. And as I remember her answers she took much the same high tone with me, though her style of writing was far lighter than mine, more easy and witty and less continuous. She flashed and flickered. As for confessed love-making there is very little,--I find at the end of one of my notes after the signature, "I love you, I love you." And she was even more restrained. Such little phrases as "Dear Stevenage"--that was one of her odd names for me--"I wish you were here," or "Dear, dear Stevenage," were epistolary events, and I would re-read the blessed wonderful outbreak a hundred times....

Our separation lengthened. There was a queer detached unexpected meeting in London in December, for some afternoon gathering. I was shy and the more disconcerted because she was in winter town clothes that made her seem strange and changed. Then came the devastating intimation that all through the next summer the Ladislaws were to be in Scotland.

I did my boyish utmost to get to Scotland. They were at Lankart near Invermoriston, and the nearest thing I could contrive was to join a reading party in Skye, a reading party of older men who manifestly had no great desire for me. For more than a year we never met at all, and all sorts of new things happened to us both. I perceived they happened to me, but I did not think they happened to her. Of course we changed. Of course in a measure and relatively we forgot. Of course there were weeks when we never thought of each other at all. Then would come phases of hunger. I remember a little note of hers. "Oh Stevenage," it was scrawled, "perhaps next Easter!" Next Easter was an aching desolation. The blinds of Burnmore House remained drawn; the place was empty except for three old servants on board-wages. The Christians went instead to the Canary Isles, following some occult impulse of Lady Ladislaw's. Lord Ladislaw spent the winter in Italy.

What an empty useless beauty the great Park possessed during those seasons of intermission! There were a score of places in it we had made our own....

Her letters to Oxford would cease for weeks, and suddenly revive and become frequent. Now and then would come a love-letter that seemed to shine like stars as I read it; for the most part they were low-pitched, friendly or humorous letters in a roundish girlish writing that was maturing into a squarely characteristic hand. My letters to her too I suppose varied as greatly. We began to be used to living so apart. There were weeks of silence....

Yet always when I thought of my life as a whole, Mary ruled it. With her alone I had talked of my possible work and purpose; to her alone had I confessed to ambitions beyond such modest worthiness as a public school drills us to affect....

Then the whole sky of my life lit up again with a strange light of excitement and hope. I had a note, glad and serenely friendly, to say they were to spend all the summer at Burnmore.

I remember how I handled and scrutinized that letter, seeking for some intimation that our former intimacy was still alive. We were to meet. How should we meet? How would she look at me? What would she think of me?