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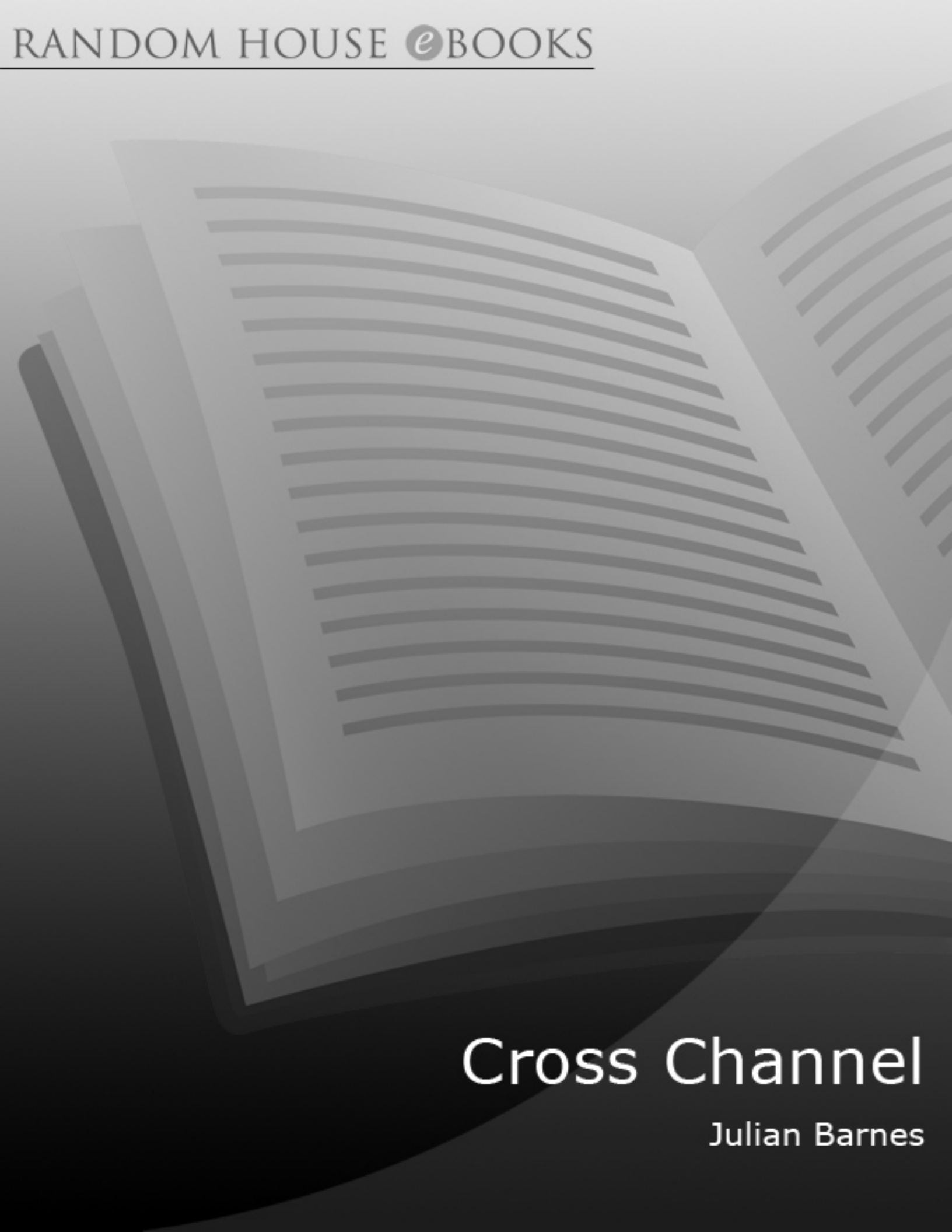

Cross Channel

Julian Barnes

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About the Book

No one has a better perspective to see things from both sides of the channel than Julian Barnes. In these exquisitely crafted and turned stories spanning several centuries, he takes as his universal theme the British in France; from the last days of a reclusive English composer, the beef consuming ‘navvies’ labouring on the Paris-Rouen railway to a lonely woman mourning the death of her brother on the battlefields of the Somme.

Clever, wise, reflective and imaginative, these stories are permeated with understanding of what it has meant for generations from these islands to cross the Channel.

About the Author

Julian Barnes is the author of ten novels, including *Metroland*, *Flaubert's Parrot*, *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* and *Arthur & George*; two books of short stories, *Cross Channel* and *The Lemon Table*; and three collections of journalism, *Letters from London*, *Something to Declare* and *The Pedant in the Kitchen*. His most recent book, *Nothing to be Frightened of*, was published in 2008. His work has been translated into more than thirty languages. In France he is the only writer to have won both the Prix Médicis (for *Flaubert's Parrot*) and the Prix Femina (for *Talking it Over*). In 1993 he was awarded the Shakespeare Prize by the FVS Foundation of Hamburg. He lives in London.

ALSO BY JULIAN BARNES

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TO PAT

JULIAN BARNES

Cross Channel

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

INTERFERENCE

HE LONGED FOR death, and he longed for his gramophone records to arrive. The rest of life's business was complete. His work was done; in years to come it would either be forgotten or praised, depending upon whether mankind became more, or less, stupid. His business with Adeline was done, too: most of what she offered him now was foolishness and sentimentality. Women, he had concluded, were at base conventional: even the free-spirited were eventually brought down. Hence that repellent scene the other week. As if one could want to be manacled at this stage, when all that was left was a final, lonely soaring.

He looked around his room. The EMG stood in the corner, a monstrous varnished lily. The wireless had been placed on the washstand, from which the jug and bowl had been removed: he no longer rose to rinse his wasted body. A low basketwork chair, in which Adeline would sit for far too long, imagining that if she enthused enough about the pettinesses of life he might discover a belated appetite for them. A wicker table, on which sat his spectacles, his medicines, Nietzsche, and the latest Edgar Wallace. A writer with the profligacy of some minor Italian composer. 'The lunch-time Wallace has arrived,' Adeline would announce, tirelessly repeating the joke he had told her in the first place. The Customs House at Calais appeared to have no difficulty allowing the lunch-time Wallace through.

But not his ‘Four English Seasons’. They wanted proof that the records were not being imported for commercial purposes. Absurd! He would have sent Adeline to Calais had she not been needed here.

His window opened to the north. He thought of the village nowadays solely in terms of nuisance. The butcher lady with her motor. The farms that pumped their feed every hour of the day. The baker with *his* motor. The American house with its infernal new bathroom. He briefly thought his way beyond the village, across the Marne, up to Compiègne, Amiens, Calais, London. He had not returned for three decades – perhaps it was almost four – and his bones would not do so on his behalf. He had given instructions. Adeline would obey.

He wondered what Boult was like. ‘Your young champion’, as Adeline always characterised him. Forgetting the intentional irony when he had first bestowed this soubriquet on the conductor. You must expect nothing from those who denigrate you, and less from those who support you. This had always been his motto. He had sent Boult his instructions, too. Whether the fellow would understand the first principles of Kinetic Impressionism remained to be seen. Those damn gentlemen of the Customs House were perhaps listening to the results even now. He had written to Calais explaining the situation. He had telegraphed the recording company asking if a new set could not be dispatched contraband. He had telegraphed Boult, asking him to use his influence so that he might hear his suite before he died. Adeline had not liked his wording of that message; but then Adeline did not like much nowadays.

She had become a vexing woman. When they had first been companions, in Berlin, then in Montparnasse, she had believed in his work, and believed in his principles of life. Later she had become possessive, jealous, critical. As if the abandoning of her own career had made her more expert in his. She had developed a little repertoire of nods and pouts

which countermanded her actual words. When he had described the plan and purpose of the ‘Four English Seasons’ to her, she had responded, as she all too regularly did, ‘I am sure, Leonard, it will be very fine’, but her neck was tight as she said it, and she peered at her darning with unnecessary force. Why not say what you think, woman? She was becoming secretive and devious. For instance, he pretty much suspected that she had taken to her knees these last years. *Punaise de sacristie*, he had challenged. She hadn’t liked that. She had liked it less when he had guessed another of her little games. ‘I will see no priest,’ he had told her. ‘Or, rather, if I so much as smell one I shall attack him with the fire-tongs.’ She hadn’t liked that, oh no. ‘We are both old people now, Leonard,’ she had mumbled.

‘Agreed. And if I fail to attack him with the fire-tongs, consider me senile.’

He banged on the boards and the maid, whatever was her name, came up at a trot. ‘Numéro six,’ he said. She knew not to reply, but nodded, wound the EMG, put on the first movement of the Viola Sonata, and watched the needle’s stationary progress until it was time, with fleet and practised wrists, to flip the record over. She was good, this one: just a brief halt at a level crossing, then the music resumed. He was pleased. Tertis knew his business. Yes, he thought, as she lifted the needle, they cannot gainsay that. ‘Merci,’ he murmured, dismissing the girl.

When Adeline returned, she looked questioningly at Marie-Thérèse, as she always did.

‘Numéro six,’ replied the maid.

The first movement of the Viola Sonata. He must have been angry; either that or suddenly fearful over his reputation. She had come to understand the shorthand of his requests, to read his mood from the music he demanded. Three months ago he had heard his last Grieg, two months ago his last Chopin. Since then, not even his friends Busoni and Sibelius; just the music of Leonard

Verity. The Second Piano Quartet, the Berlin Suite, the Oboe Fantasy (with the revered Goossens), the Pagan Symphony, the Nine French Songs, the Viola Sonata … She knew the articulations of his work as once she had known the articulations of his body. And she admitted that in general he recognised what was finest in his output.

But not the 'Four English Seasons'. She had thought, from the moment he had first talked about it, then blocked it out with his thinned fingers on the piano, that the scheme was misconceived. When he told her it was in four movements, one for each season, beginning with spring and ending with winter, she judged it banal. When he explained that it was not, of course, a mere programmatic representation of the seasons but a kinetic evocation of the memory of those seasons filtered through the known reality of other, non-English seasons, she judged it theoretical. When he chuckled at the notion that each movement would fit perfectly on the two sides of a gramophone record, she judged it calculating. Suspicious of the early sketches, she had liked the work no more in published form; she doubted that hearing it would convert her.

They had always agreed, from the beginning, to value truth above mere social form. But when truths collide, and one of them is dismissed as the squalid personal opinion of an ignorant, foolish Frenchwoman, then perhaps there was something to be said for social form. Heaven knew, she had always admired his music. She had given up her career, her life, for him; but instead of weighing with him this now seemed to count against her. The truth was, she thought – and this was *her* truth – that some composers had a fine late flowering and others did not. Perhaps the elegy for solo 'cello would be remembered, though Leonard grew suspicious nowadays at her too frequent praise of it; but not the 'Four English Seasons'. Leave such things to Elgar, she had said. What she had meant was: you seem to me to be courting the country you deliberately left, indulging a

nostalgia of the kind you have always despised; worse, you seem to be inventing a nostalgia you do not truly feel in order to indulge it. Having scorned reputation, you now appear to be seeking it. If only you had said to me, triumphantly, that your work would *not* fit on to gramophone records.

There were other truths, or squalid personal opinions, that she could not transmit to him. That she herself was not well, and the doctor had talked of surgery. She had replied that she would wait until the current crisis was over. By which she meant, until Leonard is dead, when it will not matter to me whether I submit to surgical intervention or not. His death had priority over hers. She did not resent this.

She did, however, resent being called a *punaise de sacristie*. She had not been going to Mass, and the idea of confession, after all these decades, struck her as grotesque. But everyone must approach eternity in their own way, and when she sat alone in an empty church she was contemplating extinction, not its palliation by ritual. Leonard would pretend not to see the difference. 'Thin end of the wedge,' he would say – had said. For her, it was simply that they adopted different stances before the inevitable. Of course he did not like or understand this. He was growing more tyrannical as he reached the end. The weaker his strength, the more he asserted it.

The fire-tongs sounded the opening of Beethoven's Fifth on the ceiling above. He must have heard, or guessed, her return. She ran heavily upstairs, banging an elbow on the turn of the banister. He sat in bed with the tongs aloft. 'Brought that priest of yours?' he enquired. But for once he was smiling. She fussed with his blankets and he pretended to object; but as she bent beside him, he laid his hand on her nape, just below her coiled and greying bun, and called her *ma Berlinoise*.

She had not anticipated, when they moved to Saint-Maure-de-Vercelles, that they would live quite so separately from the village. Pedantically, he had explained once more. He was an artist, did she not see? He was not an exile, since that implied a country to which he could, or would, return. Nor was he an immigrant, since that implied a desire to be accepted, to submit yourself to the land of adoption. But you did not leave one country, with its social forms and rules and pettinesses, in order to burden yourself with the parallel forms and rules and pettinesses of another country. No, he was an artist. He therefore lived alone with his art, in silence and in freedom. He had not left England, thank you very much, in order to attend a *vin d'honneur* at the *mairie*, or to tap his thigh at the local *kermesse* and offer a cretinous grin of approval to a squawking bugler.

Adeline learned that she must deal with the village in a swift and necessary fashion. She also found a way to translate Leonard's *profession de foi* into less rebarbative terms. M'sieur was a famous artist, a composer whose work had been played from Helsinki to Barcelona; his concentration must not be disturbed, lest the wonderful melodies forming within him be interrupted and lost for ever. M'sieur is like that, his head is in the clouds, it is just that he does not see you, otherwise, of course, he would tip his hat, why, sometimes he does not even notice me when I am standing in front of his face …

After they had been living in Saint-Maure for ten or so years, the baker, who played third cornet in the band of the *sapeurs-pompiers*, shyly asked her if M'sieur would as a special honour write a dance, preferably a polka, for their twenty-fifth anniversary. Adeline pronounced it unlikely, but agreed to put the request to Leonard. She chose a time when he was not working on a composition, and seemed to be of sunny temperament. Later, she regretted that she had not chosen a moment of foul temper. For, yes, he said, with

a curious smile, he would be delighted to write a polka for the band; he, whose work was performed from Helsinki to Barcelona, was not so proud that he would not do such a thing. Two days later, he gave her a sealed manila envelope. The baker was delighted and asked her to convey his particular thanks and respects to M'sieur. A week later, when she entered the *boulangerie*, he would not look at her or speak to her. Finally, he asked why M'sieur had chosen to laugh in their faces. He had scored the piece for three hundred players when they had only twelve. He had called it a polka but it did not have the rhythm of a polka; rather, that of a funeral march. Nor could Pierre-Marc or Jean-Simon, both of whom had made some musical studies, discern the slightest melody in the piece. The baker was regretful, yet also angry and humiliated. Perhaps, Adeline suggested, she had taken the wrong composition by mistake. She was handed the manila envelope and asked what the English word 'poxy' meant. She said she was not sure. She pulled out the score. It was headed 'Poxy Polka for Poxy Pompiers'. She said she thought the word meant 'bright', 'vivid', 'shining like the brass on your uniforms'. Well then, Madame, it was a pity that the piece did not appear bright and vivid to those who would not now play it.

More years passed, the baker handed over to his son, and it was the turn of the English artist, the irregular M'sieur who did not even tip his hat to the curé when he met him, to ask a favour. Saint-Maure-de-Vercelles was just within range of the British Broadcasting Corporation. The English artist had a high-powered wireless that enabled him to pick up music from London. Reception, alas, was of greatly varying quality. Sometimes the atmosphere caused problems, there were storms and bad weather, against which nothing could be done. The hills beyond the Marne were not of great assistance, either. However, M'sieur had discovered, by deduction, one day when every single house in the village had fallen silent for a wedding, that there

were also local forms of disturbance, from electric motors of all kinds. The butcher had such a machine, two of the farmers pumped their feed by this method, and of course the baker with his bread … Could they be prevailed upon, just for an afternoon, as an experiment, of course … Whereupon the English artist heard the opening bars of Sibelius's Fourth Symphony, that grave grumble from the lower strings and bassoons, which was normally below the threshold of audibility, with a sudden and refreshed clarity. And so the experiment was to be repeated from time to time, by permission. Adeline was the go-between on such occasions, a little apologetic, but also playing on the snobbery of the notion that Saint-Maure-de-Vercelles had living in its midst a great artist, one whose greatness embellished the village, and whose glory would shine the brighter if only the farmers would pump their feed by hand, the *boulanger* would confect his bread without electricity, and the butcher lady would turn off her motor as well. One afternoon Leonard discovered a new source of disturbance, which took powers of detection to locate and then delicacy of negotiation to disarm. The American ladies who were fair-weather occupants of that converted mill-house beyond the *lavoir* had naturally installed all manner of appliances, which in Leonard's view were quite superfluous to life. One of these in particular affected the reception on M'sieur's high-powered wireless. The English artist did not even have a telephone; but the two American ladies had had the decadence, and the impertinence, to install a water closet operated by electricity! It took a certain tact, a quality Adeline had developed increasingly over the years, to persuade them, on certain occasions, to delay their flushing.

It was difficult to explain to Leonard that he could not require the village to fold its shutters every time he wanted to listen to a concert. Besides, there were occasions when the American ladies simply forgot, or appeared to forget,

the Englishman's demand; while if Adeline entered the *boulangerie* and found that the baker's old father, still third cornettist for the *sapeurs-pompiers*, was in charge, she knew there was little point in even asking. Leonard tended to become irate when she failed, and his normal pallor was blasted with puce. It would have been easier had he felt able to offer a word of direct thanks himself, perhaps even a small present; but no, he acted as if countrywide silence was his prerogative. When he first became seriously ill, and the wireless was transported to his bedroom, he wished to hear more and more concerts, which strained the sympathy of the village. Happily, over the last few months he had wanted nothing but his own music. Adeline might still be dispatched to obtain a vow of muteness from the village, but she would only pretend to go, confident that by the time the concert was due to begin Leonard would have decided not to bother with the wireless that evening. Instead, he would prefer her to wind up the EMG, shuffle the horn, and play him the Oboe Fantasy, the French Songs, or the slow movement of the Pagan Symphony.

Those had been brave days, in Berlin, Leipzig, Helsinki, Paris. England was death to the true artist. To be a success there you had to be a second Mendelssohn: that was what they were waiting for, like a second Messiah. In England they had fog between the ears. They imagined themselves talking about art but they were only talking about taste. They had no concept of freedom, of the artist's needs. It was all Jesus and marriage in London Town. Sir Edward Elgar, knight, Order of Merit, Master of the King's Musick, baronet, husband. 'Falstaff' was a worthy piece, there was fine stuff in the Introduction and Allegro, but he had wasted his time with Jesus, with those infernal oratorios. Parry! Had he lived long enough, he would have set to music the entire Bible.

It was not permitted to be an artist in England. You might be a painter, or a composer, or a scribbler of some

kind, but those foggy brains did not understand the essential precondition behind all these subsequent professions: that of *being an artist*. In Continental Europe they did not laugh at such an idea. He had had fine times, brave days. With Busoni, with Sibelius. His walking tour in the Tyrol, when he had read his beloved Nietzsche in the German. Christianity preaches death. Sin is the invention of the Jews. Chastity produces as much foulness of soul as lust. Man is the cruellest animal. To pity is to be weak.

In England, the soul lived on its knees, shuffling toward the non-existent God like some butcher boy. Religion had poisoned art. 'Gerontius' was nauseating. Palestrina was mathematics. Plainsong was ditchwater. You had to leave England to find the upper slopes, to let the soul soar. That comfortable island dragged you down into softness and pettiness, into Jesus and marriage. Music is an emanation, an exaltation of the spirit, and how can music flow when the spirit is pegged and tethered? He had explained all this to Adeline when first he had met her. She had understood. Had she been an Englishwoman, she would have expected him to play the organ on Sunday and help her bottle jam. But Adeline had been an artist herself at the time. The voice had been coarse but still expressive. And she had seen that if he was to pursue his destiny, her art would have to be subordinate to his. You could not soar if manacled. She had understood that, too, at the time.

It was insistently important to him that she admire the 'Four English Seasons'. She was becoming ever more conventional and foggy between the ears: such was the penalty of age. She had at last spotted before her the great immensity of the void and did not know how to respond. He knew. Either you lashed yourself to the mast or you were carried away. He therefore kept ever more sternly and deliberately to the rigorous principles of life and art which he had spent so long enunciating. If you weakened, you

were lost, and the house would soon enough contain the priest, the telephone, and the collected works of Palestrina.

When the telegram from Boult arrived, he ordered Marie-Thérèse not to mention the fact to Madame, on pain of dismissal. Then he placed an additional pencil cross against Tuesday's concert in the *Radio Times*. 'We shall listen to this,' he informed Adeline. 'Alert the village.' As she looked over his fingers at the paper, he could sense her puzzlement. A Glinka overture, followed by Schumann and Tchaikovsky: hardly the preferred listening of Leonard Verity. Not even Grieg, still less Busoni or Sibelius. 'We shall discover what my young champion does with this old stuff,' he said by way of explanation. 'Alert the village, do you see?' 'Yes, Leonard,' she replied.

He knew it was one of his masterpieces; he knew that were she to hear it truly, she would recognise this. But it must come upon her suddenly. That opening enchantment of the remembered bucolic, with a pianissimo *cor anglais* wrapped in the quietest rustle of muted violas. He imagined the soft transformation of her face, her eyes turning towards him as they had done in Berlin and Montparnasse … He loved her enough to see it as his task to rescue her from her own later self. But there must be truth between them, too. As she straightened his blanket he therefore said, abruptly, 'This business won't be cured by *le coup du chapeau*, you know.'

She scurried from the room in tears. He could not judge whether they were caused by his acknowledgment of death or by his reference to their first few weeks together. Perhaps both. In Berlin, where they had met, he had failed to arrive for their second rendezvous, but instead of taking offence, as other women might have done, Adeline had come to his room and found him prostrate with an influenza cold. He remembered her straw hat, worn despite the lateness of the season, her full, clear eyes, the cool chord of her fingers, and the curve of her hip as she turned away.