VINTAGE HUXLEY

POINT COUNTER POINT

VINTAGE

CONTENTS

ABOUT THE BOOK

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY DAVID BRADSHAW

The dilettantes who frequent Lady Tantamount’s society parties are determined to push forward the moral frontiers of the age. Marjorie has left her family to live with Walter; Walter is in love with the luscious but cold-hearted Lucy who devours every man in sight; Maurice deflowers young girls for the sake of entertainment, while the withdrawn writer, Philip, finds himself drawn to the dangerous political charm of Everard. As they all engage in dazzling and witty conversation, the din of the age – its ideas and idiocies – grows deafening.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aldous Huxley came to literary fame in 1921 with his first novel, *Crome Yellow*. With the novels *Antic Hay, Those Barren Leaves* and *Point Counter Point*, Huxley quickly established a reputation for bright, brilliant satires that ruthlessly passed judgement on the shortcomings of contemporary society. In later life, exploration of the inner life through mysticism and hallucinogenic drugs dominated Huxley's writing, including his first-person account of experiencing mescaline in *The Doors of Perception*. Aldous Huxley died in 1963.

ALSO BY ALDOUS HUXLEY

Novels

Crome Yellow
Antic Hay
Those Barren Leaves
Brave New World
Eyeless in Gaza
After Many a Summer
Time Must Have a Stop
Ape and Essence
The Genius and the Goddess
Island

Short Stories

Limbo
Mortal Coils
Little Mexican
Two or Three Graces
Brief Candles
The Gioconda Smile
(Collected Short Stories)

Biography

Grey Eminence
The Devils of Loudun

Travel

Along the Road
Jesting Pilate
Beyond the Mexique Bay

Poetry and Drama

The Burning Wheel
Jonah
The Defeat of Youth
Leda
Verses and a Comedy
The Gioconda Smile

Essays and Belles Lettres

On the Margin
Proper Studies
Do What You Will
Music at Night
Texts and Pretexts
The Olive Tree
Ends and Means
The Art of Seeing
The Perennial Philosophy
Science, Liberty and Peace
Themes and Variations
The Doors of Perception
Adonis and the Alphabet
Heaven and Hell
Brave New World Revisited
Literature and Science
The Human Situation
Moksha

For Children

The Crows of Pearblossom

ALDOUS HUXLEY

Point Counter Point

WITH A BIOGRAPHICAL INTRODUCTION BY
David Bradshaw

VINTAGE

Oh, wearisome condition of humanity,
Born under one law, to another bound,
Vainly begot and yet forbidden vanity,
Created sick, commanded to be sound.
What meaneth nature by these diverse laws,
Passion and reason, self-division's cause?

FULKE GREVILLE

ALDOUS HUXLEY (1894–1963)

ON 26 JULY 1894, near Godalming in Surrey, Aldous Leonard Huxley was born into a family which had only recently become synonymous with the intellectual aristocracy. Huxley's grandfather, Thomas Henry Huxley, had earned notoriety as 'Darwin's bulldog' and fame as a populariser of science, just as his own probing and controversial works were destined to outrage and exhilarate readers and non-readers alike in the following century. Aldous Huxley's mother was a niece of the poet and essayist Matthew Arnold, and he was a nephew of the redoubtable Mrs Humphry Ward, doyenne of late-Victorian novelists. This inheritance, combining the scientific and the literary in a blend which was to become characteristic of his vision as a writer, was both a source of great pride and a burden to Huxley in his formative years. Much was expected of him.

Three traumatic events left their mark on the young Huxley. In 1908 his mother died of cancer, and this led to the effective break-up of the family home. Two years later, while a schoolboy at Eton, Huxley contracted an eye infection which made him almost completely blind for a time and severely impaired his vision for the rest of his life. The suicide of his brother Trevenen in August 1914 robbed Huxley of the person to whom he felt closest. Over twenty years later, in *Eyeless in Gaza* (1936), Huxley's treatment of the death of the main character's mother and his embodiment of 'Trey' in the novel as the vulnerable Brian Foxe give some indication of the indelible pain which these tragic occurrences left in their wake. To a considerable degree, they account for the darkness, pungency and cynicism which feature so prominently in Huxley's work throughout the inter-war period.

Within months of achieving a First in English Language and Literature at Balliol College, Oxford in 1916, Huxley published *The Burning Wheel*. Huxley's first collection of verse, and the three which followed it, *Jonah* (1917), *The Defeat of Youth* (1918) and *Leda* (1920), reveal his indebtedness to French symbolism and *fin de siècle* aestheticism. Also discernible, however, beneath the poetry's triste and ironic patina, is a concern with the inward world of the spirit which anticipates Huxley's later absorption in mysticism. These volumes of poetry were the first of over fifty separate works of fiction, drama, verse, criticism, biography, travel and speculative writing which Huxley was to produce during the course of his life.

Unfit for military service, Huxley worked as a farm labourer at Lady Ottoline Morrell's Garsington Manor after he left Oxford. Here he met not only D.H. Lawrence, Bertrand Russell, Clive Bell, Mark Gertler and other Bloomsbury figures, but also a Belgian refugee, Maria Nys, whom he married in 1919. By then Huxley was working for the *Athenaeum* magazine under the adroit editorship of Middleton Murry. Soon after he became the first British editor of *House and Garden*, worked for *Vogue* and contributed musical criticism to the *Weekly Westminster Gazette* in the early 1920s.

Limbo (1920), a collection of short stories, preceded the appearance of *Crome Yellow* in 1921, the novel with which Huxley first made his name as a writer. Inspired by, among others, Thomas Love Peacock, Norman Douglas and Anatole France, Huxley's first novel incorporated many incidents from his sojourn at Garsington as well as mischievous portraits of its chatelaine and his fellow guests. More blatantly still, *Crome Yellow* is an iconoclastic tilt at the Victorian and Edwardian mores which had resulted in the First World War and its terrible aftermath. For all its comic bravura, which won acclaim from writers such as Scott Fitzgerald and Max Beerbohm, Crome *Yellow* may be read,

along with Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918) and Huxley's second novel *Antic Hay* (1923), as an expression of the pervasive mood of disenchantment in the early 1920S. Huxley told his father that *Antic Hay* was 'written by a member of what I may call the war-generation for others of his kind'. He went on to say that it was intended to reflect 'the life and opinions of an age which has seen the violent disruption of almost all the standards, conventions and values current in the previous epoch'.

Even as a schoolboy Huxley had been an avid browser among the volumes of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and it did not take long for him to acquire a reputation for arcane eclecticism. Moreover, as his prestige as a debunker and an emancipator grew, so Huxley was condemned more roundly by critics of the old guard, such as James Douglas of the *Daily Express*, who denounced the explicit discussion of sex and free thought in his fiction. *Antic* Hay was burned in Cairo, and in the ensuing years many of Huxley's books were censured, censored or banned at one time or another. Conversely, it was the openness, wit, effortless learning and apparent insouciance of Huxley's early work which proved such an appetising concoction for novelists as diverse as Evelyn Waugh, William Faulkner, Anthony Powell and Barbara Pym. Angus Wilson called Huxley 'the god of my adolescence'.

From 1923 onwards Huxley lived abroad more or less permanently, first near Florence and then, between 1930 and 1937, at Sanary on the Côte d'Azur. In *Along the Road* (1925), subtitled 'Notes and Essays of a Tourist', Huxley offered a lively and engaging account of the places and works of art he had taken in since his arrival in Italy, and both the title story of his third collection of tales, *Little Mexican* (1924), and his third novel, *Those Barren Leaves* (1925), are set in that country. According to Huxley, the theme of *Those Barren Leaves* is 'the undercutting of everything by a sort of despairing scepticism and then the

undercutting of that by mysticism'. For W.B. Yeats, *Those Barren Leaves* heralded the return of philosophy to the English novel, but it was with his fourth novel, *Point Counter Point* (1928), that Huxley cemented his reputation with the reading public as a thought-provoking writer of fiction. *Point Counter Point* is Huxley's first true 'novel of ideas', the type of fiction with which he has become most closely identified. He once explained that his aim as a novelist was 'to arrive, technically, at a perfect fusion of the novel and the essay', arguing that the novel should be like a holdall, bursting with opinion and arresting ideas. This privileging of content over form was one of the many things he had in common with H.G. Wells; it was anathema to the likes of Virginia Woolf. Huxley was fascinated by the fact that 'the same person is simultaneously a mass of atoms, a physiology, a mind, an object with a shape that can be painted, a cog in the economic machine, a voter, a lover etc', and one of his key aims in *Point Counter Point* was to offer this multi-faceted view of his principal characters.

Huxley's more sombre mood in the late 1920s was epitomised by *Proper Studies* (1927), the most important of the four volumes of essays he published during the decade, and the one in which he first set himself unequivocally against what he regarded as the vulgarity and perversity of mass civilisation. Between September 1925 and June 1926 Huxley had travelled via India to the United States, and it was this visit to America which made him so pessimistic about the cultural future of Europe. He recounted his experiences in *Jesting Pilate* (1926). 'The thing which is happening in America is a revaluation of values,' Huxley wrote, 'a radical alteration (for the worse) of established standards', and it was soon after visiting the United States that Huxley conceived the idea of writing a satire on what he had encountered. *Brave New World* (1932) may be read as Huxley's contribution to the widespread fear of Americanisation which had been current in Europe since the

mid-nineteenth century, but this humorous, disturbing and curiously ambivalent novel offers much more than straightforward travesty. Similarly, although *Brave New World* has become, with Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, one of the twin pillars of the anti-utopian tradition in literature and a byword for all that is most repellent and 'nightmarish' in the world to come, it was written with Huxley's gaze very much on the crisis-torn present of Britain in 1931. When placed alongside *Brief Candles* (1930), a well-received collection of short stories, *Music at Night* (1931), a typically energetic and wide-ranging volume of essays, and *Texts and Pretexts* (1932), a verse anthology with commentaries designed to show that even in the highly-charged political atmosphere of the early 1930s 'they also serve who only bother their heads about art', Huxley's polygonal appeal as a novelist, thinker and pundit is brought home. In 1934 he published *Beyond the Mexique Bay*, an account of his travels in the Caribbean and Central America, and in 1936, *Eyeless in Gaza*. Stimulated by his conversion to pacifism in November 1935, Huxley's sixth novel imbricates the fears, foibles, prejudices and dissensions of the age with a fictionalisation of his own history. A commitment to questions which are essentially religious, rather than political or philosophical, is evident in Huxley's work for the first time.

When Huxley left Europe for the United States in April 1937 he was at the height of his fame as a novelist and the Peace Pledge Union's leading celebrity. Ironically, he was by now far more concerned with the virtues of non-attachment, anarchism, decentralisation and mystical salvation than with the failings of contemporary society, the role of pacifism in national politics or the art of fiction. If Huxley had been intent on exposing the meaninglessness of life in the 1920s, from the mid-1930s he was preoccupied with seeking the meaning of existence. *Ends and Means* (1937), in which Huxley tried 'to relate the problems of domestic and

international politics, of war and economics, of education, religion and ethics, to a theory of the ultimate nature of reality', signalled his departure for the higher ground of mystical enlightenment where he would remain encamped for the rest of his life.

It was to lecture on the issues which dominate *Ends and Means* that Huxley and his friend and guru Gerald Heard had travelled to the United States. Huxley had every intention of returning to Europe, but his wife's need to live in a hot, dry climate on health grounds and the lucrative prospect of writing for the movies contrived to keep the Huxleys in America until it was too unsafe to return. Huxley's reaction to Hollywood and its cult of youth finds mordant expression in *After Many a Summer* (1939), the story of a Citizen Kane-like character's life of grandiose illusion. The materialist excesses of Jo Stoyte are counterpointed by the ascetic convictions of Propter, a modern-day anchorite modelled on Heard. Huxley and Hollywood were not compatible, and his failure to write a popular play in the inter-war years was mirrored in his largely unsuccessful efforts to write for the movies. Walt Disney's widely reported rejection of Huxley's synopsis of *Alice in Wonderland* on the grounds that he 'could only understand every third word' was symptomatic of Huxley's problem. His natural bent was for the leisurely and allusive development of an idea; above all else the movie moguls demanded pacey dialogue. His disenchantment with the world of the film studios is evident in the opening pages of *Ape and Essence* (1948), Huxley's ghastly and graphic projection of Los Angeles as a ruinous, sprawling ossuary in the aftermath of the atomic Third World War. While the threat of global nuclear conflict has receded for the present, Huxley's discussion of the rapid deforestation, pollution and other acts of ecological 'imbecility' which preceded the self-inflicted apocalypse he describes in the novel, is still chillingly topical.

Huxley spent most of the war years in a small house at Llano in the Mojave Desert in Southern California. In 1926 he had dismissed meditation as ‘the doze’s first cousin’, but it was to a life of quietistic contemplation that Huxley now devoted himself. This phase of his career resulted in the excellent *Grey Eminence* (1941), a biography of Father Joseph, adviser to Cardinal Richelieu; *Time Must Have a Stop* (1944), a novel set in Florence in 1929 in which, to borrow Huxley’s words, ‘a piece of the *Comédie Humaine …* modulates into a version of the *Divina Commedia*’; and *The Perennial Philosophy* (1945), a profoundly influential anthology of excerpts and commentaries illustrating what Huxley called ‘the highest common factor of all the higher religions’. He went on to say with typical humour and humility, ‘The greatest merit of the book is that about forty per cent of it is not by me, but by a lot of saints, many of whom were also men of genius.’ *The Devils of Loudun*, a compelling psychological study of sexual hysteria in seventeenth-century France, which was subsequently turned into a successful film, appeared in 1952. In the same way that Huxley’s astringent social satires caught the mood of the 1920s, so, in the years during and following the Second World War and the enormity of the Jewish Holocaust, his personal concern with spiritual and ethical matters and his consternation at the accelerating arms race reflected both the tone and unease of the zeitgeist.

Huxley also acquired new readers through his support of the marginal and unconventional, and his detractors, hitherto exercised by what they saw as his immorality or preachiness, began to pour scorn on his alleged faddism. In 1942. he published *The Art of Seeing*, a passionate defence of the Bates method of eye training which aroused a storm of protest from the optometrist lobby. Even more outrageous, for many, was his suggestion in *The Doors of Perception* (1954) and its sequel, *Heaven and Hell* (1956), that mescalin and lysergic acid were ‘drugs of unique

distinction' which should be exploited for the 'supernaturally brilliant' visionary experiences they offered to those with open minds and sound livers. *The Doors of Perception* is indeed a bewitching account of the inner shangri-la of the mescalin taker, where 'there is neither work nor monotony' but only 'a perpetual present made up of one continually changing apocalypse', where 'the divine source of all existence' is evident in a vase of flowers, and even the creases in a pair of trousers reveal 'a labyrinth of endlessly significant complexity'. Not surprisingly, *The Doors of Perception* became a set text for the beat generation and the psychedelic Sixties, The Doors naming their band after the book which also earned Huxley a place on the sleeve of the Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper* album.

Maria Huxley died in February 1955, shortly before Huxley published his penultimate novel, *The Genius and the Goddess*, in which John Rivers recounts the brief history of his disastrous involvement, when he was a 'virgin prig of twenty-eight', with the wife of his colleague Henry Maartens, a Nobel Prize-winning scientist. Not for the first time, Huxley's theme is the havoc which ensues when a man with an idealistic misconception of life born of a cloistered and emotionally deprived upbringing experiences the full, sensual impact of human passion.

Huxley married Laura Archera, a practising psychotherapist, in March 1956. Two years later he published *Brave New World Revisited*, in which he surveyed contemporary society in the light of his earlier predictions. Huxley's knack of keying in to the anxieties of the moment was as sharp as ever, and this touch is also evident in a series of lectures on 'The Human Situation' which he gave at Santa Barbara in 1959, published in one volume in 1977. Both books address problems which are no less pressing today, such as overpopulation, the recrudescence of nationalism and the fragility of the natural world. Huxley's last novel, *Island*, was published in 1962, the year in which

he was made a Companion of Literature, and the year after his Los Angeles home and most of his personal effects had been destroyed in a fire which, Huxley said, left him ‘a man without possessions and without a past’.

Island is the story of how the offshore utopia of Pala, where population growth has been stabilised and Mutual Adoption Clubs have superseded the tyranny of the family, and where *maithuna*, or the yoga of love and *moksha*, an hallucinogenic toadstool, ensure that the Palanese have little reason to feel disgruntled, falls victim to the age-old menaces of material progress and territorial expansionism. *Island* is perhaps Huxley’s most pessimistic book, his poignant acknowledgement that in a world of increasing greed, mass communication, oil-guzzling transport, burgeoning population and inveterate hostility, a pacific and co-operative community like Pala’s ‘oasis of freedom and happiness’ has little hope of survival. Soon after *Island* was published Huxley commented that the ‘weakness of the book consists in a disbalance between fable and exposition. The story has too much weight, in the way of ideas and reflections, to carry.’ But, while some readers would agree with this criticism, for others *Island* exemplifies Huxley’s particular contribution to twentieth-century letters. In his early days the highbrow incarnate and a reluctant lecturer for the Peace Pledge Union, Huxley became for many a companionable polymath, a transatlantic sage at large, whose unending quest for synthesis and meaning in an ever-more perplexing and violent world provided a paradigm for their own search for peace and understanding.

Before his eyesight was damaged, Huxley’s ambition was to specialise in the sciences, and it is significant that in his last published work, *Literature and Science* (1963), he pleads yet again for a *rapprochement* between the two cultures, arguing passionately against the contemporary stress on their dichotomy. The book begins by emphasising the wide-ranging erudition of T.H. Huxley and Matthew

Arnold. Their descendant, one of the most stimulating and provocative writers of the twentieth century, proved himself a worthy inheritor of their abilities over the course of his long and varied career.

Huxley died of cancer at his home in Hollywood on 22 November 1963, unaware that President J.F. Kennedy had been assassinated earlier that afternoon in Dallas. In 1971 his ashes were returned to England and interred in his parents' grave at Compton in Surrey.

David Bradshaw
Worcester College, Oxford
1993

CHAPTER I

‘YOU WON’T BE late?’ There was anxiety in Marjorie Carling’s voice, there was something like entreaty.

‘No, I won’t be late,’ said Walter, unhappily and guiltily certain that he would be. Her voice annoyed him. It drawled a little, it was too refined – even in misery.

‘Not later than midnight.’ She might have reminded him of the time when he never went out in the evenings without her. She might have done so; but she wouldn’t; it was against her principles; she didn’t want to force his love in any way.

‘Well, call it one. You know what these parties are.’ But as a matter of fact, she didn’t know, for the good reason that, not being his wife, she wasn’t invited to them. She had left her husband to live with Walter Bidlake; and Carling, who had Christian scruples, was feebly a sadist and wanted to take his revenge, refused to divorce her. It was two years now since they had begun to live together. Only two years; and now, already, he had ceased to love her, he had begun to love someone else. The sin was losing its only excuse, the social discomfort its sole palliation. And she was with child.

‘Half-past twelve,’ she implored, though she knew that her importunity would only annoy him, only make him love her the less. But she could not prevent herself from speaking; she loved him too much, she was too agonizingly jealous. The words broke out in spite of her principles. It would have been better for her, and perhaps for Walter too, if she had had fewer principles and given her feelings the violent expression they demanded. But she had been well brought up in habits of the strictest self-control. Only the uneducated, she knew, made ‘scenes’. An imploring ‘Half-past twelve, Walter’ was all that managed to break through

her principles. Too weak to move him, the feeble outburst would only annoy. She knew it, and yet she could not hold her tongue.

‘If I can possibly manage it.’ (There; she had done it. There was exasperation in his tone.) ‘But I can’t guarantee it; don’t expect me too certainly.’ For of course, he was thinking (with Lucy Tantamount’s image unexorcizably haunting him), it certainly wouldn’t be half-past twelve.

He gave the final touches to his white tie. From the mirror her face looked out at him, close beside his own. It was a pale face and so thin that the down-thrown light of the electric lamp hanging above them made a shadow in the hollows below the cheek-bones. Her eyes were darkly ringed. Rather too long at the best of times, her straight nose protruded bleakly from the unfleshed face. She looked ugly, tired and ill. Six months from now her baby would be born. Something that had been a single cell, a cluster of cells, a little sac of tissue, a kind of worm, a potential fish with gills, stirred in her womb and would one day become a man – a grown man, suffering and enjoying, loving and hating, thinking, remembering, imagining. And what had been a blob of jelly within her body would invent a god and worship; what had been a kind of fish would create and, having created, would become the battle-ground of disputing good and evil; what had blindly lived in her as a parasitic worm would look at the stars, would listen to music, would read poetry. A thing would grow into a person, a tiny lump of stuff would become a human body, a human mind. The astounding process of creation was going on within her; but Marjorie was conscious only of sickness and lassitude; the mystery for her meant nothing but fatigue and ugliness and a chronic anxiety about the future, pain of the mind as well as discomfort of the body. She had been glad, or at least she had tried to be glad, in spite of her haunting fears of physical and social consequences, when she first recognized the symptoms of her pregnancy. The

child, she believed, would bring Walter closer; (he had begun to fade away from her even then). It would arouse in him new feelings which would make up for whatever element it was that seemed to be lacking in his love for her. She dreaded the pain, she dreaded the inevitable difficulties and embarrassments. But the pains, the difficulties would have been worth while if they purchased a renewal, a strengthening of Walter's attachment. In spite of everything, she was glad. And at first her previsions had seemed to be justified. The news that she was going to have a child had quickened his tenderness. For two or three weeks she was happy, she was reconciled to the pains and discomforts. Then, from one day to another, everything was changed; Walter had met that woman. He still did his best, in the intervals of running after Lucy, to keep up a show of solicitude. But she could feel that the solicitude was resentful, that he was tender and attentive out of a sense of duty, that he hated the child for compelling him to be so considerate to its mother. And because he hated it, she too began to hate it. No longer overlaid by happiness, her fears came to the surface, filled her mind. Pain and discomfort – that was all the future held. And meanwhile ugliness, sickness, fatigue. How could she fight her battle when she was in this state?

'Do you love me, Walter?' she suddenly asked.

Walter turned his brown eyes for a moment from the reflected tie and looked into the image of her sad, intently gazing grey ones. He smiled. But if only, he was thinking, she would leave me in peace! He pursed his lips and parted them again in the suggestion of a kiss. But Marjorie did not return his smile. Her face remained unmovingly sad, fixed in an intent anxiety. Her eyes took on a tremulous brightness, and suddenly there were tears on her lashes.

'Couldn't you stay here with me this evening?' she begged, in the teeth of all her heroic resolutions not to apply

any sort of exasperating compulsion to his love, to leave him free to do what he wanted.

At the sight of those tears, at the sound of that tremulous and reproachful voice, Walter was filled with an emotion that was at once remorse and resentment; anger, pity, and shame.

‘But can’t you understand,’ that was what he would have liked to say, what he would have said if he had had the courage, ‘can’t you understand that it isn’t the same as it was, that it can’t be the same? And perhaps, if the truth be told, it never was what you believed it was – our love, I mean – it never was what I tried to pretend it was. Let’s be friends, let’s be companions. I like you, I’m very fond of you. But for goodness sake don’t envelop me in love, like this; don’t force love on me. If you knew how dreadful love seems to somebody who doesn’t love, what a violation, what an outrage …’

But she was crying. Through her closed eyelids the tears were welling out, drop after drop. Her face was trembling into the grimace of agony. And he was the tormentor. He hated himself. ‘But why should I let myself be blackmailed by her tears?’ he asked, and, asking, he hated her also. A drop ran down her long nose. ‘She has no right to do this sort of thing, no right to be so unreasonable. Why can’t she be reasonable?’

‘Because she loves me.’

‘But I don’t want her love, I don’t want it.’ He felt the anger mounting up within him. She had no business to love him like that; not now, at any rate. ‘It’s a blackmail,’ he repeated inwardly, ‘a blackmail. Why must I be blackmailed by her love and the fact that once I loved too – or did I ever love her, really?’

Marjorie took out a handkerchief and began to wipe her eyes. He felt ashamed of his odious thoughts. But she was the cause of his shame; it was her fault. She ought to have

stuck to her husband. They could have had an affair. Afternoons in a studio. It would have been romantic.

‘But after all, it was I who insisted on her coming away with me.’

‘But she ought to have had the sense to refuse. She ought to have known that it couldn’t last for ever.’

But she had done what he had asked her; she had given up everything, accepted social discomfort for his sake. Another piece of blackmail. She blackmailed him with sacrifice. He resented the appeal which her sacrifices made to his sense of decency and honour.

‘But if *she* had some decency and honour,’ he thought, ‘she wouldn’t exploit mine.’

But there was the baby.

‘Why on earth did she ever allow it to come into existence?’

He hated it. It increased his responsibility towards its mother, increased his guiltiness in making her suffer. He looked at her wiping her tear-wet face. Being with child had made her so ugly, so old. How could a woman expect … ? But no, no, no! Walter shut his eyes, gave an almost imperceptible shuddering shake of the head. The ignoble thought must be shut out, repudiated.

‘How can I think such things?’ he asked himself.

‘Don’t go,’ he heard her repeating. How that refined and drawling shrillness got on his nerves! ‘Please don’t go, Walter.’

There was a sob in her voice. More blackmail. Ah, how could he be so base? And yet, in spite of his shame and, in a sense, because of it, he continued to feel the shameful emotions with an intensity that seemed to increase rather than diminish. His dislike of her grew because he was ashamed of it; the painful feelings of shame and self-hatred, which she caused him to feel, constituted for him yet another ground of dislike. Resentment bred shame, and shame in its turn bred more resentment.

‘Oh, why can’t she leave me in peace?’ He wished it furiously, intensely, with an exasperation that was all the more savage for being suppressed. (For he lacked the brutal courage to give it utterance; he was sorry for her, he was fond of her in spite of everything; he was incapable of being openly and frankly cruel – he was cruel only out of weakness, against his will.)

‘Why can’t she leave me in peace?’ He would like her so much more if only she left him in peace; and she herself would be so much happier. Ever so much happier. It would be for her own good … But suddenly he saw through his own hypocrisy. ‘But all the same, why the devil can’t she let me do what I want?’

What he wanted? But what he wanted was Lucy Tantamount. And he wanted her against reason, against all his ideals and principles, madly, against his own wishes, even against his own feelings – for he didn’t like Lucy; he really hated her. A noble end may justify shameful means. But when the end is shameful, what then? It was for Lucy that he was making Marjorie suffer – Marjorie who loved him, who had made sacrifices for him, who was unhappy. But her unhappiness was blackmailing him.

‘Stay with me this evening,’ she implored once more.

There was a part of his mind that joined in her entreaties, that wanted him to give up the party and stay at home. But the other part was stronger. He answered her with lies – half lies, that were worse, for the hypocritically justifying element of truth in them, than frank whole lies.

He put his arm round her. The gesture was in itself a falsehood.

‘But my darling,’ he protested in the cajoling tone of one who implores a child to behave reasonably, ‘I really must go. You see, my father’s going to be there.’ That was true. Old Bidlake was always at the Tantamounts’ parties. ‘And I must have a talk with him. About business,’ he added vaguely and importantly, releasing with the magical word a kind of

smoke-screen of masculine interests between himself and Marjorie. But the lie, he reflected, must be transparently visible through the smoke.

‘Couldn’t you see him some other time?’

‘It’s important,’ he answered, shaking his head. ‘And besides,’ he added, forgetting that several excuses are always less convincing than one, ‘Lady Edward’s inviting an American editor specially for my sake. He might be useful; you know how enormously they pay.’ Lady Edward had told him that she would invite the man if he hadn’t started back to America – she was afraid he had. ‘Quite preposterously much,’ he went on, thickening his screen with impersonal irrelevancies. ‘It’s the only place in the world where it’s possible for a writer to be overpaid.’ He made an attempt at laughter. ‘And I really need a bit of overpaying to make up for all this two-guineas-a-thousand business.’ He tightened his embrace, he bent down to kiss her. But Marjorie averted her face. ‘Marjorie,’ he implored. ‘Don’t cry. Please.’ He felt guilty and unhappy. But oh! why couldn’t she leave him in peace, in peace?

‘I’m not crying,’ she answered. But her cheek was wet and cold to his lips.

‘Marjorie, I won’t go, if you don’t want me to.’

‘But I *do* want you to,’ she answered, still keeping her face averted.

‘You don’t. I’ll stay.’

‘You mustn’t.’ Marjorie looked at him and made an effort to smile. ‘It’s only my silliness. It would be stupid to miss your father and that American man.’ Returned to him like this, his excuses sounded peculiarly vain and improbable. He winced with a kind of disgust.

‘They can wait,’ he answered, and there was a note of anger in his voice. He was angry with himself for having made such lying excuses (why couldn’t he have told her the crude and brutal truth straight out? she knew it, after all); and he was angry with her for reminding him of them. He

would have liked them to fall directly into the pit of oblivion, to be as though they had never been uttered.

‘No, no; I insist. I was only being silly. I’m sorry.’

He resisted her at first, refused to go, demanded to stay. Now that there was no danger of his having to stay, he could afford to insist. For Marjorie, it was clear, was serious in her determination that he should go. It was an opportunity for him to be noble and self-sacrificing at a cheap rate, gratis even. What an odious comedy! But he played it. In the end he consented to go, as though he were doing her a special favour by not staying. Marjorie tied his scarf for him, brought him his silk hat and his gloves, kissed him good-bye lightly, with a brave show of gaiety. She had her pride and her code of amorous honour; and in spite of unhappiness, in spite of jealousy, she stuck to her principles – he *ought* to be free; she had no right to interfere with him. And besides it was the best policy not to interfere. At least, she hoped it was the best policy.

Walter shut the door behind him and stepped out into the cool of the night. A criminal escaping from the scene of his crime, escaping from the spectacle of the victim, escaping from compassion and remorse, could not have felt more profoundly relieved. In the street he drew a deep breath. He was free. Free from recollection and anticipation. Free, for an hour or two, to refuse to admit the existence of past or future. Free to live only now and here, in the place where his body happened at each instant to be. Free – but the boast was idle; he went on remembering. Escape was not so easy a matter. Her voice pursued him. ‘I insist on your going.’ His crime had been a fraud as well as a murder. ‘I insist.’ How nobly he had protested! How magnanimously given in at last! It was cardsharping on top of cruelty.

‘God!’ he said almost aloud. ‘How could I?’ He was astonished at himself as well as disgusted. ‘But if only she’d leave me in peace!’ he went on. ‘Why can’t she be

reasonable?’ The weak and futile anger exploded again within him.

He thought of the time when his wishes had been different. Not to be left in peace by her had once been his whole ambition. He had encouraged her devotion. He remembered the cottage they had lived in, alone with one another, month after month, among the bare downs. What a view over Berkshire! But it was a mile and a half to the nearest village. Oh, the weight of that knapsack full of provisions! The mud when it rained! And that bucket you had to wind up from the well. The well was more than a hundred feet deep. But even when he wasn’t doing something tiresome, like winding up the bucket, had it really been very satisfactory? Had he ever really been happy with Marjorie – as happy, at any rate, as he had imagined he was going to be, as he ought to have been in the circumstances? It should have been like *Epipsychidion*; but it wasn’t – perhaps because he had too consciously wanted it to be, because he had deliberately tried to model his feelings and their life together on Shelley’s poetry.

‘One shouldn’t take art too literally.’ He remembered what his brother-in-law, Philip Quarles, had said one evening, when they were talking about poetry. ‘Particularly where love is concerned.’

‘Not even if it’s true?’ Walter had asked.

‘It’s apt to be too true. Unadulterated, like distilled water. When truth is nothing but the truth, it’s unnatural, it’s an abstraction that resembles nothing in the real world. In nature there are always so many other irrelevant things mixed up with the essential truth. That’s why art moves you – precisely because it’s unadulterated with all the irrelevancies of real life. Real orgies are never so exciting as pornographic books. In a volume by Pierre Louys all the girls are young and their figures perfect; there’s no hiccoughing or bad breath, no fatigue or boredom, no sudden recollections of unpaid bills or business letters unanswered,

to interrupt the raptures. Art gives you the sensation, the thought, the feeling quite pure – chemically pure, I mean,' he had added with a laugh, 'not morally.'

'But *Epipsychidion* isn't pornography,' Walter had objected.

'No, but it's equally pure from the chemist's point of view. How does that sonnet of Shakespeare's go?

"My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red:
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damask'd, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks."

And so on. He'd taken the poets too literally and was reacting. Let him be a warning to you.'

Philip had been right, of course. Those months in the cottage hadn't been at all like *Epipsychidion* or *La Maison du Berger*. What with the well and the walk to the village … But even if there hadn't been the well and the walk, even if he had had Marjorie unadulterated, would it have been any better? It might even have been worse. Marjorie unadulterated might have been worse than Marjorie tempered by irrelevancies.

That refinement of hers, for example, that rather cold virtuousness, so bloodless and spiritual – from a distance and theoretically he admired. But in practice and close at hand? It was with that virtue, that refined, cultured, bloodless spirituality that he had fallen in love – with that and with her unhappiness; for Carling was unspeakable. Pity made him a knight errant. Love, he had then believed (for he was only twenty-two at the time, ardently pure, with the adolescent purity of sexual desires turned inside out, just