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# E. M. DELAFIELD



COLLECTION

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# **Late and Soon**

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# **Late and Soon (1943)**

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The rain, slanting and silver, drove lightly across the terrace and down the grassy hollows of the park where nettles and docks and bramble bushes grew freely amongst the clumps of yellow gorse.

General Levallois stood leaning on his two sticks under the portico that jutted out beyond the garden door of Coombe and spoke to his sister, although gazing away from her as he did so.

"Better have the tennis-court dug over, I suppose."

"I thought we wouldn't, Reggie. We've dug up the paddock, and the top field, and those other two and the old rose garden. Surely we can keep the tennis-court."

"My dear girl, who do you think is ever going to play tennis here again?"

"The children," said Valentine Arbell.

Her voice died away into silence, as though she foresaw the General's reply before he spoke it.

"What children?" he demanded derisively.

What children indeed.

Primrose was three-and-twenty and even before the war had never, once her school-days were over, wished to spend her time at home.

Jessica was seventeen and a half and was waiting to be called up for the W.A.A.F.

She would be gone long before summer came again.

Valentine Arbell had never had a son.

"I suppose you're right," she acknowledged with the gentle Edwardian courtesy of tone and manner that betrayed her years far more surely than did her appearance.

"It would hardly be worth while to keep up the poor old tennis-court for one's possible grandchildren."

She smiled as she spoke and it would have taken someone more observant, and far more interested in human reactions, than was the General to notice the real gravity—a kind of permanent, incredulous sadness—of her face.

"Grandchildren!" ejaculated the General. "You aren't counting on anything of that sort from Primrose, I imagine, and as for young Jess, I hope she's a long way from thinking of such nonsense as marriage with any of those shockin' fellers she romps round with."

"I'm sure she is, Reggie. Anyhow, none of them are in earnest. They're all much too young to marry."

"That doesn't stop 'em, nowadays. And they aren't necessarily thinking of marrying either, but I suppose Jess knows what's what, like the rest of the girls. What about coming in, old girl? It's turning wet."

It had turned wet long ago. Small puddles had formed on the gravel beneath their feet, and the blue distant hills and the square tower of St. Martin's church rising from the town in the valley below were all obscured by mist.

"Come on in," repeated the General, shuffling slowly round on his sticks.

"I must see to the hens. I'll come through the house and get my gum-boots."

They went in at the garden door that was placed in direct line with the big front double-doors of the house affording a view straight across the outer and inner halls to the terrace.

Valentine adjusted her pace to that of her brother which might have belonged to a very old man, although he was in reality only fifty-six—twelve years her senior. He was the eldest, and she the youngest, of a large family of Huguenot descent, long established in England.

General Levallois had come to Coombe soon after the death of Valentine's husband, twelve years earlier, and had

remained there, without any formal discussion on either side, ever since.

The house was large enough to accommodate many more people than were likely to live there again—until it should be sold and turned into a school or an institution.

They crossed the inner hall that was coconut-matted, and very dark, with glass cases filled with stuffed fish and birds on every side, and passed into the hall proper.

This was large, furnished with comfortable, ancient armchairs and sofas covered in shabby, old-fashioned rose-patterned chintzes.

It lay under a glass cupola that had been painted a sinister dark blue in an effort to conform to the black-out regulations.

In January, nineteen hundred and forty-two, the paint had already begun to look thin and scratchy.

Out of the inner hall led half a dozen doors, each one badly in need of a fresh coat of cream-coloured paint—except one that was inadequately covered with shredded patches of red baize and obviously led to the domestic offices.

The other doors led respectively into drawing-room, dining-room, library, billiard-room and a small sitting-room that was still traditionally called the breakfast-room. Of these, only the dining-room and the library were now in use. The hall had a large open fireplace and it was there that Valentine had long ago established her writing-desk and there that she sat when she was not out of doors.

The General lowered himself into the largest armchair, nearest the fire, with his habitual hissing sound as of indrawn breath, long since become automatic.

He let both his sticks fall clattering to the floor as he always did, although it would subsequently cause him considerable discomfort to reach for them again, and he would be annoyed if anybody picked them up unasked and



would probably enquire whether he was supposed to be a damned cripple.

Valentine went on, through the glass doors at the end of the room that opened into a small lobby where coats and mackintoshes and hats hung, walking-sticks and umbrellas stood in a huge and hideous blue china receptacle, and an oak chest held old tennis racquets, old balls, still older croquet mallets and cricket-bats.

She remembered them, as she pulled a tall pair of gum-boots out of a corner and worked her slim legs and feet into them. Reggie was quite right.

The children were no more.

For twenty years her life had been conditioned by the existence of Primrose, and later on by that of Jess as well.

It had been so even in her husband's lifetime. She had loved Humphrey, but had put the children first—the child really, since Primrose had been the only one for six years.

When she and Humphrey had married, whilst he was on sick leave in nineteen hundred and seventeen, they had both been in love—Valentine imaginatively and Humphrey physically.

It had lasted longer with him than with her.

Wrestling with the slippery boots, Valentine thought back across the years as she so often did.

She had been thirty-two when Humphrey was killed out hunting and, whatever anybody might say, she knew that nothing in her had been destroyed by that shock and sadness.

Destruction, if there were any, had been accomplished during the placid, matter-of-fact years of her married life.

The romantic impulse that had once been the moving-spring of her nature moved her no longer. At Humphrey's death the strong strain of realism that is the concomitant of true romanticism had told her that she had nothing to gain by changing her way of life.

Coombe was her own, it was home, changeless and unchangeable to Primrose and Jess, and at Coombe she had remained, the months and the years divided into school terms, Christmas holidays, Easter holidays, the long summer holidays, the visits that she had paid to the children at their school on the East Coast.

Suddenly, as it seemed, all that was over. But it wasn't really sudden.

Primrose had left school at eighteen and said that she wanted to go to College and had been sent there—with difficulty, for there was hardly any money. Had she been happy there?

Valentine felt that she would never know. When once she asked the question Primrose had said: It's all right, thanks—with a slightly more discontented expression than usual on her always discontented face.

No one had expected her to take more than a pass degree, nor did she.

Since then, Primrose had spent most of her time in London, sometimes picking up a job, more often without one. She stayed with College friends or, very occasionally, with one of the Levallois' relations.

When she came home it was to sleep until luncheon-time every morning, strew soiled and torn underwear all over the bathroom and ask why one of the maids couldn't attend to it, and engage in endless and unexplained telephone calls that occupied her most of every evening.

With the outbreak of war Primrose had gone straight back to London. She had done a variety of war jobs, had scarcely been home at all, and now was driving a Mobile Canteen.

Primrose was gone—gone beyond recall, and it wasn't the war that had taken her.

Jess had come home when her school had been evacuated into Wales, begging and imploring to be allowed to volunteer for the W.A.A.F.

She was gay and eager and full of enthusiasm, and had declared candidly that there wouldn't be anything whatever to do at home, now that there was nothing to ride, and that she'd be wretched there—simply wretched. Any day, now, Jess might be called up.

Meanwhile she worked nearly every afternoon and evening at the Canteen in the village, and made friends with very young soldiers and asked them to Coombe.

When they came, she introduced them as Bill or Michael or Tony, and they had tea downstairs and then went up to the schoolroom with her or, more occasionally, played romping games in the hall.

Jess was only waiting for the moment when she should join up.

Come back she might or might not, but the words "the children" held no more meaning at Coombe, or for its mistress.

She stood up, fastened her tweed coat and went out, followed by Jessica's puppy—a leggy mongrel—and General Levallois' fat spaniel.

The hens, who should have been in the orchard, were straggling, wet and shabby-looking, on the oval grass plot before the house.

She made an encouraging sound and they lurched along behind her, squawking and clucking, as she walked to the stable yard that stood a little way off, built at right angles to the house.

Regardless of the rain, and with deliberation, Valentine fed them and shut them up in their dilapidated coops.

Then she went slowly back to the house.

Coombe was an old house, that had been often added to—three-storied, slate-roofed and stone-built. An open-sided lichen-spattered tower rose above all the irregular and numerous chimney-stacks, and in it hung a large bell, cast in the reign of Elizabeth.

Stone pillars, moss-grown and out of the true, supported, over the double-doors of entrance, a lead roofing shaped like an inverted V.

Against one of the pillars now leant a dripping bicycle, and Valentine saw a tall youthful-looking figure in battle dress reaching out to pull at the rusty iron chain that hung beside the door.

She hastened her step although knowing that she could not get to him soon enough to avert the minor disaster that experience warned her to expect.

As she had foreseen, the chain immediately broke in the young officer's hand and he was looking at the detached length of rusty links with some dismay when she reached his side.

"It's quite all right—it's been done before. It doesn't matter at all."

"I'm terribly sorry," said the young man. "I can't imagine how it happened. I didn't think I'd been so violent."

"I'm sure you weren't. The chain is very old, and every time it breaks somebody hooks it on again without mending it properly. Is there anything I can do for you? Won't you come in?"

"Thanks very much. I wondered if I could see Lady Arbell for a few minutes?"

He looked at her questioningly.

"I am Lady Arbell. Do come in."

The officer, who was apparently shy, muttered something about being very wet and scraped his boots with prolonged violence on the iron scraper at the door.

Valentine stepped inside, giving him time, and pulled off her own gum-boots. Then she turned round again.

"I'm afraid I don't know your name," she said apologetically.

At the same time she remembered, with a little inward flash of amusement, her daughter Jessica's repeated

assurances that *no one*, no one in the world, ever asked anybody's name now. It just wasn't ever done.

But Valentine knew that she would continue to do it.

"Cyril Banks," said the young man. "Lieutenant Banks—1st Battalion——" And he added the name of his regiment.

As if fearing that he might have been guilty of a too great formality he finished with a thoughtfully-spoken pronouncement:

"I'm usually—in fact always—called Buster."

"Do come in," said Valentine.

With a final scrape, and a final mutter that denoted apology but was indistinguishable, Lieutenant Banks came in.

The General was still sitting by the fire and Valentine introduced the young man to him. She knew that her brother would be very slightly pleased and stimulated by the presence of any visitor, even one whom he would neither see, nor wish to see, ever again.

Perhaps, however, they would see Lieutenant Banks again. He had come to enquire, with diffidence and apologies, whether Lady Arbell would consider the billeting of two officers. One of them was his own Colonel, the other one he could not as yet indicate.

"It's just a case of morning and evening," he said, as though in explanation. "I mean, they'd be out all day and they'd probably be away quite a lot, too, on various exercises and things. I don't know whether all your rooms are full up?"

"No, not now. We've got three evacuee children, but they're in a wing at the back. There are three empty rooms in the front of the house, though I do try to keep one in case any relation who's been bombed out of London should want to come here."

"Oh, rather," said Banks. "Well, of course, two rooms would be perfectly okay."

"This house hasn't got nearly as many bedrooms as you might suppose, from the look of it," General Levallois observed. "And only one bathroom."

"Really, sir," respectfully returned Lieutenant Banks.

He sounded sympathetically dismayed, but Valentine guessed that he had not expected more than one bathroom. If he knew anything at all about houses like Coombe, he knew that they never did have more than one bathroom and that one a converted dressing-room, very cold and with an inadequate supply of hot water.

"Would you like to see the rooms?" she asked.

Lieutenant Banks wouldn't dream of troubling her. He was certain the rooms would be marvellous.

Looking shyer than ever—he was a very fair youth and blushed conspicuously—he made a number of statements regarding the conditions of the billeting of officers and their batmen.

Valentine listened with as much attention as though she had not heard exactly the same thing before, from representatives of the three different regiments that had previously been stationed in the neighbourhood and then sent elsewhere.

In each case they had said that she would be notified within the week of a decision, and in each case she had heard not another word on the subject. To the earnest and innocent Lieutenant Banks, who looked scarcely more than twenty years old, Valentine gave no hint of these previous experiences.

General Levallois was asking the Colonel's name.

"Lonergan, sir."

"Irish," said the General, without inflection.

"Yes, sir."

The General said coldly that he should hope to have the pleasure of meeting Colonel Lonergan one of these days.

There was a pause.

Valentine began to talk about the neighbourhood, to ask whether Lieutenant Banks knew Devon already, to ascertain from him that his own part of the world was Northampton, and that before the war he had worked for one year in his father's insurance office.

She knew that he wished to go, but was finding it impossible to get up and take his leave.

She offered him a cigarette from a box on the table.

Lieutenant Banks thanked her very much, said that he didn't smoke, and talked for several minutes about the cigarette shortage, and also told a story of an uncle who had visited the East Coast and found all the shops full of cigarettes, matches, sweets and chocolates with nobody to buy them.

Valentine made the rejoinders long grown familiar and the General contributed an occasional observation.

Lieutenant Banks, looking disturbed and uneasy, still sat on.

Suddenly there sounded an outburst of barking from both the dogs. The spaniel subsided at a ferocious-sounding order from General Levallois, but the pup dashed forward excitedly, springing from side to side and making a deafening clamour.

The glass doors were pushed open and left swinging as Jess came in.

Her first greeting was for her dog.

"Hullo, aunt Sophy! Down, like a good dog, down! Darling little dog! Get down."

The puppy leapt upon her, trying to lick her face, and Jess picked it up and carried it bodily across the hall.

"Hallo!"

"This is Lieutenant Banks—my daughter Jessica."

Banks stood up and Jess said "Hallo" again and shifted the wriggling dog underneath one arm.

"Sorry about the awful row, uncle Reggie. Hallo, Sally!"

The spaniel's tail flumped upon the floor in acknowledgment.

"I say, *what* do you call your dog?" the young soldier demanded—speaking in a quite new, much more natural and animated voice.

"Aunt Sophy. Actually, she's the exact image of an aunt I have, called Sophy. Even mummie admits that. It isn't her sister, or anything like that. In fact she's a great-aunt."

"Does she know?"

"We don't think so. She's only once been here since I had the puppy and of course I said I hadn't yet decided on a name. Actually, she kept on making rather dim suggestions, like Rover and Tray and Faithful."

Lieutenant Banks began to laugh, and Jess laughed too.

Valentine felt relieved.

She leant back in her chair and looked at her younger daughter.

Primrose resented being looked at so intensely that her mother could hardly ever bear to do so, although no single word had passed between them on the subject.

Jess was not only quite unself-conscious, but she was scarcely sufficiently interested in people to notice whether they looked at her or whether they didn't. She was tall and slight, much fairer than Valentine had ever been, and with exactly Humphrey's squarely-shaped, open face, with a well-cut, firm, insensitive mouth, rather thick snub nose and big, straight-gazing brown eyes.

She looked her best in the clothes that she most often wore, riding-breeches and a high-necked wool jumper, under an open tweed riding-coat.

Her head was bare and her hair, which was flaxen and very pretty, was just shoulder-length and attractively curled at the ends.

Valentine wondered, as she wondered almost every day of her life, what Humphrey would think if he could suddenly walk into Coombe now, after twelve years.



Supposing he were able to come back?

The place was hardly altered at all. There was a painting of himself, that his mother had insisted upon having done from a photograph after his death and that now hung above Valentine's desk.

She had never liked it, and thought it a bad painting—shrill and crude in colouring and with only a superficial resemblance to the original. But she had never had it moved, even after the death of her mother-in-law.

It was almost the only new thing in the room except for the rose-patterned chintzes. The year before Humphrey died, and for several years afterwards, the covers had been blue, with a violet stripe.

Valentine remembered them clearly.

Humphrey, if he could come back, would expect to see that familiar colouring. And the Spanish leather screen that now stood opposite to where she was sitting had been in one of the spare bedrooms in Humphrey's day. It had been moved to its now permanent station in the hall when the General complained of a draught behind his habitual armchair.

The spaniel, Sally, had grown old and fat. She was nearly fourteen.

Humphrey had probably never seen her at all. But he had had two spaniels himself—both of them dead, now.

It was the people over whom Humphrey might well hesitate longest.

Jess, when he saw her last, had been a baby of five years old, backward of speech and not particularly pretty. He had not taken a great deal of notice of her, perhaps because he was disappointed that she had not been a boy.

Impossible that he should ever recognize that baby in the tall, sprawling, graceful figure of the seventeen-year-old Jess, whose artless use of a candidly vermilion lip-stick only served to emphasize her appearance of young, open-air innocence.

Humphrey would wonder who the officer was and would dismiss him with a phrase, "Not one of us, what."

Reggie? He'd know Reggie, of course, but the arthritis had only begun a year or two before Humphrey's death. Reggie hadn't been a cripple on two sticks before that. Seated, though, as he was now, he wouldn't have changed so very much. Humphrey would think he was on a visit. It wouldn't cross his mind that Reggie could be living at Coombe, paying a very small contribution to the household expenses and bringing with him his dog.

And then, thought Valentine as she had often thought before, there was herself. Humphrey would look first of all at her. She was the person he had cared for most in his life.

He had left her with brown hair—now it was heavily streaked with a silvery grey. There were lines round her eyes and her mouth, and she had lost her colour. She used a pale-rose lip-stick, whereas she had used none at all in his lifetime. Her figure had not altered: she was as slim as she had been at twenty. And yet there was a difference. It was a soft, pliant slimness still but it was, indefinably, not that of youth. One realized that, looking at Primrose or Jessica.

All the same, Humphrey would know her immediately. He would find her altered only in the sense of having grown older. To this conclusion Valentine always came, in her habitual fantasy of Humphrey's return to the home from which he had been carried, in his coffin, twelve years earlier.

Long ago she had been startled by, and had subsequently answered, the question with which her own heart had confronted her.

If that impossible return could take place, if Humphrey could come back, a living man, from the grave, would it awaken happiness in her?

Valentine knew without any doubt that the answer was No.

Humphrey had never given her either happiness or unhappiness. At best, their relationship had achieved a little

pleasure, at most, some discontent.

Valentine, having known both happiness and unhappiness in her earliest youth, could still, at moments, vividly recall either.

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"Oh, that'll be absolutely wizard!" cried Jess in her high, gay voice. "I don't suppose I shall be here myself much longer, I'm expecting to join up any minute practically—but it'll cheer up poor darling aunt Sophy like anything. She adores soldiers. D'you suppose they'll ever take her for a walk?"

"The Colonel's a terrific walker."

"Gosh!" said Jess thoughtfully. "Fancy a colonel."

She did not elucidate the exact grounds of the passing sensation of awe that had evidently prompted the exclamation.

It might have been the thought of the Colonel's rank, or his probable age, or his walking proclivities.

Lieutenant Banks said:

"The Colonel's the most marvellous man that ever lived," in quite inexpressive tones. Then at last he got up.

"Well, thanks frightfully, Lady Arbell."

"Must you go? Why don't you stay to tea?" Jess asked.

"It's terribly kind of you but I can't. I'm supposed to be back at three o'clock and it's ten minutes past four."

"Come on Sunday then. I expect I'll still be here. You could have a bath if you liked, and then tea, and then supper."

The young man's eyes turned towards Valentine.

She ratified Jessica's invitation.

"Thanks frightfully, Lady Arbell."

"Bring one or two other chaps with you, and we might play games or something," cried Jess.

"Yes, do," Valentine said.

Lieutenant Banks said that this was simply terrific, and absolutely marvellously kind, and completely okay so far as

he knew but might he ring up?

Jess picked up aunt Sophy, holding her under her arm so that the puppy's legs all dangled in the air, and conducted Banks to the glass doors and through them.

There they remained, silhouetted against the light, and there they could be heard from time to time in apparently animated discussion punctuated by peals of laughter.

Valentine smiled involuntarily, exhilarated by the spontaneity of the sounds.

She looked at the same time rather apologetically towards her brother who was never in the least exhilarated by the behaviour of very young people, but quite the contrary.

General Levallois, however, was apparently not thinking about Jess and the officer.

He met his sister's eyes meditatively.

"Lonergan," he said. "Wasn't that the name of that feller in Rome?"

"Yes."

"Funny thing, if it should turn out to be the same one."

"It isn't an uncommon name, in Ireland."

"There aren't any uncommon names in Ireland," said the General.

"How did you remember, Reggie? You were in India at the time."

"Mother wrote reams, as she always did. Anyway, I never forget a name. You've never seen or heard of him since, have you?"

"Never," said Valentine.

She smiled.

"It was only a week, you know."

"What was only a week?" demanded Jess from behind her.

"A very silly business," declared the General.

"That happened more than twenty-five years ago," added Valentine gently.

"Mummie! Were you mixed up in it?"

"Yes. I was younger than you are now."

Jess gave her mother an affectionate, amused, incredulous look, before dropping on the floor beside her dog.

"Fancy you being mixed up in any very silly business!" she ejaculated.

---

Leaving them in the hall Valentine went up the steep, curving staircase with its worn carpet, almost threadbare, to her bedroom, shivering as she moved out of the range of the fire.

The stairs, the large circular-railed landing above and the bedrooms were all unheated, and their temperature seemed lower than that of the wet, mild January afternoon out of doors.

Valentine's room was a large, high one with two big windows that looked over the drive and the front of the park.

The furniture was shabby, of mixed periods, and there was not very much of it in proportion to the size of the room.

The walnut double-bed had already been in place, facing the windows, when Humphrey Arbell's mother had come to Coombe as a bride.

Valentine slowly changed her shoes, looked at her face and hair in the looking-glass without much attention and automatically pushed the loose silvery wave over her forehead into position.

She felt faintly disturbed.

It was not that she was afraid of meeting Rory Lonergan—if it should be Rory Lonergan.

On the contrary, she'd be disappointed if it *wasn't* Rory Lonergan. The idea of seeing him again brought with it a

curious emotional excitement, partly amused and partly sentimental.

Her perturbation, Valentine found, arose from a faint sense of remorse that she had, by implication, accepted her brother's trivial estimate of the "very silly business" of twenty-five years earlier.

Reggie would necessarily see it like that—would have seen it like that even if he'd known far more about it than he ever had known.

But Valentine was clearly aware that what had happened that week in Rome in the spring of nineteen hundred and fourteen had held for her a reality that she had never found since.



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The evening meal at Coombe was still called dinner. It was announced, in a breathless and inaudible manner, by a fifteen-year-old parlour-maid.

The General nightly struggled into a patched and faded smoking-jacket of maroon velvet. Valentine Arbell—shuddering with cold—put on a three-year-old black chiffon afternoon dress and a thick Chinese shawl of embroidered silk of which the fringes caught in every available piece of furniture whenever she moved.

Jess, under violent protest, still obeyed the rule that compelled her to exchange warm and comfortable breeches or a tweed skirt and wool jumper for an outgrown silk or cotton frock from the previous summer.

"But once I've gone into uniform, mummie, never again," she said.

Valentine believed her.

As it was, she was always rather surprised that Jess should still do as she was told about changing for dinner when Primrose, at an earlier age, had flatly refused to do so.

"Come on, aunt Sophy," cried Jess hilariously as the mongrel rushed, falling over its own paws, at the young parlour-maid standing in the doorway.

Jess dashed at aunt Sophy, picked her up and allowed her face to be licked all over.

"Don't!" said Valentine involuntarily.

"Put the thing down, Jess," commanded the General. "Carting it about like that!"

Jess ignored them both, without ill-will but from sheer absorption in her dog and her own preoccupations.

Valentine sometimes wondered what those preoccupations were. Jess appeared so artless, so outspoken—yet never did she give one the slightest clue as to what her inmost thoughts might be.

She stood back now, politely, to let her mother precede her into the dining-room. The General shuffled along at his own pace with Sally, the spaniel, morosely crawling at his heels. She was old and fat, and hated leaving the fire in the hall for the unwarmed dining-room.

It was another large room and although shutters protected the three French windows behind their faded blue brocade curtains, a piercing draught always came from beneath the service door at the far end of the room.

It was impossible not to shudder, at the temperature of the dining-room.

The General made his nightly observation:

"This room is like an ice-house."

The oval walnut table, looking not unlike a desert island in the middle of an arctic sea, was laid with wine-glasses that were scarcely ever used, silver that required daily polishing, and a centrepiece of a Paul Lamerie silver rose-bowl.

Valentine disentangled the fringe of her shawl from the arm of her chair and sat down at the head of the table, and General Levallois placed himself at the other end.

Jess shrieked directions to the dogs, knocked over a glass, laughed, and took her place facing the windows.

The conversation, which consisted of isolated observations and uninspired rejoinders, was spaced across long intervals of silence, and the first word was uttered by the General after Ivy, the maid, had left the room.

"These plates are stone-cold, as usual."

"I've told her, Reggie, but you know it's only Mrs. Ditchley. It's not as though she was a proper cook."

"Shall we ever have a proper cook again, mummie?"



"I don't think so, darling. It seems extremely unlikely that anybody will have one, at least until the war's over."

"And then we'll all be Communists, under Stalin, and there'll *be* no servants," said Jess. She glanced at her uncle out of the corners of her eyes.

"I'm not going to rise, Jessica."

Jess and Valentine both laughed, and the General looked pleased with himself.

When the few spoonfuls of thin potato soup were finished, Jess got up, pretended to fall over aunt Sophy and played with her for a moment, and then went and jerked the old-fashioned china bell-handle, painted with roses and pansies, at the side of the empty fireplace.

The harsh, metallic clanging that ensued could be heard in the distance.

Jess sat down again.

She talked to the dogs in an undertone. The General put on his glasses and read the little white menu-card, in its silver holder, that he always expected to find on the table in front of him in the evenings, and that Valentine always wrote out for him.

He inspected it without exhilaration, and pushed it away again.

Ivy came in again, changed the plates, and handed round first a silver entrée dish, and then two vegetable dishes.

"Do we *have* to have baked cod every single day?" Jess asked plaintively.

"It was all I could get."

Much later on, General Levallois addressed his sister.

"I thought we'd agreed not to have the potatoes boiled every time they appear."

"I don't suppose Mrs. Ditchley has many ideas beyond boiling them. And it's not easy to spare any fat for frying them or doing anything amusing. I'll speak to her tomorrow."

Valentine made these rejoinders almost as she might have spoken them in her sleep, so familiar were they.

She knew that the food was uninteresting, ill-prepared, and lacking in variety, and she regretted it, mildly, on her brother's account, rather more on Jessica's.

Both Primrose and Jess had taken a Domestic Science course at school: on Primrose it had apparently made no impression whatever. Jess had acquired some skill at laundry-work and sometimes washed and ironed her own clothes. She said that she hated cooking, house-work and sewing, and never intended to do any of them.

Valentine rather wonderingly remembered her own education, in the various capitals of Europe into which her father's diplomatic career had taken him.

She had learnt two languages besides her own, and knew the rules of precedence at a dinner-party, and she had been a beautiful ballroom dancer and had had a good seat on a horse.

She could think of nothing else that she had ever acquired.

Certainly not the art of housekeeping in England on an inadequate income. She had never done it well, even in Humphrey's lifetime.

Contrary to what a good many people had repeatedly told her, Valentine did not really believe that she could have learned. She disliked everything that she did know about housekeeping and could not persuade herself that it was of sufficiently intrinsic importance to justify the expenditure of time, money and nervous energy that it seemed to require.

"Mummie, d'you think those officers will really be billeted here, this time?"

"They might be, Jess. But we never heard any more of the other ones who said they were coming."

"Still, a *Colonel*. They can't go chopping and changing about with *him*. I hope he'll come and I hope Buster'll be the other one."

"Buster?"

"Lieutenant Banks is always called Buster. He told me so himself. I thought he was divine. Mummie! d'you mean to say we're having a savoury *again*, instead of a sweet?"

Jess picked up, and then threw down, the small knife and fork that had led her to this deduction.

"My dear, it's almost impossible to get anything to make a sweet of, nowadays. And you know, we did have a pudding at lunch."

"Well, God help this poor Colonel person, that's all, if he comes here expecting to be fed."

Jessica's lamentations were seldom meant to be taken seriously.

When Ivy handed round the dish where sardines lay upon dark and brittle fragments of toast, it was not Jess but General Levallois who complained.

"I thought we'd just been eating fish, Val?"

"I know we have. Really and truly, Reggie, we've got to take what we can get nowadays."

"Certainly we have. But I don't think this woman has much idea of what's what. *Surely* she can arrange things so that we don't have two fish courses one on top of the other."

"She can't, but I suppose I could," said Valentine. "I must try and manage better another time."

The gentle politeness of this phrase, in return for a stricture that she thought both graceless and unreasonable, was quite automatic.

For more than twenty years now Valentine had been answering with gentle and polite phrases that meant nothing at all, most of the remarks addressed to her. She had been trained from babyhood to think politeness of the utmost importance, and she had never outgrown, nor sought to outgrow, the habit of it. But she was sometimes conscious that her own good manners afforded her a sense of superiority and of that she was slightly ashamed.

She knew that it had annoyed Humphrey, for the Arbell tradition was the blunter, more outspoken one of the British squirearchy. He had once accused her of never losing her temper.

Valentine could not remember what reply she had made to that.

The true answer, she thought, was that it had never been worth while.

"There's another sardine left, mummie. Do have it."

"No thank you, darling."

"Uncle Reggie? Aren't you going to have it?"

"It doesn't sound as though I were, Jess."

"No truly—*please* do."

"Go on. Take it. I don't want it."

"It would be quite possible to have another tin of sardines opened," said Valentine. "We've really got plenty of those in the store cupboard."

"I'm glad we're not reduced to splitting the last sardine," Jess declared. "Well, if nobody wants it——"

She got up and helped herself from the dish left on the sideboard.

"Shall I ring, now I'm up? I'll have finished long before she gets here."

Ivy's final appearance was for the purpose of clearing everything off the table, sweeping up the crumbs onto a silver salver, and then putting down three Wedgwood dessert plates each with its glass finger-bowl, a decanter with a very little port in it before the General, and a dish of small red apples.

Jess ate one of the apples and the General made his customary gesture of passing round the decanter, from which no one—not even himself—ever poured out a drink.

"You know," said Jess, "I often think this house is a bit like a madhouse. The way we sit here, and let Ivy wait on us, and all that business of clearing away for dessert when there isn't any dessert—honestly, it's bats, isn't it?"

"Must behave like civilized beings," suggested General Levallois, rather wearily and without much conviction.

"Nobody else does. Really and truly. I mean the people at school's houses that I've stayed at, everybody waits on themselves, and it's practically always supper, not dinner, and nobody *dreams* of changing their clothes. And at Rockingham, which is the only grand place I ever go to, there's a butler and a proper dinner. I don't mean that we don't get proper food here, mummie, but it isn't exactly dinner, is it? I mean, not compared to aunt Venetia's."

"Your aunt Venetia's husband is a rich man—or at least he was once. He won't be now," said the General, not without an underlying note of satisfaction.

"I bet you, however poor they get, aunt Venetia and uncle Charlie will go on having salmon and roast duck and pheasants and things. Isn't it awful how one never thinks about anything except food nowadays? Come on, dogs! It's time you thought about food, too."

Jess went out, preceded by the dogs, to feed them in the lobby.

Valentine and the General followed, Valentine disentangling the fringes of her shawl from a chair-back.

In the hall she threw another log on the fire, shook up the cushions and emptied an ash-tray. General Levallois remarked, as she had known that he would:

"Can't the housemaid or one of 'em do that while we're in the dining-room?"

"I could tell her about it."

The child of fourteen who, with Ivy and the cook, completed the indoor staff at Coombe had plenty to do already, and did it sufficiently badly. It would be useless to impose fresh duties on her.

Valentine, however, followed her usual appeasement methods almost without knowing that she did so.

"I should, if I were you," the General assented, as he had done two nights earlier and would do again on the morrow.

"Could you bear it, Reggie, if when Jess has been called up and we're all by ourselves, we had something more like—well, more like high tea? I don't mean at five o'clock, but perhaps at half-past six. It would simplify things, and as Jess says, 'it's what everybody's doing'—except apparently, Venetia and Charlie."

"I suppose we must give up whatever's necessary and I'm the last man on earth to complain, but is that really going to make so much difference? I should have thought we'd done plenty as it was. Where's my whiskey, where's my tobacco, where's my after-dinner coffee?" enquired the General rather piteously. "All given up."

"I know. Well, perhaps we can manage."

"If we're to have two soldiers billeted on us, we shall have to. I'm not going to ask any Army man—even an Irishman—to sit down to high tea."

"I don't suppose they'll come."

The telephone bell rang from the inconvenient and draughty corner, exactly outside the door of the downstairs lavatory, where Humphrey's father had installed it.

"I'll go," shouted Jess from the lobby.

They heard her rushing to it, and the puppy barking.

"There's no such tearing hurry," muttered the General. "Come here, Sally!" he shouted. The old dog ambled up and settled down at his feet.

He slowly put on his spectacles and started work on the crossword puzzle in *The Times*.

Valentine took up her knitting.

She could hear, without distinguishing any words, one side of the telephone conversation. It was evidently someone wanting to talk to Jess. A contemporary, because she was screaming freely and every now and then emitting a shriek of laughter.

Perhaps it was Primrose, speaking from London.

Primrose and Jess often quarrelled when they were together, but they would sometimes hold long, expensive,