

I.

1918

Our son Tim was killed in February. Ten months ago, now. This is the first Christmas, and in that sense alone was always bound to be difficult.

Today is the 23rd, and only this afternoon did I make the customary garlands for the dining room fireplace. Jake brought in the greenery and deposited it on the floor of the study, with a nervous glance at me. I suppose he is still wary, after the trouble I have caused these last weeks. At any rate, he brought in his armful of ivy and mistletoe and willow, as I'd asked him to, without a word, as though he were any other servant.

Making the belated decorations, I found a spider's egg sac frozen amongst the foliage, which turned to a kind of dust as I touched it, making me shudder, leaving me sad at its ruined hopes. I finished the garlands quickly, and had Mrs Fossett pin them up, though of course I eat alone these days – breakfast, luncheon, dinner, the chair opposite quite empty. Nobody to enjoy the garlands but me. I do not think the Fossetts care much about garlands, but still I am glad I made them, if only so that something, anything, might be as usual.

Now my painful hands are leaving green marks on the page.

It is dreadful, of course, not to have Tim here, though in fact this will be the third year I have missed seeing his face on Christmas Day: 1915, that was the last time. Tim's training was finished, and in the January, he would be going over. He always liked marzipan on Christmas cake, smooth and thick as a counterpane, but I hadn't been able to get the sugar for it. The afternoon he came home I was still fussing with the cake, how to make it look less

bare, while Jake went to the station to collect him. After his previous visit home, I was resolved, this time, to keep an irreproachable grip upon my emotions.

I tried to tell myself I was reconciled to Tim's going. I had held out against his joining up. Then they had come in the summer to make lists of all the men. Only that, only lists, but it suddenly seemed inevitable. Tim had turned nineteen, in any case, and volunteered. Then, a week before his visit, the list makers had come again to the house. I'd told them the truth. That Fossett was over the age; Jake not quite, but that one of his legs was two inches shorter than the other, and he cannot run without pain. I answered the men's questions, Fossett hovering nervously at my back, and told them that they already had our boy. Our only boy.

When Tim arrived he was in uniform, a dreadful, stiff thing; he looked older. He kissed me tenderly and gave me one or two wry looks, while Mrs Fossett brought tea and Richard began to deliver what he considered to be the men's news: smuggling convictions in the district; a mare sold as pregnant who turned out only to have a tumour inside her the size of a grapefruit; disputed fence boundaries. He was thinking of reviewing the rents for the top fields. The drainage needed repair by the bottom road.

I sat, picking the bits of peel out of my cake, and tried to admire Richard's assiduousness, his attention to detail. His ability to be ordinary, even in the face of this. But the dull green-brown of Tim's uniform insisted upon itself, and I looked at Richard, I looked at my own husband, and I thought: he doesn't care. Our son is going to *that*, and he doesn't care.

So I took myself off, as soon as Mrs Fossett put her head in for the plates. I went outside, to the freezing but sunny bench, and tilted my face upward, and felt the light on my closed eyelids, and listened to the voices of the men through the dining room window. There are winter days, in our part of Cornwall, which make a pale, cruel imitation of summer.

After a quarter or half an hour, Tim came out, and sat himself down, and asked how things were faring at my end. Then, more softly, 'How have you been, Mother?' A little touch, on the back of my hand. 'Really, I mean.'

‘Oh! Well enough,’ I said. And then, ‘I’ve missed you.’

He moved his arm, kindly, dismissively. ‘It’s no different than when I went up to Oxford, surely.’

I looked at him – of course it was different – and he dipped his head in acceptance.

‘In any case,’ I said, ‘Oxford, you know, I can *imagine* that.’

He accepted this, too, but I instantly regretted having said it, because suddenly it was clear to me, utterly clear, as it can be only to a mother. That despite his loud brave voice and his bright new buttons, he was frightened.

Besides, I had determined not to argue with him any more. I wanted instead to say something to him, something that would make him just get *through* it, would prevent him from being brave. But I did not know what that thing would be. In silence, we watched a blackbird prospecting the lawn, and then he said something about the training having not been so bad.

Then I asked, ‘But you don’t know where you’ll be stationed?’

‘They don’t tell us. I rather like it.’ He was moving his feet around, scuffing his boots, and I almost said a sharp word to him: but of course he was still getting used to them. Perhaps they were painful. I held back from asking about blisters, but I did press his hand, where it rested on the bench. Ridiculous in its solidity, it seems now. So very warm.

‘You mustn’t worry,’ Tim said, and when I didn’t answer, shaded his eyes and turned to me. ‘I’ll write.’

I looked away into the garden and Tim looked, too.

I said, ‘Did I tell you? Theo Stainforth’s mother says he’s getting married.’

Tim shifted on the bench. ‘Do pass on my congratulations,’ he said, lightly. ‘Good old Theo.’

Then Tim went away, and the waiting began. But I was born for that. My great-uncle was a gunpowder maker. St Rumon’s is tucked into a fold of land, deep woods stretching up to the open fields and below to the reed beds of the estuary, but though the water is salt there is no sight of the sea. No fishing, here: the village men are employed on the Earl of Falmouth’s estate or on the

farms. The same families handing down the job of gamekeeper or dairyman, father to son. Or, until the Polneath mills closed, there was powder making – coarse powder for blasting, fine powder for shooting.

Powder makers do little but wait. The incorporators especially, crouching outside their pairs of mills, listening, listening for that catch in the workings which might mean a piece of grit, a spark, disaster. The mill hands could not smoke their tobacco – nor chew, in case it should drown out the sound of the millstones – and so they simply held the stuff, silently, in either cheek. The mark of a St Rumon's man is still a quiet manner, a ghostly brown smile.

At any rate, I waited. I found it easier after Tim left to avoid the news, though Richard read the paper from cover to cover, calm, implacable. And then, of course, most days there were telegrams. They had always been common enough, in our household, with Richard's work, and until Tim went away he had treated them with nonchalance. Fossett would come into the dining room and lay down the little salver, and Richard would thoroughly wipe his lips, place his napkin to one side, and open the message, using his letter knife with precisely his usual exactitude, while Fossett went to ask Jake to bring the car round. But it was different, once Tim was away. The doorbell would ring, and I would jump; and if it was a telegram, Richard would open it quickly, fumblingly, while I looked on.

The day Tim's came, it was as though Richard knew. There was a letter opener at his elbow, but in haste he tore the message with his thumb instead, leaving that cloudy ragged edge on the paper, the exact shape of which I would come to know so well. His lips moved, and he looked up. I let out a small sound, the kind one can't always keep in when the doctor has to do something painful.

KILLED.

Just that.

I didn't understand, about the phrasing, not then. I think perhaps that Richard didn't, either. Men don't pick over these things amongst themselves, the way women do.

*

For some days, I lay face down on my bed. Richard was out a great deal, and I imagined him striding into his club in Falmouth, handing his hat over to be hung up, being greeted by all the other gentlemen whose sons had fallen, as though they had tripped and skinned their knees at rugger.

I imagined them all, condoling, congratulating, while I lay in bed, imagining *how*. Father having been a doctor, I had heard plenty of talk of the powder accidents of past years, which were my nearest comparison. And perhaps it was that association which led me to find myself, in those first days of my grief, thinking of Polneath again. Thinking of Edward Tremain; and then, appalled that I could be thinking at such a time of anything but Tim, tormenting myself all the more with what might have happened to him. Shards of wood bedded deep in the stomach, the bruised organs of a man blown clear. All kinds of seeping, gasping pain.

I pushed Polneath, pushed Edward, out of my mind, and concentrated on fretting and fretting that Tim's death had been slow. It never occurred to me that it might have been shameful; until, a few weeks later, my friend Edith came. It was the first time she had been back to St Rumon's since her father had retired from the parish and moved to join her in London. Her boots were too nice for our late winter dirt, but she was kind. She did not tell me what to be grateful for, nor produce stories of other people and other people's griefs.

She wouldn't have pried, except that she picked up a small blue glass horse she had given me many years before, which had been weighting the telegram to the table. Then she saw it, and looked at me in enquiry, and I nodded, and I watched her read it. The years have scarcely touched Edith, her hair hardly faded, her face the same lovely oval. Altered, as she read, with a frown.

She supplied – reluctantly, after some pressing – that the frown was at the simplicity of it. 'Killed in action', you see, one knew what that meant, and 'died of wounds', too. But 'killed' – well.

Go on, I said.

But she retreated quickly, and replied that it was only that she hadn't seen that form of words before.

A few days later, I failed in my resolve to put Edith's comment out of my mind, and asked the vicar's wife, when she came to return a pudding dish she had borrowed months before. She frowned, just as Edith had, and turned the cut-crystal dish nervously about in her hands. 'Killed in action', she said, meant in the course of duty: quick. 'Died of wounds' was next best: that meant the man had not lingered long, but passed away at a clearing station, or at a hospital just behind the lines. But 'killed': killed meant something unusual, something amiss. More than that, she could not say.

It was easy not to resume the slot in the church flower rota, which I had abandoned when news of Tim had first arrived. Easy, too, to refuse the vicar's wife's kind invitations, and those few others that came from ladies in the district. Easy to shut myself away and fret, until, a week after Easter, another visitor came to give shape to my fretting: Theo Stainforth. Richard had known Theo's father, who had some sort of mining interest. Theo had gone from Truro Grammar up to Oxford the year before Tim, though they had drifted since. But I had continued to correspond occasionally with his mother, and not long after Tim died, I'd learned that Theo had been wounded. He ought to come and see you, his mother had written – only that, he ought to come and see you. And so of course, I had replied. Of course he must come and see us.

I didn't tell Richard until the morning of his visit. When Richard pointed out that I hadn't mentioned it, I said he needn't sit with us, then.

Having avoided visitors for so long, I had to remind myself to look in the mirror before going downstairs, for I was still lying down a great deal during the day. I studied my reflection as the bell rang in the hall, trying to make my hair less of a fright.

I remembered Theo as a kind boy. Rather dim. Solid and sporting, so it was a shock to come downstairs and see a young man, rake thin and missing an arm. Or the lower part at least. Whatever was left below the elbow was tucked, coddled into a sling, as though it might be comforted.

I received him at the front door, Fossett trying to get out of the

way, Richard lurking in the hall at my back and Mrs Fossett behind him, come out of the kitchen for a look at this boy who had known Tim.

'It's terribly good of you,' I said, meeting the boy's eyes very pointedly; not looking, not at all, at the arm.

'I'm sorry it's taken me so long,' he said. He moved the sling. 'I got this soon after Tim – but of course, they kept me in hospital a good while . . .'

'How's your wife?' I said.

He smiled, uncertainly. 'She's expecting a child in June.' He saw Richard looking at the arm, and he moved it again, and said, 'Shrapnel. Four days before they could get us back.' With his good hand, he was digging in his watch pocket, and he produced a hard, sharp scrap of something, as big as a shilling. 'Septic,' the boy said.

Richard reached to take the piece of metal. I felt a wave of frustration, waiting there as he examined it, silently handed it back.

'They had to amputate, of course,' the boy said.

'Let's go through,' I said. 'Mrs Fossett will bring us something.'

Theo followed me to the conservatory. Richard stood in the doorway a few moments, but then of course he came in, and sat. Theo's jacket kept trying to fall off his shoulder, where it was draped in an almost coquettish way. It made me think of managing a stole one is not used to, over a gown, at some formal occasion. At any rate, his face contorted briefly in impotent rage as he pulled his jacket straight for the fifth time, before settling again into worried politeness.

First, we gave him tea, while I asked a great many questions about the child. Whether they had a cradle yet, whether they had thought about names. Mrs Fossett had made a simnel cake, which was disastrously crumbly and, I quickly saw, impossible to manage without another hand to hold the plate. The only possibility was not to see the crumbs that the boy was obliged to drop all over himself. Richard did not eat a bite, but only watched him.

When the cake was done with, I said, 'And so, you were stationed near Tim?'

Theo nodded. 'My unit was sent up next to his.' The boy said that they had been days in the line; a strange, quiet, tense part of

it that saw little action but frayed the nerves, the Germans being rather close. As it happened, that morning a German patrol had been shot from our trenches, having failed to get back to their lines before dawn broke, so the feeling was worse than usual, of something coming, of something about to break.

'And you were there,' I said. 'When he —'

'Not on the spot,' Theo said, shifting in his seat. 'Is that what Mother —? No.' He looked at me. Said, reluctantly, 'But I did see.'

I looked at Richard, then back at the boy. 'You saw what happened?'

'Yes,' Stainforth said. He looked uncertain now.

I found suddenly that perhaps I did not want to know, after all, that perhaps it was better not to know. But it was too late now.

'It was . . . I'm not sure. Late afternoon,' he continued. Looked down again. 'The sun was setting. I wouldn't have known anything of it, except I had rather a useless fellow on watch, and I went up to check on him.'

'And then?' I said.

Richard was looking at his hands.

'Tim was —' The boy broke off.

'Shot?' Richard said.

'Yes, sir.'

'But how?' I said. 'How, if he was in the trench, safe in the trench?'

Theo paused. 'I suppose he . . . I suppose it rather appeared to me that he . . . stood up.'

'Suppose?' said Richard.

I glanced at Richard. 'You mean, above the —?' I moved my hand, unsure of the word.

Theo looked away, as though there was something worrying him outside the window. 'Yes. His head was over the parapet. I'm afraid I saw him simply stand up, and . . .' The boy stopped, seemed unsure whether to say more. He looked at us, one to the other. There was a long silence. 'The fact is, you're crouched double like that, all the time, and it drives you —'

'Yes, quite,' Richard said.

But I was leaning forward. 'You said the sun was setting. Perhaps he thought he couldn't be seen.'

Theo swallowed miserably. 'It wasn't dark yet.' He looked at me. 'There were no orders to attack.' He stopped, and then murmured, 'There isn't one of us who hasn't felt the urge, you know.'

'To attack?' I said.

But Theo didn't answer. He looked at Richard.

'I was one of the first along,' the boy said, and then he began on how it had been too late, already, by the time he reached Tim; that his mother had thought I might be comforted by that.

Somehow, we all managed to pretend that Theo had not said what he had said, that he had not implied what he had implied, while the car was brought round. I was thinking of the bullet, swift, we knew that now, to the face. Cheekbone, or forehead, or his temple where that little pulse had used to beat, when he was an infant. He had simply stood up. Quick, then, after all. Quick.

At last, Mrs Fossett put her head in.

'Jake will take you back to the station,' I said.

Richard and I both went to the front door, and I raised a hand to the car as it swung round by the hedge, and Theo Stainforth raised his own good hand in reply. That could have been Tim, I thought. A kind wound like that.

The crocuses which Jake had planted were still showing raggedly mauve and blue. It was the first day upon which it was not quite painful to stand in the fresh air. Perhaps that was why I did not shut the front door straight away. Instead, I stood on the step to breathe for a moment, and Richard lingered beside me. The Fossetts, as though they knew what was coming, had made themselves scarce.

Without looking at Richard, I said, quietly, 'What ought we to tell people?'

'About what?'

'Well. What he saw -'

'What he thought he saw,' Richard said, calmly.

I turned. 'You suppose he was mistaken?'

'A great deal has happened to the boy, clearly -' He had stepped back in, gone into his study.

I closed the front door to follow him, halting on the threshold.

'I mean, who knows what went on there.' He gestured to his arm.

'You don't *wish* to know what happened,' I said.

He leaned on the desk with both palms. 'What good would it do?'

Coldly, I said, 'Or you already did know.'

'What on earth are you driving at?'

'You kept it from me. About the telegram. What it means. Mrs Benson told me, that simply "killed" means something queer. You needn't lie –'

'Why on *earth* would I lie?'

'I don't mean lie. I don't mean that.'

He had taken his hands from the desk and stood straight now, facing me.

I looked away from him. 'But we ought at least now to write to some of the officers in Tim's unit . . .' I paused. 'To be certain.'

'We'll do nothing of the kind.'

'See? You *don't* wish to know.'

'You can't ask a man to do his duty,' he said, 'to fight for his country, and then rake over it –'

He was calm again, explaining, as though to a child, and for a moment, I hated him.

'You were the one,' I said, 'who wanted him to serve.'

He had unscrewed his pen, to refill it, but now he stopped in that operation, and stared at me.

'I was trying to make him wait for the call-up,' I said. 'Every day he was in this house I tried to persuade him, and you did nothing.'

Still he kept his calm, laid the halves of the pen down. 'They were conscripting soon after. We don't know that it would have gone any differently. It might have turned out worse.'

'But we could have kept him clear of it. Another week, another month –'

'He wanted to serve with his friends.'

'And you wanted to look well in front of yours,' I said.

He moved then, quick as a coiled spring, and I backed a step into the doorway, frightened, though even now as he spoke, he mastered himself, his voice cold.

‘You were the one,’ he said, ‘who asked what we ought to tell people.’

He pushed the door into my face, gently but firmly, and I was out alone on the cold tiles of the hall, the clock ticking on decorously at the foot of the stairs.

I went upstairs, and lay face down on my bed, eyes shut and leaking. My blouse grew warm and damp and crushed. Not for the first time, I thought that if I could only stay still for long enough, I too might die. All that it would require would be persistence.

But as the light faded in the window, there came a tap at the door. I said nothing, and it opened. I felt Richard sit on the side of the bed, a careful foot away.

‘My dear,’ he said. ‘My dear, come down for some dinner.’

‘I’m not hungry,’ I replied.

Richard hated losing his temper. That was why he had come up: to make amends for a momentary failure of calm. It maddened me, knowing that, even as I lay there – as did the knowledge that if I came down, if I ate my dinner, Richard would think that order had been restored. That everything was alright.

But my body was betraying me. My stomach growled, and to disguise it I sat up, swung my legs over the side of the bed. He watched me brush myself down.

Then he said, ‘I wish Stainforth had never come.’

Downstairs, there was a piece of fish, and potatoes and spring cabbage. The fish was overdone. I suppose Mrs Fossett was upset: she has always been an inveterate listener at doors. I made my way through the fish regardless, soothed by the methodical penitence of picking out the bones. Fossett lurked about, nervously, his large red hands rattling the silver as he fetched and cleared. I knew better than to say anything more then. Richard never liked to speak in front of the servants.

After Fossett went away, we sat for a moment, each with an inch of wine remaining. Ordinarily, this is when one or other of us would have briskly excused ourselves, but that day we did not. Perhaps we both felt that there was nowhere to excuse ourselves to. Richard looked pink-faced and tired.

I thought about saying nothing.

But I said, 'The trouble is, it's my fault.'

Richard raised his head. 'How can it possibly be your fault?'

'I mean, it's my comeuppance. Isn't it? Well. Or ours.'

He wouldn't look at me. I could feel that I was flushed, excited.

Mrs Fossett came in with a tray. Her eyes were swollen. 'Oh, forgive me,' she said.

'Never mind, we're getting up now,' Richard said. He put down his napkin as he rose.

His clothes were as pressed and perfect as they had been that morning, while I was conscious of being horribly creased, my hair all anyhow.

Coolly, Richard said, 'You might sweep around the wicker chair in the conservatory, Mrs Fossett, when you have a moment.'

'Of course, sir,' she replied.

I followed him out into the hall, thinking he would go into the drawing room, where Fossett had laid another profligate blaze. But Richard paused on the shining tiles, muttered something about going to bed, then walked slowly, heavily up the stairs.

It was the last time I ever saw him do so.

That was the night the dream came for the first time. Polneath. Licking orange. Somewhere the crash of a beam falling. The feeling of being out of doors, insufficiently clothed.

I had moved into Tim's room after the telegram, feeling that there was no longer any point in pretending. His had been the small room at the front, leaving three larger for guests who rarely came. He seemed to prefer the smaller room, I suppose because it felt friendly. No dark corners, no ominous cupboards.

I woke from the dream, morning light creeping between the drapes. It took me a moment to understand that I could not truly smell smoke. The narrowness of his bed had prevented me somewhat from thrashing about, but still I was drenched in sweat. I lay listening, certain someone was there. That Tim had come back. It was the absolute feeling of him, just exactly his suppressed way of being still. He was under the bed. I was afraid to look, and ashamed to be afraid.

I hauled myself to the edge of the bed and, holding my breath, looked.

Nothing.

I lay back, and breathed. Why was I dreaming of Polneath? But I knew very well why.

Comeuppance. The bill sent in, after thirty years.

The previous day rushed in upon me. Theo's visit. What had his mother meant by sending him? It was hard not to feel that she had been gloating. Look, here is my son, and almost whole. And then Richard, Richard of all people, asking what good it would do, to enquire. But I knew that there would be no rest without knowing for certain that it was as I suspected, that the fault of Tim's death lay with me. Without knowing whether what Theo Stainforth had implied was true.

I resolved to defy Richard. I would write to some of Tim's fellow officers, I thought, as I summoned Mrs Fossett to ask for bathwater.

Richard wasn't up yet, she told me, as she arranged the soap and towel, the small pitcher for rinsing my hair. She said she hoped that the master wouldn't be troubled with more visitors that day.

I replied that I was sure he would not be; that he might appreciate his coffee in bed.

I waited until she was gone, before I took off my nightgown. I stepped into the water. It was too hot, but I kept my foot where it was, bearing the heat until I should grow used to it.

I heard Mrs Fossett come back up, her steps careful with the loaded tray.

The creak of his bedroom door.

And then came a crash, and a cry of panic, and running feet on the stairs.

2.

1888

The inquest would estimate the date and time of William Tremain's death as the 23rd of December 1888, in the small hours of the morning. As he died, I sat oblivious in my kitchen, drinking my tea, watching the clock. Father was late, but it was not the first time that I had listened to midnight strike, alone, waiting. Everyone always seemed to save their emergencies for when Father might most hope to be at home in bed, or at least with his feet pushed up close to the grate. Almost Christmas, and yesterday there had been a carthorse down in its traces, which kicked the man trying to get it up; then, the parish constable with a nasty fall – bruises and a badly sprained wrist – as well as the usual colds and rheumatisms. Father had hardly paused all week, in fact, so that as it got dark and the foreman of the powder mills came to say his wife's waters had gone, I had sorely considered speaking sternly to Father and insisting he call in someone from Truro. But Father had gone himself, hours ago, and I had finished my tasks, sent Mrs Humphrey home, and settled down to wait. Though the parlour was all decked out for Christmas, I had chosen to wait in the kitchen, where the fire was in, and the only sign of the season a large ham sitting cooling near the stove.

At least the foreman lived in the village. The weather had just that day turned dry after weeks of freezing rain, but the wind had not abated, and the roads were dreadful. I had been trying to persuade Father to get a gig, but he liked his old horse Tess, though she made his journeys around the parish no swifter than they would have been on foot.

I stood, and paced about, and peered into the glass over the mantelpiece. The truth of it was that I was oppressed by the

thought of festivity. My ordinary blue eyes looked back at me, dark in the dim kitchen; I poked at my hair, more brown now than gold. I missed my friend Edith, who had married that autumn. She would be at her new house, in London, putting together gifts for her new neighbours. Going to hear concerts. I knew, looking into the glass, that I would never leave St Rumon's, never be free of my duties of helping Father with his patients, of fruitlessly tending the chest complaints of the powder makers, of answering the door while Father was over at the Polneath mills to look at a crushed thumb, a lower back suddenly in spasm.

There came a creak, and I glanced away from the glass, but no. Every rush of wind in the bare tree branches, I thought it was Father coming in. I'd never liked birth, how dreadfully and suddenly it could turn, and each one a reminder of all the others that have gone before. The happy ones – ones the child survived, and the woman did – and then the ones by which both were taken, as my mother and brother had been, when I was twelve years old. The wind throbbed in the chimney and made the fire back and smoke, and I stepped away to save my petticoat, which was clean on that day. The night seemed to collect and merge in the darkness with all those other nights. How Mother would fret, when Father was out at a birth.

And yet: births, illnesses, accidents, that was life, and there had been nothing dreadful lately. Father had been managing, had been getting, on the whole, seven hours' sleep and three meals per day. Seeing to that had always been my occupation – my sole occupation, now, since Edith had gone away. I stood, warming my legs at the hearth, pinching my cheeks. I had overheard a woman in church say that nineteen was no age to be married. But for myself, I felt ancient. I licked a finger, and smoothed first one brow, then the other. Edith's sister had asked me to make up a party for charades on the 27th, and I supposed I would go, even though Rose and her friends were two years younger, and it would hardly be the same. There would be men there, though likely none I had not already met, already discounted. Though I had been finding all other men more agreeable since Father had

found more frequent cause to mention Mr Boscawen, the district coroner, who had the big white house on the top road.

As for Edward Tremain, he wouldn't go to the party. He couldn't, even if he wished to: by my calculation, he was not quite out of mourning for his wife.

I wondered if the frock I had worn for Edith's wedding breakfast would do.

But here, now, Father came – the sound of the front door loud and distinct, after all, as it knocked into the coat stand. I poured out his tea, overstewed, and put the kettle back on its stand, to rescue it. He came in, looking like a cloth that had been thoroughly wrung out. But cheerful.

I got up, and took his bag from him. 'Is everybody well?'

He nodded. 'A boy.'

He sat down, and I passed him his cup.

'Name yet?'

'Noel.' He set his cup back down in the saucer – rather a cheap set, for I had finally put away Mother's wedding service. The cup rattled as he tried to extricate his finger from the handle.

We both smiled. We had been doing that for months: he shaking, myself pretending not to see.

I set the bag on the table, and nodded at his plate of bread and jam. 'That's the last of the gooseberry,' I said, and sat down opposite.

I felt drowsy suddenly – quite contented. I had loved these moments, ever since Mother had died and the task of sitting up had fallen to me. Father and I would have our 'midnight feasts', scratch meals of which Mrs Humphrey would discover the crumbs the next morning, and only be able to scold when it was too late. I could relish the excitement of a difficult birth, or some other emergency. Once it was over.

'Edith has written,' I said.

Father had jam at the side of his whiskers; but I would wait, and tell him when he had finished.

'Oh yes? What does she say?'

'I don't know. I'm saving it for Christmas Day. Since there won't be another before then.'

He nodded. The jam glistened.

'I wonder if they've fixed any dates for Paris,' I said.

She could chaperone me, now. That was the only silver lining. It was different than when we had dreamed of it together, before, knowing that there would be no point in so much as asking permission; now, our going would be unimpeachably proper. Her husband was a sensible fellow, a surveyor for the railways.

Father had put down his slice, and detected the stray jam. He engaged in some careful licking, and then said, 'My dear, Edith might not – now that she's married, she might not –'

The clock struck one, and it was then that the hammering came.

I hesitated a moment, before I moved to the door. I would, I really would insist they sent to Truro, or waited till morning. But it was Boscawen, the coroner. Was he ill himself? He did not look ill. But he had been running.

'Fire,' he said. 'At Polneath.'

My stomach dropped unpleasantly. The powder mills. Everyone in St Rumon's feared fire.

'At this time of night?' Father said. He had stooped to tie his boots again, and craned his neck to look up at Boscawen. 'How many hurt?'

Boscawen was unpleasantly out of breath, his cheeks red. 'Not the mills. The big house.'

'Is it out?' I said. I was attending to Father's bag. I had unloaded a variety of bloodied rags on to the scrubbed kitchen table, and now I was holding the morphia bottle up to the light. At Boscawen's approving look, I put the bottle down.

'They were making sure when I left. It didn't spread beyond the north wing. Tremain's office on the ground floor, and above, one of the bedrooms used by the female servants,' he said, in a rush. 'The maid lost her head rather. Her skirt caught fire, and she ended up in the pond. She was insensible, but breathing. The cook has turned her ankle, and Tremain looked a little singed to me, but –' He tried to catch his breath. 'The maid caught the worst of it, I think.'

'And Mr Edward?'

Boscawen looked at me. 'He seemed alright.'

Father reached for his bag. 'I trust she is being kept warm –'

I had taken off my apron, and balled it up in my hand. He raised his eyebrows, as I fastened my coat.

'I'm coming, too,' I said, firmly.

'I'm on foot –' Boscawen said.

I asked Father whether I should tack up Tess, but he protested that he had only just rubbed her down, it would take longer than it was worth, that he could perfectly well walk. I didn't protest, only put the guard over the fire, and followed them out.

I tried to tell myself my nerves were rattled from fretting about the birth. Smoke inhalation, I thought. A chill, minor burns. Salve, bed rest, a little steam. It comforted me to rehearse the diagnoses and the remedies. Mr Edward was well, I told myself. But something already felt dreadfully wrong.

We took the short way, the lane skirting the foot of the Polneath woods, which extended a mile or more on every side of the mills, and through which Old Tremain, Mr Edward's father, was known to hunt. I had glimpsed Old Tremain more than once, through the trees, his shotgun draped over his arm, and ducked out of sight behind the wall, counted to a hundred as he passed on. Occasionally, he would nail a badger kit to the posts of the mill gates, as though the little corpses diminishing in the wind would teach others to keep away. But tonight the gateposts were empty, the gates open, as we turned up the track through the mills. Father walked in the middle, and we had to keep shortening our strides for him. I walked close to him, trying to shield him from the wind which was thrashing in the oaks whose boughs almost joined overhead.

Men poached in the Polneath woods. The walls around them were high, but there were trees which grew close enough to help scale them. A less agile man could creep in during the day, and lie waiting for dark. Tremain grudged what he spent on lead shot; for hares and rabbits he'd lay little delicate snares. The gun, it was said, he reserved for birds and men. Mrs Humphrey had always told me to keep out of the Polneath woods, and I had certainly never been in them alone, and never been in them at night. Some said

Tremain was not so bad, only a little gruff, but even had he and the poachers not frightened me, there had always been foolish talk of a ghost in those woods: a yellow ghost, a child, though nobody could say whose child, or where the story had sprung from.

We walked without lights, there being enough to see our way, just, from the moon between the racing clouds, which picked out the paler track from the darker woods. I had last been up to the mills in the spring, after an owl had got into one of the incorporating mills – Tremain had not been attending to the rooves, one of the hands had said, and now look. The owl must have got grit into the workings, for a pair of the mills had gone up. We had heard the blast at home, but there was no one badly hurt, only a stray fragment of stone to remove from the foreman's cheek. 'Lucky,' Father had said, as the foreman perched on a stool, and Father steadied his tweezers.

It had not been like the other time, when I was little. I could still summon the noise of that. Mother saying it was fortunate that her uncle had retired from his position there. That explosion had moved rocks which now the moss grew over, and the intestines of one of the incorporators had been found festooned in a tree a clear mile away. It had put out the windows in the lodge keeper's house – almost a half-mile distant – but it had not touched the big house, huddled behind its great blast wall.

I had not seen Edward Tremain, when the owl got in, in the spring. Only his father, raising his voice to the works carpenter. Old Tremain was the sort of man who wished to think himself cheated; who, if a thing did not work the first time, kicked it, to see if that would make it go. He also liked to think himself clever, but he drank his money and so, as the years had gone on, had become penny-pinching, too.

His son was as different from him as day from night. He really *was* clever, and generous, and liked in the village; people had been hoping for years that he would settle to the mills, bring in new ways of doing things, though no one had imagined it to be the loss of his young wife, not quite a year earlier, which would bring him back to Polneath at last. All year I had only seen him in church, where he had looked light, starved, gentle; the little boy,

William, sturdy and watchful. A lovely child, and Edward as dotting a father as Old Tremain had been a harsh one.

We passed the mill buildings, the wind buffeting the bare trees planted to keep the air moist and cushion the shock of any accidental blast. The rushing sound of branches drowned out the trickle of the filigree network of waterways, falls and runnels which turned the mill wheels and dampened the air. My teeth were chattering, and it was not only with the cold. I had long been foolish about Edward Tremain. Only a few days ago, I had prayed, let something, let anything happen to bring me into a room with Edward Tremain. And now look.

But nobody badly hurt, I reminded myself. I would not think about him any more.

Father slowed for breath, and Boscawen and I held up, too. Now that we might hear each other, Boscawen said, 'I hope the maid's alright. That fellow fished her out, I think he's the gardener -'

'Jake,' I said. 'Jake Feltham.'

Father looked at me. 'Yes, I should think it was Feltham.'

'What of the little boy?' I asked Boscawen.

'Mr Edward was looking for him.'

'William's been missed?' Father said.

Boscawen moved his hand, dismissive. 'He'll have got frightened. Run off somewhere. It was only the servants' wing, as I said. The cook and the maid are both out.'

He started on again, and we followed him. There was the blast wall, grown up with young trees and moss, and the little fold in it where one could get through.

We emerged beside the pond; the house four-square in the darkness, lights burning in one of the downstairs rooms. Over by the north wing there were more lights, men moving about and calling to one another. As we approached, I recognized Boscawen's man, and the lodge keeper behind him. Both grey-faced.

'It's all out, thank God,' the lodge keeper said. 'The master's office is a sorry mess.' He lowered his voice. 'Looks as though it spread upstairs, but started in there. Can't tell how.'

Old Tremain appeared then, from the gaping door of the north wing, and threw down an empty bucket. Boscawen's man nodded