

Poor Irish Protestants is what the Fogartys are: butler and cook. They have church connections, and conversing with Miss Fogarty people are occasionally left with the impression that their father was a rural dean who suffered some misfortune: in fact he was a sexton. Fogarty is the younger and the smaller of the pair, brought up by Miss Fogarty, their mother dying young. His life was saved by his sister's nursing the time he caught scarlatina, when he was only eight.

Dapper in his butler's clothes, a slight and unimposing man with a hazelnut face, Fogarty is at present fascinated by the newly arrived governess: Anna Maria Heddoe, from somewhere in England, a young woman of principle and sensibility, stranger and visitor to Ireland. Fogarty is an educated man, and thinks of other visitors there have been: the Celts, whose ramshackle gypsy empire expired in this same landscape, St Patrick with his holy shamrock, the outrageous Vikings preceding the wily Normans, the adventurers of the Virgin Queen. His present employers arrived here also, eight years ago, in 1839. The Pulvertafts of Ipswich, as Fogarty thinks of them, and wishes they had not bothered to make the journey after old Hugh Pulvertaft died. House and estate fell away under the old man, and in Fogarty's opinion it is a pity the process didn't continue until everything was driven back into the clay it came from. Instead of which along had come the Pulvertafts of Ipswich, taking on more staff, clearing the brambles from the garden in their endeavour to make the place what it had been in the past, long before the old man's time. The Pulvertafts of Ipswich belong here now. They make allowances for the natives, they come to terms, they learn to live with things. Fogarty has watched surprise and dismay fade from their faces. He has watched these people becoming important locally, and calling the place they have come to 'home'. Serving them in the dining-room, holding for them a plate of chops or hurrying to them a gravy dish, he wishes he might speak the truth as it appears to him: that their fresh, decent blood is the blood of the invader though they are not themselves invaders, that they perpetrate theft without being thieves. He does not dislike the Pulvertafts of Ipswich, he has nothing against them beyond the fact that they did not stay where they were. He and his sister might alone have attended the mouldering of the place, urging it back to the clay.

The governess is interesting to Fogarty because she is another of the strangers whom the new Pulvertafts have gathered around them in their advent. Such visitors, in the present and in the past, obsess the butler. He observes Miss Heddoe daily; he studies her closely and from a distance, but he does not reveal his obsession to his sister, who would consider it peculiar. He carries Miss Heddoe's meals to her room when normally this duty would be Cready's or Brigid's; he reads the letters she receives, and the diary she intermittently keeps.

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October 15th, 1847. I look out of the window of my attic room, and in the early morning the men are already labouring on the road that is to encircle the estate. The estate manager, the one-armed Mr Erskine, oversees them from his horse. Mr Pulvertaft rides up, gesturing about some immediate necessity – how a particular shrub must be avoided, so his gestures suggest, or where best to construct a bridge. The estate manager listens and assents, his men do not cease in their work. Beyond the trees, beyond the high stone walls of the estate, women and children die of the hunger that God has seen fit to visit upon them. In my prayers I ask for mercy.

October 17th, 1847. Fogarty came in with my dinner on a tray and said that the marks of the stigmata had been discovered on a child.

‘Is the child alive?’ I demanded when he returned a half-hour later for the tray.

‘Oh yes, miss. No doubt on that. The living child was brought to Father Horan.’

I was amazed but he seemed hardly surprised. I questioned him but he was vague; and the conversation continuing because he lingered, I told him the Legend of the True Cross, with which he was unfamiliar. He was delighted to hear of its elaborations, and said he would recount these in the kitchen. The stigmata on the child have been revealed on feet and hands only, but the priest has said that other parts of the body must be watched. The priest has cautiously given an opinion: that so clearly marked a stigma has never before been known in Ireland. The people consider it a miracle, a sign from God in these distressful times.

October 20th, 1847. I am not happy here. I do not understand this household, neither the family nor the servants. This is the middle of my third week, yet I am still in all ways at a loss. Yesterday, in the afternoon, I was for the first time summoned to the drawing-room to hear Adelaide play her pieces, and George Arthur’s lessons being over for the day he sat by me, as naturally he should. Charlotte and her mother occupied the sofa, Emily a chair in a recess. Mr Pulvertaft stood toasting his back at the fire, his riding-crop tapping time on the side of his polished boot. They made a handsome family picture – Emily beautiful, Charlotte petite and pretty, the plump motherliness of Mrs Pulvertaft, her husband’s ruddy presence. I could not see George Arthur’s features, for he was a little in front of me, but I knew them well from the hours I have surveyed them across our lessons-table. He is bright-faced, and dark like all the family except Mrs Pulvertaft, whose hair I would guess was red before becoming grey. Only Adelaide, bespectacled and seeming heavy for her age, does not share the family’s gift of grace. Poor Adelaide is cumbersome; her movements are awkward at the piano and she really plays it most inelegantly.

Yet in the drawing-room no frown or wince betrayed the listeners' ennui. As though engrossed in a performance given by a fine musician, Mr Pulvertaft slightly raised and dropped his riding-crop, as he might a baton; similarly expressing absorption, his wife's lips were parted, the hurry and worry of her nature laid aside, her little eyes delighted. And Emily and Charlotte sat as girls more graciously endowed than a plain sister should, neither pouting nor otherwise recoiling from the halting cacophony. I too – I hope successfully – forced delight into an expression that constantly sought to betray me, while surreptitiously examining my surroundings. (I cannot be certain of what passed, or did not pass, over George Arthur's features: in the nursery, certainly, he is not slow to display displeasure.)

The drawing-room is lofty and more than usually spacious, with pleasant recesses, and french windows curving along a single wall. Two smaller windows flank the fireplace, which is of white marble that reflects, both in colour and in the pattern of its carving, the white plasterwork of the ceiling. Walls are of an apricot shade, crowded with landscape scenes and portraits of the Pulvertafts who belong to the past. Silks and velvets are mainly green; escritaires and occasional tables are cluttered with ornaments and porcelain pieces – too many for my own taste, but these are family heirlooms which it would be impolite to hide away. So Mrs Pulvertaft has explained, for the same degree of overcrowding obtains in the hall and dining-room, and on the day of my arrival she remarked upon it.

'*Most* charmingly rendered,' her husband pronounced when the music ceased. 'What fingers Adelaide is blessed with!'

Hands in the drawing-room were delicately clapped. Mr Pulvertaft applauded with his riding-crop. I pursed my lips at the back of George Arthur's head, for he was perhaps a little rumbustious in his response.

'Is not Adelaide talented, Miss Heddoe?' Mrs Pulvertaft suggested.

'Indeed, ma'am.'

Two maids, Cready and Brigid, brought in tea. I rose to go, imagining my visit to the drawing-room must surely now be concluded. But Mrs Pulvertaft begged me to remain.

'We must get to know you, Miss Heddoe,' she insisted in her bustling manner. (It is from his mother, I believe, that George Arthur inherits his occasional boisterousness.) 'And you,' she added, 'us.'

I felt, to tell the truth, that I knew the Pulvertafts fairly well already. I was not long here before I observed that families and events are often seen historically in Ireland – more so, for some reason, than in England. It surprised me when Mrs Pulvertaft went into details soon after I arrived, informing me that on the death of

a distant relative Mr Pulvertaft had found himself the inheritor of this overseas estate. Though at first he had apparently resisted the move to another country, he ended by feeling it his bounden duty to accept the responsibility. 'It was a change of circumstances for us, I can tell you that,' Mrs Pulvertaft confessed. 'But had we remained in Ipswich these many acres would have continued to lose heart. There have been Pulvertafts here, you know, since Queen Elizabeth granted them the land.' I thought, but did not remark, that when Mr Pulvertaft first looked upon drawings of the house and gardens his unexpected inheritance must have seemed like a gift from heaven, which in a sense it was, for the distant relative had been by all accounts a good man.

'Much undergrowth has yet to be cleared and burnt,' Mr Pulvertaft was saying now, with reference to the estate road that was being built. 'The merry fires along the route will continue for a while to come. Next, stones must be chipped and laid, and by the lakeside the ground raised and strengthened. Here and there we must have ornamental seats.'

Cake was offered to us by Cready and by Brigid. It was not my place in the drawing-room to check the manners of George Arthur, but they do leave much to be desired. Old Miss Larvey, who was my predecessor and governess to all four children, had clearly become slack before her death. I smiled a little at George Arthur, and was unable to resist moving my fingers slightly in his direction, a gesture to indicate that a more delicate consuming of the cake would not be amiss. He pretended, mischievously, not to notice.

'Will the road go round Bright Purple Hill?' Emily inquired. 'It would be beautiful if it did.'

It could be made to do so, her father agreed. Yes, certainly it could go round the northern slopes at least. He would speak to Erskine.

'Now, what could be nicer,' he resumed, 'than a picnic of lunch by the lake, then a drive through the silver birches, another pause by the abbey, continuing by the river for a mile, and home by Bright Purple Hill? This road, Miss Heddoo, has become my pride.'

I smiled and nodded, acknowledging this attention in silence. I knew that there was more to the road than that: its construction was an act of charity, a way of employing the men for miles around, since the failure of their potato crops had again reduced them to poverty and idleness. In years to come the road would stand as a memorial to this awful time, and Mr Pulvertaft's magnanimity would be recalled with gratitude.

'Might copper beech trees mark the route?' suggested Adelaide, her dumpling countenance freshened by the excitement this thought induced. Her eyes bulged

behind her spectacles and I noticed that her mother, in glancing at her, resisted the impulse to sigh.

‘Beech trees indeed! Quite splendid!’ enthused Mr Pulvertaft. ‘And in future Pulvertaft generations they shall arch a roof, shading our road when need be. Yes, indeed there must be copper beech trees.’

The maids had left the drawing-room and returned now with lamps. They fastened the shutters and drew the curtains over. The velvets and silks changed colour in the lamplight, the faces of the portraits became as they truly were, the faces of ghosts.

A silence gathered after the talk of beech trees, and I found myself surprised at no one mentioning the wonder Fogarty had told me of, the marks of Christ on a peasant child. It seemed so strange and so remarkable, an occurrence of such import and magnitude, that I would hardly have believed it possible that any conversation could take place in the house without some astonished reference to it. Yet none had been made, and the faces and the voices in the drawing-room seemed as untouched by this visitation of the miraculous as they had been by Adelaide’s labouring on the piano. In the silence I excused myself and left, taking George Arthur with me, for my time to do so had come.

October 23rd, 1847. I am homesick, I make no bones about it. I cannot help dwelling on all that I have left behind, on familiar sounds and places. First thing when I awake I still imagine I am in England: reality comes most harshly then.

While I write, Emily and George Arthur are conversing in a corner of the nursery. She has come here, as she does from time to time, to persuade him against a military career. I wish she would not do so in this manner, wandering in and standing by the window to await the end of a lesson. It is distracting for George Arthur, and after all this is my domain.

‘What I mean, George Arthur, is that it is an uncomfortable life in a general sort of way.’

‘Captain Coleborne does not seem uncomfortable. When you look at him he doesn’t give that impression in the least.’

‘Captain Coleborne hasn’t lived in a barracks in India. That leaves a mark, so people say.’

‘I should not mind a barracks. And India I should love.’

‘I doubt it, actually. Flies carry disease in India, the water you drink is putrid. And you would mind a barracks because they’re rough and ready places.’

'You'd drink something else if the water was putrid. You'd keep well away from the flies.'

'You cannot in India. No, George Arthur, I assure you you enjoy your creature comforts. You'd find the uniform rough on your skin and the food unappetizing. Besides, you have a family duty here.'

The nursery is a long, low-ceilinged room, with a fire at one end, close to which I sit as I write, for the weather has turned bitter. The big, square lessons-table occupies the centre of the room, and when Fogarty brings my tray he places it on the smaller table at which I'm writing now. There are pictures on the walls which I must say I find drab: one, in shades of brown, of St George and the Dragon; another of a tower; others of farmyard scenes. The nursery's two armchairs, occupied now by George Arthur and Emily, are at the other end with a rug between them. The floor is otherwise of polished board.

'Well, the truth is, George Arthur, I cannot bear the thought of your being killed.'

With that, Emily left the nursery. She smiled in her graceful manner at me, her head a little to one side, her dark, coiled hair gleaming for a moment in a shaft of afternoon sun. I had not thought a governess's position was difficult in a household, but somehow I am finding it so. I belong neither with the family nor the servants. Fogarty, in spite of calling me 'miss', addresses me more casually than he does the Pulvertafts; his sister is scarcely civil.

'Do they eat their babies, like in the South Seas?' George Arthur startled me by asking. He had crossed to where I sat and in a manner reminiscent of his father stood with his back to the fire, thereby blocking its warmth from me.

'Do who eat their babies, George Arthur?'

'The poor people.'

'Of course they don't.'

'But they are hungry. They have been hungry for ever so long. My mother and sisters give out soup at the back gate-lodge.'

'Hungry people do not eat their babies. And I think, you know, it's enemies, not babies, who are eaten in the South Seas.'

'But suppose a family's baby did die and suppose the family was hungry—'

'No, George Arthur, you must not talk like that.'

'Fogarty says he would not be surprised.'

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‘Well, she has settled down, I think,’ Mrs Pulvertaft remarks to her husband in their bedroom, and when he asks her whom she refers to she says the governess.

‘Pleasant enough, she seems,’ he replies. ‘I do prefer, you know, an English governess.’

‘Oh yes, indeed.’

George Arthur’s sisters have developed no thoughts about Miss Heddoe. They neither like nor dislike her; they do not know her; their days of assessing governesses are over.

But George Arthur’s aren’t. She is not as pretty as Emily or Charlotte, George Arthur considers, and she is very serious. When she smiles her smile is serious. The way she eats her food is serious, carefully cutting everything, carefully and slowly chewing. Often he comes into the nursery to find her eating from the tray that Fogarty carries up the back staircase for her, sitting all alone on one side of the fireplace, seeming very serious indeed. Miss Larvey had been different somehow, although she’d eaten her meals in much the same position, seated at the very same table, by the fire. Miss Larvey was untidy, her grey hair often working loose from its coils, her whole face untidy sometimes, her tray untidily left.

‘Now it is transcription time,’ Miss Heddoe says, interrupting these reflections. ‘Carefully and slowly, please.’

Fogarty thinks about the governess, but hides such thoughts from his sister. Miss Heddoe will surely make a scene, exclaiming and protesting, saying to the Pulvertafts all the things a butler cannot. She will stand in the drawing-room or the hall, smacking out the truth at them, putting in a nutshell all that must be said. She will bring up the matter of the stigmata found on the child, and the useless folly of the road, and the wisdom of old Hugh Pulvertaft. She will be the voice of reason. Fogarty dwells upon these thoughts while conversing with his sister, adept at dividing his mind. His faith is in the governess.

‘Declare to God,’ remarks Miss Fogarty, ‘Brigid’ll be the death of me. Did you ever know a stupider girl?’

‘There was a girl we had once who was stupider,’ Fogarty replies. ‘Fidelma was she called?’

They sit at the wide wooden table that is the pivot of kitchen activities. The preparation of food, the polishing of brass and silver, the stacking of dishes, the disposal of remains, the eating and drinking, all card-playing and ironing, all cutting out of patterns and cloth, the trimming of lamps: the table has as many

uses as the people of the kitchen can devise. Tears have soaked into its grain, and blood from meat and accidents; the grease of generations polishes it, not quite scrubbed out by the efforts made, twice every day, With soap and water.

The Fogartys sit with their chairs turned a little away from the table, so that they partly face the range and in anticipation of the benefit they will shortly receive from the glow of dampened slack. It is their early evening pose, daily the same from October to May. In summer the sunlight penetrates to the kitchen in a way that at first seems alien but later is welcomed. It spreads over the surface of the table, drying it out. It warms the Fogartys, who move their chairs to catch its rays when they rest in the early evening.

‘You would not credit,’ remarks Miss Fogarty, ‘that Brigid has been three years in this kitchen. More like three seconds.’

‘There are some that are untrainable.’ His teeth are less well preserved than his sister’s. She is the thinner of the two, razorlike in face and figure.

‘I said at the time I would prefer a man. A man is more trainable in my opinion. A man would be more use to yourself.’

‘Ah, Cready knows the dining-room by now. I wouldn’t want a change made there.’

‘It’s Cready we have to thank for Brigid. Wasn’t it Cready who had you blackguarded until you took her on?’

‘We had to take someone. To give Cready her due she said we’d find her slow.’

‘I’ll tell you this: Cready’s no racehorse herself.’

‘The slowness is in that family.’

‘Whatever He did He forgot to put brains in them.’

‘We live with His mistakes.’

Miss Fogarty frowns. She does not care for that remark. Her brother is sometimes indiscreet in his speech. It is his nature, it is part of his cleverness; but whenever she feels uneasy she draws his attention to the source of her uneasiness, as she does now. It is a dangerous remark, she says, better it had not been made.

Fogarty nods, knowing the nod will soothe her. He has no wish to have her flurried.

‘The road is going great guns,’ he says, deeming a change of subject wise. ‘They were on about it in the dining-room.’

‘Did they mention the ground rice pudding?’

‘They ate it. Isn’t it extraordinary, a road that goes round in a circle, not leading anywhere?’

‘Heddoe left her ground rice. A pudding’s good enough for the dining-room but not for Madam.’

‘Was there an egg in it? Her stomach can’t accept eggs.’

‘Don’t I know the woman can’t take eggs? Isn’t she on about it the entire time? There were four good turkey eggs in that pudding, and what harm did a turkey egg do anyone? Did eggs harm Larvey?’

‘Oh true enough, Larvey ate anything. If you’d took a gate off its hinges she’d have ate it while you’d wink.’

‘Larvey was a saint from heaven.’

Again Fogarty nods. In his wish not to cause flurry in his sister he refrains from saying that once upon a time Miss Larvey had been condemned as roundly as Miss Heddoe is now. When she’d been cold in her room she’d sent down to the kitchen for hot-water jars, a request that had not been popular. But when she died, as if to compensate for all this troublesomeness, Miss Larvey left the Fogartys a remembrance in her will.

‘A while back I told Heddoe about that child. To see what she’d say for herself.’

Miss Fogarty’s peaked face registers interest. Her eyes have narrowed into the slits that all his life have reminded Fogarty of cracks in a plate or a teacup.

‘And what did the woman say?’

‘She was struck silent, then she asked me questions. After that she told me an extraordinary thing: the Legend of the True Cross.’

As Fogarty speaks, the two maids enter the kitchen. Miss Fogarty regards them with asperity, telling Brigid she looks disgraceful and Cready that her cap is dirty. ‘Get down to your work,’ she snappishly commands. ‘Brigid, push that kettle over the heat and stir a saucepan of milk for me.’

She is badly out of sorts because of Heddoe and the ground rice, Fogarty says to himself, and thinks to ease the atmosphere by relating the legend the governess has told him.

‘Listen to me, girls,’ he says, ‘while I tell you the Legend of the True Cross.’

Cready, who is not a girl, appreciates the euphemism and displays appropriate pleasure as she sets to at the sink, washing parsnips. She is a woman of sixty-one, carelessly stout. Brigid, distantly related to her and thirty or so years younger, is of the same proportions.

‘The Legend of the True Cross,’ says Fogarty, ‘has to do with a seed falling into Adam’s mouth, some say his ear. It lay there until he died, and when the body decomposed a tree grew from the seed, which in time was felled to give timber for the beams of a bridge.’

‘Well, I never heard that,’ exclaims Cready in a loud, shrill voice, so fascinated by the revelation that she cannot continue with the parsnips.

‘The Queen of Sheba crossed that bridge in her majesty. Later – well, you can guess – the Cross to which Our Lord was fastened was constructed from those very beams.’

‘Is it true, Mr Fogarty?’ cries Cready, her voice becoming still shriller in her excitement, her mouth hanging open.

‘Control yourself, Cready,’ Miss Fogarty admonishes her. ‘You look ridiculous.’

‘It’s only I was never told it before, miss. I never knew the Cross grew out of Adam’s ear. Did ever you hear it, Brigid?’

‘I did not.’

‘It’s a legend,’ Fogarty explains. ‘It illustrates the truth. It does not tell it, Miss Fogarty and myself would say. Your own religion might take it differently.’

‘Don’t you live and learn?’ says Cready.

There is a silence for some moments in the kitchen. Then Brigid, stirring the saucepan of milk on the range as Miss Fogarty has instructed her, says:

‘I wonder does Father Horan know that?’

‘God, I’d say he would all right.’ Cready wags her head, lending emphasis to this opinion. There isn’t much relating to theological matters that eludes Father Horan, she says.

‘Oh, right enough,’ agrees Fogarty. ‘The priests will run this country yet. If it’s not one crowd it’s another.’ He explains to the maids that the Legend of the True Cross has come into the house by way of the governess. It is a typical thing, he says, that a Protestant Englishwoman would pass the like of that on. Old Hugh wouldn’t have considered it suitable; and the present Pulvertafts have been long

enough away from England to consider it unsuitable also. He'd guess they have anyway; he'd consider that true.

Miss Fogarty, still idle in her chair by the range, nods her agreement. She states that, legend or not, she does not care for stuff like that. In lower tones, and privately to her brother, she says she is surprised that he repeated it.

'It's of interest to the girls,' he apologizes. 'To tell the truth, you could have knocked me down when she told me in the nursery.'

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'The boulders from the ridge maybe used for walls and chipping?' inquires Mr Pulvertaft of his estate manager.

'It is a distance to carry boulders, sir.'

'So it is, but we must continue to occupy these men, Erskine. Time is standing still for them.'

'Yes, sir.'

The two men pace together on a lawn in front of the house, walking from one circular rose-bed to the next, then turning and reversing the procedure. It is here that Mr Pulvertaft likes to discuss the estate with Erskine, strolling on the short grass in the mid-morning. When it rains or is too bitterly cold they converse instead in the great open porch of the house, both of them gazing out into the garden. The eyes of Mr Pulvertaft and Erskine never meet, as if by unspoken agreement. Mr Pulvertaft, though speaking warmly of Erskine's virtues, fears him; and Erskine does not trust his eye to meet his master's in case that conjunction, however brief, should reveal too much. Mr Pulvertaft has been a painless inheritor, in Erskine's view; his life has been without hardship, he takes too easily for granted the good fortune that came his way.

'The road,' he is saying now, seeming to Erskine to make his point for him, 'is our generation's contribution to the estate. You understand me, Erskine? A Pulvertaft planted Abbey Wood, another laid out these gardens. Swift came here, did you know that, Erskine? The Mad Dean assisted in the planning of all these lawns and shrubberies.'

'So you told me, sir.'

It is Erskine's left arm that is missing but he considers the loss as serious as if it had been his right. He is an Englishman, stoutly made and once of renowned strength, still in his middle age. His temper is short, his disposition unsentimental, his soldier's manner abrupt; nor is there, beneath that vigorous exterior, a gentler

core. Leading nowhere, without a real purpose, the estate road is unnecessary and absurd, but he accepts his part in its creation. It is ill fortune that people have starved because a law of nature has failed them, it is ill fortune that he has lost a limb and seen a military career destroyed: all that must be accepted also. To be the manager of an estate of such size and importance is hardly recompense for the glories that might have been. He has ended up in a country that is not his own, employing men whose speech he at first found difficult to understand, collecting rents from tenants he does not trust, as he feels he might trust the people of Worcestershire or Durham. The Pulvertaft family – with the exception of Mr Pulvertaft himself – rarely seek to hold with him any kind of conversation beyond the formalities of greeting and leave-taking. Stoically he occupies his position, ashamed because he is a one-armed man, yet never indulging in melancholy, for this he would condemn as weakness.

‘There is something concerning the men, sir.’

‘Poor fellows, there is indeed.’

‘Something other, sir. They have turned ungrateful, sir.’

‘Ungrateful?’

‘As well to keep an eye open for disaffection, sir.’

‘Good God, those men are hardly fit for that.’

‘They bite the hand that feeds them, sir. They’re reared on it.’

He speaks in a matter-of-fact voice. It is the truth as he recognizes it; he sees no point in dissembling for politeness’ sake. He watches while Mr Pulvertaft nods his reluctant agreement. He does not need to remind himself that this is a landowner who would have his estate a realm of heaven, who would have his family and his servants, his tenants and all who work for him, angels of goodness. This is a landowner who expects his own generosity of spirit to beget such generosity in others, his unstinted patronage to find a reflection in unstinted gratitude. But reality, as Erskine daily experiences, keeps shattering the dream, and may shatter it irrevocably in the end.

They speak of other matters, of immediate practicalities. Expert and informed on all the subjects raised, Erskine gives the conversation only part of his attention, devoting the greater part to the recently arrived governess. He has examined her in church on the four occasions there have been since she joined the household. Twenty-five or –six years old, he reckons, not pretty yet not as plain as the plain one among the Pulvertaft girls. Hair too severely done, features too nervous, clothes too dowdy; but all that might be altered. The hands that hold the hymn book open before her are pale as marble, the fingers slender; the lips that open and

close have a hint of voluptuousness kept in check; the breast that rises and falls has caused him, once or twice, briefly to close his eyes. He would marry her if she would have him, and why should she not, despite the absence of an arm? As the estate manager's wife she would have a more significant life than as a governess for ever.

'Well, I must not detain you longer,' Mr Pulvertaft says. 'The men are simple people, remember, rough in their ways. They may find gratitude difficult and, you know, I do not expect it. I only wish to do what can be done.'

Erskine, who intends to permit no nonsense, does not say so. He strides off to where his horse is tethered in the paddocks, wondering again about the governess.

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Stout and round, Mrs Pulvertaft lies on her bed with her eyes closed. She feels a familiar discomfort low down in her stomach, on the left side, a touch of indigestion. It is very slight, something she has become used to, arriving as it does every day in the afternoon and then going away.

Charlotte will accept Captain Coleborne; Adelaide will not marry; Emily wishes to travel. Perhaps if she travels she will meet someone suitable; she is most particular. Mrs Pulvertaft cannot understand her eldest daughter's desire to visit France and Austria and Italy. They are dangerous places, where war is waged when offence is taken. Only England is not like that: dear, safe, uncomplicated England, thinks Mrs Pulvertaft, and for a moment is nostalgic.

The afternoon discomfort departs from her stomach, but she does not notice because gradually it has become scarcely anything at all. George Arthur must learn the ways of the estate so that he can sensibly inherit when his own time comes. Emily is right: it would be far better if he did not seek a commission. After all, except to satisfy his romantic inclination, there is no need.

Mrs Pulvertaft sighs. She hopes Charlotte will be sensible. An officer's wife commands a considerable position when allied with means, and she has been assured that Captain Coleborne's family, established for generations in Meath, leave nothing whatsoever to be desired socially. It is most unlikely that Charlotte will be silly since everything between her and Captain Coleborne appears to be going swimmingly, but then you never know: girls, being girls, are naturally inexperienced.

Mrs Pulvertaft dozes, and wakes a moment later. The faces of the women who beg on Sundays have haunted a brief dream. She has heard the chiming of the church bell and in some confused way the Reverend Poole's cherub face was among the women's, his surplice flapping in the wind. She stepped from the carriage and went towards the church. 'Give something to the beggars,' her husband's voice

commanded, as it does every Sunday while the bell still rings. The bell ceases only when the family are in their pew, with Mr Erskine in the Pulvertaft pew behind them and the Fogartys and Miss Heddoe in the estate pew in the south transept.

It is nobody's fault, Mrs Pulvertaft reflects, that for the second season the potatoes have rotted in the ground. No one can be blamed. It is a horror that so many families have died, that so many bloated, poisoned bodies are piled into the shared graves. But what more can be done than is already being done? Soup is given away in the yard of the gate-lodge; the estate road gives work; the Distress Board is greatly pleased. Just and sensible laws prevent the wholesale distribution of corn, for to flood the country with corn would have consequences as disastrous as the hunger itself: that has been explained to her. Every Sunday, led by the Reverend Poole, they repeat the prayer that takes precedence over all other prayers: that God's love should extend to the hungry at this time, that His wrath may be lifted.

Again Mrs Pulvertaft drifts into a doze. She dreams that she runs through unfamiliar landscape, although she has not run anywhere for many years. There are sand dunes and a flat expanse which is empty, except for tiny white shells, crackling beneath her feet. She seems to be naked, which is alarming, and worries her in her dream. Then everything changes and she is in the drawing-room, listening to Adelaide playing her pieces. Tea is brought in, and there is ordinary conversation.

Emily, alone, walks among the abbey ruins on the lake-shore. It is her favourite place. She imagines the chanting of the monks once upon a time and the simple life they led, transcribing Latin and worshipping God. They built where the landscape was beautiful; their view of Bright Purple Hill had been perfect.

There is a stillness among the ruins, the air is mild for late October. The monks would have fished from the shore, they would have cultivated a garden and induced bees to make honey for them. For many generations they would have buried their dead here, but their graveyards have been lost in the time that has passed.

Evening sun bronzes the heathery purple of the hill. In the spring, Emily reflects, she will begin her journeys. She will stay with her Aunt Margaret in Bath and her Aunt Tabby in Ipswich. Already she has persuaded her Aunt Margaret that it would be beneficial to both of them to visit Florence, and Vienna and Paris. She has persuaded her father that the expense of all the journeys would be money profitably spent, an education that would extend the education he has expended money on already. Emily believes this to be true; she is not prevaricating. She believes that after she has seen again the architecture of England – which she can scarcely remember – and visited the great cities of Europe, some anxious spirit within her will be assuaged. She will return to Ireland and accept a husband, as Charlotte is about to do; or not accept a husband and be content to live her life in her brother's house, as Adelaide's fate seems certainly to be. She will bear

children; or walk among the abbey ruins a spinster, composing verse about the ancient times and the monks who fished in the lake.

A bird swoops over the water and comes to rest on the pebbled shore, not far from where Emily stands. It rises on spindly legs, stretches out its wings and pecks at itself. Then it staggers uncomfortably on the pebbles before settling into an attitude that pleases it, head drawn into its body, wings wrapped around like a cloak. Such creatures would not have changed since the time of the monks, and Emily imagines a cowed and roughly bearded figure admiring the bird from a window of the once gracious abbey. He whispers as he does so and Emily remembers enough from her lessons with Miss Larvey to know that the language he speaks is not known to her.

It is a pleasant fancy, one for verse or drawing, to be stored away and one day in the future dwelt upon, and in one way or the other transcribed to paper. She turns her back on the lake and walks slowly through the ruins, past the posts which mark the route of the estate road, by the birchwood and over the stone bridge where Jonathan Swift is said to have stood and ordered the felling of three elms that obscured the panorama which has the great house as its centre. In the far distance she can see the line of men labouring on the road, and the figure of Erskine on his horse. She passes on, following a track that is familiar to her, which skirts the estate beneath its high boundary wall. Beyond the wall lie the Pulvertaft acres of farmland, but they have no interest for Emily, being for the most part flat, a territory that is tediously passed over every Sunday on the journey to and from church.

She reaches the yard of a gate-lodge and speaks to the woman who lives there, reminding her that soup and bread will be brought again tomorrow, that the utensils left last week must be ready by eleven o'clock on the trestle tables. Everything will be waiting, the woman promises, and a high fire alight in the kitchen.

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October 31st, 1847. Fogarty told me. He stood beside me while I ate my dinner by the fire: stew and rice, with cabbage; a baked apple, and sago pudding. The child with the stigmata has died and been buried.

'And who will know now,' he questioned, himself, as much as me, 'exactly what was what?'

There is a kind of cunning in Fogarty's nutlike face. The eyes narrow, and the lips narrow, and he then looks like his sister. But he is more intelligent, I would say.

'And what is what, Mr Fogarty?' I inquired.

‘The people are edgy, miss. At the soup canteen they are edgy, I’m to understand. And likewise on the road. There is a feeling among them that the child should not have died. It is unpleasant superstition, of course, but there is a feeling that Our Lord has been crucified again.’

‘But that’s ridiculous!’

‘I am saying so, miss. Coolly ridiculous, everything back to front. The trouble is that starvation causes a lightness in the head.’

‘Do the Pulvertafts know of this? No one but you has mentioned this child to me.’

‘I heard the matter mentioned at the dinner table. Mr Pulvertaft said that Mr Erskine had passed on to him the news that there was some superstition about. “D’you know its nature, Fogarty?” Mr Pulvertaft said, and I replied that it was to do with the marks of Our Lord’s stigmata being noticed on the feet and hands of a child.’

‘And what did anyone say then?’

‘ “Well, what’s the secret of it, Fogarty?” Mr Pulvertaft said, and I passed on to him the opinion of Miss Fogarty and myself: that the markings were inflicted at the time of birth. They had all of them reached that conclusion also: Mrs Pulvertaft and Miss Emily and Miss Charlotte and Miss Adelaide, even Master George Arthur, no doubt, although he was not present then. As soon as ever they heard the news they had come to that assumption. Same with Mr Erskine.’

I stared, astonished, at the butler. I could not believe what he was telling me: that all these people had independently dismissed, so calmly and so finally, what the people who were closer to the event took to be a miracle. I had known, from the manner in which Fogarty spoke after his introduction of the subject, that he was in some way dubious. But I had concluded that he doubted the existence of the marks, that he doubted the reliability of the priest. I had never seen Father Horan, so did not know what kind of man he was even in appearance, or what age. Fogarty had told me he’d never seen him either, but from what he gathered through the maids the priest was of advanced years. Fogarty said now:

‘My sister and I only decided that that was the truth of it after Cready and Brigid had gone on about the thing for a long time, how the priest was giving out sermons on it, how the bishop had come on a special journey and how a letter had been sent to Rome. Our first view was that the old priest had been presented with the child after he’d had a good couple of glasses. And then oiled up again and shown the child a second time. He’s half blind, I’ve heard it said, and if enough people raved over marks that didn’t exist, sure wouldn’t he agree instead of admitting he was drunk and couldn’t see properly? But as soon as Miss Fogarty and myself heard that the bishop had stirred his stumps and a letter had gone to Rome we realized

the affair was wearing a different pair of shoes. They're as wily as cockroaches, these old priests, and there isn't one among them who'd run a chance of showing himself up by giving out sermons and summoning his bishop. He'd have let the matter rest, he'd have kept it local if he was flummoxed. "No doubt at all," Miss Fogarty said. "They've put marks on the baby." "

I couldn't eat. I shivered even though I was warm from the fire. I found it difficult to speak, but in the end I said:

'But why on earth would this cruel and blasphemous thing be done? Surely it could have been real, truly there, as stigmata have occurred in the past?'

'I would doubt that, miss. And hunger would give cruelty and blasphemy a different look. That's all I'd say. Seven other children have been buried in that family, and the two sets of grandparents. There was only the father and the mother with the baby left. "Sure didn't they see the way things was turning?" was how Miss Fogarty put it. "Didn't they see an RIP all ready for them, and wouldn't they be a holy family with the baby the way they'd made it, and wouldn't they be sure of preservation because of it?" "

In his dark butler's clothes, the excitement that enlivened his small face lending him a faintly sinister look, Fogarty smiled at me. The smile was grisly; I did not forgive it, and from that moment I liked the butler as little as I liked his sister. His smile, revealing sharp, discoloured teeth, was related to the tragedy of a peasant family that had been almost extinguished, as, one by one, lamps are in a house at night. It was related to the desperation of survival, to an act so barbarous that one could not pass it by.

'A nine days' wonder,' Fogarty said. 'I'd say it wasn't a bad thing the child was buried. Imagine walking round with a lie like that on you for all your mortal days.'

He took the tray and went away. I heard him in the lavatory off the nursery landing, depositing the food I hadn't eaten down the WC so that he wouldn't have to listen to his sister's abuse of me. I sat until the fire sank low, without the heart to put more coal on it even though the coal was there. I kept seeing that faceless couple and their just-born child, the woman exhausted, in pain, tormented by hunger, with no milk to give her baby. Had they touched the tiny feet and hands with a hot coal? Had they torn the skin open, as Christ's had been on the Cross? Had either of them in that moment been even faintly sane? I saw the old priest, gazing in wonder at what they later showed him. I saw the Pulvertafts in their dining-room, accepting what had occurred as part of their existence in this house. Must not life go on lest all life cease? A confusion ran wildly in my head, a jumble without a pattern, all sense befogged. In a civilized manner nobody protested at the cacophony in the drawing-room when the piano was played, and nobody spoke to me of the stigmata because the subject was too terrible for conversation.

I wept before I went to bed. I wept again when I lay there, hating more than ever the place I am in, where people are driven back to savagery.

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‘The men have not arrived this morning,’ Erskine reports. ‘I suspected they might not from their demeanour last evening. They attach some omen to this death.’

‘But surely to heavens they see the whole thing was a fraud?’

‘They do not think so, sir. Any more than they believe that the worship of the Virgin Mary is a fraud perpetrated by the priests. Or that the Body and the Blood is. Fraud is grist to their mill.’

Mr Pulvertaft thanks Erskine for reporting the development to him. The men will return to their senses in time, the estate manager assures him. What has happened is only a little thing. Hunger is the master.

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Emily packs for her travels, and vows she will not forget the lake, or the shadows and echoes of the monks. In Bath and Florence, in Vienna and Paris she will keep faith with her special corner, where the spirit of a gentler age lingers.

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Mrs Pulvertaft dreams that the Reverend Poole ascends to the pulpit with a bath towel over his shoulder. From this day forth we must all carry bath towels wherever we go, and the feet of Jesus must be dried as well as washed. ‘And the woman anointed the feet,’ proclaims the Reverend Poole, ‘and Jesus thanked her and blessed her and went upon his way.’ But Mrs Pulvertaft is unhappy because she does not know which of the men is Jesus. They work with shovels on the estate road, and when she asks them they tell her, in a most unlikely manner, to go away.

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Alone in front of the drawing-room piano, Adelaide sits stiffly upright, not wishing to play because she is not in the mood. Again, only minutes ago, Captain Coleborne has not noticed her. He did not notice her at lunch; he did not address a single word to her, he evaded her glance as if he could not bear to catch it. Charlotte thinks him dull; she has said so, yet she never spurns his attentions. And he isn’t dull. His handsome face, surmounting his sturdily handsome body, twinkles with vigour and with life. He has done so much and when he talks about the places he has been he is so interesting she could listen to him for ages.

Adelaide's spectacles have misted. She takes them off and wipes them with her handkerchief. She must not go red when he comes again, or when his name is mentioned. Going red will give away her secret and Emily and Charlotte will guess and feel sorry for her, which she could not bear.

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'Very well,' Charlotte says by the sundial in the fuchsia garden.

Captain Coleborne blinks his eyes in an ecstasy of delight, and Charlotte thinks that yes, it probably will be nice, knowing devotion like this for ever.

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'Heddoe's gone broody,' Fogarty reports in the kitchen.

'Not sickness in the house! One thing you could say about Larvey, she was never sick for an hour.'

'I think Heddoe'll maybe leave.' Fogarty speaks with satisfaction. The governess might leave because she finds it too much that such a thing should happen to a baby, and that her employers do not remark on it because they expect no better of these people. Erskine might be knocked from his horse by the men in a fit of anger because the death has not been honoured in the house or by the family. Erskine might lie dead himself on the day of the governess's departure, and the two events, combining, would cause these Pulvertafts of Ipswich to see the error of their ways and return to their native land.

The china rattles on the tea-trays which the maids carry to the draining boards, and Fogarty lights the lamps which he has arrayed on the table, as he does every afternoon at this time in winter. He inspects each flame before satisfying himself that the trimming of the wick is precisely right, then one after another places the glasses in their brass supports and finally adjusts each light.

The maids unburden the trays at the sink, Miss Fogarty places a damp cloth around a fruitcake and lays aside sandwiches and scones, later to be eaten in the kitchen. Then the maids take the lamps that are ready and begin another journey through the house.

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In the nursery Miss Heddoe reads from the history book Miss Larvey has used before her: 'In this manner the monasteries were lawfully dissolved, for the King believed they harboured vile and treacherous plots and were the breeding grounds for future disaffection. The King was privy, through counsellors and advisers, of the vengeance that was daily planned, but was wise and bade his time.'

George Arthur does not listen. He is thinking about the savages of the South Sea islands who eat their enemies. He has always thought it was their babies they ate, and wonders if he has misunderstood something Miss Larvey said on the subject. He wonders then if Emily could possibly be right in what she says about the discomfort of the regimental life. It is true that he enjoys being close to the fire, and likes the cosiness of the nursery in the evenings; and it is true that he doesn't much care for rough material next to his skin. He knows that in spite of what Emily says officers like Captain Coleborne would not be made to drink putrid water, and that flies can't kill you, but the real thing is that he is expected to stay here because he is the only son, because somebody will have to look after the place when his father isn't able to any more. 'Duty', Emily says, and it is that in the end that will steal from him his dream of military glory. Itchy and uneasy, like the bite of an insect, this duty already nags him.

January 12th, 1848. Today it snowed. The fall began after breakfast and continued until it was almost dark. Great drifts have piled up in the garden, and from my window the scene is beautiful. George Arthur has a cold and so remained in bed; he is too feverish for lessons.

January 18th, 1848. The snow is high on the ground. In the garden we break the ice on pools and urns so that the birds may drink. Scraps are thrown out of the scullery doors for them.

February 4th, 1848. It is five months since I arrived here, and all that I have learnt is distressing. There is nothing that is not so. Last night I could not sleep again. I lay there thinking of the starvation, of the faces of the silent women when they come to the gate-lodge for food. There is a yellow-greyness in the flesh of their faces, they are themselves like obedient animals. Their babies die when they feed them grass and roots; in their arms at the gate-lodge the babies who survive are silent also, too weak to cry until the sustenance they receive revives them. Last night I lay thinking of the men who are turned away from the work on the road because they have not the strength that is necessary. I thought of the darkness in the cottages, of dawn bringing with it the glaring eyes of death. I thought of the graves again clawed open, the earth still loose, another carcass pushed on to the rotting heap. I thought of an infant tortured with Our Saviour's wounds.

The famine-fever descends like a rain of further retribution, and I wonder – for I cannot help it – what in His name these people have done to displease God so? It is true they have not been an easy people to govern; they have not abided by the laws which the rest of us must observe; their superstitious worship is a sin. But God is a forgiving God. I pray to understand His will.

February 5th, 1848. Charlotte Pulvertaft is not to be married until her sister's return. 'Will you still be with us for the wedding?' Fogarty impertinently inquired last night, for he knows the age of George Arthur and unless I am dismissed I must

of course still be here. The work continues on the road, it having been abandoned during the period of snow.

March 6th, 1848. A singular thing has happened. Walking alone in the grounds, I was hailed by Mr Erskine from his horse. I paused, and watched while he dismounted. I thought he had some message for me from the house, but in this I was wrong. Mr Erskine walked beside me, his horse ambling obediently behind. He spoke of the sunshine we were enjoying, and of the estate road. Beyond saluting me at church on Sundays he has never before paid me any attention whatsoever. My surprise must have shown in my face, for he laughed at something that was displayed there. 'I have always liked you, Miss Heddoe,' he said to my astonishment.

I reddened, as any girl would, and felt extremely awkward. I made no attempt at a reply.

'And have you settled, Miss Heddoe?' he next inquired. 'Do you care for it here?'

No one has asked me that before: why should they? My inclination was to smile and with vague politeness to nod. I did so, for to have said that I did not care for this place would have seemed ill-mannered and offensive. Mr Erskine, after all, is part of it.

'Well, that is good.' He paused and then resumed: 'If ever on your walks, Miss Heddoe, you pass near my house you would be welcome to stroll about the garden.'

I thanked him.

'It is the house at the southernmost point of the estate. The only large house there is, nearly hidden in summer by sycamore trees.'

'That is very kind of you, Mr Erskine.'

'I reclaimed the little garden, as the estate was reclaimed.'

'I see.'

The subject of conversation changed. We spoke again of the time of year and the progress that was being achieved on the estate road. Mr Erskine told me something of his history, how a military career had been cut short before it had properly begun. In return, and because the subjects seemed related, I passed on the ambition George Arthur had had in this direction.

'He is reconciled now,' I said, and soon after that the estate manager and I parted company, he riding back along the way we'd walked, I turning toward the house.

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The estate road is completed on June 9th, 1848. Soon after that a letter arrives for Mr Pulvertaft from the Distress Board, thanking him for supplying so many months of work for the impoverished men. Since the beginning of the year the families of the area – some of them tenants of Mr Pulvertaft, some not – have been moving away to the harbour towns, to fill the exile ships bound for America. At least, Fogarty overhears Mr Pulvertaft remark in the dining-room, there is somewhere for them to go.

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In August of that year there is champagne at Charlotte's wedding. Guests arrive from miles around. Emily, returned from her travels, is a bridesmaid.

At the celebrations, which take place in the hall and the drawing-room and the dining-room, and spill over into the garden, Fogarty watches Miss Heddoe, even though he is constantly busy. She wears a dress he has not seen before, in light-blue material, with lace at the collar and the wrists, and little pearl buttons. Wherever she is, she is in the company of George Arthur in his sailor suit. They whisper together and seem, as always nowadays, to be the best of friends. Occasionally Miss Heddoe chides him because an observation he has made oversteps the mark or is delivered indiscreetly. When Mr Erskine arrives he goes straight to where they are.

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September 24th, 1848. I have been here a year. The potatoes are not good this year but at least the crop has not failed as completely as hitherto. I have not given Mr Erskine his answer, but he is kind and displays no impatience. I am very silly in the matter, I know I am, but sometimes I lie awake at night and pretend I am already his wife. I repeat the name and title; I say it aloud. I think of the house, hidden among the sycamores. I think of sitting with him in church, in the pew behind the Pulvertafts, not at the side with the Fogartys.

September 25th, 1848. A Mr Ogilvie comes regularly to take tea, and often strolls with Emily to the ruined abbey. Emily has made some drawings of it, which show it as it used to be. 'Well?' Mr Erskine said quietly this afternoon, riding up when I was out on my walk. But I begged, again, for more time to consider.

November 1st, 1848. All Saints' Day. Fogarty frightened me tonight. He leaned against the mantelpiece and said:

'I would advise you not to take the step you are considering, miss.'

'What step, Fogarty?'

‘To marry or not to marry Mr Erskine.’

I was flabbergasted at this. I felt myself colouring and stammered when I spoke, asking him what he meant.

‘I mean only what I say, miss. I would say to you not to marry him.’

‘Are you drunk, Fogarty?’

‘No, miss. I am not drunk. Or if I am it is only slight. You have been going through in your mind whether or not to marry Mr Erskine. A while ago you said you could never settle in this troubled place. You said that to yourself, miss. You could not become, as the saying goes, more Irish than the Irish.’

‘Fogarty –’

‘I thought you would go. When I told you about the child I thought you would pack your bags. There is wickedness here: I thought you sensed it, miss.’

‘I cannot have you speaking to me like this, Fogarty.’

‘Because I am a servant? Well, you are right, of course. In the evenings, miss, I have always indulged myself with port: that has always been my way. I have enjoyed our conversations, but I am disappointed now.’

‘You have been reading my diary.’

‘I have, miss. I have been reading your diary and your letters, and I have been observing you. Since they came here I have observed the Pulvertafts of Ipswich also, and Mr Erskine, who has done such wonders all around. I have watched his big square head going about its business; I have listened when I could.’

‘You had no right to read what was private. If I mentioned this to Mr Pulvertaft –’

‘If you did, miss, my sister and I would be sent packing. Mr Pulvertaft is a fair and decent man and it is only just that disloyal servants should be dismissed. But you would have it on your conscience. I had hoped we might keep a secret between us.’

‘I have no wish to share secrets with you, Fogarty,’

‘A blind eye was turned, miss, you know that. The hunger was a plague: what use a few spoonfuls of soup, and a road that leads nowhere and only insults the pride of the men who built it? The hunger might have been halted, miss, you know that. The people were allowed to die: you said that to yourself. A man and his wife were driven to commit a barbarous act of cruelty: blasphemy you called it, miss.’

‘What I called it is my own affair. I should be grateful, Fogarty, if you left me now.’

‘If the estate had continued in its honest decline, if these Pulvertafts had not arrived, the people outside the walls would have travelled here from miles around. They would have eaten the wild raspberries and the apples from the trees, the peaches that still thrived on the brick-lined walls, the grapes and plums and greengages, the blackberries and mulberries. They would have fished the lake and snared the rabbits on Bright Purple Hill. There is pheasant and woodcock grown tame in the old man’s time. There was his little herd of cows they might have had. I am not putting forth an argument, miss; I am not a humanitarian; I am only telling you.’

‘You are taking liberties, Fogarty. If you do not go now I will most certainly mention this.’

‘That was the picture, miss, that might have been. Instead we had to hear of Charlotte’s marrying and of Emily’s travelling, and of George Arthur’s brave decision to follow in the footsteps of his father. Adelaide sulks in the drawing-room and is jealous of her sisters. Mrs Pulvertaft, good soul, lies harmlessly down in the afternoon, and you have put it well in calling her husband a fair and decent man.’

‘I did not call him that.’

‘You thought it long before I said it.’

‘You are drunker than you think, Fogarty.’

‘No, miss, I am not. The wickedness here is not intentional, miss. Well, you know about the wickedness, for you have acutely sensed it. So did Mr Pulvertaft at first, so did his wife. Charlotte did not, nor Adelaide, nor did the boy. Emily sensed it until a while ago. Emily would linger down by the old abbey, knowing that the men who lie dead there have never been dispossessed by all the visitors and the strangers there have been since. But now the old abbey is a lady’s folly, a pretty ruin that pleases and amuses. Well, of course you know all this.’

‘I know nothing of the sort. I would ask you to leave me now.’

‘You have thought it would be better for the boy to have his military life, to perish for Queen and empire, and so extinguish this line. Listening to talk of the boy’s romance, you have thought that would not be bad. So many perish anyway, all about us.’

‘That is a wicked thing to say,’ I cried, made furious by this. ‘And it is quite untrue.’

‘It is wicked, miss, but not untrue. It is wicked because it comes from wickedness, you know that. Your sharp fresh eye has needled all that out.’

‘I do not know these things.’ My voice was quieter now, even, and empty of emotion. ‘I would ask you to leave this room at once.’

But Fogarty went on talking until I thought in the end he must surely be insane. He spoke again of Charlotte’s marriage to Captain Coleborne, of Emily and Adelaide, of George Arthur taking the place of his father. He spoke again of the hungry passing without hindrance through the gates of the estate, to feed off what its trees and bushes offered. He spoke of his sister and himself left after the old man’s death, he glad to see the decay continue, his sister persuaded that they must always remain.

‘The past would have withered away, miss. Instead of which it is the future that’s withering now.’

Did he mean the hunger and the endless death, the exile ships of those who had survived? I did not ask him. He frightened me more than ever, standing there, his eyes as dead as ice. He was no humanitarian, he repeated, he was no scholar. All he said came from a feeling he had, a servant’s feeling which he’d always had in this house during the years the old man had let everything decline. Poor Protestants as they were, he and his sister belonged neither outside the estate gates with the people who had starved nor with a family as renowned as the Pulvertafts. They were servants in their very bones.

‘You have felt you have no place either, miss. You can see more clearly for that.’

‘Please go, Fogarty.’

He told me of a dream he’d had the night before or last week, I was too upset to note which. The descendants of the people who had been hungry were in the dream, and the son of George Arthur Pulvertaft was shot in the hall of the house, and no Pulvertaft lived in the place again. The road that had been laid in charity was overgrown through neglect, and the gardens were as they had been at the time of old Hugh Pulvertaft, their beauty strangled as they returned to wildness. Fogarty’s voice quivered as his rigmarole ridiculously rambled on; an institution for corrected girls the house became, without carpets on the floors. The bones of the dogs that generations of Pulvertafts had buried in the grounds were dug up by the corrected girls when they were ordered by a Mother Superior to make vegetable beds. They threw the bones about, pretending to be frightened by them, pretending they were the bones of people.

‘I don’t wish to hear your dreams, Fogarty.’

'I have told you only the one, miss. It is a single dream I had. The house of the estate manager was burnt to the ground, and people burnt with it. The stone walls of the estate were broken down, pulled apart in places by the ivy that was let grow. In a continuation of the dream I was standing here talking to you like I'm talking now. I said to you not to perpetuate what has troubled you.'

He took my tray from me and went away. A moment later I heard him in the lavatory, depositing the food I had not eaten.

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'Not a bad soul,' Miss Fogarty remarks, 'when you come to know her.'

'Her father was a solicitor's clerk.'

'Oh granted, there's not a pennyworth of background to the creature. But I'd hardly say she wasn't good enough for Erskine.'

Fogarty does not comment. His sister resumes:

'I would expect to be invited to the house for late tea. I would expect her to say: "Why not walk over on Wednesday, Miss Fogarty, if you have a fancy for it?" I would expect the both of us to walk over for cards with the Erskines of an evening.'

'She has pulled herself up by marrying him. She is hardly going to drop down again by playing cards with servants.'

'Friends,' corrects Miss Fogarty. 'I would prefer to say friends.'

'When a bit of time goes by they'll dine with the Pulvertafts, she and Erskine. You'll cook the food at the range, I'll serve it at the table.'

'Oh, I hardly believe that'll be the order of it.'

Fogarty considers it unwise to pursue his argument and so is silent. Anna Maria Heddoe, he thinks, who was outraged when two guileful peasants tried on a trick. Well, he did his best. It is she, not he, who is the scholar and humanitarian. It is she, not he, who came from England and was distressed. She has wept into her pillow, she has been sick at heart. Stranger and visitor, she has written in her diary the news from Ireland. Stranger and visitor, she has learnt to live with things.