

LONDON WAS HOT AND STICKY, and the population longed for fresh air and open fields. On the first day of August everyone went to the races at Goodwood.

They traveled by special trains from Victoria Station in south London. The divisions of British society were carefully mirrored in the transport arrangements—high society in the upholstered luxury of the first-class coaches, shopkeepers and schoolteachers crowded but comfortable in second class, factory workers and domestic servants crammed together on hard wooden benches in third. When they got off the train the aristocracy took carriages, the middle class boarded horse buses, and the workers walked. The picnics of the rich had been sent by earlier trains: scores of hampers, carried on the shoulders of strapping young footmen, packed with china and linen, cooked chickens and cucumbers, champagne and hothouse peaches. For the less wealthy there were stalls selling sausages, shellfish and beer. The poor brought bread and cheese wrapped in handkerchiefs.

Maisie Robinson and April Tilsley went with Solly Greenbourne and Tonio Silva. Their position in the social hierarchy was dubious. Solly and Tonio clearly belonged in first class, but Maisie and April should have gone third. Solly compromised by buying second-class tickets, and they took the horse bus from the station across the downs to the racecourse.

However, Solly was too fond of his food to settle for a lunch bought off a stall, and he had sent four servants ahead with a vast picnic of cold salmon and white wine packed in ice. They spread a snow-white tablecloth on the ground and sat around it on the springy turf. Maisie fed Solly titbits. She was growing more and more fond of him. He was kind to everyone, full of fun, and interesting to talk to. Gluttony was his only real vice. She still had not let him have his way with her, but it seemed that the more she refused him, the more devoted to her he became.

The racing began after lunch. There was a bookmaker nearby, standing on a box and shouting odds. He wore a loud checked suit, a flowing silk tie, a huge spray of flowers in his buttonhole, and a white hat. He carried a leather satchel full of money slung over his shoulder and stood under a banner which read: "Wm. Tucker, the King's Head, Chichester."

Tonio and Solly bet on every race. Maisie got bored: one horse race was the same as another if you didn't gamble. April would not leave Tonio's side, but Maisie decided to leave the others for a while and look around.

The horses were not the only attraction. The downs around the racecourse were crowded with tents, stalls and carts. There were gambling booths, freak shows, and dark-skinned gypsies in bright head scarves telling fortunes. People were selling gin, cider, meat pies, oranges and Bibles. Barrel organs and bands competed with one another, and through the crowds wandered conjurers and jugglers and acrobats, all asking for pennies. There were dancing dogs, dwarfs and giants and men on stilts. The boisterous carnival atmosphere reminded Maisie powerfully of the circus, and she suffered a nostalgic twinge of regret for the life she had left behind. The entertainers were here to take money from the public any way they could and it warmed her heart to see them succeed.

She knew she should be taking more from Solly. It was crazy to be walking out with one of the richest men in the world and living in one room in Soho. By now she ought to be wearing diamonds and furs and have her eye on a little suburban house in St. John's Wood or Clapham. Her job riding Sammles's horses would not last much longer: the London season was coming to an end and the people who could afford to buy horses were leaving for the country. But she would not let Solly give her anything but flowers. It drove April mad.

She passed a big marquee. Outside were two girls dressed as bookmakers and a man in a black suit shouting: "The only racing certainty at Goodwood today is the coming Day of Judgment! Stake your faith on Jesus, and the payout is eternal life." The interior of the tent looked cool and shady, and on impulse she went in. Most of the people sitting on the benches looked as if they were already converted. Maisie sat near the exit and picked up a hymnbook.

She could understand why people joined chapels and went preaching at race meetings. It made them feel they belonged to something. The feeling of belonging was the real temptation Solly offered her: not so much the diamonds and furs, but the prospect of being Solly Greenbourne's mistress, with somewhere to live and a regular income and a position in the scheme of things. It was not a respectable position, nor permanent—the arrangement would end the moment Solly got bored with her—but it was a lot more than she had now.

The congregation stood up to sing a hymn. It was all about being washed in the blood of the Lamb, and it made Maisie feel ill. She went out.

She passed a puppet show as it was reaching its climax, with the irascible Mr. Punch being knocked from one side of the little stage to the other by his club-wielding wife. She studied the crowd with a knowledgeable eye. There was not much money in a Punch-and-Judy show if it was operated honestly: most of the audience would slip away without paying anything and the rest would give halfpennies. But there were other ways to fleece the customers. After a few moments she spotted a boy at the back robbing a man in a top hat. Everyone but Maisie was watching the show, and no one else saw the small grubby hand sliding into the man's waistcoat pocket.

Maisie had no intention of doing anything about it. Wealthy and careless young men deserved to lose their pocket watches, and bold thieves earned their loot, in her opinion. But when she looked more closely at the victim she recognized the black hair and blue eyes of Hugh Pilaster. She recalled April's telling her that Hugh had no money. He could not afford to lose his watch. She decided on impulse to save him from his own carelessness.

She made her way quickly around to the back of the crowd. The pickpocket was a ragged sandy-haired boy of about eleven years, just the age Maisie had been when she ran away from home. He was delicately drawing Hugh's watch chain out of his waistcoat. There was a burst of uproarious laughter from the audience watching the show, and at that moment

the pickpocket edged away with the watch in his hand.

Maisie grabbed him by the wrist.

He gave a small cry of fear and tried to wriggle free, but she was too strong for him. "Give it to me and I'll say nothing," she hissed.

He hesitated for a moment. Maisie saw fear and greed at war on his dirty face. Then a kind of weary resignation took over, and he dropped the watch on the ground.

"Away and steal someone else's watch," she said. She released his hand and he was gone in a twinkling.

She picked up the watch. It was a gold hunter. She opened the front and checked the time: ten past three. On the back of the watch was inscribed:

Tobias Pilaster
from your loving wife
Lydia
23rd May 1851

The watch had been a gift from Hugh's mother to his father. Maisie was glad she had rescued it. She closed the face and tapped Hugh on the shoulder.

He turned around, annoyed at being distracted from the entertainment; then his bright blue eyes widened in surprise. "Miss Robinson!"

"What's the time?" she said.

He reached automatically for his watch and found his pocket empty. "That's funny ..." He looked around as if he might have dropped it. "I do hope I haven't—"

She held it up.

"By Jove!" he said. "How on earth did you find it?"

"I saw you being robbed, and rescued it."

"Where's the thief?"

"I let him go. He was only a wee lad."

"But ..." He was nonplussed.

"I'd have let him take the watch, only I know you can't afford to buy another."

"You don't really mean that."

"I do. I used to steal, when I was a child, any time I could get away with it."

"How dreadful."

Maisie found herself once again becoming annoyed by him. To her way of thinking there was something sanctimonious in his attitude. She said: "I remember your father's funeral. It was a cold day, and raining. Your father died owing my father money—yet you had a coat that day, and I had none. Was that honest?"

"I don't know," he said with sudden anger. "I was thirteen years old when my father went bankrupt—does that mean I have to turn a blind eye to villainy all my life?"

Maisie was taken aback. It was not often that men snapped at her, and this was the second time Hugh had done it. But she did not want to quarrel with him again. She touched his arm. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to criticize your father. I just wanted you to understand why a child might steal."

He softened immediately. "And I haven't thanked you for saving my watch. It was my mother's wedding gift to my father, so it's more precious than its price."

"And the child will find another fool to rob."

He laughed. "I've never met anyone like you!" he said. "Would you like to have a glass of beer? It's so hot."

It was just what she felt like. "Yes, please."

A few yards off there was a heavy four-wheeled cart loaded with huge barrels. Hugh bought two pottery tankards of warm, malty ale. Maisie took a long draught: she had been thirsty. It tasted better than Solly's French wine. Fixed to the cart was a sign chalked in rough capital letters saying WALK OFF WITH A POT AND IT WILL BE BROKE OVER YOUR HED.

A meditative look came over Hugh's usually lively face, and after a while he said: "Do you realize we were both victims of the same catastrophe?"

She did not. "What do you mean?"

"There was a financial crisis in 1866. When that happens, perfectly honest companies fail ... like when one horse in a team falls and drags the others down with it. My father's business collapsed because people owed him money and didn't pay; and he was so distraught that he took his own life, and left my mother a widow and me fatherless at the age of thirteen. Your father couldn't feed you because people owed him money and couldn't pay, and you ran away at the age of eleven."

Maisie saw the logic of what he was saying, but her heart would not let her agree: she had hated Tobias Pilaster for too long. "It's not the same," she protested. "Workingmen have no control over these things—they just do what they're told. Bosses have the power. It's their fault if things go wrong."

Hugh looked thoughtful. "I don't know, perhaps you're right. Bosses certainly take the lion's share of the rewards. But I'm sure of one thing, at least: bosses or workers, their children aren't to blame."

Maisie smiled. "It's hard to believe we've found something to agree about."

They finished their drinks, returned the pots and walked a few yards to a merry-go-round with wooden horses. "Do you want a ride?" said Hugh.

Maisie smiled. "No."

"Are you here on your own?"

"No, I'm with ... friends." For some reason she did not want him to know she had been brought here by Solly. "And you? Are you with your awful aunt?"

He grimaced. "No. Methodists don't approve of race meetings—she'd be horrified if she knew I was here."

"Is she fond of you?"

"Not in the least."

"Then why does she let you live with her?"

"She likes to keep people in sight, so she can control them."

"Does she control you?"

"She tries." He grinned. "Sometimes I escape."

"It must be hard, living with her."

"I can't afford to live on my own. I have to be patient and work hard at the bank. Eventually I'll get promoted and then I'll be independent." He grinned again. "And then I'll tell her to shut her gob like you did."

"I hope you didn't get into trouble."

"I did, but it was worth it to see the expression on her face. That was when I started to like you."

"Is that why you asked me to dine with you?"

"Yes. Why did you refuse?"

"Because April told me you haven't a penny to your name."

"I've enough for a couple of chops and a plum pudding."

"How could a girl resist that?" she said mockingly.

He laughed. "Come out with me tonight. We'll go to Cremorne Gardens and dance."

She was tempted, but she thought of Solly and felt guilty. "No, thank you."

"Why not?"

She asked herself the same question. She was not in love with Solly and she was taking no money from him: why was she saving herself for him? I'm eighteen years old, she thought, and if I can't go out dancing with a boy I like, what's the point in living? "All right, then."

"You'll come?"

"Aye."

He grinned. She had made him happy. "Shall I fetch you?"

She did not want him to see the Soho slum where she shared a room with April. "No, let's meet somewhere."

"All right—we'll go to Westminster Pier and take the steamer to Chelsea."

"Yes!" She felt more excited than she had for months. "What time?"

"Eight o'clock?"

She made a rapid calculation. Solly and Tonio would want to stay until the last race. Then they had to get the train back to London. She would say good-bye to Solly at Victoria Station and walk to Westminster. She thought she could make it. "But if I'm late, you'll wait?"

"All night, if necessary."

Thinking of Solly made her feel guilty. "I'd better get back to my friends now."

"I'll walk with you," he said eagerly.

She did not want that. "Best you don't."

"As you wish."

She put out her hand and they shook. It seemed oddly formal. "Until tonight," she said.

"I'll be there."

She turned and walked away, feeling that he was watching her. Now why did I do that? she thought. Do I want to go out with him? Do I really like him? The first time we met we had a quarrel that broke up the party, and today he was ready to squabble again if I hadn't smoothed it over. We really don't get on. We'll never be able to dance together. Perhaps I won't go.

But he's got lovely blue eyes.

She made up her mind not to think about it anymore. She had agreed to meet him and she would. She might enjoy it or she might not, but fretting beforehand would not help.

She would have to invent a reason for leaving Solly. He was expecting to take her out to dinner. However, he never questioned her—he would accept any excuse, no matter how implausible. All the same she would try to think of something convincing, for it made her feel bad to abuse his easygoing nature.

She found the others where she had left them. They had spent the whole afternoon between the rail and the bookmaker in the checked suit. April and Tonio were looking bright-eyed and triumphant. As soon as April saw Maisie she said: "We've won a hundred and ten pounds—isn't it wonderful?"

Maisie was happy for April. It was such a lot of money to get for nothing. As she was congratulating them, Micky Miranda appeared, strolling along with his thumbs in the pockets of his dove-gray waistcoat. She was not surprised to see him: everyone went to Goodwood.

Although Micky was startlingly good-looking, Maisie disliked him. He reminded her of the circus ringmaster, who had thought all women should be thrilled to be propositioned by him, and was highly affronted when one turned him down. Micky had Edward Pilaster in tow, as always. Maisie was curious about their relationship. They were so different: Micky slim, immaculate, confident; Edward big, clumsy, hoggish. Why were they so inseparable? But most people were enchanted by Micky. Tonio regarded him with a kind of nervous veneration, like a puppy with a cruel master.

Behind them were an older man and a young woman. Micky introduced the man as his father. Maisie studied him with interest. He did not resemble Micky at all. He was a short man with bowed legs, very broad shoulders and a weatherbeaten face. Unlike his son he did not look comfortable in a stiff collar and a top hat. The woman was clinging to him like a lover but she had to be younger than him by thirty years. Micky introduced her as Miss Cox.

They all talked about their winnings. Both Edward and Tonio had made a lot on a horse called Prince Charlie. Solly had won money then lost it again, and seemed to enjoy both equally. Micky did not say how he had fared, and Maisie guessed

he had not bet as much as the others: he seemed to person, too calculating, to be a heavy gambler.

However, with his next breath he surprised her. He said to Solly: "We're going to have a heavyweight game tonight, Greenbourne—a pound minimum. Will you join in?"

She was struck by the thought that Micky's languid posture was covering up considerable tension. He was a deep one.

Solly would go along with anything. "I'll join in," he said.

Micky turned to Tonio. "Would you care to join us?" His take-it-or-leave-it tone sounded false to Maisie.

"Count on me," Tonio said excitedly. "I'll be there!"

April looked troubled and said: "Tonio, not tonight—you promised me." Maisie suspected that Tonio could not afford to play when the minimum stake was a pound.

"What did I promise?" he said with a wink at his friends.

She whispered something in his ear, and the men all laughed.

Micky said: "It's be the last big game of the season, Silva. You'll be sorry if you miss it."

That surprised Maisie. At the Argyll Rooms she had got the impression that Micky disliked Tonio. Why was he now trying to talk Tonio into joining the card game?

Tonio said: "I'm lucky today—look how much I've won on the horses! I shall play cards tonight."

Micky glanced at Edward, and Maisie caught a look of relief in their eyes. Edward said: "Shall we all dine together at the club?"

Solly looked at Maisie, and she realized she had been provided with a ready-made excuse for not spending the evening with him. "Dine with the boys, Solly," she said. "I don't mind."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. I've had a lovely day. You spend the evening at your club."

"That's settled, then," said Micky.

He and his father, Miss Cox and Edward took their leave.

Tonio and April went to place a bet on the next race. Solly offered Maisie his arm and said: "Shall we walk for a while?"

They strolled along the white-painted rail that bounded the track. The sun was warm and the country air smelled good. After a while Solly said: "Do you like me, Maisie?"

She stopped, stood on tiptoe, and kissed his cheek. "I like you a lot."

He looked into her eyes, and she was mystified to see tears behind his spectacles. "Solly, dear, what is it?" she said.

"I like you, too," he said. "More than anyone I've ever met."

"Thank you." She was touched. It was unusual for Solly to show any emotion stronger than mild enthusiasm.

Then he said: "Will you marry me?"

She was flabbergasted. This was the last thing in the world she had expected. Men of Solly's class did not propose to girls like her. They seduced them, gave them money, kept them as mistresses, and had children by them, but they did not marry them. She was too astounded to speak.

Solly went on: "I'd give you anything you want. Please say yes."

Marriage to Solly! Maisie would be unbelievably rich for ever and ever. A soft bed every night, a blazing fire in every room of the house, and as much butter as she could eat. She would get up when she pleased, not when she had to. She would never be cold again, never hungry, never shabbily dressed, never weary.

The word "yes" trembled on the tip of her tongue.

She thought of April's tiny room in Soho, with its nest of mice in the wall; she thought of how the privy stank on warm days; she thought of the nights they went without dinner; she thought of how her feet ached after a day of walking the streets.

She looked at Solly. How hard could it be, to marry this man?

He said: "I love you so much, I'm just desperate for you."

He really did love her, she could tell.

And that was the trouble.

She did not love him.

He deserved better. He deserved a wife who really loved him, not a hard-hearted guttersnipe on the make. If she married him she would be cheating him. And he was too good for that.

She felt close to tears. She said: "You're the kindest, most gentle man I've ever met—"

"Don't say no, please?" he interrupted. "If you can't say yes, say nothing. Think about it, at least for a day, perhaps longer."

Maisie sighed. She knew she should turn him down, and it would have been easier to do so right away. But he was begging her. "I'll think about it," she said.

He beamed. "Thank you."

She shook her head ruefully. "Whatever happens, Solly, I believe I'll never be proposed to by a better man."

HUGH AND MAISIE TOOK THE PENNY RIDE on the pleasure steamer from Westminster Pier to Chelsea. It was a warm, light evening, and the muddy river was busy with cockle-boats, barges and ferries. They steamed upstream, under the new railway bridge for Victoria Station, passing Christopher Wren's Chelsea Hospital on the north shore and, on the south, the flowers of Battersea Fields, London's traditional dueling ground. Battersea Bridge was a ramshackle wooden structure that looked ready to fall down. At its south end were chemical factories, but on the opposite side pretty cottages clustered around Chelsea Old Church, and naked children splashed in the shallows.

Less than a mile beyond the bridge they disembarked and walked up the wharf to the magnificent gilded gateway of Cremorne Gardens. The Gardens consisted of twelve acres of groves and grottoes, flower beds and lawns, ferneries and copses between the river and the King's Road. It was dusk when they arrived, and there were Chinese lanterns in the trees

and glsight along the winding paths. The place was packed: many of the younger people who had been at the races had decided to finish the day here. Everyone was dressed up to the nines, and they sauntered carefree through the gardens, laughing and flirting, the girls in pairs, the young men in larger groups, the couples arm-in-arm.

The weather had been fine all day, sunny and warm, but now it was becoming a hot, thundery night that threatened a storm. Hugh felt at once elated and nervous. He was thrilled to have Maisie on his arm, but he had the insecure sense that he did not know the rules of the game he was playing. What did she expect? Would she let him kiss her? Would she let him do anything he wanted? He longed to touch her body, but he did not know where to begin. Would she expect him to go all the way? He wanted to, but he had never done it before and he was afraid of making a fool of himself. The other clerks at Pilasters talked a lot about dollymops, and what they would and would not do, but Hugh suspected that much of what they said was boasting. Anyway, Maisie could not be treated as a dollymop. She was more complex than that.

He was also a little worried that he might be seen by someone he knew. His family would disapprove powerfully of what he was doing. Cremorne Gardens was not only a lower-class place, it was thought by Methodists to encourage immorality. If he were found out, Augusta would be sure to use it against him. It was one thing for Edward to take loose women to disreputable places: he was the son and heir. It was different for Hugh, penniless and poorly educated and expected to be a failure like his father: they would say that licentious pleasure gardens were his natural habitat, and he belonged with clerks and artisans and girls like Maisie.

Hugh was at a critical point in his career. He was on the point of getting promoted to correspondence clerk—at a salary of 150 pounds a year, more than double what he was getting now—and that could be jeopardized by a report of dissolute behavior.

He looked anxiously at the other men walking along the winding paths between the flower beds, fearful of recognizing someone. There was a sprinkling of upper-class men, some with girls on their arms; but they all carefully avoided Hugh's eye, and he realized they too were apprehensive about being seen there. He decided that if he saw people he knew they would probably be as keen as he to keep it quiet; and he felt reassured.

He was proud of Maisie. She was wearing a blue-green gown with a low neckline and a bustle behind, and a sailor hat poised jauntily on her piled-up hair. She attracted a lot of admiring glances.

They passed a ballet theatre, an oriental circus, an American bowling green and several shooting galleries, then went into a restaurant to dine. This was a new experience for Hugh. Although restaurants were becoming more common, they were mostly used by the middle classes: upper-class people still did not like the idea of eating in public. Young men such as Edward and Micky ate out quite often, but they thought of themselves as slumming, and they only did it when they were either looking for or had already found dollymops to keep them company.

All through dinner Hugh tried not to think about Maisie's breasts. The tops of them showed lusciously above the neckline of her gown, and they were very pale, with freckles. He had seen bare breasts, just once—at Nellie's brothel a few weeks ago. But he had never touched one. Were they firm, like muscles, or limp? When a woman took off her corset, did her breasts move as she walked, or remain rigid? If you touched them, would they yield to pressure, or were they hard, like kneecaps? Would she let him touch them? He sometimes even thought about kissing them, the way the man in the brothel had kissed the whore's breasts, but this was a secret desire that he felt ashamed of. In fact he was vaguely ashamed of all these feelings. It seemed brutish to sit with a woman and think all the time of her naked body, as if he cared nothing for her, but just wanted to use her. However, he could not help it, especially with Maisie, who was so alluring.

While they were eating there was a fireworks display in another part of the gardens. The bangs and flashes upset the lions and tigers in the menagerie, and they roared their disapproval. Hugh recalled that Maisie had worked in a circus, and he asked her what it was like.

"You get to know people very well when you live so close together," she said thoughtfully. "It's good in some ways, bad in others. People help each other all the time. There are love affairs, lots of quarrels, sometimes fights—there were two murders in the four years I was with the circus."

"Good heavens."

"And the money is unreliable."

"Why?"

"When people need to economize, entertainment is the first thing they cut out."

"I'd never thought of that. I must remember not to invest the bank's money in any form of entertainment business."

She smiled. "Do you think about finance all the time?"

No, Hugh thought, I think about your breasts all the time. He said: "You have to understand that I'm the son of the black sheep of the family. I know more about banking than the other young Pilasters, but I have to work doubly hard to prove my worth."

"Why is it so important to prove yourself?"

Good question, Hugh thought. He considered. After a minute he said: "I've always been that way, I suppose. At school I just had to be top of the class. And my father's failure made it worse: everyone thinks I'm going to go the same way, and I have to show them they're wrong."

"In a way I feel the same, you know. I'm never going to live the way my mam did, always on the edge of destitution. I'm going to have money, I don't care what I have to do."

As gently as he could, Hugh said: "Is that why you go around with Solly?"

She frowned, and for a moment he thought she was going to be angry, but that passed and she smiled ironically. "I suppose that's a fair question. If you want to know the truth, I'm not proud of my connection with Solly. I misled him with certain ... expectations."

Hugh was surprised. Did that mean she had not gone all the way with Solly? "He seems to like you."

"And I like him. But comradeship isn't what he wants, and it never was, and I always knew that."

"I see what you mean." Hugh decided she had not gone all the way with Solly, and that meant she might not be willing to do it with him. He felt both disappointed and relieved: disappointed because he was so hungry for her, relieved because he was so nervous about it.

"You seem pleased about something," said Maisie.

"I suppose I'm glad to hear that you and Solly are only comrades."

She looked a little sad, and he wondered if he had said the wrong thing.

He paid for their dinner. It was quite expensive but the money he had brought the money he had been saving for his next suit of clothes, nineteen shillings, so he had plenty of cash. When they left the restaurant the people in the gardens seemed more boisterous than they had earlier, no doubt because they had consumed a good deal of beer and gin in the interim.

They came upon a dance floor. Dancing was something Hugh felt confident about: it was the only subject that had been well taught at the Folkestone Academy for the Sons of Gentlemen.

He led Maisie onto the floor and took her in his arms for the first time. His fingertips tingled as he rested his right hand in the small of her back, just above her bustle. He could feel the warmth of her body through her clothing. With his left hand he held hers, and she gave it a squeeze: the sensation thrilled him.

At the end of the first dance he smiled at her, feeling pleased, and to his surprise she reached up and touched his mouth with a fingertip. "I like it when you grin," she said. "You look boyish."

"Boyish" was not exactly the impression he was trying to give, but at this point anything that pleased her was all right with him.

They danced again. They were good partners: although Maisie was short, Hugh was only a little taller, and they were both light on their feet. He had danced with dozens of girls, if not hundreds, but he had never enjoyed it this much. He felt as if he was only now discovering the delightful sensation of holding a woman close, moving and swaying with the music, and executing complicated steps in unison.

"Are you tired?" he asked her at the end of the dance.

"Certainly not!"

They danced again.

At society balls it was bad manners to dance with the same girl more than twice. You had to lead her off the floor and offer to fetch her some champagne or a sorbet. Hugh had always chafed at such regulations, and now he felt joyfully liberated to be an anonymous reveler at this public dance.

They stayed on the floor until midnight, when the music stopped.

All the couples left the dance floor and moved on to the garden paths. Hugh noticed that many of the men kept their arms around their partners, even though they were no longer dancing; so, with some trepidation, he did the same. Maisie did not seem to mind.

The festivities were becoming unruly. Beside the paths there were occasional small cabins, like boxes at the opera, where people could sit and dine and watch the crowds walk by. Some of the cabins had been rented by groups of undergraduates who were now drunk. A man walking in front of Hugh had his top hat playfully knocked off his head, and Hugh himself had to duck to avoid a flying loaf of bread. He held Maisie closer to him, protectively, and to his delight she wound her arm around his waist and gave him a squeeze.

There were numerous shadowy groves and bowers off the main footpath, and Hugh could dimly perceive couples on the wooden seats, although he could not be sure whether they were embracing or just sitting together. He was surprised when the couple walking in front of them stopped and kissed passionately in the middle of the path. He led Maisie around them, feeling awkward. But after a while he got over his embarrassment and began to feel excited. A few minutes later they passed another embracing couple. Hugh caught Maisie's eye, and she smiled at him in a way that he felt sure was meant to be encouraging. But somehow he could not summon up the nerve to just go ahead and kiss her.

The gardens were becoming more rowdy. They had to detour around a scuffle involving six or seven young men, all shouting drunkenly, punching and knocking one another down. Hugh began to notice a number of unaccompanied women, and wondered if they were prostitutes. The atmosphere was turning threatening, and he felt the need to protect Maisie.

Then a group of thirty or forty young men came charging along, tipping people's hats off, pushing women aside and throwing men to the ground. There was no escaping them: they spread out across the lawns on either side of the path. Hugh acted quickly. He stood in front of Maisie with his back to the onslaught, then took off his hat and put both arms around her, holding her tight. The mob swept by. A heavy shoulder hit Hugh in the back, and he staggered, still holding Maisie; but he managed to remain upright. On one side of him a girl was knocked over, and on the other a man was punched in the face. Then the hooligans were gone.

Hugh relaxed his grip and looked down at Maisie. She looked back at him expectantly. Hesitantly, he leaned down and kissed her lips. They were deliciously soft and mobile. He closed his eyes. He had waited years for this: it was his first kiss. And it was as delightful as he had dreamed. He breathed in the scent of her. Her lips moved delicately against his. He wanted never to stop.

She broke the kiss. She looked hard at him, then hugged him tight, pulling his body against hers. "You could spoil all my plans," she said quietly.

He was not sure what she meant.

He looked to one side. There was a bower with an empty seat. Screwing up his courage, he said: "Shall we sit down?"

"All right."

They made their way into the darkness and sat on the wooden seat. Hugh kissed her again.

This time he felt a little less tentative. He put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her to him, and with his other hand he tilted her chin; and he kissed her more passionately than before, pressing his lips to hers hard. She responded enthusiastically, arching her back so that he could feel her bosom crushed against his chest. It surprised him that she should be so keen, though he knew of no reason why girls should not like kissing as much as men did. Her eagerness made it doubly exciting.

He stroked her cheek and her neck, and his hand fell to her shoulder. He wanted to touch her breasts, but he was afraid she would be offended, so he hesitated. She put her lips to his ear, and in a whisper that was also a kiss, she said: "You can touch them."

It startled him that she had been able to read his mind, but the invitation excited him almost beyond endurance—not just because she was willing, but that she should actually speak of it. You can touch them. His fingertips traced a line from her shoulder, across her collarbone, down to her bosom, and he touched the swell of her breast above the neckline of her gown. Her skin was soft and warm. He was not sure what he should do next. Should he try to put his hand inside?

Maisie answered his unspoken question by taking his hand and pressing it to her dress below the neckline. "Squeeze them, but gently," she whispered.

He did so. They were not like muscles or kneecaps, he found, but more yielding, except for the hard nipples. His hand

went from one to the other, stroking and squeezing alternately. Maisie's breath was hot against his neck. He felt as if he could do this all night, but he paused to kiss her lips again. This time she kissed him briefly then pulled away, kissed then pulled away, again and again, and that was even more thrilling. There were lots of ways to kiss, he realized.

Suddenly she froze. "Listen," she said.

Hugh had been vaguely aware that the gardens were getting very noisy, and now he was hearing shouting and crashing. Looking toward the footpath he saw that everyone was running in different directions. "There must be a fight," he said.

Then he heard a police whistle.

"Damn," he said. "Now there'll be trouble."

"We'd better leave," Maisie said.

"Let's find our way to the King's Road entrance and see if we can pick up a hansom cab."

"All right."

He hesitated, reluctant to leave. "One more kiss."

"Yes."

He kissed her and she hugged him hard.

"Hugh," she said, "I'm glad I met you."

He thought it was the nicest thing anyone had ever said to him.

They regained the footpath and headed north, hurrying. A moment later two young men came hurtling along, one chasing the other; and the first crashed into Hugh, sending him flying. When he scrambled to his feet they had gone.

Maisie was concerned. "Are you all right?"

He brushed himself off and picked up his hat. "No damage," he said. "But I don't want it to happen to you. Let's cut across the lawns—it might be safer."

As they stepped off the path, the gaslights went out.

They pressed forward in the dark. Now there was a continuous clamor of men shouting and women screaming, punctuated by police whistles. It suddenly occurred to Hugh that he might be arrested. Then everyone would find out what he had been up to. Augusta would say he was too dissolute to be given a responsible post at the bank. He groaned. Then he recalled how it had felt to touch Maisie's breasts, and he decided he did not care what Augusta said.

They kept away from paths and open spaces, and picked their way through trees and shrubbery. The ground rose slightly from the riverbank, so Hugh knew they were headed the right way as long as they were going uphill.

In the distance he saw lanterns twinkling, and steered toward the lights. They began to meet up with other couples going the same way. Hugh hoped there would be less chance of trouble with the police if they were in a group of obviously respectable and sober people.

As they approached the gate a troop of thirty or forty policemen entered. Fighting to get into the park against the flow of the crowd, the police started indiscriminately clubbing men and women. The crowd turned and began to run in the opposite direction.

Hugh thought fast. "Let me carry you," he said to Maisie.

She looked puzzled but said: "All right."

He stooped and picked her up, with one arm under her knees and the other around her shoulders. "Pretend you've fainted," he said, and she closed her eyes and went limp. He walked forward, against the press of the crowd, shouting: "Make way, there! Make way!" in his most authoritative voice. Seeing an apparently sick woman, even the fleeing people tried to get out of the way. He came up against the advancing policemen, who were as panicky as the public. "Stand aside, constable! Let the lady through!" he shouted at one of them. The man looked hostile and for a moment he thought his bluff would be called. Then a sergeant shouted: "Let the gentleman pass!" He advanced through the line of police and suddenly found himself in the clear.

Maisie opened her eyes and he smiled at her. He liked holding her this way and he was in no hurry to lay down his burden. "Are you all right?"

She nodded. She seemed tearful. "Put me down."

He put her down gently and hugged her. "I say, don't cry," he said. "It's all over now."

She shook her head. "It's not the riot," she said. "I've seen fights before. But this is the first time anyone ever took care of me. All my life I've had to look after myself. It's a new experience."

He did not know what to say. All the girls he had ever met assumed that men would take care of them automatically. Being with Maisie was a constant revelation.

Hugh looked about for a cab. There were none to be seen. "I'm afraid we may have to walk."

"When I was eleven years old I walked for four days to get to Newcastle," she said. "I think I can make it from Chelsea to Soho."

MICKY MIRANDA HAD BEGUN to cheat at cards while he was at Windfield School, to supplement the inadequate allowance he received from home. The methods he invented for himself had been crude, but good enough to fool schoolboys. Then, on the long transatlantic voyage home which he had taken between school and university, he had tried to fleece a fellow passenger who turned out to be a professional cardsharp. The older man had been amused, and had taken Micky under his wing, teaching him all the basic principles of the craft.

Cheating was most dangerous when the stakes were high. If people were playing for pennies it never occurred to them that someone would cheat. Suspicion mounted with the size of the bets.

If he were caught tonight it would not just mean the failure of his scheme to ruin Tonio. Cheating at cards was the worst crime a gentleman could commit in England. He would be asked to resign from his clubs, his friends would be "not at home" any time he called at their houses, and no one would speak to him in the street. The rare stories he had heard about Englishmen cheating always ended with the culprit's leaving the country to make a fresh start in some untamed territory such as Malaya or Hudson Bay. Micky's fate would be to go back to Cordova, endure the taunts of his older brother, and spend the rest of his life raising cattle. The thought made him feel ill.

But the rewards tonight were as dramatic as the risks.

He was not doing this just to please Augusta. That was important enough: she was his passport into the society of London's wealthy and powerful people. But he also wanted Tonio's job.

Papa had said Micky would have to earn his keep in London—there would be no more money from home. Tonio's job was ideal. It would enable Micky to live like a gentleman while doing hardly any work. And it would also be a step on the ladder to a higher position. One day Micky might become the minister. And then he would be able to hold his head high in any company. Even his brother would not be able to sneer at that.

Micky, Edward, Solly and Tonio dined early at the Cowes, the club they all favored. By ten o'clock they were in the card room. They were joined at the baccarat table by two other club gamblers who had heard of the high stakes: Captain Carter and Viscount Montagne. Montagne was a fool, but Carter was a hardheaded type, and Micky would have to be wary of him.

There was a white line drawn around the table ten or twelve inches from the edge. Each of the players had a pile of gold sovereigns in front of him, outside the white square. Once money crossed the line into the square it was staked.

Micky had spent the day pretending to drink. At lunch he had wet his lips with champagne and surreptitiously poured it out on the grass. On the train back to London he had accepted the offer of Edward's flask several times, but had always blocked the neck with his tongue while appearing to toss off a swig. At dinner he had poured himself a small glass of claret then added to it twice without ever drinking any. Now he quietly ordered ginger beer, which looked like brandy and soda. He had to be stone-cold sober to perform the delicate sleight-of-hand operations that would enable him to ruin Tonio Silva.

He licked his lips nervously, caught himself, and tried to relax.

Of all games the cardsharp's favorite was baccarat. It might have been invented, Micky thought, to enable the smart to steal from the rich.

In the first place, it was a game purely of chance, with no skill or strategy. The player received two cards and added up their values: a three and a four would make seven, a two and a six would make eight. If the total came to more than nine, only the last digit counted; so fifteen was five, twenty was zero, and the highest possible score was nine.

A player with a low score could draw a third card, which would be dealt faceup, so everyone could see it.

The banker dealt just three hands: one to his left, one to his right, and one to himself. Players bet on either the left or the right hand. The banker paid out to any hand higher than his own.

The second great advantage of baccarat, from the cheat's point of view, was that it was played with a pack of at least three decks of cards. This meant the cheat could use a fourth deck and confidently deal a card out of his sleeve without worrying whether another player already had the same card in his hand.

While the others were still making themselves comfortable and lighting their cigars he asked a waiter for three new decks of cards. When the man came back he naturally handed the cards to Micky.

In order to control the game Micky had to deal, so his first challenge was to make sure he was banker. This involved two tricks: neutralizing the cut, and second-card dealing. They were both relatively simple, but he was stiff with tension, and that could make a man bungle the easiest maneuvers.

He broke the seals. The cards were always packed the same way, with the jokers on top and the ace of spades at the bottom. Micky took out the jokers and shuffled, enjoying the clean slippery feel of the new cards. It was the simplest of operations to move an ace from the bottom to the top of the pack; but then he had to let one of the other players cut the cards without moving the ace from the top.

He passed the pack to Solly, sitting on his right. As he put it down he contracted his hand a fraction, so that the top card—the ace of spades—stayed in his palm, concealed by the breadth of his hand. Solly cut. Keeping his hand palm-downward all the time to conceal the ace, Micky picked up the pack, replacing the hidden card on top as he did so. He had successfully neutralized the cut.

"High card gets the bank?" he said, forcing himself to sound indifferent as to whether they said yes or no.

There was a murmur of assent.

Holding the pack firmly, he slid the top card back a fraction of an inch and began to deal fast, keeping the top card back and always dealing the second until he came to himself, when at last he dealt the ace. They all turned over their cards. Micky's was the only ace, so he was banker.

He managed a casual smile. "I think I'm going to be lucky tonight," he said.

No one commented.

He relaxed a little.

Concealing his relief, he dealt the first hand.

Tonio was playing on his left, with Edward and Viscount Montagne. On his right were Solly and Captain Carter. Micky did not want to win: that was not his purpose tonight. He just wanted Tonio to lose.

He played fair for a while, losing a little of Augusta's money. The others relaxed and ordered another round of drinks. When the time was right, Micky lit a cigar.

In the inside pocket of his dress coat, next to his cigar case, was another deck of cards—bought at the stationer's in St. James's Street where the club's playing cards came from, so that they would match.

He had arranged the extra deck in winning pairs, all giving a total of nine, the highest score: four and five, nine and ten, nine and jack, and so on. The surplus cards, all tens and court cards, he had left at home.

Returning his cigar case to his pocket, he palmed the extra deck; then, picking up the pack from the table with his other hand, he slid the new cards to the bottom of the old pack. While the others mixed their brandy and water he shuffled, carefully bringing to the top of the pack, in order, one card from the bottom, two cards at random, another from the bottom, and another two at random. Then, dealing first to his left, then to his right, then to himself, he gave himself the winning pair.

Next time around he gave Solly's side a winning hand. For a while he continued the same way, making Tonio lose and Solly win. The money he won from Tonio's side was thus paid out to Solly's side, and no suspicion attached to Micky, for the pile of sovereigns in front of him remained about the same.

Tonio had started by putting on the table most of the money he had won at the races—about a hundred pounds. When it was down to about fifty, he stood up and said: "This side is unlucky—I'm going to sit by Solly." He moved to the other side of the table.

That won't help you, Micky thought. It was no more difficult to make the left side win and the right side lose from now on. But it made him nervous to hear Tonio talk about bad luck. He wanted Tonio to go on thinking he was lucky today, even while he was losing money.

Occasionally Tonio would vary his style by betting five or ten sovereigns on a hand instead of two or three. When this happened, Micky dealt him a winning hand. Tonio would rake in his winnings and say gleefully: "I'm lucky today, I'm sure of it!" even though his pile of coins was steadily getting smaller.

Micky was feeling more relaxed now. He studied his victim's mental state while he smoothly manipulated the cards. It was not enough that Tonio should be cleaned out. Micky wanted him to play with money he didn't have, to gamble on borrowed money and be unable to repay his debts. Only then would he be thoroughly disgraced.

Micky waited with trepidation while Tonio lost more and more. Tonio was awestruck by Micky and would generally do whatever Micky suggested, but he was not a complete fool and there was still a chance he might have the sense to draw back from the brink of ruin.

When Tonio's money was almost gone Micky made his next move. He took out his cigar case again. "These are from home, Tonio," he said. "Try one." To his relief, Tonio accepted. The cigars were long and would take a good half-hour to smoke. Tonio would not want to leave before finishing his cigar.

When they had lit up Micky moved in for the kill.

A couple of hands later Tonio was broke. "Well, that's everything I won at Goodwood this afternoon," he said despondently.

"We ought to give you a chance to win it back," Micky said. "Pilaster will lend you a hundred pounds, I'm sure."

Edward looked a little startled, but it would have seemed ungenerous to refuse when he had such a big pile of winnings in front of him, and he said: "By all means."

Solly intervened. "Perhaps you should retire, Silva, and be grateful that you've had a great day's gambling at no cost."

Micky silently cursed Solly for being a good-natured nuisance. If Tonio did the sensible thing now the whole scheme was ruined.

Tonio hesitated.

Micky held his breath.

But it was not in Tonio's nature to gamble prudently, and as Micky had calculated, he could not resist the temptation to carry on. "All right," he said. "I might as well play on until I finish my cigar."

Micky let out a discreet sigh of relief.

Tonio beckoned to a waiter and ordered pen, paper and ink. Edward counted out a hundred sovereigns and Tonio scribbled an IOU. Micky knew that if Tonio lost all that he could never repay the debt.

The game went on. Micky found himself sweating a little as he held the delicate balance, ensuring that Tonio lost steadily, with the occasional big win to keep him optimistic. But this time when he was down to fifty pounds he said: "I only win when I gamble high. I'm putting the lot on this next hand."

It was a big bet even for the Cowes Club. If Tonio lost he was finished. One or two club members saw the size of the stake and stood near the table to watch the play.

Micky dealt the cards.

He looked at Edward, on the left, who shook his head to indicate that he did not want another card.

On the right, Solly did the same.

Micky turned over his own cards. He had given himself an eight and an ace, making nine.

Edward turned over the hand on the left. Micky did not know what the cards were: he knew in advance what he himself was going to get, but he dealt the others at random. Edward had a five and a two, making seven. He and Captain Carter had lost their money.

Solly turned over his hand, the cards on which Tonio had staked his future.

He had a nine and a ten. That made nineteen, which counted as nine. This equaled the bank's score, so there was no winner or loser, and Tonio got to keep his fifty pounds.

Micky cursed under his breath.

He wanted Tonio to leave those fifty sovereigns on the table now. He gathered up the cards quickly. With a mocking note into his voice he said: "Going to reduce your stake, Silva?"

"Certainly not," said Tonio. "Deal the cards."

Micky thanked his stars and dealt, giving himself another winning hand.

This time Edward tapped his cards, indicating that he wanted a third. Micky dealt him a four of clubs and turned to Solly. Solly passed.

Micky turned over his cards and showed a five and a four. Edward had a four showing, and turned over a worthless king and another four, making eight. His side had lost.

Solly turned up a two and a four, making six. The right side had also lost to the banker.

And Tonio was ruined.

He turned pale and looked ill, and muttered something that Micky recognized as a Spanish curse.

Micky suppressed a smile of triumph and raked in his winnings—then he saw something that took his breath away and stopped his heart with dread.

There were four fours of clubs on the table.

They were supposed to be playing with three decks of cards. Anyone who noticed the four identical fours would immediately know that extra cards had somehow been added to the pack.

It was a hazard of this particular method of cheating, and the chances of its happening were roughly one in a hundred thousand.

If the anomaly were seen, it would be Micky, not Tonio, who was ruined.

So far no one had spotted it. Suits had no significance in this game, so the irregularity was not glaring. Micky picked up the cards swiftly, his heart beating hard. He was just thanking his stars that he had got away with it when Edward said:

“Hang on—there were four fours of clubs on the table.”

Micky cursed him for a blundering elephant. Edward was just thinking aloud. Of course he had no idea of Micky’s scheme.

“Couldn’t be,” said Viscount Montagne. “We’re playing with three decks of cards, so there are only three fours of clubs.”

“Exactly,” said Edward.

Micky puffed on his cigar. “You’re drunk, Pilaster. One of them was a four of spades.”

“Oh, sorry.”

Viscount Montagne said: “At this time of night, who can tell the difference between spades and clubs?”

Once again Micky thought he had got away with it—and once again his elation was premature.

Tonio said belligerently: “Let’s look at the cards.”

Micky’s heart seemed to stop. The cards from the last hand were placed on a pile which was shuffled and reused when the pack ran out. If the discards were turned over, the four identical fours would be seen, and Micky would be finished.

Desperately he said: “I hope you’re not questioning my word.”

This was a dramatic challenge to make in a gentlemen’s club: it was not very many years since such words would have led to a duel. People at the neighboring tables began to watch what was happening. Everyone looked at Tonio for his response.

Micky was thinking fast. He had said that one of the fours had been a four of spades, not clubs. If he could produce the four of spades from the top of the discard pile he would have proved his point—and with luck no one would look at the rest of the discards.

But first he had to find a four of spades. There were three. Some might be in the discard pile on the table, but the odds were that at least one was in the pack they had been playing with, which was in his hand.

It was his only chance.

While all eyes were on Tonio, he turned the pack so that the cards faced him. With infinitesimal movements of his thumb he exposed a corner of each card in turn. He kept his eyes firmly fixed on Tonio, but held the cards within his vision so that he could still read the letters and symbols in the corners.

Tonio said stubbornly: “Let’s look at the discards.”

The others turned to Micky. Steeling his nerve, he carried on fiddling with the pack, praying for a four of spades. In the midst of such drama no one remarked on what he was doing. The cards in contention were in the pile on the table, so it would seem to make no difference what he did with those in his hand. They would have to look quite hard to see that behind his hands he was sorting through the pack, but even if they did so they would not immediately realize he was up to no good.

But he could not stand on his dignity indefinitely. Sooner or later one of them would lose patience, abandon courtesy, and pick up the discards. To gain a few precious moments he said: “If you can’t lose like a man, perhaps you oughtn’t to play.” He felt a slight sweat break out on his forehead. He wondered whether he had missed a four of spades in his haste.

Solly said mildly: “It can’t hurt to look, can it?”

Damn Solly, always so sickeningly reasonable, Micky thought desperately.

Then at last he found a four of spades.

He palmed it.

“Oh, very well,” he said with a feigned nonchalance that was the polar opposite of what he was feeling.

Everyone became very still and quiet.

Micky put down the pack he had been furtively sorting through, keeping the four of spades in his palm. He reached out and picked up the discard pile, dropping the four on top. He placed the pile in front of Solly and said: “There will be a four of spades in there, I guarantee.”

Solly turned over the top card, and they all saw that it was the four of spades.

A hum of conversation broke out around the room as they all relaxed.

Micky was still terrified that someone might turn over more cards and see that there were four fours of clubs underneath.

Viscount Montagne said: “I think that settles it, and speaking for myself, Miranda, I can only apologize if any doubt has been cast upon your word.”

“Good of you to say so,” Micky said.

They all looked at Tonio. He stood up, his face working. “Damn the lot of you, then,” he said, and he walked out.

Micky swept up all the cards on the table. Now no one would ever know the truth.

His palms were wet with perspiration. He wiped them surreptitiously on his trousers. “I’m sorry about my compatriot’s behavior,” he said. “If there’s one thing I hate it’s a fellow who can’t play cards like a gentleman.”

IN THE EARLY HOURS OF THE MORNING Maisie and Hugh walked north through the raw new suburbs of Fulham and South Kensington. The night became hotter and the stars disappeared. They held hands, even though their palms were sweaty in the heat. Maisie felt bewildered but happy.

Something odd had happened tonight. She did not understand it but she liked it. In the past, when men had kissed her and touched her breasts, she had felt it was part of a transaction, something she gave in return for whatever she needed from them. Tonight had been different. She had wanted him to touch her—and he had been too polite to do anything without being asked!

It had started while they were dancing. Until then she had not been aware that this was going to be radically different from any previous evening spent with an upper-class young man. Hugh was more charming than most, and he looked good in his white waistcoat and silk tie, but still he was just a nice boy. Then, on the dance floor, she had begun to think how pleasant it would be to kiss him. The feeling had got stronger as they walked around the gardens after the dancing and saw all the other courting couples. His hesitation had been engaging. Other men saw dinner and conversation as a tedious preliminary to the important business of the evening, and could hardly wait to get her in a dark place and start groping, but