

PART VI
THE FAKERS

Chapter 1

WHAT colossal presence, these trees near whose summits she sat – to be shut up there like that, in a London garden-lagoon! Who would have supposed, on the pavements of the streets not fifty feet away, that these great bodies stood behind the house-fronts like giraffes at bay! Five-floored ramparts of blackened brick, the late Victorian terraces – irrelevantly vast, and of course sepulchral-basemented, for staffs of vanished domestics – secured the secret of the continued existence of this fragment of park. The weakening rays of the sun of this particularly feeble autumn found their journey's-end upon the hecatombs of leaves – a shimmer of melancholy rust – of these towering creatures of the forest.

A well of beautiful loneliness – at the bottom of what the horrid Americans would call a 'block'! No one ever appeared to have time to stroll in it. To lie down under a tree would be considered, probably, unsuitable in a householder, and of the last tactlessness in a guest. Yet to lie down at the foot of an elm – these must be elms, with their great stature – as a sentimental guest of this estate – at the bottom of this sylvan well – with the steep plumes of verdure ascending into the sky above her, was what Margot desired to do. With a book! Yes, with an appropriate book.

And as she idly considered what book she should take down with her, if this were *her* room, to read in the exquisite seclusion of this heaven-sent deep bit of park (thrown away upon barbarians like Agnes), she thought that *A Room of One's Own* would exactly suit the requirements of the case – would beautifully abet the lonely occasion. Though, of course, that slender peacock-wrapped volume – which had been for her a *livre de chevet* at the time when she still had a *bed of her own* – during that period of her life when Margot (as she had now come to be, complete with voice, coiffure, and

carriage), was painfully in the making – the pages of that militant little treatise she knew so much by heart, she would take down into the garden only for dipping-in. But it would not be her intention, in any event, to read, only to lie in listless contemplation – a fragile figure, alone, in an abandoned scrap of park.

Here indeed was a very *Park of One's Own* for a solitary woman; and that was distinctly a luxury, to have attached to the regulation *room of one's own*, if one had one – if, like Agnes Irons, one had lived by oneself in a posh little service-flatlet! Margot almost wished she could sail forth from this spotlessly tidy bachelor cell to go to dinner with Victor in Soho, as in the days before she was 'Mrs Stamp,' and experience the romantic courtship of 'the hermit girl,' as she had nicknamed herself, all over again. Victor was so happy then! It was for Victor's sake that she desired to go back and retrace her steps; to sacrifice once more, upon the altar of Australian passion, 'the hermit girl' of her a little enervated fabrication – the clever picture of a lonely girl, to whose immaculate conception Virginia Woolf had so decisively contributed.

Musing at the open window, as if already under the green-wood tree with her favourite author, she fancied herself back in Oxford (where she had never set foot) at the don's lunch, by the side of her goddess, Virginia (unseen, but there all the same). Or there they both drooped discreetly, side by side, perhaps, two feminine *outsiders*, as it were, in a masculine universe of one-sided learning. And how delicious to be an *outsider* with such an one as the stately Virginia, thought she, and blushed with a little wistful happiness. As onlookers, then, in this sense, they found themselves at the post-war academic banquet – remarking upon the masculine wealth locked up in these colleges, announcing itself in the pomp of the table, in vintage wines and in great vainglorious cigars: and they would be comparing together (if Virginia and she had really *gone* there in each other's company and as two girl-friends) the quality of those present with what the pre-war had had to offer in the way of luncheon-parties – the talk, the ambitious, almost naïf effervescence. But the pre-war, it went without saying, was to be vastly preferred (though, of course, Margot had

been in a humble tradesman's cradle at the time, in a factory-city, and *pre-war* was for her – like everything else that was elegant and socially beautiful – a name, no more).

And (delicately dipping-in, hovering above the delicious pages, in her imagination) she came upon the verses of Tennyson – the literary lord, the Arthurian poetry-baron – as she had done with a thrill of romantic surprise, when first she had entered this 'highbrow' feminist fairyland – purchased for five shillings at the local Smith's: and very softly indeed, and with a mincing distinctness, she spoke to herself, she said to herself the lines, as she imagined that great queen among women (that great weary queen, as she romantically pictured her), her adored Virginia, would have spoken them –

From a passion flower at the gate
Has fallen a splendid tear.

She heard the deep rich baying voice, of such a great weary queen among women as her fancy suggested, underlying her own whispering: she *saw* the gate, she *saw* the passion flower – which was of an imposing size and of a bold heart-blood red. And a superb dew-drop had detached itself from the dew-land at its perfumed centre, revolved proudly along the slight declivity of one of its velvet petals, and plunged towards the ground, like a falling world!

I am coming, my own, my sweet!
I am coming, my love, my dear!

Her lips uttered, with scarcely more than a phantom of sound, the romantic declaration. And the words, so diaphanously winged, passed out into the haunted air of the unexpected park – where, at any moment, the solitude might be invaded, and heightened, by two figures who, at a likely guess, if you followed them to discover their habitat, would reintegrate the pages of Framley Parsonage, but *never* derive from anything more grossly twentieth-century or anything privy to internal-combustion – to name the arch-serpent of the pre-war Eden. 'What poets they were!' she repeated to herself, in the very words of Virginia Woolf. 'What poets they were!' They being those splendid Victorian monogamists – flowering, as great-

hearted passion flowers, hyperpetalous and crimson red, upon the spoils of the Anglo-Indies and of the Dark Continent.

But this seductive train of images – which had contrived, by the medium of Margot, to quicken themselves to quite a respectable degree, if not exactly to achieve the status of protoplasm – these were all rudely dissolved. All the dreamy rout of them were sent smartly about their business, at the brazen entrance of Agnes Irons, the clamour of whose voice broke out almost immediately behind the small thaumaturgic head of her friend, this self-consecrated Bloomsbury priestess.

Margot stiffened, but at first did not move at all, so that Agnes supposed she had fallen asleep. Indeed, like one of the Trollopian figures now brutally expelled from the landscape, Margot almost felt that she herself, as well, had been forcibly liquidated, and had followed her day-dreams into their limbo. For the moment she allowed herself to wonder if in fact she was still there at all, visible and in the flesh.

An appreciable fraction of time did, indeed, elapse, during which she was not present – during which she had done a precipitate fade-out. She sat quite motionless, in her pale taffeta dress, with the effect of a crinoline – with at the throat the hint of a locket – with a fashionable felt female helmet arranged to counterfeit a bonnet. Her head rested upon her slender hand, her elbow upon the window-sill. Literally she had been *suppressed* by this dynamic intrusion, so much was she involved in the things that she was prone to imagine.

Then she recovered. She became sorted out from all those shapes which were susceptible to extinction at the mere vibration of a human voice, and resumed the narrower mould which was contingent upon the mortal give and take of objective experience. The colour flowed back into her cheeks. A painful light of welcome came into her eyes. She turned her head upon her shoulders; and her eye twinkled feebly, as the image of a starched-collared and jacketed, a scotch-tweeded amazon, equipped for the sex-war with an alarming chin and jet-black eye – Agnes! – impressed itself upon her senses.

Margot rose there, straight up from the seat of the chair, as if dreamily to defend herself – with the movement, rather, of an entranced medium. She met the blast with a brave breath-

lessness, as Agnes seized her to be kissed. For the striding woman, who had put down a collection of small parcels upon the table, was now upon her, grabbing the frail wax-work to her wizened, muscular bosom, in a spasm of masterful girlishness.

'Darling! How are you?' she hailed her, at very close range. 'Have you been here long?' Why didn't you make yourself some tea? You look a little cheap.'

A doctor had once told her she looked *cheap*, and at the doctor's word Margot now recoiled instinctively, as then: for however the word was intended, it was not nice to have it used about one. And Agnes smelled of peat, which always made her feel a little sick.

'Do I?' she said, smiling with tired composure at the big dark energetic face of her best girl-friend. 'You look very well, Agnes! Did you enjoy your holiday?'

'My dear, I had the most perfectly topping time.' (For it is 'topping time' still in distant Malaya.) 'Perfect weather! Oceans of golf! Awfully decent people! In the water half the day! Look at me!' She displayed her sun-blackened chest, and her biceps ditto. 'I was jolly sorry to come back!'

'I expect you were.'

'If I could only live on my golf. Or if daddy weren't so poor!'

Margot looked round the room.

'Isn't there something different about your room?' she asked.

'Nothing except this!' Agnes pointed, grinning broadly, at a large writing-desk. 'How do you like it?'

'Yes, of course! That's what it is. It's very nice indeed, Agnes, isn't it? And very useful too. For you. Was it a present?'

'It's a present from Agnes Irons!' For five or ten minutes after her entrance Agnes made no remark whatever without an obligato of deafening laughter, which lasted for a longer or shorter period upon some principle of jolly-good-sortishness, of seeing the humorous-side-of-things, admitting no visible relation to the ratio of comic matter in its verbal counterpart.

She stood rocking with laughter now, as if shaken by hiccups, her legs wide apart in golfing attitude. Her merry eyes were bent upon her self-present, screwed up as if to spy out a distant bunker: all her teeth were uncovered, and anyone would have thought that the most side-splitting object on earth had now been given house-room in her flatlet, and that there it stood, a constant provocation to the humorist every true Briton conceals – if *conceal* is indeed the word. And Agnes Irons would probably not have stopped laughing for a long time yet if Margot had not said:

'It must have cost a great deal of money, Agnes darling.'

'Do you like it?'

'I think it's a beauty.'

'Guess what it cost!'

'I couldn't, I'm afraid.'

'I paid six pounds ten for it.' She exploded. The room reeled with clap upon clap of laughter. 'Not bad, is it?'

'It's lovely.'

'I bought it out of my golf prizes. I had over five pounds in vouchers.'

'Really! It do wish you would go in for it professionally, darling. You would get so rich.'

Agnes shook her head.

'Yes, I made quite a lot. In a small way – the local club is not very large. There was an open meeting. I made five pounds five in vouchers, and fifty-three shillings in the sweep. Not too bad, was it? About eight pounds. That's better than a spit in the eye!'

'It is indeed.'

'So this child thought to herself: *How about buying a desk?* And there it is as large as life. I've wanted one for a long time. I really do need something of the sort.'

'Of course you do. It's made of beautiful wood,' said Margot, stroking it.

'Rather nice, isn't it? It's supposed to be antique!'

A ghastly clap of laughter shook her from head to foot, at the notion of the absurd pretensions of this *per se* so humorous object – won on the playing fields of Stoke Poges, or Witton le Zouche, with her strong right arm.

'Weren't the local people very impressed with your playing, Agnes? I wonder if they knew you were a champion?'

'They were a bit impressed, I think, when they saw my handicap certificate!' Agnes answered – always a little more sober when referring to what was her long suit – for a *golf champion*, although not exempt from drollery, did not knock you back, exactly, so much as cause you to just fall slackly half-recumbent into a simmering smiling reverie.

'They must have been!' said Margot faintly. 'When they saw your handicap. Of course, you have to show it, haven't you?'

Agnes sat down, and began to untie the little parcels. One was a Brooke Bond packet, another a box of Kensitas. Margot likewise sat down, lightly touching her neck, her hand afterwards drifting into her lap.

'Daddy is such an old lamb!' Agnes exclaimed. 'He's so proud of his little girl.'

'I'm not surprised,' said Margot, still more faintly than before.

'Came out on the links every day, poor old darling, and insisted upon following his little girl around, bless him. He was tremendously bucked when I won!'

Winning anything, naturally, requires a great deal of democratizing and must *always* be treated with a big dose of disinfectant British mirth. Which Agnes promptly administered.

'I expect he was,' said Margot, almost inaudibly. 'He must have been, darling.'

'You do look jolly well fagged out, Margot! I'll make us a cup of nice tea, shall us? Let's! Yes – what?'

Margot nodded.

And watched by the visitor, the broad square shoulders of the open golf champion of the Straits Settlement – *mem-sahib* and white wage-slave – squared up to the domestic cupboard – routing out of their hiding-places the jolly old tea things, drat them, and chucking them down on the jolly old table in open order – the gallant teapot at the head of his men, of course, and the commissariat – biscuits and bath buns – bringing up the jolly old rear, with a segment of obsolete chocolate cake absolutely at the fag-end, hiding behind the caddy – the *tea* same, not the golfing variety, not the niblick-wallah.

Still swimming in a homeric ocean of thunderous laughter, of course, out of which she incessantly flung up some hearty remark, outwards at Margot, Agnes moved hither and thither, in massive attitudes of overwhelming competence. And to see her prepare the tea was something like witnessing Jove's thunder-bolt brought down from heaven to brain a gnat.

But with great suddenness a fearful obstreperous piercing shriek shattered the last vestige of such peace as Agnes had left intact in the poor little room. Margot put her fingers in her ears and closed her eyes. But, as it turned out, it was only the whistling kettle, announcing the climax of its activities; where, discreetly out of sight behind a screen, it had for some minutes been subjected to a relatively intense heat. Agnes laughed ruggedly, and swung over to the centre of the disturbance. It was a kettle with a sense of humour, such as Agnes approved of, that's why she had bought it. It sang out, with a good hearty shriek, when it was approaching the boiling point, and, like the pukka sport that it was, kept down the gas bill.

As the slice of old chocolate cake was the least desirable thing on the table, it was the chocolate cake that Margot selected. She could not be prevailed upon to 'sample' a bath bun, or 'try her luck' with a moka biscuit.

'I wish I hadn't put out that stale bit of cake now,' Agnes complained of herself, driving her artificial fangs into a bun.

'Why? It's lovely. It's all the better for being a little seasoned.'

'Seasoned is right!' roared Agnes 'ruefully,' frowning up her batrachian skin - seasoned, that, in the sunshine of the tropical colonies - and displaying the entire expanse of her dentures, which had to be pretty large not to be shattered by her laughs.

'You have got brown, Agnes! You are almost the colour of a dago, if you don't mind my saying so. I should take you for a Spanish girl if I saw you anywhere without knowing you.'

'Yes, it's pretty bad, isn't it. I could pass for a Philippino, I believe! I get sunburnt very quickly. I'm like this all over!'

She roared with laughter at what she must look like *nude*! How the jolly old sun can turn a *mem-sahib* into a mulatto in

time! Liked doing it! Just to take the White Man down a peg or two! - and show her - *Misses* White Man, that is - that the Colonel's Lady and the shadiest of the shady are sisters under their skins!

'I am very dark,' she confessed. 'Always have been. Don't know where I get it from!' - this rather roguish. As she drawled out these things she seemed to be transferring a hot vegetable, or a big juicy brandy-ball, from one side of her mouth to the other. And she gave another hearty roar at the absurd idea of being *dark*. Nature is a topping old sportsman! And all nature's little jokes are worth a guffaw or two - even if some are in questionable taste (for, of course, we know that nature is, well, not exactly *white*! - but a jolly old sportsman nevertheless - a sort of sporting nabob, don't you know, resplendent at gymk'anas!). And then a good laugh against oneself is always more of a pukka laugh, isn't it, than one at the expense of another person - especially if they are a social equal. To possess a saving sense of humour *eases* the White Man's Burden just a little. It is indeed what the White Man has had bestowed upon him, especially the Englishman, to make it possible for him to go on carrying it at all - the too vast orb of his globe-trotting fate!

There was an interval during which Agnes expatiated upon the topping character of her uncle, whose jolly old Rolls was always looming up at the psychological moment, and rolling the jolly laughing person of his sporting niece away in this direction or that. And then *other* persons, who were beastly rich, also *would* keep breaking into the narrative. 'Rolls Royces - butlers and footmen - pots of money!' was a wistful incantation never for long off her chuckling lips. The magic words were drawled out in a tone of comic commiseration at the absurdity of the 'pots of money' these same sahibs had and which, of course, one could not help noticing - though between one sahib who *had* the shekels and another who *hadn't*, the beastly things would be only one more joke, and, of course, not such a bad one as all that. These fleshpots *had* their uses.

When Agnes had drawled 'Rolls Royces - butlers and footmen - pots of money!' for the third time, Margot said:

'Have the Bulkeleys – did you say Bulkeleys –?'

'Yes, Bulkeleys,' Agnes confirmed her, with an indulgent smile, as if *she* were 'a Bulkeley' herself (or the next thing to it) and understood that it must be a struggle for those not 'a Bulkeley' to get the name right without a good deal of privileged practice – which obviously Margot could not be expected to have had.

'Have the Bulkeleys a lot of pictures?'

'Oh yes, swarms of them!' said Agnes with a great careless confident heartiness. 'Gold frames – Old Masters –'

And she was *just* about to add 'pots of money.' But she remembered that she had said that already. So she stopped, and smiled opulently and misty-eyed instead – a whole picture-gallery of priceless masterpieces reflected in the mirthful glimmer of her far-away gaze.

'Have they any pictures by living people?' Margot asked.

'Pictures by living people?' That the living were rather common for the Bulkeleys to have anything to do with, in the matter of artists (who were only made respectable by death), obviously was the first thing that occurred to Agnes.

'Oh yes, some of them must be *alive*. Though, of course, most of them died long ago. They are the Old Masters.'

'Oh.'

'Family portraits, you know! Dear old gentlemen in periwigs and breastplates. Awfully quaint.'

'No modern pictures – really modern?' Margot gently persisted.

'You don't mean those *cubist* horrors, do you?' Agnes exclaimed – as the trend of these questions became plain to her suddenly. 'No, I don't think they have anything like that, in fact I'm sure they haven't. I should have noticed. But then, they wouldn't have anything like that.'

'I only wondered – as you said they had so many pictures.'

'Another cup, darling? And *do* have one of these bikkies, they're not bad at all.'

It was at this point that the laughing stopped. Agnes seemed to admit that even *her* sense of humour required a rest sometimes. Beyond a certain age – and Margot judged that thirty-nine summers was about the correct mark in the case of Agnes,

sometimes she looked very creased and stained out in the street – once you had passed whatever the age might be, a quarter of an hour at a stretch was about all that could be managed, in the way of *really* hearty and incessant laughter. Then one must rest on one's oars for a bit – discharging an occasional guffaw for the say-so.

But the cue for a spell of quiet in this instance was the mention of the art of the Cube. For the humorous mind that subject would normally be irresistible. It would be the signal for an orgy of jokes. But having regard to Margot's feelings, this unfortunately must be nipped in the bud and sternly repressed. So Agnes became rather suddenly deflated. A somewhat careworn shell a little alarmingly took the place of the 'dynamic' personality. The young veteran of the links – whose nickel-plated trophies stood in a row upon the mantelpiece – showed for a moment the strain of the White Man's Burden and of ten thousand rounds of golf.

'And how is Victor?' she inquired dutifully and soberly, at this, as if asking after a sick person. 'Going strong, as usual?'

'He is working,' said Margot, bashfully.

Agnes sat up. She looked very grave, almost alarmed.

'Working? You don't mean he's got a job?' she asked.

'A sort of job,' said Margot, with docility, and in a tone of some deprecation.

'Not in an office?'

'No.'

'Gone on the screen?' This was facetious. Her massive scarlet lips flowered lazily to show the naughty intention.

Margot shook her head, smiling a little reproachfully at Agnes.

'But still, he's got a pukka job?' crashed Agnes Irons, prepared to leave it at that. 'I'm glad to hear Victor's got a job, it's sporting of him. It makes things easier, doesn't it? You won't have to work now, darling, I suppose. Or will you all the same?'

'I'm afraid Victor's job is not very satisfactory,' Margot looked over with her direct, expressionless, filmy gaze. 'He's faking pictures for a living.'

'Doing *what*?'

'He goes every day and fakes pictures in a sort of factory. It's not a *factory*. It's a studio.'

'Fakes pictures!' repeated Agnes – as if Margot had said that her husband had been faking horses or cats. 'What's that! I've never heard of people faking pictures.' Agnes stared back at her mistily-staring companion – attempting to picture to herself, evidently, an artist-fellow, a sketcher, in the act of *faking* a sketch, instead of *sketching* it, or whatever it was the fellow did.

'He hates it!' Margot faintly intoned, with devotional intensity.

'Why does he do it then?' came back from Agnes, in her rugged drawl.

'I didn't want him to do it. I tried hard to dissuade him. But Victor said he might as well be doing that as anything else.'

'It depends what he was doing. What did he mean?'

'It's not bad money. But I don't like his doing it at all.'

Agnes lit a cigarette. The brains of Agnes Irons were now called upon to engage in paths where, to say the truth, they were not exactly at home. So she was cudgelling her brains, as it is called, that was painfully evident.

'But what *is* this faking exactly, Margot?' she asked, as one person soliciting the confidential low-down upon something from another.

'Oh, didn't you know how people faked pictures? It's often done.'

'I know old furniture is faked!'

And Agnes looked hard at her new desk, a self-confessed fake – a rather noble possession, but with, as it were, a big bar-sinister.

'Yes, except that's easier.'

'Which?' asked Agnes sharply.

'Well, I meant the furniture.'

'Are they sold as genuine antiques?' Agnes asked, hesitating, to show that it was not her wish to in any way suggest that there was anything *dishonourable* in what Margot's eccentric bread-winner was doing.

'They aren't antiques,' Margot told her, hesitating, too. 'Victor was faking a picture by a living artist all day yesterday, for instance.'

'One who's still living!' This was very peculiar. 'Why did he fake that?'

'Picasso, the artist is called. Have you heard of him?'

'I can't say I have – what an odd name! It sounds dago.'

'It is dago,' said Margot, smiling with the mildest of mild mischief. 'He's Spanish.'

'Foreigners are, of course, always good at that sort of thing, aren't they?' said Agnes a little defiantly, sleepily half-closing her eyes – lying back in her chair, in monumental ease, one arm flung over the back, her short hard legs sturdily crossed. 'They're very clever, I suppose, as artists.'

'Victor says they have it in their blood.'

'I suppose it's the blood,' Agnes agreed, yawning, and tapping her mouth – for the by-products of tainted and un-English blood was a subject after all that could not be described as thrilling.

'We haven't, Victor thinks,' Margot timidly continued, for the sake of talking about Victor. 'He doesn't mean *everybody* of course.' (He didn't mean *Victor*!)

'I'm bound to say I think Victor's right there,' the golf champion of Malaya drawled, giving herself two or three smart raps on the lips, out of the farded tissues of which yawn after yawn was attempting to expel itself.

'I think he is,' Margot made no difficulty about assenting to that.

'I suppose I'm an out-and-out Philistine. Don't say *Oh no!* darling – it's not necessary, really! But we can't *all* be artists, can we? The Britisher's got a good deal to be said for him, one way and another. Patriotic – what! Yes, I know. A proper jingo – that's Agnes Irons! But the Britisher can leave art to the foreigners, since they seem to be cut out for it. Why not? Or so say I! – I *know* you want to *chuck* something at me for talking like that – why don't you?' And Agnes shook in a storm of lazy chuckles as she lay back in her chair, offering herself as a bombastic target to this outraged partisan of the Muses.

Margot looked away, confused by the aggressive diversion, her mind full of Victor and Victor only.

'I've never pretended though, have I, darling? – give me credit for that!' pleaded Agnes, fiercely arch – 'to be anything but a hardened old Philistine!' And she laughed full-chestedly, an unrepentant hardened old Philistine cackle.

Margot blushed a little.

'I'll be damned if I know, darling,' Agnes drawled on, 'how you can put up with me! I've often wondered. We are an ill-assorted couple – as they say!'

A further crash of bonhomie from the more humorous member of the ill-assorted couplement. Margot flinched – she almost *ducked*.

Margot recovered. She smiled with difficulty, a sickly smile in truth, and gave Agnes a weak caress with her a little haggard, red-rimmed eyes of liquid blue: for at these times she did certainly find Agnes a handful and she never left her without a bad headache and usually a troublesome singing in the ears.

'I'm not very patriotic,' Margot said, in a washed-out voice to start with, though it got stronger afterwards. 'I don't think it matters, Agnes, really who are artists or who are not.'

'No, I don't think it does. You're quite right.'

'But as to my putting up with you, I don't know, darling, how you manage to put up with me.'

'Darling – how sweet you are!'

'I'm not an Empire girl, I'm afraid. I think I must be a cosmopolitan.'

'Empire girl! Oh Margot! I think that's meant to be unkind!'

'No, why? No, it wasn't really. But I'm not for the Red, White and Blue,' she gulped, 'quite as much as you are, darling.'

A stern British bulldog-bark of grim mirth greeted this statement.

'Well, I'll let that pass!' said Agnes. 'We'll say no more about it. But there is something that's worrying me, darling.'

'What is that, Agnes?'

'Well. Is it *honest* – you know what I mean, could one get

into trouble? – to fake these pictures? Especially by *living persons*, Margot – even if they are foreigners!'

Margot nodded, a painful frown upon the tightly-drawn skin of her forehead – as tightly-drawn as the straight old-gold panels of her centre-parted hair.

'Of course it isn't,' she said. 'That's just it. Victor hates doing it.'

'But couldn't he get into trouble, Margot darling, if he was found out?'

'Victor says not.'

'I should say he *could*.'

'Victor says he wouldn't care if he did.'

'A nice young man, I must say! What would happen to you?'

'But I don't think he *will* be found out, Agnes. It's not that.'

'Why shouldn't he?'

'But so many people are doing it, you see. As a matter of fact Tristram Phipps has just gone there too.'

Agnes betrayed a reawakening of interest – the name Tristram seemed to stimulate her slightly.

'Tristram's rather a lamb, isn't he?' she said.

'I like him,' said Margot.

'He's doing it too, is he?' Agnes drawled in reflective fashion.

'It all sounds very *irregular* to me – very *irregular* – it's the business woman speaking!' (A crash of sportive gaiety for the business woman.) 'But artists are a funny lot – you don't mind my saying! They're quite irresponsible!'

'The business woman again, Agnes!' Margot smiled.

'All the same, *irresponsible* is what they are!'

'Some of them are. Victor is very unhappy about having to do this. He threatens to throw up the job. I shouldn't mind if he did. I should be glad.'

'Well, I suppose it is regular work, which is something.'

'If Tristram hadn't gone there, Victor would have left, I think – I wish he hadn't! Tristram and he work together.'

'That must be rather fun.'

Agnes was softening towards this illicit nest of 'fakers.'

'It amuses Victor in a way – it is after all *painting*.'

'I suppose the work is *light*,' Agnes said. 'He just does the sketching I mean.'

'That depends on what they're doing. Van Gogh is easy to do, he says. The other day they turned out a Derain. He's French. *He's* alive, now, still.'

'Is he?' Agnes looked startled again. It was 'faking' a *live* sketcher that seemed to her to smack of the risky.

'Oh yes. But Victor said it was too good for Derain, what they did.'

'Then why not sell it as his own picture?'

'There's the name.'

'I see. Yes, I suppose the name is everything.'

'Victor says it bores him to tears imitating all the *mistakes* of the artist he's faking.'

Agnes scratched her head with a red-dyed finger-nail. This remark was practically meaningless, she decided: as you would not, it was obvious, take the trouble to fake a *bad* picture, one that was full of *mistakes*.

'Have you seen Gillian lately?' Agnes asked. 'That is her name, isn't it? Tristram's *wife*, I mean. She was an awfully sweet kid, I thought.'

Margot shook her head.

'She's gone away. She and Tristram are not together now.'

'What, has she left Tristram?'

'No. I think Tristram left her.'

'Whatever for?'

Margot thought a moment, as if the terms of this question had assailed her with doubt.

'I don't quite know what it was all about,' she said. 'I think it was politics.'

'Politics!'

'So I understood,' Margot nodded, with a special phantom-smile she reserved for Agnes. 'That's what Victor says. There must be something else, I think. But I don't know what it is. Victor says it was because they didn't agree about politics.'

Agnes stood up and stretched, looking at a large photograph of a girl-child of about ten years old, with a large determined chin and an unmistakable *mem-sahbish* expression already peeping through the puerile accessories of the tender years.

'Politics!' she drawled. 'You are absurd really, all of your crowd. Who ever heard of a young man and young woman separating because they didn't agree about *politics*?'

'I said I didn't believe it was that altogether, Agnes.'

Agnes began putting away the tea things, and Margot got up and joined her without speaking.

'Oh, thank you, darling. But don't you trouble.'

'Victor suggested we should meet him at the Swan,' Margot said.

'What, that pub in Shepherd's Bush?'

'Yes. It's near where he works. Tristram will be there. Shall we go? What do you say?'

'Yes, let's!' said Agnes Irons.

'Tristram lives down that way now. We might have supper there.'

'A jolly good idea!'

And Agnes straddled in front of the window, her hands in her skirt pockets.

'These mangy old trees give me the hump,' she said.

'The hump?'

'Yes. The hump. Don't they you, when you're dopy I mean? Give me the tropics every time!'

And she released a pukka laugh, to salute the ridiculous tropics.