

ill-lit by gas-jets, or casting one's eyes wildly towards the infinitely distant ceiling overhead, one struggled to traverse its dreadful length, to reach a tiny chair or a far-distant fireplace, conscious as one did so that some kind of queer life was clustered thick about one, that heaven knows how many eyes watched from just adumbrated sofas, that brains crouched behind the piano, that there were other presences, remote, aloof, self-occupied, and mysteriously dominating the scene – then, in truth, one had come – whether one realized it or no – into an extraordinary holy of holes. The gigantic door, with its flowing portière of pale green silk, swung and shut behind one. One stepped forwards in the direction of the three distant windows covered by their pale green limitless curtains, one looked about, one of the countless groups of persons disintegrated, flowed towards one, one sat and spoke and listened: one was reading the riddle of the Victorian Age.

I only mean to say that the Lancaster Gate drawing-room was, in its general nature, the concentrated product of an epoch; for certainly it was too full of individuality and peculiarity to be typical of anything. For one thing, it was too intelligent. I believe that it was not absolutely ugly; the decorations were undoubtedly, for the time, slightly advanced. But it is almost impossible for me to come to an impartial judgement on it. I know it far too well. To the entering stranger, puzzled and alarmed, the impression it produced may well have been one of mere confusion; to me, all was clear, all was articulate, every one of the innumerable details was accurately, intimately, and unforgettably known. At this moment I am perfectly certain that I could reconstruct the whole complexity, complete and exact in every inch. The details were indeed literally innumerable, but there was a climax – immediately obvious – in the arrangement of them. This climax occurred at the more distant of the two mantelpieces – on the right-hand wall, near the window end of the room – a very large high structure of a most peculiar kind. But I cannot hope to describe that bulk of painted wood with its pilasters and cornices, its jars and niches, its marble and its multi-coloured tiles. Designed by Halsey Ricardo, it combined, with an effect of emasculated richness, the inspiration of William Morris, reminiscences of the Renaissance, and a bizarre idiosyncrasy of its own. Guests, finding themselves for the first time face to face with this colossal complication, nearly always exclaimed 'What a magnificent mantelpiece!' It is difficult to see what else they could have done, for to have remained silent before an object so peculiarly conspicuous would have been decidedly marked. Standing by that mottled hearth, one had reached the citadel of the great room. Surveying it from that vantage-spot, one could see that it was a room that was utterly unromantic. It was a mere rectangular

parallelepiped – a large ill-shaped box, crammed in between a whole series of exactly similar boxes, ranged on each side of it up and down the street. And yet, though there was no romance in it, there certainly *was* something that was not quite analysable. Was it the effect of its size or its ugliness or its absurdity? – I don't know; but familiar, incredibly familiar as it was to me, who had spent my whole life in it, there was never a time when I was not, in the recesses of my consciousness, a little surprised by it. It was like one of those faces at which one can look for ever without growing accustomed to. Up to my last hour in it, I always felt that the drawing-room was strange.

Strange indeed! Is it conceivable, after all, that I ever was really there? Is it conceivable that Dorothy, evening after evening, in that room, kissed me a hundred times, in a rapture of laughter and affection, counting her kisses, when I was six? that, in that same room, perhaps twenty years later, sitting on a sofa alone with Andrew, I suddenly kissed *him*, much to his surprise and indignation – 'My dear man! Really! One doesn't do those things!' – And that – but never mind.

It was a family room – (Andrew, I may mention, was my nephew) – and the family combinations and permutations in it were very various. Apart from the ordinary domestic moments, it was on Sunday afternoons, when my mother was invariably at home, that the family atmosphere, reinforced from without, reached its intensest and its oddest pitch. Then the drawing-room gradually grew thick with aunts and uncles, cousins and connections, with Strachey's, Grants, Rendels, Plowdens, Battens, Ridpaths, Rows. One saw that it had indeed been built for them – it held them all so nicely, so naturally, with their interminable varieties of age and character and class – from Nina Grey in her faded airs of Roman Catholic aristocracy to Fanny Stanley and her lodging-house garrulity, from Uncle George, bent double with age and eccentricity, hideously sniffing, and pouring out his opinions upon architecture and Tasso to anyone who ventured within his reach, to Black Pat, youthful, horribly snouted, absurdly mendacious, who had come, it was clear, by arrangement, to meet Millie Plowden, and overdid his surprise when at last in yellow feathers she giggled into the room.

The crowd was at its largest at about six, and then it gradually thinned away. But somebody very often stayed on to dinner – Sir William Ward, perhaps, who, besides having been Governor of the Straits Settlements was an executor, of astonishing brilliancy, on the pianoforte. Pressed to play, he would seat himself at the piano and dash into a Chopin waltz with the verve of a high-stepping charger, when suddenly a very odd and discordant sound, rising and falling with the music, would make itself heard. It was something between a snore and a whistle, and nobody