

which the old forms still lingered, but debased and enfeebled, in which Morris wallpapers had taken the place of Adam panelling, in which the swarming retinue had been reduced to a boy in livery, in which the spoons and forks were bought at the Army and Navy Stores. And then, introducing yet another element into the mixture, there was the peculiar disintegrating force of the Strachey character. The solid bourgeois qualities were interpenetrated by intellectualism and eccentricity. Our family dinners expressed the complicated state of things. They were long and serious meals; but, unless there were visitors, we never dressed for them. At the end, the three mystic bottles of port, sherry, and claret were put at the head of the table and solemnly circulated – the port, sherry and claret having come from the grocer's round the corner. The butler and the liveried boot-boy waited on us, and the butler was Frederick, or, later, a figure even more characteristic of our subtle *dégingolade* – Bastiani – a fat, black-haired, Italianate creature, who eventually took to drink, could hardly puff up the stairs from the basement, and, as he handed the vegetables, exuded an odour of sweat and whisky into one's face. He disappeared – after a scene of melodramatic horror – to be replaced by Mr Brooks who, we could only suppose, must have been a groom in earlier life, since all his operations were accompanied by a curious sound of *sotto voce* hissing – or, of course, he might have been Sir William Ward, rather thinly disguised. Peering into the drawers of the sideboard, we discovered tangled masses of soda water-bottle wires, broken corkscrews, napkins, and the mysterious remains of disembowelled brushes. We took note of another filth-packet, observing at the same time, with gusto, that the glass stopper of the brandy decanter had been removed by Mr Brooks, and that a cork had been rammed into its place.

Disintegration and *dégingolade*, no doubt, and yet the total effect, materialized and enormously extended, was of a tremendous solidity. Lancaster Gate towered up above us, and around us, an imperturbable mass – the framework, almost the very essence – so it seemed – of our being. Was it itself, perhaps, one vast filth-packet, and we the mere *disiecta membra* of vanished generations, which Providence was too busy or too idle to clear away? So, in hours of depression, we might have unconsciously theorized; but nevertheless, in reality, it was not so. Lancaster Gate vanished into nothingness, and we survive. To me, that that régime would inevitably, someday, come to an end was a dreadful thought – one not to be dwelt upon – like death; what would, what *could* happen, when we went away from Lancaster Gate? Circumstances – a diminished income – brought about at length the unspeakable catastrophe: but I see now that, whatever had happened, however rich

we might have continued, Lancaster Gate was in fact doomed. The disintegration would have grown too strong for it at last. Indeed the end, I think, had really come before we actually left it: Dorothy, with extraordinary courage, married a penurious French artist [Simon Bussy], and Lancaster Gate was shaken to its foundations. The new spirit was signalized by the omission – under the feeble plea of the difference in nationality – of a wedding service in a church – an omission which would have been impossible ten years earlier; but a family party to celebrate the occasion it was out of the question to omit. Once more the drawing-room was flooded by those familiar figures: even Uncle William in his coat and waistcoat of quaint cut and innumerable buttons – the very same that he might have worn in the forties in Holland House – even Mabel Batten, with that gorgeous bust on which the head of Edward the Seventh was wont to repose – were there. When the strange company had departed, something – though at the time we hardly realized it – had happened: it was the end of an age.

The actual events of life are perhaps unimportant. One is born, grows up, falls in love, falls out of love, works, is happy, is unhappy, grows old, and dies – a tedious, a vulgar, succession; but not there lies the significance of a personal history: it is the atmosphere that counts. What happened to me during my first twenty-five years of consciousness may well be kept to the imagination; what cannot be left to the imagination is the particular, the amazing, web on which the pattern of my existence was woven – in other words, Lancaster Gate. To imagine *that!* – To reconstruct, however dimly, that grim machine, would be to realize with some real distinctness the essential substance of my biography. An incubus sat upon my spirit, like a cat on a sleeping child. I was unaware, I was unconscious, I hardly understood that anything else could be. Submerged by the drawing-room, I inevitably believed that the drawing-room was the world. Or rather, I neither believed nor disbelieved; it *was* the world, so far as I was concerned. Only, all the time, I did dimly notice that there was something wrong with the world – that it was an unpleasant shape.

Of course, it would be absurd to pretend that I was permanently and definitely unhappy. It was not a question of unhappiness so much as of restriction and oppression – the subtle unperceived weight of the circumambient air. And there were moments, luckily, when some magic spring within me was suddenly released, and I threw off that weight, my spirit leaping up into freedom and beatitude. Coming home in the night in the summer once from the Temple with Clive, parting from him, excited, faintly amorous, opposite the sentry at St James's Palace, walking on in the early morning opalescence through sleeping Mayfair and