and complain that he didn’t smell clean and hand him straight back to the nursemaid to be washed.

Kit was a man of forty, tall, thin and slightly balding. The sparse hairs at the back of his neck were long and damp and looked like those of a new-born baby. He had no definite work, and although he owned some land adjacent to Maddalena’s he never went there and relied on Maddalena to keep an eye on it; she was always complaining about having quite enough work of her own without being saddled with the responsibility for Kit’s land as well. Kit spent every day with us; he played with the baby, chatted to the nursemaid, played cards with Valentino and sprawled in an armchair, smoking. Then, towards evening, he and Valentino would go into town and sit outside a bar watching the elegantly-dressed women as they passed by.

I was very worried about Valentino because he never seemed to study. He would go to the room where he kept his microscope, his books and a skull, but was incapable of sitting at his desk for a minute without ringing down for an egg-flip, and then he would put a lighted candle inside the skull, darken the room completely, call the maid and frighten her out of her wits. Since his marriage he had sat two of his exams and passed them both; he seldom failed an exam because he had a way with words and could bluff examiners into thinking that he knew much more than he really did. But there were still many more exams to go before he qualified and several of his friends who had begun their studies at the same time as he did had been qualified for quite a while. Whenever I mentioned the subject of exams he shied away from it and there was nothing I could do. When Maddalena got home she always asked him if he had been studying and he said yes and she believed him; or maybe she was just tired after spending the whole day working and talking business and preferred to avoid arguments at home. She would sit on the settee with her feet up and Valentino sitting near her on the floor. I found her abject manner towards Valentino embarrassing at these times; she would take his head between her hands and stroke it, and

her face shone and her expression became gentle and maternal. ‘Has Valentino been studying?’ she would ask Kit, and he would reply: ‘Indeed he has.’ And she would sit there quietly with her eyes closed, stroking Valentino’s forehead with her fingertips.

Maddalena had another baby and we went to the coast for the summer. She bore her children with no difficulty at all and continued to go back and forth between the house and her farm throughout the pregnancy; then, once they were born, she found a wet-nurse and had little more to do with them; it was enough for her to know that they were there. She had a similar attitude towards Valentino: she was content to know that he was there but she spent her days apart from him; it was enough to find him at home when she returned, to caress his hair for a while and lie on the settee with his head in her lap. I recalled his telling my mother that with Maddalena he could talk about anything, yet I never noticed them talking at all. Meanwhile, there was always Kit; he was always the one who did the talking, relating endless boring anecdotes about his housekeeper who was simple-minded and nearly blind, or moaning about his bad health and his doctor. And if Kit were not there, Maddalena would ask one of us to telephone and tell him to come at once.

So we went to the seaside, and Kit and Bugliari and the maid and the wet-nurse came too. We stayed in a hotel, a very smart hotel, and I was ashamed of my scant wardrobe but was unwilling to ask Maddalena for money and it did not occur to her, apparently, to offer it; nor did she trouble to look elegant herself but always wore the same sun-dress with blue and white spots; and she said that she had no intention of spending money on clothes because Valentino already spent so much on his. Valentino certainly dressed well, sporting linen trousers and a constant succession of sweaters and tee-shirts. Kit advised him in the matter of clothes even though he himself always wore the same slightly shabby trousers with the excuse
that he was so unprepossessing that clothes gave him no pleasure. Valentino went off sailing with Kit while Maddalena, Bugliari and I waited on the beach; and Maddalena said that she was already bored with this way of life because she was incapable of sitting idly in the sun. In the evening Valentino and Kit went out dancing. Maddalena suggested that they might take me with them but Valentino retorted that one did not take one's sisters to a dance.

We returned to town and I took my teaching diploma. I was appointed to a temporary post at a school and Maddalena drove me there every morning before going to the farm. I told her that I could live on my own and look after myself now, but she treated the suggestion as an affront and said there was no reason why I should have to fend for myself with such a big house at my disposal and plenty of food to eat; did I really want to rent some tiny room and cook soup over a gas ring? She could see no sense in the idea. And the babies were fond of me and I could keep an eye on them when she was away, and I could also keep an eye on Valentino and make sure that he got on with his studies.

At that point I took my courage in both hands and told her that I was worried about Valentino: he seemed to be spending less and less time on his studies and now Kit had persuaded him to learn to ride and they went to the riding-stables every morning. Valentino had acquired a riding outfit complete with boots, tight-fitting jacket and crop and would stand in front of the mirror at home brandishing the whip and doffing the hat. On hearing this, Maddalena called Kit and gave him a tongue-lashing; she told him that even if he was a failure and a layabout, Valentino was not to become a failure too and he was to leave him alone. Kit listened with his eyes half-closed, his mouth open and one hand gently massaging his jaw; Valentino, meanwhile, angrily retorted that riding was doing him good, that he had been much healthier since he started to ride. Maddalena then ran to fetch the breeches, boots, hat, jacket and whip, parcelled them up and said that she was going to throw them all into the river. She went out with the big bundle under her arm; she was pregnant again and her swollen belly protruded from her fur coat as she ran, limping slightly from the combined weight of her belly and the package. Valentino ran after her and Kit and I were left alone. 'She's right,' said Kit, heaving a deep sigh; he scratched his head with its few straggly hairs and pulled such a comic face that I had to laugh. 'Maddalena is right,' he repeated. 'I'm nothing but a failure and a layabout. She's right. There's no hope for someone like me. But there's no hope for Valentino either: he's just like me, just the same type. Or rather, he's worse than me, because he cares about nothing. I do care a bit about some things; not a great deal, but I do care.' — 'And to think that my father always believed that Valentino would be a man of consequence,' I said. 'Oh really?' said Kit, suddenly bursting into laughter with his head thrown back and his mouth wide open. He rocked backwards and forwards in his chair, clasping his hands between his knees and guffawing. There was something unpleasant in his laughter and I left the room. When I returned he had gone. Valentino and Maddalena did not appear for the evening meal, and there was still no sign of them when darkness had fallen; after I had been in bed for some time I heard them come upstairs and the sound of whispers and laughter told me that they had made it up. The following day Valentino went off to the stables in his riding outfit; Maddalena had not thrown it into the river and the only damage was to the jacket which had got slightly creased and had had to be ironed. Kit stayed away for a few days, but then reappeared, his pockets bulging with socks to be mended which he gave to the maid because he had no one at home to mend his socks, living alone as he did with the old housekeeper who was half blind and incapable of mending anything.

Maddalena's third child was born. It was another boy and she said she was glad that her children were all boys because had she had a girl she would have been scared that it might have
grown up to look like her, and she was so ugly that she would not wish that on any woman. She had become reconciled to her ugliness because she had Valentino and the children, but as a girl it had been a source of grief and she had been afraid that she would never get married, afraid that she would grow old alone in the big house with only carpets and pictures for company. Perhaps the reason why she had so many children was in order to forget her previous fears by surrounding herself with toys and nappies and the sound of voices; but having given birth to her children, she had little to do with them.

Valentino and Kit went off on a trip together. Valentino had sat another examination and had passed and said he now needed a little rest. They visited Paris and London because Valentino had never been abroad and Kit said that to know nothing about the great capitals of the world was a disgrace. He criticised Valentino’s provincial background saying that it had to be corrected and Valentino must visit dance-halls and famous art galleries. I taught every morning and in the afternoon I played with the children in the garden; and I tried my hand at making toys for them with rags and sawdust as Valentino used to do for the caretaker’s children. When Maddalena was out the maid and the cook came to sit with me in the garden; they said that they were not in the least bit shy with me but were very fond of me; and they took off their shoes and put them on the grass beside them, and they made themselves paper hats and read Maddalena’s newspapers and smoked her cigarettes. In their opinion I was too much alone and cut off from the rest of the world, and they thought that Maddalena should take me out and about a bit; but all she thought about was her farm. And they said that if things went on like this, I should never find myself a husband: no one ever came to the house apart from Kit and Bugliari; Bugliari was too old for me so they decided that I should marry Kit: he was a nice man but so disorganized, roaming about the city half the night instead of going to bed; and perhaps what he really needed was a woman to look after him and mend his socks and care for him generally. But they were both scared stiff of Maddalena and as soon as they heard her car approaching they put their shoes on and slipped back to the kitchen as quickly as possible.

I visited Clara from time to time but she always made me feel unwelcome and complained that I cared nothing about her or her children any more but only thought of Valentino’s boys. All that Maddalena had done for her child when he was ill, arranging for him to go into hospital and paying all the expenses, had already faded from her memory; she no longer had a good word for Maddalena and said that Valentino’s marriage to her had completely ruined him: everything was provided for him and we could wave goodbye to our cherished hopes of seeing him qualified. He would fritter away the whole of his wife’s fortune eventually. While she spoke she continued to type out addresses; the work had given her corns on her fingers, she had continuous pain in her back and hardly slept at night for toothache. She needed treatment but it was very expensive and she couldn’t afford it. I suggested that she ask Maddalena for a loan but this made her indignant and she said she refused to ask favours from people like that. So I got into the way of handing over my stipend to her every month; after all, I had food to eat and a bed to sleep in and wanted for nothing. I hoped that this would make her happier, that she would see a dentist and not tire herself out so much by typing addresses. In the event she continued to type addresses and did not go to see a dentist: she told me that her daughter had needed a new coat and her husband a new pair of shoes and that I had no idea what her life was like but if I ever got married I would find out for myself what a bed of roses marriage really was. Because I, she was convinced, if I got married at all, was bound to land myself with a man without a penny to his name as she had done and after all as a family we already had Valentino who had married money and could hardly expect a second stroke of fortune like that. Speaking of which, it looked like a stroke of luck but in reality was the opposite, because for Valentino having money only meant that he could slouch around doing nothing and frittering it all away bit by bit.
Valentino and Kit returned and we all left for the coast; but Valentino was in a very bad mood and he and Maddalena quarrelled continually. Valentino drove off alone every morning without saying where he was going; and Kit spent the day under the beach umbrella with us and was very unhappy. Half way through August Valentino announced that he was tired of the sea and wanted to go up into the Dolomites: so we went to the Dolomites, but the weather there was wet and the youngest child became feverish. Maddalena blamed the child's illness on Valentino because he had dragged us away on the spur of the moment from the coast where we had been perfectly content to a hotel that was uncomfortable and where you couldn't find a corner out of the draught. Valentino retorted that he could just as well have come alone: he hadn't asked us to come with him but he couldn't move a step without our dogging his heels and he was fed up with babies and nursemaids and the whole lot of us. Kit drove off in the dark to fetch a doctor, and when the child had recovered he went home.

All at once the relations between Maddalena and Valentino seemed to have deteriorated and there was never a moment of peace when they were together. Maddalena was very tense and irritable and as soon as she got up in the morning she began to shout at the maid and the cook. She was irritable with me, too, and snapped at me every time I opened my mouth. And I heard her and Valentino quarrelling loudly late into the night: she would tell him that he was a layabout and a failure just like Kit, but that whereas Kit was a decent person, he, Valentino was not: he was an egoist who never thought of anyone but himself and he was throwing away money on clothes and on other things that she knew nothing about. And Valentino shouted back at her that it was she who had ruined him, that her shouting in the morning was driving him mad and that to see her sitting opposite him at table made him shudder. Sometimes they made it up, Valentino crying and asking her to forgive him and she asking his forgiveness too; and for a while everything was as peaceful as before: he would sit on the carpet and she would lie on the sofa stroking his hair, and they would send for Kit and listen to all his gossip about the town. But these interludes never lasted very long and became increasingly rare: there was many a long-drawn-out day of grim faces and silence succeeded by an outburst of raised voices late at night.

After one particular scene with Maddalena the maid gave in her notice, and Maddalena asked me if I would go to a certain village near her farm to see if I could engage a replacement from among a list of names that she had been given. She would ask Kit to drive me there. So one morning Kit and I drove off. Driving through the countryside, neither of us spoke for some time; every now and then I glanced at Kit's slightly comic profile with the balding head topped by a little beret and the rather pointed nose. I noticed that he was wearing Valentino's gloves. 'Are those Valentino's gloves?' I asked, to break the silence. He took his hands off the wheel for a moment and looked at them. 'Yes, they're Valentino's. He didn't want to lend them to me: he likes to keep his possessions to himself.' I leant my face against the window and looked at the countryside; and the thought of a whole day of freedom ahead, away from that house and its constant quarrels, filled me with a sense of relief and of peace; and it occurred to me that I had to get away from that place: I no longer enjoyed living there, it was too oppressive; I had even taken a dislike to the pale blue carpet in my room which I had liked so much at first. I said: 'What a splendid morning!' And Kit said: 'Isn't it just! And we shall find a splendid girl and we'll have lunch at a little place I know where the wine is excellent. It'll be a holiday, a little one-day holiday: life must be very trying for you with those two quarrelling all the time and never a moment's peace.' — 'Yes,' I said, 'there are times when it becomes unbearable. I should like to get away for good.' — 'Where to?' asked Kit. 'Oh, I don't know, just somewhere.' — 'We could go away together, you and I,' he said. 'Find some peaceful little place and leave those two to get on with it. I've had enough of them too. Many a time when I get up in the
morning I tell myself that I shan’t go to the house, but somehow I always do in the end. It’s a habit; for years I’ve been used to dining with Maddalena, it’s nice and warm there and they mend my socks. My own house is a hovel: there’s a coal-burning stove that doesn’t draw properly and one day I shall probably die of asphyxiation; and my housekeeper does nothing but gossip. I should put in central heating. Maddalena comes to my place every so often and tells me all the things I should do to improve it. I tell her that I can’t afford the money but she says that I could if I would only manage my property sensibly, selling one plot and buying another; she knows all about it. But I don’t want to have to make decisions. Maddalena also says that I should get married, but that’s something I shall never do. I don’t believe in marriage. When Maddalena and Valentino told me that they were getting married, I spent a whole day trying to dissuade them. I even told Valentino to his face that I could have no respect for him. If only they had listened! But now you see what a mess they’re in: always squabbling, always making each other unhappy.

‘Do you really have no respect for Valentino?’ I asked.
‘No. Do you?’
‘I love him, because he’s my brother.’
‘Loving is another matter. It could be that I, too, love him dearly.’ He scratched his head under the beret. ‘But I have no respect for him. I’ve no respect for myself, either; and he is just like me, just the same type. The type that will never do anything positive. The only difference between us is this, that he cares for nothing at all, not things nor people nor anything else. He only worships his own body, his sacred body that has to be cared for daily with good food, good clothes and must be allowed to lack for nothing. But I do care a bit, both about things and people, though there’s no one who cares about me. Valentino is lucky: self-love never leads to disappointment; but I’m just a poor unfortunate for whom nobody on this earth gives a snap of the fingers.’

We had now reached the village to which Maddalena had told us to go, and Kit drew up and parked the car. ‘Now to find this girl,’ he said.

We made some enquiries in the village and someone pointed to a house in the distance, high on a hillside, where they thought a girl lived who might be prepared to work in town. We climbed up a narrow pathway with vineyards on either side and Kit became breathless and fanned himself with his beret. ‘It’s a bit much,’ he puffed, ‘to expect us to find their maid for them. Why can’t they do their own dirty work?’

The girl was out working in the fields and we had to wait for her to return. We sat in a small, dark kitchen and the girl’s mother gave us a glass of wine and some little wrinkled pears. Kit chatted away rapidly in dialect to the woman, praising the wine and asking a hundred and one detailed questions about the work on the farm. I sat sipping my wine in silence, my thoughts gradually becoming blurred: the wine was very strong and all at once I felt happy to be in that little kitchen with the open fields beyond the windows and the taste of wine on my tongue and Kit there with his long legs and his beret and his pointed nose; I found myself thinking, ‘I do like Kit, he’s such a nice person.’

Then we went out into the sunshine and sat on a stone bench in front of the house, eating the pears and enjoying the warmth of the sun. ‘How nice this is!’ said Kit. He took my hand and, having removed the glove, examined it. ‘Your fingers are just like Valentino’s,’ he said. He pushed my hand away suddenly. ‘Did your father seriously believe that Valentino would become a man of consequence?’— ‘Yes,’ I replied, ‘he did. We went without a great many things so that he could study; life was pretty hard and it was always a struggle to make ends meet. But Valentino always had everything he wanted and my father said that one day we would have our reward when Valentino was a famous doctor making important discoveries.’

‘Well, well,’ he said. For a moment I thought he was about to start guffawing as he had on the previous occasion when we were discussing the same subject in the sitting room. He rocked backwards and forwards on the bench with his hands
clasped between his knees; but then he quickly glanced at my face and his expression became serious again.

‘You know,’ he said, ‘fathers always have peculiar ideas. My father wanted me to be an Air Force officer. An Air Force officer! Me! I can’t even go on a switch-back because when I look down I get giddy!’

The girl arrived: she had red hair and thick legs with black stockings rolled down to her ankles. Kit fired an interminable series of meticulous, probing questions at her in dialect; he seemed to have an excellent knowledge of all the skills required by a housemaid. The girl said that she would be happy to enter service; she would make her preparations and be ready to leave within two or three days.

We returned to the village for a meal and then went for a long walk through the streets and out into the fields. Kit was in no hurry to get home. Every courtyard that we passed, he pushed open the door, went through and nosed around; on one occasion an irate old woman chased us away and threw a shoe at us as we fled. We went for a long walk through the fields and vineyards. Kit’s pockets were still stuffed with little pears and he gave some to me now and then. ‘How nice it is to be away from those two!’ he exclaimed repeatedly. ‘See how happy and relaxed we are! We really should go away together to some peaceful spot.’

It was dark by the time we got back into the car. ‘Will you marry me?’ Kit said suddenly. He hadn’t switched on the engine and was sitting with his hands on the wheel; the expression on his face was a comical mixture of fear and solemnity, his beret sat askew on his brow and his eyebrows were drawn together in a frown. ‘Will you marry me?’ he repeated sharply; I laughed and said yes. Then he started the car and we drove off.

‘I’m not in love,’ I said.

‘I know; nor am I. And I don’t believe in marriage. But who knows? It could be a good thing for both of us; you’re such a calm, sweet girl that I see no reason why we shouldn’t be happy. We wouldn’t do anything extraordinary, we wouldn’t travel all over the place, but we could go on little trips like this one occasionally and look at a village or two and nose around the courtyards.’

‘Do you remember the old woman who threw a shoe at us?’

‘Oh yes,’ he said, ‘what a temper!’

‘Perhaps I should think about it for a while,’ I said.

‘Think about what?’

‘Whether we should get married.’

‘Oh yes,’ he said, ‘we mustn’t rush things. But, you know, this isn’t the first time that it’s occurred to me. Watching you, I’ve often thought how fond I am of you. I’m basically a decent sort of chap; I’ve got some bad faults, I’m lazy and I don’t get round to doing things: in my house the chimneys don’t draw properly and I don’t have them seen to. But basically I’m a decent enough fellow. If we get married, I shall have something done about the chimneys and I’ll take an interest in my business. Maddalena will approve.’

When we got back to the house, he opened the car door for me and said goodnight. ‘I shan’t come in,’ he said, ‘I’ll just put the car away and then go home to bed. I’m tired.’ He pulled off the gloves and handed them to me, saying: ‘Give these back to Valentino.’

I found Valentino in the sitting room reading Mysteries of the Black Jungle. Maddalena had already gone up to bed.

‘Did you find a housemaid?’ Valentino asked. ‘Where’s Kit?’

‘He’s gone home to bed. Here are your gloves,’ I said and tossed them to him. ‘But aren’t you a bit past Mysteries of the Black Jungle?’

‘Stop talking like a schoolmistress,’ he replied.

‘I am a schoolmistress,’ I said.

‘I know; but you needn’t talk like one to me.’

My supper had been left on a side-table in the sitting-room and I sat down to eat. Valentino went on reading. When I had finished my meal I sat on the settee next to him. I put my hand on his head. He frowned and muttered something under his breath without raising his eyes from the book.
'Valentino,' I said, 'Kit has asked me to marry him. I may accept.'

He let the book drop and stared at me. 'Are you serious?' he asked.

'Quite, Valentino,' I said. He smiled crookedly, as if embarrassed, and moved away from me.

'You're not serious, are you?'

'Indeed I am.'

Neither of us spoke for a while. He continued to smile crookedly; I couldn't look at him because there was something unpleasant in that smile: I couldn't understand what was behind it; I sensed shame and embarrassment but didn't understand why he should be ashamed or embarrassed, nor could I understand what was going through his mind.

'I'm getting on, Valentino,' I said, 'I'm nearly twenty-six. And I'm no great beauty and I haven't any money. And I should like to get married; I don't want to grow old alone. Kit's a nice person; I'm not in love with him but my reason tells me that he's a decent person, unpretentious, sincere and good-hearted. If he wants to marry me, I shall be happy to accept; I would like to have children and a home of my own.'

'Ah yes,' he said, 'I see. But don't go rushing into anything. I'm not the best person to be giving advice. But give it some more thought.'

He got up, stretched his arms and yawned. 'He's a dirty fellow,' he said, 'he never washes properly.'

'But that's not a serious fault,' I said.

'I tell you, he hardly ever washes. It is a serious fault. I don't like people who don't wash. Goodnight,' he said, and patted my cheek. A caress of any kind from Valentino was rare, and I was grateful for it. 'Goodnight, Valentino dear,' I said.

All night long I lay thinking about whether I should marry Kit. I was too agitated to sleep. My mind went back over the day we had spent together and I recalled every detail: the wine, the little pears, the girl with red hair, the courtyards and the fields. It had been such a happy day, and it occurred to me that there had not been many happy days in my life, days of freedom to do as I liked.

The next morning Maddalena came to sit on my bed. 'I hear that you and Kit are to be married,' she said. 'It might not be such a bad idea, actually. You would have been better off with a steadier sort of person: Kit's disorganized and lazy, as I keep telling him; and his health is not too good, either. But perhaps you will manage to change his life for the better. There's no reason why you shouldn't. Of course, you will have to be very firm with him: his house is in a dreadful state; he must put in central heating and have the walls painted. And he must keep an eye on his farmland every day like I do. It's good land and would yield well if he would only take some trouble over it; and you must help too. I expect you're thinking that I should be firmer with Valentino; I do my best to persuade him to study, but we always end up having a dreadful row and things are bad. They're so bad, in fact, that I sometimes think we shall have to separate; but there are the children to think of and I haven't the heart to do it. But let's not think about such miserable things for the moment; you're engaged to be married and this is a time for happiness. I've known Kit all his life, we grew up together like brother and sister; his heart's in the right place and I'm very fond of him and want him to be happy.'

My engagement to Kit lasted for twenty days. For twenty days we toured the shops with Maddalena, looking at furniture; but Kit never decided on anything. These were not particularly happy days: I kept thinking about the day we went to find the housemaid, Kit and I, and expected a return of the happiness we had shared that day; but that happiness never returned. We went round the antique shops, always with Maddalena, and Maddalena quarrelled with Kit because he never made up his mind about anything and she told him that he was missing out on some good bargains. The girl with red hair was now installed at the house; she wore a black dress and a little lace cap and I found it difficult to identify her with the muddy
peasant girl we had met that day, yet every time I saw her red

hair I recalled the little pears and the wine and the dark kitchen
and the stone bench in front of the cottage and the wide

expanse of the fields; and I wondered if Kit remembered too.

It occurred to me that Kit and I should have been spending

some time alone together, but he appeared not to want this

and invariably asked Maddalena to accompany us when we

went to look at furniture, and when we were in the house he

continued to play cards with Valentino as he had always done.

Everyone in the house was happy for me. The cook and the

nursemaid were delighted and reminded me that they had

always said that Kit and I should get married. I had asked the

school for a three months’ leave of absence on grounds of

health; I rested and played with the children in the garden

whenever I was not looking at furniture with Kit and

Maddalena. Maddalena had told me that she would provide

my trousseau, and she insisted on going to tell my sister Clara

about the engagement. Clara had met Kit two or three times

and couldn’t stand him; but she always found Maddalena very

intimidating and dared say nothing to her; she was probably

impressed, too, by the fact that I was to marry a landed

proprietor and not the penniless nobody that she had always

predicted for me.

One afternoon when I was in the garden winding some

wool, the maid came to tell me that Kit was in the sitting-

room and wanted to see me. I took the wool in with me

intending to ask him to hold the skein for me. Maddalena was

out and Valentino sleeping, so I thought we might be able to

have an hour or two to ourselves.

I found him slumped in an armchair with his long legs

stretched out in front of him. He was still wearing his coat and

was crushing his beret between his hands; he looked pale and

depressed.

‘Are you unwell?’ I asked.

‘Yes; I’m not well at all. I feel shivery. I may be in for a bout

of ’flu. I won’t hold the wool,’ he said, glancing at the skein

over my arm and wagging a long forefinger to emphasize his

refusal. ‘Forgive me. I’ve come to tell you that we won’t be

getting married.’

He got up and started pacing up and down the room. He

continued to crush his beret in his hands, then suddenly flung

it down and came to a stop in front of me. We stood facing

each other and he put a hand on my shoulder. His face was that

of a very old new-born baby, with the sparse hairs plastered

damply to the elongated head.

‘I’m deeply sorry that I ever proposed to you. I realize that I

can never marry. You’re a dear girl, so quiet, so sweet, and I

had woven a whole world of fantasy for the two of us. It was

a beautiful fantasy but all made up and with no basis in reality.

I beg you to forgive me. I cannot marry. I’m terrified.’

‘That’s all right,’ I said, ‘it doesn’t matter, Kit.’ I wanted

very much to cry. ‘I don’t love you, as I told you before. If I’d

fallen in love with you it would have been difficult for me; but

as things are, it won’t be too hard. There’s no point in brood-

ing; some things we just have to put behind us and soldier on.’

I turned towards the wall, my eyes brimming with tears.

‘I really cannot, Caterina,’ he said. ‘You mustn’t cry over

me, Caterina: I’m not worth it. I’m a wreck. I spent the whole

night thinking how to break this to you; and throughout these

past weeks my mind has been in a turmoil. I hate having to

hurt someone as dear to me as you are. You would have

regretted it bitterly after a while: you would have come to

realize the sort of person that I am, a wreck not fit for civilized

society.’

I said nothing but stood fiddling with the wool. ‘Now I’ll

hold the skein for you,’ he said, ‘now I’ve got all that off my

chest and I’m feeling calmer. On my way here, my head

seemed to be spinning; and I didn’t sleep a wink all night.’

‘No, I don’t want to wind the wool now,’ I said, ‘but thank

you.’

‘Forgive me,’ he said. ‘I wish there was something I could

do to make you forgive me. Tell me, is there anything I can do

that would persuade you to forgive me?’

‘You don’t have to do anything,’ I said, ‘really, Kit. Nothing
has happened; we hadn't bought any furniture, nothing was really settled. We were only toying with the idea and were only half-serious about it.'

'Yes, yes, only half-serious,' he repeated. 'Deep down, no one really believed us. But we can still have the odd day out together; that day we had was such fun. Do you remember the old woman with the shoe?'

'Yes.'

'No one can stop us going out for the day together. We don't need to be married to do that. We'll do it again sometime, won't we?'

'Yes, we'll do it again.'

I went slowly up to my room. I still had the wool to wind, but all at once the effort seemed too much; it was even an effort to drag myself up the stairs, undress, fold my clothes on the chair and get into bed. I wanted to call the maid and tell her that I had a headache and should not be down for supper; but I didn't want to see the maid, I didn't want to see her red hair and be reminded of that day. I decided that I had to leave the house as soon as possible, the very next day, and never see Kit again. And I thought how even the quality of beauty was lacking in my pain because I was not in love with Kit: I felt only shame, shame that he should have asked me to marry him and then changed his mind. And it seemed to me that my attempts over the past weeks to push into the background those things about Kit which I disliked and highlight the things I liked, learning to reconcile myself to the thought of living with his old-baby face, had all been so much wasted effort, a silly, humiliating waste of effort! And how ridiculous Kit had been, panicking at the thought of actually having to marry me!

When Maddalena came into my room, I told her that Kit and I had come to a joint decision not to get married, and that I wanted to go away for a time. I spoke very quietly and kept my face turned to the wall; I had worked out exactly what I wanted to say and had rehearsed the words to myself; now I recited them by heart, very quietly and slowly and completely without expression, as if recounting events that had happened a long time ago; I had chosen to explain things in this way so that Maddalena wouldn't be angry with Kit and also to spare myself some embarrassment. But in the event Maddalena was entirely unconvinced about the decision having been made by both of us.

'You both changed your minds? No; only Kit changed his mind,' she said, and appeared not in the least surprised.

'We both did,' I repeated in a low voice. 'Both of us.'

'Only Kit,' she said. 'I know him too well. You're not the sort of person to change your mind. Anyway, it's no great misfortune; you'll find someone much better than Kit. He's so disorganized. He'll probably come round tomorrow and propose to you again. I know him. Just forget him; you've seen how muddle-headed and indecisive he is; remember how he couldn't even make a decision about the furniture?'

'I want to go away for a while,' I said.

'Where would you go?'

'I don't know. I want to be alone, I don't mind where.'

'As you wish,' she said, and left the room.

I left early the next morning, before Valentino had even got up. Maddalena helped me to pack, insisted on giving me some money and drove me to the station. She kissed me goodbye.

'Please don't quarrel too much with Valentino,' I said.

'I'll try not to,' she said. 'And you mustn't give way to tears and bitterness. That idiot Kit is really not worth it.'

I went to stay with my aunt Giuseppina, my mother's sister. Aunt Giuseppina lived in the country, in the same village where she had spent her whole working life as a schoolteacher. She was retired now and spent her time knitting; the knitting brought in a little money and she lived on that and her pension. I hadn't seen her for many years and I was struck by her likeness to my mother; looking at her white hair gathered
into a chignon and her delicate profile, I almost had the impression of being with my mother again. I had told her that I had been ill and needed to rest and she was full of concern for me, taking pains to see that I had everything I needed and preparing my favourite dishes. We went for a walk every evening before supper; she walked very slowly, resting her thin hand on my arm, and it was just like walking with my mother.

Every now and then a letter would arrive from Maddalena, short and concisely informative: she and Valentino were getting on so-so, the children were well, they were thinking of me and looking forward to my return. I told Aunt Giuseppina all about Valentino’s children and Clara’s children; I found myself repeating the same things over and over again and Aunt Giuseppina repeated the same questions over and over again. She was especially curious to hear about Valentino’s wealthy wife and that house of hers with all those servants and carpets; and she was rather surprised that I should have left such a comfortable house and come to stay with her in the poor little village with its muddy streets and so out of the way.

After two months with Aunt Giuseppina, the time when I was due to return to my teaching was drawing near and I wrote to our old caretaker to ask if she knew of a room I could rent, for I had no wish to return to Maddalena’s house. I prepared to leave and went with Aunt Giuseppina to say my farewells to all her friends and promise them postcards.

One morning I received a letter from Valentino. It was all blots and disjointed sentences. He wrote: ‘With Maddalena life has become impossible for us to stay together. I’m extremely unhappy. Come as soon as you possibly can.’ And at the bottom of the page he wrote: ‘I suppose you heard about Kit’s death.’

I had heard nothing. Kit, dead? I could almost see him lying there, dead, his long legs stiffened by rigor mortis. All this time I had tried not to think about him, because although I hadn’t loved him his rejection had been a blow. And now he, Kit, was dead!

I wept. I recalled the death of my father and that of my mother; their faces were receding ever more completely from my mind and I would try in vain to recall the phrases they had used every day. And what of Kit’s phrases, what had he said? ‘Do you remember the old woman with the shoe?’ he had said. ‘There’s nothing to stop us going out for the day together. I’m a wreck,’ he had said, ‘unfit for civilized society.’

I said goodbye to Aunt Giuseppina. In the train I re-read Valentino’s almost illegible scrawl. Another quarrel with Maddalena, then; but I was used to their rows and it was quite possible that they would have made it up before I arrived. But that phrase: ‘I’m extremely unhappy’ struck a note which puzzled me: it didn’t sound like Valentino at all. And how strange, too, that he, who had a horror of picking up a pen, should have written to me at all!

I had never read the papers during my stay with Aunt Giuseppina because in the first place she didn’t buy them and in the second place they were always days out of date by the time they got to her little village. So I had known nothing about Kit’s death. But why had Maddalena not written? Anxiety clutched at my heart, I was shivering and felt feverish; and the train was rattling at high speed through the countryside past the places we had seen from the car that day when Kit and I had gone to find the new housemaid and had been so happy; and I remembered the wine, the little pears and the old woman throwing a shoe at us.

I got to the house at four o’clock in the afternoon. The children ran across the garden to meet me and made a great fuss of me. The nursemaid was doing the washing in the scullery, the gardener was watering the flowerbeds; everything seemed perfectly normal. I went up to the sitting room.

Maddalena was sitting in an armchair, her glasses on the end of her nose and a pile of socks beside her to darn. It was unusual for her to be at home at that hour and unknown for her to darn socks. ‘Hello,’ she said, looking at me over the top of her spectacles. She seemed, all of a sudden, to have grown very old, to be a little old lady.
‘Where’s Valentino?’ I asked.
‘Not here any more. He doesn’t live here now. We have separated. Sit down.’

I sat down. ‘You’re surprised to find me darning socks,’ she said, ‘but I find it soothes the nerves. Apart from which, I needed a change; from now on I intend to spend my time darning socks and looking after the children and sitting down a lot. I’m tired of managing farmland and shouting at people and wearing myself out. We’ve got enough money to live on, and now there’s no Valentino to throw it away on clothes and all the other things. As for Valentino, I’ve told him that I shall make him a monthly allowance; I shall send him an envelope.’

‘Valentino will come to live with me,’ I said. ‘We can rent a couple of rooms. Just until there’s a reconciliation.’

She made no reply. She was darning very carefully, her lips compressed and her brow furrowed.

‘You may make it up very soon,’ I said. ‘You’ve had quarrels before and then made it up. He said in his letter that he was extremely unhappy.’

‘Ah, so he wrote to you?’ she said. ‘What did he tell you?’

‘He said that he was extremely unhappy, that’s all,’ I said.

‘That was why I came back at once. And he told me that Kit was dead.’

‘Ah, so he told you about it. Yes, Kit committed suicide,’ her voice was cold and distant. Suddenly she put down the sock she was mending, the needle still stuck through it. She snatched off her glasses and stared at me with wide, unfriendly eyes.

‘I’ll tell you what happened,’ she said. ‘Kit killed himself. He sent his housekeeper away with some excuse or other, lit the stove in his bedroom, opened the top and shut the flue. He left a letter for Valentino. I read it.’

Breathing heavily, she mopped her face, hands and neck with a handkerchief.

‘I read it. And then I went through every drawer in the house. There were photographs of Valentino and letters from him. I never want to see Valentino again.’ She suddenly began to sob convulsively. ‘I never want to see him again,’ she said. ‘Never let me see him again. I couldn’t bear it. I could have borne anything to do with another woman, no matter what had happened. But not this.’ She lifted her head and gave me another hard look. ‘And the same goes for you: I never want to see you again. Go away.’

‘Where is Valentino?’ I asked.

‘I don’t know. Bugliari knows where he is. We have started separation proceedings. Tell him not to worry, Bugliari will bring him his money every month.’

‘Goodbye, Maddalena,’ I said.

‘Goodbye, Caterina,’ she replied. ‘Don’t come here again. I would rather not see any member of your family ever again. I want to be left in peace.’ She had picked up her darning again. ‘I shall make sure that you can see the children as often as possible,’ she said, ‘but not here. I’ll make arrangements with the lawyer. And I’ll send the money every month.’

‘The money is not important,’ I said.

‘It is,’ she said, ‘it is.’

I was half-way down the stairs when she called me back. I returned. She embraced me, weeping; not angrily this time, but softly and piteously.

‘It’s not true that I never want to see you again,’ she said.

‘Come back to see me, Caterina, darling Caterina!’ And I wept too and we stood with our arms around each other for a long time. Then I went out into the peace of the sunny afternoon and went to phone Bugliari to ask where I could find Valentino.

Valentino and I live together now. We share two small rooms, a kitchen and a little balcony that overlooks a courtyard very much like the courtyard of my parents’ flat. Valentino sometimes wakes up in the morning with his head full of ideas for some commercial enterprise, and he comes and sits on my bed and juggles with figures and dreams about barrels of oil and ships; and then he complains about father and mother and
their having insisted on his studying when his real métier was in commerce. I let him talk.

I teach in school every morning and give private lessons in the afternoon; and when I teach at home I ban Valentino from the kitchen because when he's at home he will insist on wearing a shabby old dressing-gown. I find Valentino reasonably docile and obedient and affectionate, too, and when I get home cold and tired after school he prepares a hot-water bottle for me. He has grown fatter because he no longer plays any sport, and the occasional tuft of white hairs is now visible among his dark curls.

He seldom goes out in the morning but wanders around the flat in his shabby dressing-gown, reading magazines or doing crossword puzzles. In the afternoon he shaves, dresses and goes out. I watch him until he turns the corner; but after that I do not know where he goes.

Once a week, on Thursdays, the children come to visit us. They come with their nanny; the nurse has gone now and been replaced by a nanny. And Valentino makes the same rag and sawdust toys for his own children that he used to make for the caretaker's children, dogs and cats and monsters with lumpy bodies.

We never mention Maddalena. Nor do we speak about Kit. Our conversation is strictly limited to daily trivia, to our food or the tenants of the flat opposite. I visit Maddalena from time to time. She has got very fat and her hair is completely grey; she is an old lady. She occupies herself with her children, taking them skating and organizing picnics in the garden. She seldom visits her farm; she is tired of it and says that she has more than enough money already. She spends whole afternoons at home and Bugliari keeps her company. She enjoys my visits but I have to avoid talking too much about Valentino. With her, as with Valentino, I am always careful to keep the conversation on topics which cannot cause pain. We talk about the children, Bugliari, the nanny. So there is no one to whom I can speak the words that most need to be spoken, about the events which most closely concern our family and