

The Plate

1894-1914

By Victoria E. Lake

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For my mother.
Thank you for being my most loyal reader.
And, thank you for your love.

Cast of Characters

The Edwards

Hugh Edwards, Royal Navy Officer

Violet Edwards, Hugh Edwards' wife

Children: Arthur and Alice Edwards

Thomas Knight, Violet's brother

Sophie Knight, Thomas' first wife

Helen Knight, Thomas' second wife

The Edwards household

London

Mr Hudson, butler

Mr Davis, butler after Mr Hudson

Mrs Mathews, housekeeper

Miss Atkinsons, lady's maid

John Bailey, first footman

James Little, first footman after John Bailey

Henry Gray, second footman

Mrs (Eugene) Ward, cook

Emma, first maid

Mary Bell, scullery maid

Mrs Wilson, the nanny

Margate

Mr Davis, butler

James Little, footman

Mark Holmes, first footman after James Little

Mrs Matthews, housekeeper

Miss Atkinson, lady's maid

Mrs Ward, cook

Sally, first maid

Martha, maid

Jane, scullery maid

Edwards' Friends

Edgar Moore, admiral of the Royal Navy

Esther Moore, Edgar Moore's wife

Phillip Burton, owner of a large mill and pioneer in advertising

Edith Burton, Phillip Burton's wife

Children: Florence and Percy Burton

London

Chapter 1 May 1908

I am a plate. I am round and white and gold rimmed. I am two dessert spoons long and two dessert spoons wide. I have the signet of my maker on my back: two crossed swords in deep cobalt blue. It is Meissen's¹ trademark and I carry it with pride. The signet prevents forgery, I am thus unforgeable.

Under the swords, thick black letters indicate the year of my making: eighteen ninety-three.

I am made of clay, felspar, silica and fourteen hundred Celsius of heat. I am resistant to all elements of nature. Also, I am resistant to the pass of time. Because I am strong and robust, it is thought that I have no feelings. This is however, a misconception. Feelings are the only bullets that can destroy my soul. Hence, for the sake of self-preservation, feelings are important to me. My own, because they are key to sensing the outside world's feelings objectively, and people's feelings, because anticipating what others feel is key to my survival. Therefore, next to being strong and robust, I am also very brave. Because thee who acknowledges feelings makes itself vulnerable. And that takes courage.

Hastily, I am taken from the display cabinet in the scullery. The first footman's hands are cold. He looks tired. His green eyes contrast with the dark purplish lines under them. He has a runny nose and he blows it with a handkerchief that he keeps in his pocket. It has a coat of arms embroidered on it. Green and blue and red and yellow, the heart of a family that has overcome the pass of time. Apparently, it is unclear

¹ Meissen was the first porcelain maker in Europe. For ten years, this German manufacturer was the only producer of the porcelain tableware method it imported from China. Its trademark signet was two cross swords in cobalt blue which prevented forgery.

whether the coat of arms is from his own family or of a family he served, or perhaps, as I heard one of the servants suggest:

‘I think he just nicked it!’

The first footman’s name is Bailey, Richard Bailey. However, Hugo Edwards, the master of the house, decided that he ought to be called John because that is a nice and pleasant name for a servant. John Bailey is a strong man, well-built, athletic. He is extraordinarily tall yet very agile. When he walks, he seems to be gliding, a few inches from the ground, like a deer, glides through a meadow chasing its prey. He has dark brown hair that curls behind his ears and neck, a rather large nose that suits his big body and a very pronounced chin. When he talks his chin dictates the movement of his lips. In fact, all his features obey the chin which bravely stretches itself into the distance like a compass searching for the truth. His eye-brows are very thick and they reveal his thoughts and emotions before he has even sensed them himself.

Bailey stacks me up along with six other plates. Three dinner plates and three side plates. Just like me, they all have the proud gold rim embracing them and are marked with the cobalt blue crossed swords.

I am under the stack, the weight falls upon me heavily, but I bear it with pride. I like being the holder of the stack: I get to see myself as confident and capable and important. Bailey puts me on the counter and collects the glasses. He grabs the tray with his usual brusqueness and runs upstairs, crosses through the vast entrance hall, and walks into the dining room as if he owned the place.

John Bailey arrived at the house a few weeks ago and the other servants are not fond of him.

‘He is one cocky brute.’

‘He thinks he knows it all!’

‘Did you see the way he looked at Sir Hugo?’

These are some of the comments I have heard about Bailey. Next to that, there is something untruthful about him and the servants, honest and upright people as they are, sense it. The thing is, the first footman's accent does not belong to upstairs but it certainly does not belong to downstairs either. Every now and then, a peculiar intonation, more proper from a highborn than a servant, slips in. Even the second footman, Henry Gray, whose surname is Gray and his first name is not Henry but Eddy – once again chosen by Mr Edwards-, distrusts him. I can see it by the way Gray looks at Bailey from the corner of his eye and how he takes one step back when Bailey approaches him. Gray is a very decent fellow, and if he is wary about him there ought to be a reason for it.

'Just keep yer eyes open, that's all we can do I suppose,' Gray advised the others in the servants' kitchen one evening.

Mrs Ward, the cook, shook her head, upset. 'Well, that is one pleasant thought!'

Mrs Matthews, the housekeeper, nodded, agreeing with her subordinate, which was unusual. 'On top of all our demanding chores we also have to watch our backs!' she exclaimed.

'I don't understand what made Hudson choose him,' added Miss Atkinson, the lady's maid, looking up from her needle work. 'There were so many other candidates, far more suitable than him, I can tell yer that!'

Adam Hudson is the butler. They are supposed to refer to him as Mr Hudson, but when they are on their own the butler's subordinates rebelliously skip the 'mister' part.

Gray sighed. 'That is our fate. We aren't allowed to choose who we work with. It has been like this for centuries ... "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun!"²

'So, since when did yer start reading Shakespeare?!'

'It is not Shakespeare, Mrs Moore, but Ecclesiastes.'

‘Eccle -what!?’

‘The Bible, Mrs Moore.’

‘Ah, I see.’

‘And I have read Shakespeare’s work already, by the way.’

‘Oh, so yer an intellectual?!’

‘I am a man with ambition, and knowledge is essential to achieving my goals!’

‘Blimey, at least someone believes in a better future,’ sighs Miss Atkinson.

‘Of course, hope is the essence of life!’

‘Well let’s just hope this Bailey doesn’t turn out to be a thief!’

‘Or chop us all into pieces, Mrs Ward!’ adds the lady’s maid, Miss Atkinson.

And so, it was established by the other servants, that Bailey was not to be trusted and there was nothing they could do about it.

Bailey briskly grabs me with one hand and lays me at the head of the table, where Mr Edwards’ always sits. It has been quite some time since I was his plate and I am looking forward to gaining insight in his thoughts and feelings. Perhaps I can unravel the reason of the distant and evasive behaviour he has been displaying towards his family lately. A loud clatter is heard. As if he were throwing grenades from the trenches, Bailey brusquely lays the side-plates on top of all the dinner plates and I am suddenly semi-covered; I am used to it.

Next to his awkward accent, he also has peculiar manners for a footman. His roughness is one of them.

I watch Bailey lay the table and hope I will be used and not only serve as decoration. Those are the most tedious meals.

One is on the table with nothing to observe but the dark circle of the plate resting on top. When one is used to serve the meal, on the other hand, one gets to zoom into the diner's soul in a way few objects, let alone people, can.

Finally, I am placed at Mr Edwards' place at the table and I sigh, relieved. I will be close to him, at last. It has been quite some time since I was his plate, and now finally, the day has come!

Candles are lit. Fancy silver candleholders in the middle of the table, surrounded by fresh flowers scattered around the broken white embroidered mantelpiece. The gardener picks the flowers every morning. I know this because once, Mr Taylor, the gardener, used me as a plate to have his breakfast, much to Mrs Matthews' annoyance, because I am a porcelain plate and restricted to the sole use of the Edwardses and their guests.

Mrs Matthews, the housekeeper, is reserved and very strict. She is a middle-aged woman with blond hair with streaks of grey at the sides and her hair tied up in a tight bun. She has pale gray eyes and her face is etched with lines that have easily found a way through her fragile skin. She is rather tall, and everything about her is long: her legs, her arms, her neck, her face. The only one thing about her that is not long and is as short as can possibly be, is her patience.

The old friendly gardener was aware of his fault. His fork approached the food with the cautiousness of a cat preying on a mouse. I could also tell that he was sad. In between mouthfuls he looked away, in the distance, out into the light, the window the scullery maid looks through when she does the washing up. Next to not being in the best of spirits, I could also tell, by the way that he lay the flowers next to me, that he was beyond his tight schedule. There was a little vase with water just in front of him, but he spared himself the trouble of putting the flowers in it. Instead, he lay them brusquely in between the napkin and

me, leaving a mark on the tablecloth, something he would undoubtedly get reprimanded for as well.

Mr Taylor ate his breakfast making haste, while I was caressed by the fresh leaves pouring out of the bouquet's stems. The leaves, dark green at the stem turning into golden-green as they reached their top, creating their own individuality at last. Like a celebration to being, giving itself a well-deserved golden crown for having become itself, autonomous from the stem it originated from. Under one of the leaves, the petals of a rose in bloom, a few hours before it starts to wither, tickled me. A subtle gesture reminding me of how grateful I ought to be. Not only because of the intimacy I was gifted with, but also because it reminded me that I, on the other hand, could theoretically resist the pass of time, if I am kept safe from anger and rage and desperation. And all other destructive feelings that blind people's senses and mute the good of their heart.

The first morning light bursts into the dining room and the traffic bustles outside. An air of expectancy hangs in the room. Soon, Mr Edwards and ten-year-old Arthur, Mr Edwards and Mrs Edwards' son, will come down for breakfast. Seeing that there are three places laid on the table, I expect that Mrs Edwards, Violet, will have breakfast downstairs as well and not in her bedroom as she usually does when Master Arthur is in Eton.

The walls of the dining room are dark turquoise, and the curtains that hang from the ceiling to floor windows, from which the busy street of London is seen, are ochre and embroidered with a yellow floral pattern. Both the dining table and the large sideboard are made of mahogany and the oak wooden floor is covered by a large Persian Heriz rug. On top of the fireplace there is a portrait of one of Mr Edwards ancestors, a stern looking man, with blond hair and a full-grown beard, dressed in a Royal Navy officer's uniform. Next to the fireplace, there is a

large mirror from which one can see everything that is going on in the room. There are more portraits hanging from the other walls, all solemnly looking men and women, but none hold the viewer's gaze with the pride that the Royal Navy officer does.

I patiently wait for the family to come downstairs as the grand-father clock subtly strikes the minutes, indicating the inexorable pass of time. Waiting for the meal to start is my favourite moment; the anticipation of all the emotions I will be perceiving and the conversations I will be listening to is an extraordinary experience. As I indulge in what is yet to come, I observe the candles flicker, casting shy waves of warmth. It reminds me of the moment when I was taken out of the kiln and laid on a large tray to cool off at the factory in Germany where I was made. My first moments alive:

‘Das ist fertig!’ (It’s ready) I heard a voice say in German.

‘Ja! Wir müssen nach Hause’ (Yes master. It is. It’s time to go home)

‘Have a joyful weekend Bernd, and give regards to Mrs Shröder.’

‘Thank you, sir, I shall do so. You too Mr Hösel, enjoy the splendid weather.’

‘Indeed. It is finally summer!’

There was a lot of chatting and greeting in the large factory hall and then, the voices diminished into a soft murmur, followed by footsteps padding into the hallway, fading into the past. And that was my first day in this world. It was 1894, fourteen years ago.

After some time, I was wrapped up and stacked in a box and after many long moments of utter darkness in which I lost track of time, the box was suddenly opened. I was unwrapped and I finally saw the light of day again. I was in the dining room I am in now. A dining room in a house in Piccadilly, London. A mansion for what I have heard. Not that I understand the differences among houses when I listen to my diners discuss

them. The sights from the house however, indicate that the house I am in is exquisite indeed, and comprises all the fine elements a mansion ought to have. The first-time visitors are always caught by surprised.

‘Good heavens, what a view!’

‘One can see over the parks! Blimey, I have never seen such a vast extension of green before.’

‘It is hard to believe that we are in the middle of London!’

‘And look over there! It is the hills of Surrey, is it not?’

‘This drawing room is grand!’

‘... and it’s next to the “In and Out”³ now, that comes in handy, Hugo.’

‘... and next to Devonshire House, the centre of London political life!’

In this lavish environment I spend my days, enriching my soul with all the beauty the magnificent interior offers. I do not however, forget my origins. And yes, the candlelight warmth reminds me of that first instant in which my senses awoken to the world. Where I came to be me: the Plate.

The door swings open and Bailey strides into the dining room. He is carrying the tray with the tea and coffee pots and cups and saucers. He lays the tray on the sideboard and throws a glance at the table. He squints, observing every detail meticulously, then walks over to the large mahogany oval table, his eye-brows furrowed, and stretches the tablecloth, gently patting away some infinitesimal creases here and there. From his spot next to the sideboard, Mr Hudson eyes the table as well and nods approvingly. Bailey’s face, strained as he observes his superior assess his work, relaxes. The butler, despite being the kind of man one could easily forget ever

³ The In & Out was the informal name for the Naval and Military Club. It was called like this because of the prominent signs on the building that indicated vehicle entrance and exit gate. The Club was formerly based at Cambridge House at 94 Piccadilly, opposite Green Park. The club is now located in St James Square.

having seen or even having spoken to, has managed to impose his authority, even to this new first footman, who certainly does not lack conceitedness nor self-awareness.

There is nothing unusual nor outstanding about Mr Hudson. Everything in him is mediocre, a chronicle in betweenness that moves around the house on two legs, operating in a consistent pattern, like an automatized machine lacking surprise, utterly predictable, so calmly and diligently that one could easily believe that he is hiding something, a secret that would reveal his true nature. The reliable butler is neither young nor old, neither tall nor short, neither fat nor thin, neither clever nor short-sighted. He is imperceptible, as imperceptible as it gets. He has served the Edwardses for twenty years, and throughout time, has certainly earned his respect among the servants.

Bailey walks around the table, hastily pouring the orange juice, miraculously not spilling anything on the scratched and crisp tablecloth while the first maid, Emma, gives the final touches to the room. The first maid's real name is Bertha. Just like John Bailey, however, the Edwardses have chosen the name Emma for her. She has fair features, brown chocolatey hair neatly combed in a pony tail and an extraordinarily intelligent look in her eyes. She is a fine-looking woman and without her calmness and diplomacy I sometimes think that the servant's hall would be an anarchical scene where total chaos prevails. Observing her serene demeanour as she pads around the dining room like a fairy with her magic stick, I remember about how much she has changed since she arrived at the house two years ago.

It was an early morning in late summer, and I was on a tray waiting to be brought upstairs by Bailey. From there I could observe how Mrs Matthews instructed Emma on how to lay the servant's table. The new first maid had arrived the day before

and still walked around the house as if she had been living in a dark cave until then. She tip-toed through the corridors and into the rooms, her head down, squinting at the light bursting from the windows, gazing at her surroundings with a fearful expression on her face.

‘Napkin on the left side, under the forks,’ Mrs Matthews said to the willing yet clearly unexperienced maid.

Emma watched her, intently. She was wearing the house’s dark blue uniform and starched white cap and apron and despite looking like an ordinary maid, there was something captivating about her.

‘Not in the water glass, Mrs Matthews?’

‘No, never. Always on the left side. And if there’s no room, then on the plate or on the charger.’

‘Yes, Mrs Matthews.’

‘And knives’ blades pointing inwards please.’

‘Inwards, Mrs Matthews?’

‘Towards the plate. The largest closest to the plate. In the same order they will be used.’

I hear doubt in Emma’s breathing. ‘The same order, Mrs Matthews?’

‘Oh, never mind child. Just do as I say, will yer?’

‘Where does the spoon go, Mrs Matthews?’

‘At the right side, next to the knife.’

‘Yes, Mrs Matthews.’

‘Upwards please! For the life of God girl, have yer never seen a table laid before?’

I heard the footsteps padding around the table, back and forth, the dance of daytime, the dance of life about to begin.

‘Well done, Emma, this looks pretty, yer, see?’

‘It does indeed, Mrs Matthews.’ The young maid’s voice still trembling.

And now, two years later, when Bailey rushed into the kitchen, Emma was laying the servants' table, diligently, with the skills of a fully experienced maid.

Mr Hudson walks to the table and performs the very last check: he measures the distance from the plates and glasses with a ruler. The day can begin. I will soon be loaded with food, listening to my diners, and sinking into their world of feelings and thoughts. Observing their movements, sensing their fears, their anger, their love. Knowing that what they say is not always what they feel; and what they feel is not always something they are aware of.

'I am sure it'll be all right, Violet. There's not much you can do now, is there?' It is Mr Edwards who has just entered the dining room and takes his place at the table. He opens the newspaper and sighs.

'Golly, the King has refused to come back from Biarritz to appoint Asquith!'⁴ Mr Edwards says, shaking his head, his eye-brows furrowed, building up on his forehead, his lips set in a line. 'I never thought our new prime minister would comply. It does not sound promising; I am telling you that. I hear the rustling of the newspaper; Mr Hudson slides the chair and Mr Edwards sits down.

'Arthur, put your napkin on your lap please,' his mother instructs. 'That's a good boy.'

'Hudson, tell the chauffeur that I need the carriage at ten o'clock.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Where are you going? It's Saturday!' There is a tremor in Violet's voice.

4 In April 1908, during his annual stay in Biarritz, King Edward's accepted the resignation of British Prime Minister Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman and asked Campbell-Bannerman's successor, H. H. Asquith, to travel to Biarritz to kiss hands because he did not want to leave Biarritz. Asquith complied, but the king was severely criticised for appointing a prime minister on foreign soil instead of returning to Britain

'I need to pass by the Ministry. I forgot to sign some papers.'

'Oh. That's a shame. I thought we'd take Arthur out for a ride.'

'Perhaps next Saturday, Vi. The weather will still be suitable for riding, surely.'

A spell of silence falls. Violet sighs.

'Do you think we could do something about it?'

'About Kaiser Wilhelm?'

'No, my darling. Margate, the house, what I was talking to you about.' Violet takes a deep breath and raising her voice and with a persuasive tone, adds, 'I do not think it is wise to holiday there any longer, there's nobody there, everyone is going to Southport!'

'Yes, of course, Margate, the holidays, yes,' Mr Edwards takes a sip of his tea. 'Well, the thing is Vi, as I see it, it is something that must be considered very carefully. It has been in the family for five generations. My family has holidayed there for ages. It is perhaps the only place in England I feel I belong to. The only place that brings back happy childhood memories. I shall never sell it. Never.'

'We shall create new pleasant memories somewhere else, like Southport or perhaps Llandudno. The Burtons and the Elliots have just bought an estate in Llandudno and the Moores one in Southport. Apparently, they have marvellous views.'

'But they have not sold their properties in Kent, have they?'

'No, they have not.'

Mr Edwards sighs. He rests his knife and fork on my lip. Violet, continues talking, excitedly, lost in a world of leisure and extravagance to which she fervently adheres to.

'You will enjoy your time there just as much!' she insists.

‘That is what you think, Vi. Still, I don’t see it happening. Selling the Margate estate is unconceivable to me. I could consider letting it, but selling it, never!’

‘If we let it, where shall we holiday then? Are we not to holiday at all?!’

‘I’m not saying that, my dear,’ Mr Edwards remarks, impatiently, then muttering, ‘although, who knows.’

‘Sorry?’

‘Nothing, Vi, nothing.’

‘Right, so you do not want to spend time with us?!’ Violet protests, laying her cutlery on the lip of her plate, her eyes darting into the distance. After some time, she eyes her husband and in a harsh tone, says, ‘I don’t know why I came down for breakfast after all. I should have stayed in my room as I always do.’

‘You always jump into conclusions. We must consider it carefully, talk it through, taking our time.’

‘But when?’

‘When the time is right.’

Arthur looks at his mother and then at his father, lost. Then, a joyful expression bursts in that little face of his.

‘Is that what we need feathers for Mama?’ he cries out, breaking the uncomfortable silence that has fallen.

Violet and Mr Edwards look at their son, confused. Slowly, a warm smile draws itself on Violet’s lips and she looks at her son lovingly.

Arthur is referring to a poem I heard his mother read to him a few years ago, when he was still a little boy.

‘Hope is the thing with feathers

That perches in the soul -

And sings the tune without the words -

*And never stops - at all*⁵

5 Fragment of the poem, ‘Hope is a thing with weathers’ by Emily Dickenson’s, 1861

It was a wet and cold day in the beginning of November. Arthur had just celebrated his seventh birthday and he was having tea with his mother in the drawing room. He looked at her, his large hazel eyes full of enthusiasm and curiosity.

'It's a bird? he cried out.

'No darling!

'A hen then?'

Violet laughed, impregnating the room with love. I breathed in, hoping to become her laughter, become her joy. Her face illuminated, as if light had taken over her soul and feathers and free flying birds had all joined in and formed a choir of hope.

'It is not a bird nor a hen, my sweet! But it makes one feel that one can fly.'

'Can we ever learn how to fly, Mama?'

'No, but we can learn how to hope. And that is pretty much the same thing.'

Now, several months later, Violet remembers the day they discussed the essence of hope, and grins as she looks at her son, proudly. 'Yes, exactly. That's what feathers are for my boy.'

Mr Edwards looks at his son then to his wife and then to his son again, puzzled. 'Feathers? What's that about?'

'Nothing Hugo. Nothing you would be interested in.' Her tone is sharp, resentful.

The air in the room has chilled. The bustling of the traffic outside is all that is heard as the family of three eat their fruit in silence. Violet looks around the room. Her big hazel eyes which her son has inherited, search for something, an answer to an unknown question. Today she is wearing her dark old rose dress and the colour reflects on her pale skin, giving it liveliness. She has been looking rather subdued lately, quiet, withered, like the last shimmering of a candle before it fades away. She has an oval face and everything in it, all in exquisite proportion, is

extraordinarily delicate: a small snub nose, a pointy chin, and cheekbones from which one can easily sense the colour of her thoughts and the warmth, or not, of her soul. She has wavy sandy-brown hair which she wears in an elaborate low bun. Miss Atkinson is a skilled hairdresser and Violet's hairdos are very often praised.

The Edwardses finish eating their fruit and Bailey collects the side plates rapidly, throwing them on the tray that he lays on the sideboard. Now that the side plate is taken away, I am fully exposed to daylight. Free at last. I can finally decipher Mr Edward's emotions and thoughts, be the thermometer of his soul. I can indulge in an ocean of words and feelings and gain insight in what my diner's heart beats for and what wanders through his mind.

From the pace at which the cutlery caresses my surface I sense excitement and then fear and then excitement again, just to be knocked down by fear one more time. Then, the fork stops, stabbing into me. A thought has crossed his mind and Mr Edwards looks pensively out of the window. Then, his cutlery starts moving again, his fork stopping from time to time, overwhelmed by tiny waves of anxiety, anticipation for the unknown. It is all soothed by the gentle movements of the knife from which I perceive cautiousness. Mr Edwards looks at his wife intently. Violet looks back at him with an unwelcoming gaze. Its bitterness stabs every grain of clay I am made of.

'I think the boy should go out more when he is home. He only stays inside, playing the violin.'

'The boy as in Arthur, our son?' Violet asks, irritated.

Mr Edwards looks at his wife, defiantly.

'Yes, as in Arthur, our son.'

'What do you think, Arthur? Would you like to play with your friends more often?'

Arthur shrugs his shoulders and looks down. Violet is not the only one that fears Mr Edwards at times. At times, because

there are moments in which Violet seems to feel a wave of courage and she speaks up to him. Like she is doing now.

Mr Edwards clears his throat. 'You haven't eaten much.'

'No, I haven't, Hugo.'

Another uncomfortable spell of silence falls which is interrupted by the clatter of Mr Edward's tea cup being laid on the saucer.

'Is everything all right, Vi?'

Violet half-smiles as she meets her husband's gaze. 'Perhaps Hugo. Only time will tell.' I catch the glimpse that crosses in between them. I am surprised to see that the bitterness is gone. The resentfulness, even the hatred at times, has vanished like snow would melt if fallen in June. Violet giggles shyly. Mr Edwards looks out of the window again. The cutlery rests neatly on my lip, some scrambled egg and a slice of bacon remain untouched. Mr Edwards looks at his wife again and gently places the fork and knife on me, slanted. This time, the handles are not warm like they usually are: Mr Edwards' hands are cold.

'If you will excuse me,' he says abruptly. I must be off or I'll be late for my appointment.'

'Will you be here at luncheon?' his startled wife asks.

'Regrettably not, my dear.'

The butler slides Mr Edwards' chair, he stands up and walks over to his wife. He puts a hand on her shoulder and kisses her on the cheek. It is an automatized kiss, as their kisses have been lately. Then, I hear his footsteps padding towards the door. His footsteps diminishing contest the silence that has fallen. Suddenly, another sliding of a chair on the thick Persian rug is heard. It is followed by footsteps rushing out of the room, echoing the song the fallen silence and Mr Edwards' footsteps had left behind. The steps are not as loud as Mr Edwards' steps but gentle and light, like a feather that has just been swift into the morning breeze.

‘Good-bye, Papa!’ I hear Arthur’s voice from the hallway.

‘Good-bye. Good-bye Arthur,’ I hear Mr Edwards’ voice answer.

I get a glimpse on the butler, Mr Hudson, who is standing next to the sideboard and observes the scene. He looks pensive, worried. His mouth is set in a straight line; all that he sees and hears, thinks, and discovers, ought to remain behind those lips, never to become the sound that breaks silence.

Chapter 2 1908

Upon entering the kitchen downstairs, I hear Mrs Ward and Emma gossiping, as they usually do after a meal has been served upstairs.

'It was not the warm and cosy last breakfast we would have wished for Master Arthur, that is for sure,' the kind and pleasant second footman, Henry Gray, told the cook and the first maid.

'Unbelievable. They used to be crazy about each other!' Mrs Ward exclaims.

Emma stops drying the serving plate she has in her hands and looks at the cook surprised. 'Really? It is hard to believe seeing them now.'

'Yes, I know. But believe me, those two were the vivid example of a passionate relationship.'

'Sir Hugo is half German, isn't he?'

'Yes, he is.'

'Hard to believe that a German could be capable of being passionate,' Emma sighs.

'Oh, yer silly girl, passion is universal, it does not know about nationalities! Behind his calm and collected manner there is a fervent romantic hidden in Sir Hugo, I'm telling yer. The things he did to win her heart! Not that it was that difficult as she was blown away when she first saw him at that ball.'

'Things have changed, surely! They seem like complete strangers to each other now.' Emma lays the serving plate on the kitchen table and takes a plate from the tray without taking her eyes away from the cook. 'He lived in Germany when he was young, didn't he?'

'Yes, in Bavaria. With his aunt Catherine, his mother's youngest sister. Sir Hugo's father died in the First Boar war and his mother a year after that. It started with a cough and nine

days later she was gone,' Mrs Ward's voice fades as she looks away, distancing herself from the painful memory.

'Poor child, he must have been devastated.'

'Yes, he was, it was a horrid time.' Mrs Ward stares back at the stew she is stirring. She shrugs her shoulders and takes a deep breath. 'So, yes, Sir Hugo became an orphan at the young age of seven and he moved to Germany to live with his aunt. Until then he had lived in this house, spending summers in Margate. He missed it dearly. We, the servants, stayed here, taking care of the house. It was wonderful when he came back to live here. We had missed him dearly.'

'Have the Edwardses owned this place for a long time?'

'Yes, this house was built by Sir Hugo's great grandfather from his mother's side and Sir Hugo's great aunt inherited it.'

'Interesting that a mansion in Piccadilly would be owned by a German family.'

'The Loefft von Unterweiling were extraordinarily rich. Traders, those are the ones making the big money nowadays. Yes, yer and me are in the wrong business!'

Half a smile appears on Emma's lips, but it is short lived: she stares at cook inquisitively and continues asking questions to the jolly cook who seems more than happy to answer them.

'When did Sir Hugo come back to England?'

'When he turned fourteen his great aunt sent him back to England so he could go to Eton, just as his father and great grandfather had done. She died five years ago and he was her sole heir so he inherited the house.'

'Were there no other relatives?'

'No.' Once again, Mrs Ward stops stirring and takes a deep breath. 'He had a younger brother but he died when he was very young.'

'I see.'

Mrs Ward looks at Emma, fixing her eyes on hers. She is going to say something but stops herself. Then, after some silence, in a casual tone she says, 'Many of the portraits hanging on the walls are from his German ancestors.'

'Ah, that would explain their blond hair and blue eyes,' Emma muttered.

'Yes, they are as pure Germans as it gets, that's for sure.'

Mrs Ward's words corroborate what I had understood of Mr Edwards' past. Listening to conversations that Violet and Mr Edwards have had in the past has given me insights on how Mr Edwards experienced the years he spent in Germany, living with his aunt.

'It was a dreadful time Vi. I do hope Arthur never has to go through something like it,' I once heard him say. They were celebrating their fourth wedding anniversary.

'We will not let that happen, darling.'

'But what if it does? What if we are to die. Who would take care of him?' Your brother?!

'I am afraid Thomas and Sophie are the only option we have.'

'At least they live in England and he wouldn't have to move abroad.'

'Is that the only advantage?'

'You aren't that fond of Thomas yourself ...'

'As a brother. But that might be because of how my parents treated us. He was the heir. He was their pride and joy. Who was I? I was nothing.'

'Come here my dear. To me you are Everything.'

'Say it,' Violet whispered, teasingly.

'You know I don't like to.'

'And you know I love it'

Mr Edwards grinned. 'Ok then: Meine Liebling. Ich habt du lieb'.

'Oh, it sounds lovely to my ears!'

They kissed tenderly. 'You wouldn't be fluent in German if things had gone differently ...'

Mr Edwards sat back on his chair, and sighed. 'Well, not that being fluent in German has been of any help lately.'

'Why would you say such thing. Come here.' She held his face in her two hands and whispered, 'I find it extraordinarily appealing if you may know ...'

Yes, Mr and Mrs Edwards were certainly happy back then. I sensed it by the way they ate and by the conversations they held. But somehow, ever since Violet's brother Mr Knight and his wife Mrs Knight came over to New Year's Eve in 1899, things changed. I was Mr Edwards' plate that night and the conversation that took place during the dinner have proven to be pivotal to how things developed from then on.

Mrs Knight, Sophie Knight, Violet's sister in-law, is, according to many, a stunning looking lady. I know this because of the compliments she gets. I am no judge of beauty. The only reference I have in this world are thoughts and the subsequent feelings that eradicate from them. And, if I may say, there is nothing remarkable about Mrs Knight's feelings, not because of the colour they are but because they lack to exist all together. When I am her plate, which has happened several times, I find it difficult to get a grasp on what exactly her heart pounds for. Her thoughts however, are a hurricane in full force. They are her main drive. They muffle everything about her. Her heart is lost in a vertical labyrinth of erratic thought and her soul is buried in a pile of cold and suffocating concrete. I am surprised that her heart still beats at all and blood stills finds a way to stream up and down her body. Surely, they should have a hiccup every now and then with so much scheming that goes on in

that mind of hers. Next to that, by the tone of her voice and word choice I can only but conclude that she is extraordinarily manipulative.

‘Tell me, Hugo, how is work at the ministry going? You must miss the sea dreadfully!’

‘In a way, yes, I do.’

‘The routine of office work can drive one mad, surely!’

Mr. Edwards laughed lightly.

Violet looked up from her plate. I could sense the surprised look in her eyes. Mr Edwards was oblivious to his wife’s dismay and continued his animated conversation with Mrs Knight. Violet and her brother Mr Knight were silent spectators of the slight flirtation that was unfolding right in front of their very eyes. Mrs Knight asked Mr. Edwards about his life as a Royal Navy Officer and Mr. Edwards narrated anecdotes of the past. Whether they were exaggerated to put him in a favourable light or not, one could not tell. The only evident fact was that Mr. Edwards was flattered by Mrs Knight’s undivided attention, and that Mrs Knight had found in Mr. Edwards a new hero.

‘Working at the ministry must be tedious to you now.’

‘I wouldn’t exactly call it tedious but ...’

‘Utterly tedious!’ Mrs Knight exclaimed mockingly.

Mr Edwards took a somewhat larger than proper mouthful. Aiming, most probably, at figuring out a way to interrupt the uncomfortable wave of attention Mrs Knight was giving him and change the conversation. It took some time, but even he realized that Mrs Knight’s overt attention was becoming somewhat inappropriate.

Unfortunately, I could not perceive that clearly how Violet and Mr Knight were experiencing the animated discussion their partners were involved in. The inverted incandescent burner had not been installed in the dining room yet and the old-fashioned gas burner created many shadows that made clear

observations challenging. It was however, better than the first gas burner that was installed, the backswing. Cherished as it was when first installed, the loud hissing sound that remained in one's thoughts as a bumblebee captured indoors on a summer day, was a very irritating downside. Next to that, the light was rather gloomy. Therefore, all I knew was that Violet had stopped eating and, by the shadow of her profile on the wall behind her, I could see that she gazed around the room, with her head down, as if hoping to disappear, never to be found again. In the shadow I could see her head move around, slowly, as if in search of some pleasurable memory once lived in between those walls that could remind her that life is not always as bad as it is now and can be worthwhile.

Violet's brother was sitting at the left of Mr Edwards and he was easier to observe. He looked at the table, studying the glasses, the cutlery, and the plates. An angry expression on his face. As Mrs Knight and Hugo continued talking, brother and sister seemed to get lost in an uneasy silence.

Self-centred Mrs Knight continued chatting animatedly, looking at Mr Edwards as if he had just saved planet Earth from all evils, while the Royal Navy Officer, now stuck in an office, could not help talking enthusiastically about his passion: the sea.

'Perhaps you should drop by the embassy one day. It would do you good to speak your mother tongue again.'

To this, Mr. Edwards reacted in the way he always does when he is reminded about his half-German blood. His enthusiastic tone changed drastically into harsh and stern when he said,

'Excuse me Sophie, but as you know, my mother tongue is not German. I was born in England.'

'Oh, pardon me Mr Edwards Loëft von Unterweild!' she giggled and took a sip of her wine 'You did however, live in Bavaria for several years and live in a house built by a German,'

she added, stabbing her eyes on him. Then, with that beaming self-confident smile of hers she said, 'One does not shake off one's German roots that easily!'

Violet cleared her throat. She looked away from the wall, stared at her sister-in-law and broke the uncomfortable silence that had fallen by asking,

'How is your father doing, Sophie?'

'Papa is doing splendidly, thank you for asking. He is always busy, fervently working on a constructive German-British liaison.'

'It is admirable that he was re-appointed as Ambassador.'

'It is, Violet, surely. He is very proud about it!'

'How he boasted!' Mr Knight added, laughing.

His wife joined him, laughing as she took another sip of her wine, emptying her glass. 'Still does!' Then, in a business-like tone, 'Well, you know Papa, passionate about guarding the relationship between Britain and Germany and determined to do whatever it takes to safeguard it.'

'So, we can all dance to Kaiser Wilhelm's whip!' Mr Edwards cried out.

By the movement of his cutlery until then I assumed he was not following the conversation. He seemed lost in an overwhelming puzzle that Mrs Knight had placed right in front of him, a thousand pieces scattered in the air. But now he rested his fork and knife on my lip. His hands were trembling and a subtle clatter was heard.

Mr Knight nodded, agreeingly. 'Not the most tactful of statemen, I'll give you that,' and then, imitating Kaiser Wilhelm's voice, "spare nobody, make no prisoners, fight like

the Huns!”⁶ He is not that much of a pacifist after all, mark my words.’

‘Dancing or not, it is essential to stick together if we want to keep peace in Europe.’

‘I agree to that Hugo.’

‘Yes Thomas, we are undoubtedly in for some unrest the coming months, years perhaps.’ Mr Edwards reached for his glass of wine and took a long sip, savouring it with gusto. Once he was done, he carefully placed the glass on the table, as if world peace depended on it. ‘The first thing that the Germans should do is find a substitute for Hohenlohe. He does not have the charisma a statesman requires.’

Mrs Knight giggled. It was a forced giggle. Its gaiety contrasted with the stern look in her eyes. ‘Golly, do I sense some frustration in your voice, Hugo?’

‘Not at all...’ Mr Edwards muttered, staring at me, his plate. He laid his cutlery on my lap. Again, the subtle clatter, the unusual trembling hands leaving a trace of their existence. The always cool, calm, and collected Hugo Edwards, the seasoned Royal Navy Officer, survivor of the atrocious Second Boar War, the devoted husband and father, was unprecedentedly agitated.

Aware or not of Mr Edwards’ uneasiness, Mrs Knight continued in her cheerful and casual tone, as if trivialities such as the weather or the next holiday destination were being discussed. ‘I knew that you were concealing something behind that persistent lack of interest in Germany, Hugo!’ The green eyes of the bubbly woman searched her host as she smiles, a warm open and trustful smile yet I could sense that it was utterly fake. ‘Are you disappointed about how things are going in your beloved Germany after all?’

⁶ German Kaiser Wilhelm II (1859-1941) on July 27th, 1900 bid farewell in Bremerhaven to the soldiers parting to fight in China to establish order after the Boar Rebellion and asked them to fight like the Huns did, savagely. The speech is commonly known in history as the “Hun Speech”.

Mr Edwards' breathing accelerated. He remained silent and stared at me again. It was important for him to remain neutral when it came to politics and certainly when it involved Germany. The less he heard about that country, the less he was reminded of the years 'in exile', the better. By the way he ate when the country was mentioned I could tell that it stirred up overwhelming emotions; he was a tranquil man but when victories of the German army were mentioned, and the increasing power Kaiser Wilhelm had in Europe was discussed, Mr Edwards' vulnerability was exposed.

He took his knife and fork again and resumed eating his meal. He took smaller mouthfuls from then on, so he could interject in the conversation when needed. His knife zigzagged gently in the air above me, like a sword waiting for the right time to ambush the enemy. The unequivocal sign that despite being deeply disturbed he had found the courage to take control of the conversation, determined not to let others corner him again. The skill one learned at boarding school, where rivalry impregnated the air like a covered grey sky, unmoveable, permanent, unavoidable.

'No fret. Kaiser Wilhelm has everything under control. His focus on building a strong army is certainly being fruitful,' Mrs Knight's words echoed through the room. The zigzagging above me stopped abruptly. Mr Knight cleared his throat and interjected,

'Violet has told me that you'll be getting electricity installed in a few months, Hugo.'

Mr Edwards exhaled, relieved. 'Yes, finally! We will be getting power from the new installations. Speaking of, how did your investments in the North Eastern Electric Supply Company go, Thomas?'

'Splendidly! In fact, I have just received the latest update from my broker yesterday. It is perhaps too early to say, but it certainly looks promising. I strongly advise you to look into it.'

‘I shall. For now, I have been offered to supervise a new power station that will be built in the council.’

‘Yes, I heard about the new Act of Parliament granting rights to power companies. It is an important leap forward.’

‘It is, Thomas. The one I will be supervising can supply 6.6 kV and there’s talk about 11 kV in the near future.’

‘That is a lot!’

‘Rather!’

‘And most importantly, power stations can interconnect, so conditions are safer and when needed, they can get supplies from larger power stations.’

‘It is such a shame that the prices are outrageous sometimes. It is simply unaffordable to many.’

‘Yes, that should not happen,’ Mr Edwards agreed. ‘The efficiency of the generating stations varies considerably. I shall supervise the station at Deptford. It’s one of the largest, so the prices are reasonable. It is such the case, that some supply authorities buy a bulk supply from us and subsequently shut down their own station.’

‘They become intermediaries.’

‘Exactly,’

Mr Knight sighed and shook his head as he said, ‘Intermediaries, they are everywhere nowadays.’

‘It is where the money is to be found!’ remarked Mrs Knight. ‘Just like your German family did. The Loëft von Unterweild were extraordinary traders, they built one of the most successful trading enterprises in Bavaria. It’s something you ought to be very proud of Hugo!’ Again, that giggle of hers, and the stabbing eyes on Mr Edwards, who laid his cutlery on me, slanted. Not a sound was heard this time. His hands were steady, he had managed to get a grip on his turmoiled thoughts.

Chapter 3 Early Summer 1908

Bailey takes me from the display cabinet together with five other dinning plates. He places the stack on a heavily loaded tray that lays on a corner cabinet, next to the window. On the tray, there is another stack consisting of six soup bowls and six side plates. Guests are expected. Mr Hudson is pacing the room impatiently, shouting out orders to which the servants instantly obey.

‘John, check the library!’

‘Yes, Mr Hudson!’

‘Mrs Matthews, are the privies in order!?’

‘Yes, Mr Hudson!’

‘Mrs Ward, caution with that salt, will you?’

Despite the footman and the housekeeper displaying an unprecedented submissiveness which shows that the upcoming dinner is important, the cook is less willing to obey,

‘Oh, you bugger, mind your own business!’

‘What was that, Mrs Ward?!’

‘I said I know what I am doing!’

The butler stops pacing the hallway and peeks into the kitchen. ‘Mr Hudson’ he adds.

Mrs Ward grunts and sighs and says, ‘Mr Hudson,’ imitating the butler’s tense tone. And then, as the cubby middle-aged woman walks into the kitchen again, she mutters, ‘Tumby!’ and stifles a giggle.

Mrs Ward, Eugene Ward, was born in this house. Her family has served the Loëft von Unterweild for two generations, ever since the house was built in the beginning of the 19th century. I know this because the dedicated cook cannot help boasting about this fact when she introduces herself to new servants. That Germans built the house, however, is something she is less proud about and therefore, she avoids mentioning

Mr Edwards' mother's family name if she can. She is an emotional woman, with a tendency to dramatizing and, according to Mrs Matthews and Hudson, with a natural eagerness to shed a tear. She is short and round, closer to being old than young and has an enviable livelihood that never fades away. Regardless of the hour of the day, no matter what the sun and the clouds and wind are up to, her smile is a fixed feature in her jolly face. Chronically set in a happy curve, bringing about two deep dimples in her rosy cheeks. Under her white starched cap, strays of red curly hair burst out, as if they were tired of being trapped under her hastily made-up bun; the copper-coloured curls stretch out, wanting to be set free, reflecting the aspirations of Mrs Ward's lively soul. She is a free spirit that is stuck in between a stove and a list of demands coming from upstairs. Behind the drama and the tears and the sporadic whispers for freedom, is a cry for the one thing all mortals need: Love.

As I wait on the tray, I think about who could be the guests tonight. There have not been many dinners lately because Violet is pregnant. She often chooses to remain in bed and not only has her breakfast in her room but luncheon as well. I have been her plate several times and I found her rather quiet. Her thoughts were far away, unresponsive to Miss Atkinson and Mr Edwards. When Arthur was home for Easter, she was not talkative with him either and they did not rehearse any new pieces for violin and piano as they usually did before the pregnancy. All she does now is read, play her favourite pieces on the piano on her own and immerse herself in embroidery.

I worry that perhaps it could have something to do with comments I heard during a dinner held a few weeks ago. Mr and Mrs Moore were invited for dinner. Mrs Moore is Violet's life-time friend, and for what I understood, they had the same nanny when they were young, and it could easily be said that they are almost sisters. The same can be said about their

husbands: Mr Moore and Mr Edwards' have known each other since Eton, where Mr Edwards was Mr Moore's fag and just as their wives, they too have a long endearing friendship. The conversations the Edwardses have with the Moores are truthful, meaningful, they do not waste time with trivialities.

The night in question, despite some trivialities, meaningful words were spoken. I was Mr Edwards' plate and I was able to get a clear picture of what was going on in his mind and in his heart. Mr Edwards' attitude and his words, his thoughts and emotions during the dinner have worried me.

'By the way, it can easily be said that despite his age, the King has not tired of causing scandals! A champagne bath for crying out loud!'⁷

'God forbids! And the Mordant scandal was thought to be dreadful!'⁸ exclaimed Mr Moore.

'This certainly surpasses everything,' Mrs Moore exclaimed, irritated. 'We need his diplomatic skills now more than ever.'

'At least l'oncle de l'Europe is managing to befriend both the Tsar Nicholas and Kaiser Wilhelm,' remarked Mr Edwards, emphasizing the 'and'.

'Still, I don't care if he is beloved and known as Edward the Peacemaker, his behaviour is just unacceptable,' continued Mrs Moore, baffled. 'We may be in 1908 but it does not mean one can get away with such scandalous behaviour. Queen Victoria would have him deported to Australia ipso facto if she still lived!'

7 King Edward VII was a frequent visitor of 'Le Chabanais', a brothel in Paris, and he had a huge copper bath with a design of half a woman and half a swan which he had filled with champagne and bathed in it with his mistresses.

8 King Edward VII had a relationship with Lady Henriette Mourdant, wife of a Member of Parliament. When she gave birth to a blind daughter, she thought she was being punished for her adultery and confessed all about it to her husband who wanted to sue the king but never did.

‘My dear, it is the way it is. We have a majority Liberal Government now. Times have changed,’ said Mr Moore, who had not joined the conversation until then. He was observing the room intently, as he always does. He always seems to be distracted but time and time again he proves to be a keen listener. He is just not that talkative. He chooses his moments to intervene, which is usually at the end when all has been said and done and a new perspective is needed.

‘And yet, by all accounts, he remains charismatic and popular!’ remarked Violet.

‘Perhaps the old chap proves that when one does as he wishes he gains other’s respect,’ said Mr Edwards gravely. His breathing was accelerated and he stopped eating. He rested his cutlery on my lap, and stared at his plate, me.

The three other diners froze and the dining room was wrapped in a stifling blanket of silence. I could see Violet peeking at her husband while keeping her head low. Finally, Mr Moore spoke. Even he found the fallen silence uncomfortable.

‘Recovering from typhoid had a positive effect on the king’s image, surely, but would people have forgiven his appalling behaviour if he hadn’t recovered?’

‘Certainly. I hold no doubt that his charm is scandal proof because he follows his heart.’ Mr Edwards answered solemnly, as he reached for his glass of wine. Mrs Moore, Violet, and Mr Moore looked at him, baffled. This was not the Hugo they knew. Oblivious to the stares, Mr Edwards took a sip of his wine, savouring it intently, carefully laying his glass on the table when he was finished. I could tell by the tranquil and content expression on his face that he relished the silence that had fallen, and for a moment I feared he would have it extended until dawn.

The air in the room chilled and seeing that the diners had finished, Hudson ordered Bailey and Gray to collect the plates.

The two young men diligently and swiftly removed the dining plates, laying us all on the tray which Bailey took to the kitchen in his brisk and brusque manner.

In the kitchen, a lively conversation was going on. As always, the rest of the servants had been informed about the conversation that had taken place during the dinner and of course, Mr Edwards remarkable words were thoroughly discussed.

‘You are trying to say that you believe that the master approves of love affairs?’ asked Emma, who was now skilfully trained in her tasks as first maid.

‘I cannot come up with any other explanation,’ said the scullery maid, whose name was Mary, Mary Bell. Sir Hugo did not change her name because that is only done with servants whose name is called out frequently, like butlers, footmen, or lady’s maids.

Mary grabbed me from the stack of plates and started scrubbing me fervently. One could almost believe that she envisioned King Edward the VII painted all over me, as her scrubbing intensified by every word of disapproval of the scandalous king.

‘And do you think the master would do the same?’

‘Who knows!?’ spurted out the lady’s maid, Miss Atkinson.

I had been placed on the drying rack by then and from there I could observe the lady’s maid easily. Her face was somewhat contorted, with a mixture of anger and fear sparking from her eyes, her breathing was accelerated and she fidgeted with the rim of the red bonnet she held in her hands. It was Violet’s favourite bonnet for taking strolls in the park. I gathered that she would be using it the next day as she and Mrs Moore had made an appointment for something but I was not able to gather for what exactly. I could picture her walking along the

paths, admiring the well-kept garden of Hyde Park. It was for a second that I suddenly regretted being but a plate. How I wish I could accompany her on what would be her first stroll in spring! Perhaps it would be her last outing because for what I understood, she was due to give birth soon.

The other two maids looked back at Miss Atkinson, as if wanting her to say more, but Miss Atkinson had already left the kitchen.

Although the servants had been very surprised about Mr Edwards' remarks on the King's scandalous champagne bath tub, to me, the words that stunned me most were those concerning how listening to one's heart help gain other's respect. I mused on the possibility of Mr Edwards feeling unappreciated. In retrospect, I realized that for a few years already, the couple that had once teased each other endlessly over dinners and hid to kiss behind curtains during receptions, had increasingly become distant and cool and hardly even talked. When I once made a list of moments in which I had witnessed Mr Edwards animatedly taking part in conversations during a meal, I came to the realization that it was always when Mrs Knight was present. Surely, she looked up to him, and he happily engaged in conversations when she was around, but could there possibly be a romantic liaison in between the two? I found it hard to believe. This I knew because when I had had the opportunity of being his plate during these meals, I could not grasp what his emotions were. All I could sense were the thousand thoughts that ravelled in his mind, overwhelming him. I gathered that it was not his heart struck at the sight of his sister-in-law, but the mind. Given the circumstances, it was not surprising at all; she too was all thoughts and there was not a trace of emotion to be sensed when observing her.

Since that dinner with the Moores, I have been attentive to anything unusual in the interactions among Mr Edwards and

Violet. The former's absentness both physical and mental have increased as much as the latter's palpable loneliness has intensified. Violet's withered semblance has worsened, and although the pregnancy is being blamed for it, surely, there is more in her mind than just a new life that is fighting its way to set a foot in this world. She has barely left her bedroom lately and asks Hudson to say that she is away when she receives calls. Therefore now, the six-person table setting surprises me and I am curious to know what the occasion is that could possibly interfere with the seclusion Violet has recently chosen for.

The grandfather clock has just struck eight thirty. Violet enters the dining room, flanked by her two friends, Mrs Moore, and Mrs Burton. Their arms are linked, forming a wall of colourful silk that swirls around their legs and rustles as the smiling women stride through the dining room and approach the table. They are followed by Mr Moore who seems to float instead of walk, such is the awe in his eyes as he glances at his host's ancestors' portraits on the walls. His mind seems miles away, in a world of art and beauty, driven by an inquisitive mind and passion for aesthetics. Behind them is Mr Edwards, who is listening to Mr Burton, a boisterous short and fat man who barely reaches the upper button of Mr Edwards' evening jacket and his voice is so loud that my clay trembles, and my felspar and silica fight the urge of running for shelter.

The dining room is brightly lit and it takes me some time to get accustomed to so much light, but the advantages make my efforts worthwhile. Much to the staff's fear, electricity has recently been installed in the entire house and just when they had come to terms with the frightful idea of living between wires, Hudson, under the orders of Mr Edwards, had a large chine lamp run by electricity installed in the dining room, replacing the gas burner. So now, there aren't any shadows hiding facial

expressions and the gloomy atmosphere is gone. Everything is bright and all can be seen and sensed with utmost accuracy.

‘God almighty, what an exuberant light!’ Mr Burton exclaims, standing still at the doorway as he gazes at the lamp with his bulky eyes, his bushy eye-brows elevated like two mountains poking into his short and deeply etched forehead.

‘It is, isn’t it!?’ exclaims Mr Edwards proudly. ‘We are now capable of distributing 15 w. We started with 6!’

‘Heavens! Our friends in Lincolnshire would envy this!’ Mrs Burton giggles. ‘I want the same in our new house, Phillip!’

‘My dear, of course the grandest mansion of the area will have this kind of light, you can count on that!’ Mr Burton cries out, boastfully.

Mrs Moore smiles and nods, and says in her usual calm and warm tone, ‘It is shameful that electricity is not being installed in all counties at the same time.’

But Mr Burton is not listening. He is observing the lamp, squinting at it, studying every detail. ‘Not that I think our staff in Lincolnshire would dare to use it.’ Mr Burton says with disdain. ‘It took them quite some time to overcome their fear of the telephone! These country lads!’

‘We had the same here,’ says Mr Edwards calmly. ‘It is inherent to human nature to be afraid of technological developments.’

‘Indeed,’ agrees Violet timidly as she meets Mr Edwards’ eyes. They exchange a smile, warm and intimate, and Violet instinctively caresses her abdomen. Then, she gazes at the bouquet and with a confident tone in her voice, adds ‘our staff still does not dare to use the telephone, only Hudson uses it because he has to, otherwise he wouldn’t, I am sure about that. And yes, they have certainly been anxious about electricity as well.’

Mr Edwards nods agreeingly and while eyeing his wife affectionately, says 'this lamp is the proof of it, its installation has been postponed for ages.'

'Well, it certainly was worth the effort. The room looks marvellous,' Mrs Moore says, as she sits on the chair that Hudson slides for her, and adds, 'look how the light falls on the lovely bouquet!'

'It does. Goodness me, it's stunning. Where did you get it from?' Mrs Burton asks, in the blunt tone of hers.

After a few seconds of silence which feel like an eternity, Violet speaks.

'I ordered them myself.' Despite the decisiveness in her voice, I was surprised to see shame in her eyes. Instead of looking to her guests as she speaks, she looks down, and instead of smiling, she frowns. Yes, shame is what I read in her expression. But, why?

'The roses match beautifully with the rug and the curtains. An exquisite choice, Violet!'

'It is, it is. Now, tell me,' Violet says as she observes Mrs Burton's dress, 'where did you get your dress made? It is lovely'

'Oh, thank you dear. My lady maid gave me the name of a new seamster working at the Burlington Arcade. I had the material brought from India.'

Mrs Moore squints her eyes, taking the material in, indulging in its beauty. 'One can tell by the colours, they are extraordinary.'

'Do you think the skirt is too narrow?' Mrs Burton asks, quietly, vulnerability in her tone, suddenly disclosing her insecurity. It helps me understand her usual boastful and over confident tone.

'No, not at all. It's quite fashionable, Edith. The puffed sleeves and wide skirts are passé, surely.'

Violet gazes at her two friends converse with a dreamy look in her eyes. She looks at the bouquet, and as if a snowflake

had just been kissed by the sun's beams, her perfectly shaped lips form into a smile. She reaches out for her glass of water and takes a sip. She puts the glass down, pats her lips with her napkin and looks at Mrs Burton.

'The colour suits you very well,' she says, eyeing her friend, caringly.

'That's what Phillip says too, don't you, my dear?' Proudly, Mrs Burton eyes her husband who is chatting animatedly with Mr Moore and Mr Edwards.

Mr Burton puts his wineglass down. 'Definitely!' he answers. As usual, he had started drinking without waiting for his host, Mr Edwards. I have seen him do this before. He is a self-made man, son of a mill worker in Lincolnshire, and with admirable effort and determination he earned an Eton scholarship. That is where he met Mr Edwards and Mr Moore. Once he graduated, he did not go to Oxford nor Cambridge as his fellow classmates did. Not because of the lack of funds. With his intelligence and hard-working mentality he could have easily been granted a scholarship for a prestigious university. But Phillip Burton, eager to earn money, went back to Lincolnshire and worked at the very same mill his father had sacrificed his life to. Within no time, he fulfilled his lifetime dream of becoming the sole owner, turning it into one of the most successful mills of the county. Although he is respected for his achievements, I have sometimes heard Mrs Matthews question the legitimacy of the means he used. Now, a decade later from becoming the owner of the mill, he has discovered the magic of advertising and owns one of the largest advertising agencies of London.

'You should definitely wear red more often,' the self-made man says, looking at his wife proudly. I can see Violet looking at him from the corner of her eye, her lips turn down, forming an unhappy hill on her delicate face. 'I do hope I survive you because black doesn't suit you at all!' he adds chuckling, with his mouth still full.

A roar of laughter is heard. But it is a forced laughter.

‘What a dreadful thing to say! As if that would be the worst thing of all if you died!’

Mr Burton takes another sip of his wine, and Mrs Burton throws a conspiratorially look at Violet. In a low voice, she excuses her husband’s behaviour.

‘The latest developments with Germany have been troubling him lately. He is worried that we will go to war against the Germans.’

Violet nods discretely, and puts a hand on her friend’s arm. Mrs Burton sighs.

‘Let’s just hope it doesn’t come to that,’ Violet says, lowering her eyes, staring at me, her plate. She resumes her meal. The cutlery now held with a steadier hand, but still a note of melancholy to be traced. She glances at her husband, presiding the table at the other side. Thanks to the new lamp, I can see him very clearly. He is listening to Mr Burton and Mr Moore attentively. I hear Violet inhale, as if searching for air to breathe, searching for space to live. Then, she puts her fork and knife on my lip and takes a sip from her water glass. She glances to her right, and sets her gaze on the bouquet once again. The corners of her lips find their way up into her cheeks and a dreamy smile enlightens her face.

‘What are you smiling at?’ asks Mrs Burton. ‘The flowers?’ At the other side of the table, Mr Edwards stops eating. With an inquisitive expression, he eagerly awaits his wife’s answer.

Violet looks at Mrs Burton in the eye. ‘Looking at them reminds me that there are beautiful things in life.’

‘Yes, I see what you mean Violet. They are lovely’

‘They are beyond everything. In the wary times we are living in, it brings hope’

‘If Florence were here, she would tell us what they mean.’

‘Red roses mean “I love you,”’ Mr Edwards says.

‘Is that so, Hugo?’ Mrs Burton asks. ‘Florence knows all about the hidden messages behind flowers,’ she says, ‘and these could have another message than just “I love you.”’

Florence is the Burtons’ daughter. She used to come over to play with Arthur, together with her brother Percy, but they are older now and they only drop by during the Christmas holidays.

‘I sure hope they do,’ Violet says blushing. ‘Although it feels rather narcissistic to buy oneself flowers that mean “I love you” now that I think of it.’

‘A bit of self-love can do no harm,’ Mrs Moore says..

Violet smiles and stares at me, she does not know what to say. Her thoughts race, searching for a way to change the conversation. Mr Edwards stares at his plate too. I cannot see the expression on his face, but by the steady hands with which he takes his fork and knife, I believe that he is not bothered about his wife’s enchantment with the bouquet nor the message of love they convey. Violet, on the other hand, picks her cutlery with trembling hands. She has felt Mr Edwards eyes pierced on her, and by the way she eats I sense the troubled thoughts swimming relentlessly through her mind. She sighs for herself, and then savours her food, trying to get a grip on her thoughts.

‘The turmoil the WSPU caused is unprecedented !⁹ You must have been terrified, having the meeting at your doorstep!’ Mrs Moore exclaims, breaking the silence.

‘Certainly, it was a frightful scene. We did not dare to leave the house,’ Violet says.

Mr Burton takes a deep breath and takes his hands to his head. ‘Three hundred thousand women! Fiddlesticks! Don’t they have some household chores to do!’

‘Mind you, Philip, I shall admit that I think they have a point!’ Mrs Moore eyes her best friend Violet for support.

‘I couldn’t agree more, Esther.’

Mr Burton puts his cutlery on my sides, he wipes his chubby rosy lips with his napkin and against all protocol, gesticulates, his arms in the air. 'I have never seen so many banners in my life. The Daily Telegraph talks about seven hundred! I shall not wish to see anything purple again in my life. You better start burning any purple dress my dear'.

'White and green as well?!' asks Mrs Burton provocatively.

Mr Burton looks at his wife. Flashes of anger flickering from his eyes, casting on everything in the room, on the table, on the other diners.

'The world shall have to get used to the idea,' Mr Moore says, diplomatically. 'Women will be granted the right to vote soon. The Whig's Reform Act of 1832 was not enough'

'That was just a diplomatic move to keep us quiet!'

'Dear Esther,' says Mr Burton with a disdainful sidelong glance towards Mrs Moore, 'giving the right to vote to all householders with an annual rental of ten pounds was more than enough!'

'For women it wasn't even the beginning! The world has not heard the end of it,' says Mrs Moore resolutely. 'This meeting was just to prove that we are serious about our cause.'

Mr Moore and Mr Edwards exchange a glance and smile. Mr Edwards resumes eating his meal. His fork is confident, at ease, picking his food delicately. His knife cuts the veal neatly, letting the blade do its work denoting self-confidence, patience, contentment. Violet sets her cutlery on her plate, slanted, and gazes at the bouquet once again. Her eyes squint and her lips draw a dreamy smile on her pretty face, painting the portrait of a woman deeply in love.

9 In June 1908, the first meeting by the Woman's Social and Political Union (WSPU) took place. It was known as the 'monster meeting'. It attracted a crowd of up to 300000 women from all over the United Kingdom. They marched in seven different processions through Central London to Hyde Park, carrying 700 banners and dressed in the Suffragette purple, white and green colours.

Chapter 4 September 1908

It is autumn. From the large windows I can see the cyan blue sky. Some tawny coloured leaves fly around, guided to their new destination by the sporadic strong gusts of wind. I am on a tray that lays on the round table in the drawing room. I have a pile of fresh sandwiches on top of me. On my left, there is a cakestand with a block of fruitcake and on my right, there is a tea pot. In front of me, blocking the view of the room, there are three sets of tea cups and saucers. Violet is playing a piece on the piano I have not hear before. Her eyes closed, immersed in her music. Just when the notes engage in a tempestuous battle and the door swings open and Mr Hudson steps in, carrying a large bouquet in his hands.

‘This bouquet has just arrived for your, my lady.’

Violet looks at the bouquet and takes her hands to her mouth, surprised. Slowly, she stands up and walks over to the butler, her eyes fixed on the beautiful white hyacinths and yellow jasmines, captivated, transfixed. With one hand she takes the bouquet and with the other she caresses her showing abdomen. She opens the envelope that is tied to the wrapping paper, takes the card that is in it and reads it.

‘Was there another note perhaps, Hudson?’

‘Only this envelope, my lady.’

‘I see.’ Violet looks at the hyacinths and jasmines embraced in a dance. She smiles. Dismay and bewilderment and a touch of excitement. ‘Well then Hudson, please put them in a vase. Set them on the mantelpiece in the drawing room for now. After the luncheon, put them in the dining room.’

‘Very well, my lady,’ the butler says as he leaves, closing the door behind him.

After pacing the room restlessly, Violet finally sits on the piano bench and resumes her playing. It is a vigorous and lively

as I have ever seen her play before. She looks outside, finding inspiration in the leaves that fall and fall and fall, giving up the struggle to contest their impending fate. Just as the music that her fingers sing, the leaves drift into their future cheerfully, with pride, hopeful.

After a while, Hudson's voice is heard. 'Mrs Moore' he announces. Before he has finished pronouncing her name, Violet's best friend has entered the room.

'Oh, Esther, how nice to see you again!'

'How do you do?'

'How do you do?'

The two friends sit at the round table and Hudson, who has put the bouquet in a blue vase that proudly stands on the mantelpiece as ordered, pours the tea. Violet gazes at them, dreamily. It is a pleasant scene to see her expression change when she lays her eyes on the bouquet. Just as the first bouquet that arrived some time ago, they have the capacity of transforming her into a young carefree woman, fully of life and joy and hope. Her eyes widen and her lips curve up, disclosing delight for life and all it has to offer.

Violet is not a flamboyant and cheerful woman as Mrs Moore is or Mrs Burton. When in company, she tends to keep to herself. It is her the one that asks the questions. But now things have changed. She talks to Mrs Moore animatedly and Mrs Moore listens, her eyes popping out and her mouth hung open.

'It is a matter I have ceased to find an answer to,' Violet says resolutely.

'But surely you would like to know who's sending them!' Mrs Moore exclaims

'What difference would it make? If they are from an admirer who wishes not to disclose his or her name, what am I to do about that? Enjoying their beauty is all I can do and ought to do.'